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Storytelling Tradition Lives in “The Outlaw Album”

Kalin Clements · Thursday, October 13th, 2011

The Outlaw Album just might be the most eagerly anticipated book release in years that doesn't involve insufferably prude emo-glampires or awkward tween warlocks. After all, this is the first book we've seen from Daniel Woodrell since his masterful '06 novel, *Winter's Bone*. Forget the disappointing irony that it took a film (the 2010 adaptation of *Bone*) to get a writer critics spent years calling American literature's best-kept-secret the readership he deserved. He has it now. The question is: what's he going to do with it? Anyone who's followed Woodrell's career can easily answer that question – Woodrell always delivers.



Many of our country's greatest literary lights suffer from quality inconstancy. Hence, John Updike caps a career as one America's most esteemed modern novelists with a paint-by-numbers embarrassment like *Terrorist* and the maladroit fumble that was *The Widows of Eastwick*. Philip Roth gets it right with *Exit Ghost* then follows it up with the thoroughly humbling *The Humbling*. Fortunately, Woodrell doesn't share this hit-or-miss quality. Consistency may be the hobgoblin of small minds, but it's an admirable trait for a writer to aspire to and one Woodrell can rightfully claim.

Woodrell hearkens back to an older age of story-telling. It would be hard to draw a more obvious literary progression than from William Faulkner to Flannery O'Connor to Daniel Woodrell. Woodrell's novels have always seemed like a middle ground between these predecessors – but *The Outlaw Album* (perhaps because it's strictly short stories) seems fully in the camp of the latter. It's as if he's found Flannery O'Connor's secret formula for short story perfection and boiled it down to its essence. Instead of the longer, more character-driven pieces she wrote, Woodrell starts the story just an hour or two before the violent, often shocking, climax we know to expect at the end of an O'Connor story – then slows things down enough to fill us in on what came before.

For Woodrell fans, the fact that *Outlaw* is a book of short stories may be a bit of a let-down. But if short stories it's to be – one could do no better than *The Outlaw Album*. Similar to the trajectory of the Woodrell canon, the further one gets through the book, the more impact the stories have – the more layers of meaning exist to be peeled back. He kicks things off with some character sketches and short vignettes. There's an old man who murders his neighbor for killing his wife's dog, then returns to crow over the corpse whenever the mood strikes him. There's the harrowing monologue from a girl who cares for “her baby,” a paralyzed uncle who sexually terrorized women until he was finally struck down, in the act, by his niece. There's a prodigal son returned, who at first finds himself out of touch with the rhythms and casual violence of his Ozarks homeland until it rises

again crying out for blood. And there's a father frozen in time by the disappearance of his daughter, surviving on suspicion and heartbreak.

By the fifth story, the mystique of the land that Woodrell so expertly summons has reached full power. It's as if Woodrell were the Ghost of Christmas Future, floating with us over the rugged Ozarks landscape, allowing us to peak into the windows of men and women who are each on the verge of some violent reckoning. "The Black Step" is a powerful tale of an Iraqi veteran returned home to find himself in the midst of another kind of war – between his ill mother and the conniving town girl who might be carrying his child.

Next up is "The Night Stand", arguably *Outlaw's* most powerful statement, about the lingering consequences of war borne by two generations of servicemen that come to a head when the story's protagonist wakes in the dead of night to find a naked man howling at the foot of his bed. After he does what his instincts have trained him to do, he slowly comes to see the young shell-shocked intruder as a reflection of himself, and carries the pain and knowledge with him back into a life forever changed.

After the breathtaking end of "The Night Stand", Woodrell provides something his work has only hinted at before – comic relief. "Two Things" is a hilarious vignette in which a social worker who has taken a special interest in a convict who writes lofty poetry, visits the convict's parents only to find them unimpressed with their son's "gift." When the social worker reads the convict's father some of his son's recently published poems, the following scene occurs:

"Hold it right there I tell her. That is a poem that actually happen several times lady. Cecil a goddamn thief."

"No no no. He wants to make amends for it. He wants to overcome the guilt of what he done."

I tell her it would be in the hundreds of dollars to do that. Is these poems going to get him that kind of money? My question is beneath her. She won't answer it.

"This poem has meanings for all the people," she says. "They look into it and see themselves."

That is nice and interesting I tell her but how come Wilma and me has to pay for this poem all alone? Everybody who looks in it and sees their selves ought to pay some back to us."

As the social worker prepares to make her exit, exasperated by the father's refusal to help his son gain early parole by letting him move back in, the father/narrator's parting shot is: Look lady I say. Wish Cecil well but it is like this. He ain't gonna get no more poems off of us.

Another standout is "Woe to Live On", which is also the name of Woodrell's second novel (though later editions were published as *Ride with the Devil* in an attempt to capitalize off Ang Lee's poorly received film adaptation). "Woe"'s narrator is a young Dutch-immigrant, Jake Roedel, a reckless boy pushed by loyalty and desperate circumstances to join the Missouri Bushwhackers in several bloody raids on Jayhawkers, Union sympathizers and innocent bystanders – culminating in the Lawrence Massacre. Now, almost 50 years later, Roedel stands on the precipice of mortality when the last of his old night-riding pals, Coleman Younger, passes. The main events of "Woe" (minus the love story) are retold in a series of memories and half-conversations with Roedel's son,

who's ashamed of the atrocities committed by his father in those days. This is skillfully done. Instead of being accurately recalled, as one might expect, the situations in the novel have been reworked in a manner evocative of the faulty, self-serving nature of human memory.

The final two stories in *The Outlaw Album* – “One United” and “Returning to the River” – are dreamy, desperate encounters. One narrated by a female schizophrenic we can only assume is several days off her meds, the other by a man whose brother burns down the neighbor's house so his dying father can spend his final days enjoying a view of the river that house once blocked. Both are tight, fascinating, and hint at larger dramas both before and after the events we read about, as all the best short stories do.

If, as Michael Stipe recently quoted, the skill in going to a party is knowing when to leave – the same holds true for the short story. Woodrell has mastered that skill, he seems to know exactly when a story has reached its pitch-perfect moment, the instant when everything else is either denouement or the predictable fulfillment of a promised conflict. His stories end at a point where, before we can start the next piece, we're inclined to sit for a spell, playing out the rest of the story in our heads, wondering what might have happened next to characters who, in an incredibly short period of time, have become real to us.

While it would've been great to see another novel from Woodrell, *The Outlaw Album* should keep the appetites of his readers satisfied until his next one's released. Let's just hope it doesn't take him another four years to get around to it.

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