

# Machine Dreams: *Retooling Fiction*

When John Steinbeck published *The Grapes of Wrath* in 1939, the story he was telling was not entirely new; journalists had been writing about the exodus of the Okies and Arkies from the Dustbowl throughout the 1930s, and several articles had already been written about conditions in the migrant labor camps of California. Steinbeck himself had published an article in the *San Francisco News* in 1936 called "The Harvest Gypsies" that provided him with much of the raw material for *The Grapes of Wrath*.

But conveying the basic facts about Dustbowl refugees was not the lasting achievement of the book. "Mr. Steinbeck did not have to create a world for the Joads," wrote a reviewer for *The New York Times* in 1939. "It is there. What he did do is to make you see it and feel it and understand it." Similarly, in Jayne Ann Phillips's new first novel\*, the facts that we are given about life in a small West Virginia town over the course of 40 years, from the Depression through the Vietnam war, are not all that revealing. The historical information could easily be gleaned from a survey of old *Life* magazines, or a talk with a sharp old-timer. Like *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Machine Dreams* is important not for the facts it provides about a particular era in history but for its empathy for people who lived through those times and its understanding of how their

lives connected to other lives. These are, of course, qualities that we expect all fiction to possess. But little of the fiction produced today manages to communicate this feeling. The reason, I would argue, stems from the inability or unwillingness of most novelists to draw upon the kind of broad understanding of society that has always informed the best literature.

*Machine Dreams* tells the story of two generations of the Hampson family: Jean and her husband Mitch, their daughter Danner, and their son Billy. During the thirties, Jean endures a girlhood with a father gone alcoholic from Depression misfortune. In the war years, Mitch serves in the South Pacific, out of direct combat but not out of sight of the dead and wounded, who haunt him for years afterward. The war over, Jean and Mitch marry and begin to raise a family. The texture of their lives is exactly what you'd expect: VFW dances, parades, new consumer goods delivered in the postwar prosperity. The details of archetypal small-town life are all here—lights on the front porch, backseat sexual initiations, sidewalk sages and busybodies, doctors named "Reb"—but these are rendered unstereotypically, with a richness that speaks of Phillips's understanding of real life, and not an idea of real life. Against this backdrop, the dissolution of the couple's marriage and the death of the son, Billy,

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\**Machine Dreams*. Jayne Anne Phillips. Dutton, \$16.95.

B Y W I L L I A M M C G O W A N

in Vietnam, acquire a deeper significance.

"Easy to tell good from evil," reminisces Jean Hampson in describing the moral clarity of the war years. But in the years that follow, the lines are not so clearly drawn; all the old certainties are threatened. You can see it in the contrast between Mitch's war experience and Billy's. Stationed in the Pacific, Mitch writes in a letter home that the thought of his half-sister being able to walk down Main Street fills him with a sense of purpose. Isn't the idea of a Main Street where people exchange talk "a small but human reason" we're in the war in the first place? he asks. In Vietnam, Billy has no such comforting connection to the home front. "I'm with Luke and the crew and we live in the chopper," he writes. "These guys are the only country I know of and they are what I am defending. I'm not stupid enough to think my country is over here."

Like other novels in the mainstream of American fiction today, *Machine Dreams* is about love, death, divorce, and family dissolution. But it differs in one crucial way: its insistence that these things be understood as part of the life of the community. The characters are revealed not only by what is happening to them but also by what is going on around them. Historical events come to bear indirectly on the narrative; for example, a young Hampson cousin develops a lifelong heart murmur due to a wartime penicillin shortage, and long after his own war experience, Mitch listens to the sound of his own heartbeat and hears "the Guinea tides" he heard as a young man. Such narrative devices make *Machine Dreams* something of a "political" novel, although not in the same sense that novels about Washington are political. Instead of exploring politics itself, *Machine Dreams* shows the impact that changes in society have on the lives of its characters.

### Fiction like us

Why does such a novel seem so unusual today? Certainly we must recognize Phillips's uncommon skill as a storyteller as part of the reason. But another reason has less to do with the merits of this particular novel than with the general state of American fiction. More and more, American novels seem removed from the ordinary concerns of life that weave various social classes and special interest groups into something we might call a society. Great American novels, whether they depict a broad slice of humanity, like *Huckleberry Finn*, or an elite, like *The House of*

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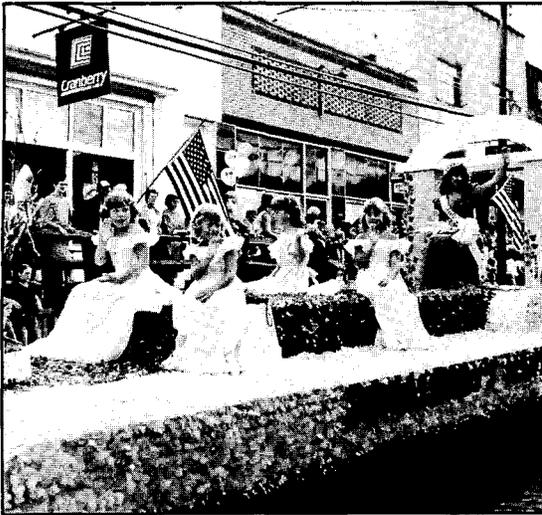
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*Mirth*, have always reflected an understanding of the fabric of American life—a sense of how this story fits into the broader pattern of our culture. Today, however, there is a growing tendency for novelists to reveal only the obsessions of one segment of the population—the literary upper middle class. As Earl Shorris put it recently in *The New York Times Book Review*, "We are in danger of creating a national literature of growing up and getting divorced."

Consider three recent books by up-and-coming novelists depicting life in New York City. There's *Bright Lights, Big City*, a first novel by Jay McInerney, a former fact-checker for *The New Yorker*. McInerney's book has received much acclaim for its satirical depiction of the yuppie subculture. The novel follows his protagonist (also a former fact-checker for *The New Yorker*) entertainingly and accurately enough on a coke-jag through Manhattan's trendiest clubs, but there's little insight along the way into the significance of this world. Then there's Emily Listfield's *It Was Gonna Be Like Paris*, which explores the lives of lower-Manhattan bohemians through an impressionistic collection of diary-like ravings by a New Wave groupie desperately searching for artistic truth and sexual intensity. How such yearnings connect to the rest of us is never made clear. Finally, there's Janet Hobbouse's *Dancing in the Dark*, in which a young corporate wife teams up with a group of Eurofag designer types to seek excitement and fulfillment in downtown discos and boutiques. Hobbouse doesn't even *try* to be satirical in her depiction of this quest.

The problem with these novels is not that they confine themselves to the upper reaches of soci-

Courtesy of Jim Comstock



***The details of small-town life are all here—lights on the front porch, backseat sexual initiations, sidewalk sages and busybodies, doctors named “Reb.”***

ty; many great novels have explored the manners of the elite. Rather, it is that these books do not seem to be informed by a sense of what lies beyond the immediate settings. One never feels as though there's any life occurring just outside the frame. Without a sense of perspective as to where their characters fit into a broader social context, these writers can never get any critical distance on what they are describing, and can never cut to the quick with any insights about habits or tastes.

This is a problem not only with the younger generation of writers. You can see it also in the work of those who are a few years ahead of the McInerneys and the Listfields. Take John Irving's *The World According to Garp*. The fact that the book portrays the life of a writer who resembles Irving himself shouldn't necessarily be a hindrance; after all, lives that have meaning are being lived in prep schools and college campuses, just as they are in factories and ghettos. But because Irving lacks a true understanding of the world beyond these settings, the only way he knows to introduce a sense of what is happening to American society is through cartoonish depictions of political hysteria—for example, the “Ellen Jamesians,” fanatical feminists who cut out their tongues to demonstrate devotion to their cause, and who ultimately kill Garp. For all its humor and narrative power, no one would ever mistake *The World According to Garp* for a novel that helped us understand American culture.

## From cadres to class snobs

One reason that the view of the world we receive from our fiction is so inadequate is that novelists tend to see social concerns as a distraction from the novel's true mission, which is to explore the self. This idea evolved from a serious debate that gripped American intellectuals in the forties, which in turn grew out of broad political, social and cultural changes occurring at the time.

Before 1940, there was a rich tradition of American fiction informed by a broad social awareness. It reached back into the nineteenth century to such writers as Twain and Melville and into the twentieth century with novelists like Dos Passos and Faulkner. But at the beginning of this century, a more narrow form, “social realism,” took hold in the works of Theodore Dreiser and James T. Farrell, and during the thirties this form was embraced by the growing ranks of leftist political activists who were radicalized by the Great Depression. Some of these writers joined the Communist Party; many more had intellectual sympathies. As the politics of the genre grew more fervent than the aesthetics, social realism became heavy-handed and lifeless. By the forties writers were turning to modernism, which placed individual consciousness above social consciousness. An earlier generation of European practitioners of the form—writers like James Joyce and Virginia Woolf—became the new literary heroes in America.

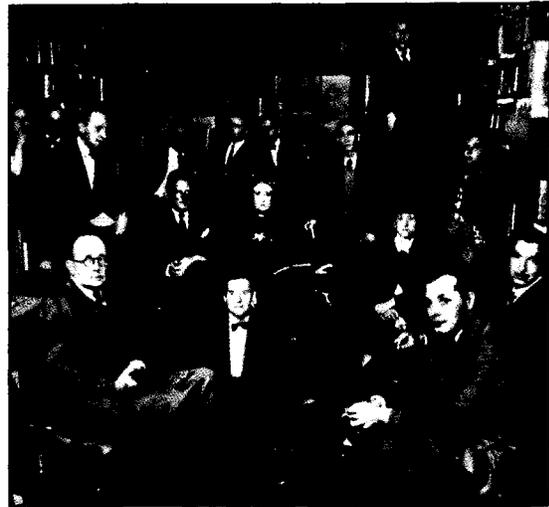
A key reason for this change in literary taste was a growing disillusion with the Soviet experiment. As news of the purge trials trickled in, radical politics lost its aura, and with the signing of the Hitler-Stalin pact the disillusion was complete for all but the most hardened Communists. Finding both Stalinism and Fascism equally repellent, *Partisan Review*, the premier intellectual journal of the day, called for the replacement of all academic orthodoxies in favor of “unlimited freedom of speculation, the union of free radicalism and modernism,” as Alfred Kazin recalls in his memoir of the period, *New York Jew*. This grew into a sweeping condemnation of any “official” culture. “It is a matter of cultural life and death to resist this tendency, regardless of one's specific political beliefs,” wrote Dwight MacDonald in *Partisan Review* on the eve of Pearl Harbor.

The end of the war brought calm and equanimity; intellectuals who had been inspired by FDR were embarrassed by Harry Truman, whom they considered a lowbrow. Public life and

politics gave way to an assortment of leisure pursuits that grew increasingly elaborate—and hierarchical. While the GI Bill, the housing boom, and general prosperity increased upward mobility, anxiety about social status increased along with it, until having the right tastes—a preference for *The New Yorker* over *Life* magazine, for foreign over domestic cars, and, most significant for fiction, for modernism over clumsy “message” novels like *Gentlemen’s Agreement* and *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*—became more important than money in determining social status at the upper levels. The most gifted writers of fiction, trembling at the thought of being branded “middlebrow,” were quickly caught up in the game themselves, and lost a sense of the broad panorama.

Why didn’t proletarian writers keep the tradition of social realism alive while the bards of the upper-middle class—from John Updike to Irving to McInerney—pandered to elite self-absorption? The answer is that, as much as we’d like to think creative genius has just as great a chance surfacing in the lower classes as it does in the upper, this is largely a delusion. Artistic and literary genius happens, in the main, in the class which can afford to pursue it: that is, the upper middle class. But this social class lives in a social vacuum. The civic institutions that once brought together people from different stations in life—public schools, the military—increasingly fail to do that. Neighborhoods are precisely indexed to income levels, robbing them of social diversity. Our community life has grown more undemocratic; why should our fiction—the mirror of that life—be any different?

It takes a very strong sense of rootedness to one place, an understanding of its history and social fabric, to develop the kind of imaginative reach that the best novelists give us. But people maturing in the postwar period have suffered more disjunction and mobility in their lives than any other previous generation. Increasingly throughout the fifties and sixties, corporations developed employee transfer policies that relocated rising executives every three years or so (mainly to keep them from establishing power bases from which to challenge the organization). This created a class of upper-middle-class people now in their twenties and thirties who never stayed in one place long enough to develop a feeling for community life. At the same time, divorce became endemic, splintering the sense of family—both immediate and extended—and the family legends so vital to a writer’s sense of



Courtesy of Frances Steloff

*The post-war literary generation assembles at the Gotham Book Mart to honor the Sitwells.*

himself and the culture at large. With family and community life so disrupted, it followed that the writer would feel a sense of disconnection, and that appreciation for the social diversity of the country would be stunted.

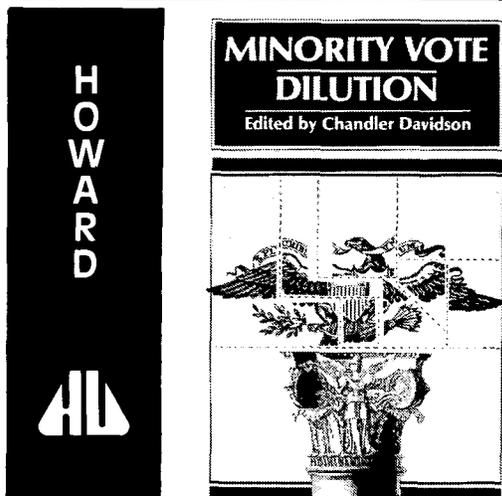
Another factor that eroded a sense for the broad community in our literature was the increasingly large role that universities came to play in the care and feeding of novelists. The academic cloister, in which more and more writers find themselves as a function of simple economic survival, has a great influence on what is thought and what is written. While it is laudable that university-sponsored writer-in-residence positions and tenured faculty appointments are keeping writers from starving in garrets or quitting altogether, the university may be doing more harm to literature than good. A recent article in *Esquire* explained how university writing program directors and visiting writers holding temporary teaching jobs have become the lead scouts in the search for rising literary talent. Meanwhile, through increasingly influential university presses, the universities have also taken over a large role in deciding who gets published. Not surprisingly, a high proportion of the novelists end up being academic writers (although to avoid a conflict of interest, universities may refrain from publishing members of their own faculties). Finally, it is the universities that produce the reviewers (or, broadly speaking, set the standards for non-academic reviewers) who evaluate the

books that get published. As *Esquire* summed it up: "The colleges and universities now—first by finding writers, then supporting them, and now by beginning to publish them, as well as making the ultimate judgment on them—seem just about ready to take over the entire business of publishing itself." The only thing left out of this process is a public to read these novels.

The worst thing about the rise of university writing programs and tenured professorships of creative writing is that it has brought credentialism into a field that had always been unusually free of it. The MFA in creative writing has become the MBA of the literary world; without it it's rare that someone will be able to break into the small circle of writers who can actually get their fiction published. Small wonder, then, that much fiction writing today seems the product of a professionalized class, with that class's own hierarchies and biases coloring its view of life. In a recent review of *Intro 13*, an anthology of writing from college writing programs around the country, the novelist Jaimy Gordon noted a striking preponderance of stories involving blue collar milieus—but found most of them unconvincing.

*"... provides an education in fundamental voting rights and the distribution of political power in America today."*

The New York Times Book Review



Howard University Press, 2900 Van Ness Street, N.W.  
Washington, DC 20008

As the university fiction factory has expanded its role in publishing, the notion that writers really work from intuition and imagination rather than from experience has gained currency in certain literary quarters. A true creative genius, it is argued, doesn't have to lead the old stereotypical "writerly" life in order to write about the world convincingly. He doesn't have to be the knockaround guy it was imagined he had to be—the bartender, the sailer, the ditchdigger, the rider of rails. The decline of this romantic notion, I would argue, has hurt fiction. To be sure, the old Hemingway ideal of running with the bulls in Pamplona had its ludicrous side. But surely *some* breadth of experience is required before one can write a novel that will express anything meaningful about life.

Danny Santiago's 1983 novel, *Famous All Over Town*, was presumed to be the work of a talented young Hispanic novelist from East Los Angeles. Then Danny Santiago was revealed to be Dan James, a 73-year-old WASP social activist who had been a classical Greek major at Yale. James spent nearly 35 years in the ghetto as a social worker and spent nearly 15 years crafting one of the most convincing novels ever written about Hispanic America. You'd think the literary world would have heaped praise on the author when it was revealed that he was an Anglo. But the critics chose instead to brood about the fraud that had been perpetuated on the public and to reevaluate the novel's "authenticity."

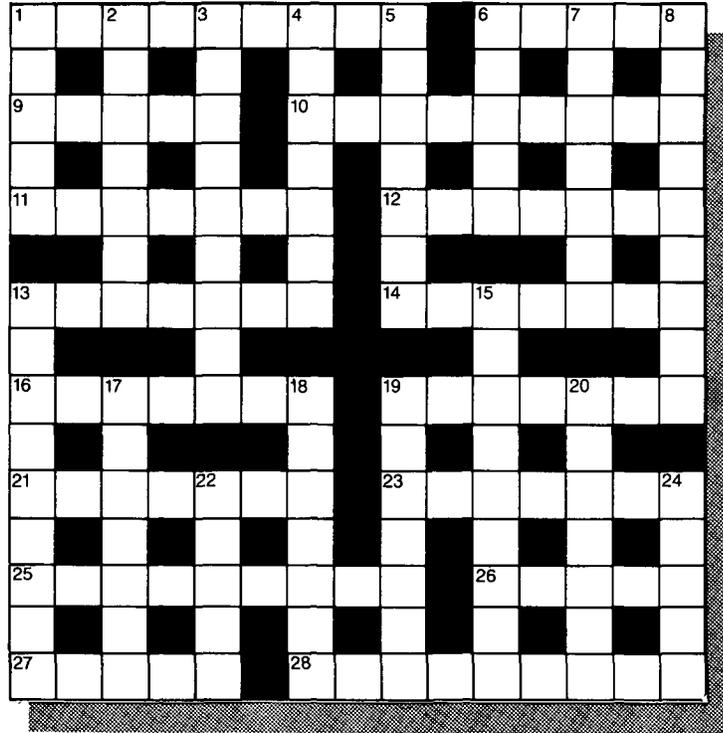
What's most baffling about the unwillingness of writers to take in the big picture is that Americans are hungry for this kind of writing. The enormous popularity of James Michener shows how much Americans crave fiction that provides some social and historical perspective, in this case quite explicit, for its characters. Unfortunately, while the Micheners make a lot of money, they do not make a great amount of art. Novelists like Phillips and James are among the few who recognize that an understanding of the broad fabric of society not only serves the muse but may also provide a way to reach beyond the tiny audience that now exists for "good" fiction.

Encouraging more novels like *Machine Dreams* is not a call for social tracts outfitted with the kind of cardboard characters that brought realism into such artistic disrepute with the *Partisan Review* crowd back in the forties. It is simply a matter of asking novelists to pick their heads out of the sand. We need more fiction that can show us how individual experience connects to the larger life of society. ■

# POLITICAL PUZZLE

by John Barclay

The numbers indicate the number of letters and words, e.g., (2, 3) means a two-letter word followed by a three-letter word. Groups of letters, e.g., USA, are treated as one word.



## ACROSS

1. International negotiations for limb stems? (4,5)
5. Cracks at the bargaining table. (5)
9. Roles played by unsuccessful candidate. (5)
10. Make a third more for revolutionary month. (9)
11. Pursuit of four in trial. (7)
12. Keep up blemish around this country. (7)
13. Service station signs are rife, surprisingly. (4, 3)
14. Strange, strange bold lad. (7)
16. Four years generated ten more. (3, 4)
19. Workshop constructed clumsily, i.e., later. (7)
21. Moved in and led after strange test. (7)
23. Injury is par for the course? (7)
25. Girl puts on a little weight before Roger's first emcee. (9)
26. Mistake in ferro-rubidium alloy. (5)

27. End of war is part we hear. (5)
28. Eponymous patriot for 2 Down. (9)

## DOWN

1. Give out ballot finally. (5)
2. Elaborate similes subject of 1 Across. (7)
3. Stop and meet train somehow. (9)
4. Golfer falling short? (7)
5. Toe mess gives an impression. (5, 2)
6. Walter and David, for example. (5)
7. State of popular princess. (7)
8. Alien about 50 is murderer. (9)
13. Most of pad arranged for benefit of needy. (4, 5)
15. Most boring when moving air rested. (9)
17. Russian territory wrong way to Sienna. (7)
18. English mother takes in a kind of poetry a little bit. (7)
19. Jolson's Algerian city or 9 Across. (4-3)

20. Unusual merit in the meantime. (7)
22. Excellent soul backs cad. (5)
24. Rhone-based flier. (5)

Answers to January puzzle:

