

## **In Pursuit of a Genuine American Fiction**

by  
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After the turn of the millennium we were confronted with a cultural outlook that refused to accept the conventions of the past—so much of what passes for genuine artistry is the simplified construct of familiar commercial fiction. And so much of what is perceived as art is inferior work, or work that glorifies convention as art. But I do not believe that a genuine American fiction exists today that stands at the same level of past American fiction. We, as readers, have become accustomed to mediocrity and the incestuous quality of popular culture. But we, as human beings, also retain the overpowering desire to know ourselves intimately as people and as social beings. And if we fail to connect with the depth of our humanity, in the social context in which we find ourselves, how are we to produce a genuine American fiction that reflects the deeper qualities of the people it professes to examine?

This is the question I raised in my own mind in 1995 as I compared the quality of literary fiction of the past with that of my contemporaries. And I was not satisfied with my perception that the will to create an accessible literary fiction had been lost, or, at the very least, misplaced by contemporary writers. Perhaps the fault lay in the requirements of publishers savvy enough to know that the pursuit of a genuine American fiction was a gamble in itself, and that the odds of betting on the salability of commercial fiction tinged with the stain of popular culture and heroic proportions were far more attractive than the 'possibility' of producing a national literature. Whatever the reason, the loss of the desire to write well while defining the America of the time seems to have been lost with Fitzgerald, Hemingway and Steinbeck.

The urban tradition that began with the Harlem Renaissance, and powered by the work of Richard Wright, Langston Hughes and Ralph Ellison, seemed to decay into a reaction against writing in the tradition of literary excellence—and what remains of that urban tradition seems bastardized by immature and unrealistic idol worship in the form of aggrandized violence and simplified vision-quest. The lives and motivations of people living in the cities of our country seem overly influenced by the superficial affectations ceaselessly explored on television, in music, and in film. Any appreciation for deep human motivation is remaindered in the art house and the occasional 'unexpected' success.

The rural tradition, once a staple of literary fiction, has pretty much disappeared altogether. The realistic basis of these stories, truthful to the nature of their American localities, was used as settings for morality tales that often defined contemporary American morals and ethics. Faulkner used this paradigm to great success, as well as O'Connor and a host of other authors. Harper Lee's "To Kill a Mockingbird" is the quintessential rural novel, and one that defined the moral imperatives of its time and place in American history.

But these are not the writers who are defining America today.

And even the identity of the America that is being defined is in question—and the question is this: does the America being represented in contemporary literature actually exist?

Perhaps as much as anything the human heart has been relocated in an artificial environment that does not receive as much punishment from the reality of being human. Super-human vessels, in the form of outlandishly unrealistic characters, seem to accept the consequences of the fantastic circumstances of their lives better than those very real people who are confronted in their daily lives by the trying and disarming crises of real life, such as disease, psychological illness and death. Whether in voluminous techno-thrillers, or shallow horror stories, or overly familiar serial killer novels invested with an heroic investigator charged by God to deliver the perpetrator in death-defying fashion—the legacy of human conduct has become one of assuming that the cartoon short is actually the feature film of life. And this philosophy has so permeated contemporary literature that most readers have become incapable of discerning between the two; and, more to the point, are convinced that the former is more appealing to their sense of being human than the latter.

Perhaps this circumstance insures for most people the continuance of vicarious living, but it does nothing to keep realistic fiction from becoming extinct. If this is a symptom of the individual contemporary American psyche then the problem exceeds the limits of literature and begins to describe a dangerous association with childish comforts and expectations. When we, as a people, are removed from our ability to accept the deepest permutations of life then we become incapable of offering a mature perspective on the nature of our own lives and the society in which we live. And if contemporary literature is simply a reflection of contemporary American perspective then we are in danger of becoming a nation of adolescent minds, rather than a nation of mature thinkers capable of accurately assessing the implications of our motivations and desires. When we fail to assess the depth of meaning in our lives (and this being reflected in our artistic appraisal of it) then we fail to grow beyond our childish need to associate ourselves with simplistic qualities of being.

Literature—and in particular, fiction and poetry—has always acted as a conduit to the deepest reflections of the mind, on itself and the world in which it finds itself. When this conduit is obstructed, or obscured from access by the availability of shallower paths, then the mind fails to appreciate its greater dimensions—practically applied, this simply means that the motivations we find in formulaic literature lead us to a shallow appreciation of life, and more specifically, life in America.

Escapist fiction has always had its place in culture—in fact, sometimes the line between escapist fiction and literary fiction is without merit. But when a culture's literature fails to capture the esoteric currents of that culture then an important resource for growth and reflection has been lost. American literature has had innumerable influences over the past fifty years, primarily the advent of television and our preoccupation with its consumption as an artistic outlet. Strictly speaking, television cannot be blamed for the decline of meaningful literature in America—but it can be blamed for the homogenization of attitudes and beliefs of the children that grow up to be the adults who create that literature. The dynamics of television production are not the same as literature—that much is obvious. But what is not so obvious is the perception of the human mind that what is produced as an expression in the artistic realm of television is only superficially related to the dynamics of a written work. Nor can the two achieve the same specific effect on the perceiver of each production. That too many American minds have been trained to find artistic excellence in television productions is a peripheral harm to literature. The same means of appreciation cannot be perfectly applied, and so the mind that has been trained to appreciate television cannot appreciate literature on the same level; in fact, I don't believe that the values of each as an artistic medium translate at all. The mind that has been trained to appreciate the esthetic and artistic value of television must first be trained to appreciate the esthetic and artistic value of literature; otherwise the literature produced by that mind will be appropriately shallow and formulaic.

This may seem like a harsh indictment, but I believe it is a quantifiable reality, all too well known and understood by serious writers of contemporary literature. If the audience of good literature must first be trained away from an artistic sensibility for television, then the task is daunting indeed, for the mind trained to find esthetic pleasure in television will have a difficult time finding correlatives in literature. The difference lies in a person's ability to perceive meaningful psychological effect from perceived artistic expression, and when the majority of minds have been trained to appreciate one kind of expression—primarily formulaic and shallow—then the apprehension of an artistic expression in another medium (and qualitatively different) may be altogether intolerable.

And so the better part of a culture has been trained to appreciate only a very limited avenue of artistic expression. And those seeking enlightenment in other forms and levels of artistic expression grow fewer by the year as the majority of minds are trained away from a deeper sense of artistic appreciation.

That this process has been continuing since the nineteen fifties indicates the length of such an artistic indoctrination, and also indicates the depth of repatriation of artistic sensibilities from one medium to the other. And so we have a national literature that is replete with writers who have grown up with television's limited sensibility; when these writers translate this sensibility into literature they also produce the kind of expression that reflects it. Which is to say, an expression based on something other than a deep understanding of literature.

So what constitutes contemporary American literature?

I believe the best answer to this question is, paradoxically enough, the literature that the contemporary artistic sensibility recognizes as being of legitimate artistic interest. When we keep in mind that that interest is colored by influences other than the truly literary we find that a strange hybrid is produced: a literature that frames a popular culture sensibility in apprehended literary terms. This approach has the habit of producing grotesqueries when it is haphazardly applied, and insightful and unique expressions when carefully combined. The difficulty lies in most writers' inability to consciously discern between the two. The result can be as fascinating as Pearce's "Cool Hand Luke", or as culturally revealing as Herlihy's "Midnight Cowboy", both literary works which inspired meaningful cinematic works. One only needs to investigate the process of the adaptation of a novel into film to understand the wide gulf between effects. Perhaps this also helps to explain the confusion many people possess over the true nature of contemporary artistic sensibility—after all, how does one understand the potential of literary effect without first studying those works which best illustrate them? The paradox continues when we realize that the above scenario is also colored by the influence of the sensibility that has no interest in reading past works for which it can find no artistic correlative. The result is much like someone digging a hole and eventually neglecting the world above the pit that he has labored to produce; since he cannot see the world beyond the hole, he has no sense of it, and the repetitive conditioning he has received has caused him to confine his appreciation to the limited world-view surrounding him.

The practical result is obvious: those whose sensibilities linger in shallow streams will have a very difficult time following the river to the sea. And so we have a problem of perspective in contemporary writers—a long-range perspective versus a short-ranged perspective, each producing appropriate works. And when popular culture is combined with a good or partial appreciation of literature the results are usually mixed. In any case, the production of a genuine American fiction is too often a matter of chance. And so we are left with a circumstance that only confuses the pursuit of such a literature.

I believe that this is the standard of contemporary fiction—that good writing and literary reflection are becoming a matter of chance. Fewer writers are attempting serious work because they are growing into a literary society in love with superficial conventions of life; fewer writers are also attempting introspective work because they are certain (and not without painful examples) that such work will be ignored or passed over by the publishing industry for more 'salable' work. And so we also find ourselves confronted by an industry that encourages homogeneity and sameness instead of diversity and artistic merit. This helps to explain why so few writers today are recognized as literary or quasi-literary successes (and subsequently valuable) such as Joyce Carol Oates, Toni Morrison, or John Irving. Too often what are touted as works of literary merit are works that fail to offer the reader a greater depth of human understanding and observation, works that aspire to greater reflection but fail to surpass the conventions that produce a literary timidity. Again, the backlash of this timidity is an over-compensation by writers to represent a purely 'academic' fiction, and the works this effort produces tend to depict mere caricatures of genuine human life rather than deeper perceptions of undefined human motivation. The happy median seems to be the solitary

intersection between lopsided extremes. And this effect can only succeed in creating a barrier to the creation of meaningful American fiction.

I believe the need for a genuine American fiction does exist today—or, at least a need for writers to attempt to write an American fiction that fully describes the society in which they live. And by society I do not mean popular culture. I do mean the day-to-day worlds in which we find ourselves as people, our associations, our families, our loves and crises, our genuine human qualities that manifest themselves daily and in ways that popular culture would only dismiss as trivial. But I believe heroic qualities exist in these very aspects of our lives, and can be described in profound fiction if only we, as writers, conscientiously attempt to describe them in traditionally dramatic ways. I also believe that seminal literature can be produced by artists who believe in the esthetic value of the lives we actually live but tend to hide behind the veil of popular myth.

In America we have the unique privilege of living in a country of such diverse cultural attributes that the writing of the Great American Novel can only remain an elusive grail; no single work of fiction could possibly capture the breadth of American society, and so we must find our country in the fragments that we cut and polish as individual literary gems. So great is the diversity of belief in America—contrary to the international perception that our country is simplistically structured—that no single work of art has ever captured the entirety of the American experience. In a country of such diverse religious, political, philosophical and cultural belief no single work *could* possibly capture the true face of our nation. And so we must capture these reflections of our country in small observations and declarations. But that, too, is the promise of a genuine American fiction—so much exists to explore in the American psyche that a wealth of material still remains to be artistically rendered in the oeuvre of literature. We, as a nation of writers and artists, need only attempt to find the literary tradition—and that lying beyond the scope of popular culture—that best illustrates it. What could the reader more closely identify with other than the heroic aspects of the ordinary lives we share in common?

The stories in my collection, *Ghosts of the American Dream*, represent an attempt to write a genuine American fiction about the heroic and fantastic world of common American life. In innocent and profane terms, in stark and poetic prose, I have attempted to explore a literature that describes the facets of our country in a literary manner that combines the best of traditional literature with the most insightful techniques of contemporary literature. My hope is that the resulting fiction is both immediately accessible to the contemporary reader and also illustrative of a new approach to American literature. Without the specific intent of the artist to achieve a desired result the creation of a meaningful literature must rely on chance and the recognition and proliferation of ideal representative works. I believe that it is the writer's responsibility to define the parameters of a representative fiction, and so these stories represent the definition I created in 1995 after posing the initial question of a national literature. The parameters they describe may not be wide enough to encompass a truly meaningful fiction, but without a conscious effort to achieve it (and the collective efforts of every conscientious writer)

then I believe that American literature will continue to follow the path of least resistance to a place that only describes an unrealistic reality.

As William Faulkner suggested, the human heart is a far more meaningful dramatic vehicle than any popular invention. The lives that we live in America should be celebrated and explored in the art that they inspire, no matter how beautiful or sublime.

When we invest our literature only with the qualities of popular culture we lose, as a country, a higher quality of artistic identity. I believe that it is imperative that greater literary traditions are kept alive in our country, and that we do not lose the traditions that we have enjoyed in the past for the sake of illusory 'progress'. Progress can also take the form of decay and devolution. I believe that we must continue to define America in literary terms that are not merely commercial or academically inbred, but in terms that are realistic and honestly descriptive of the human heart in our society.