

THE NOVELS OF ROBERT CANTWELL

By Peter Donahue



RETROSPECTIVE REVIEWS

Kurt Cobain would have identified closely with the characters in Robert Cantwell's novels. He would have recognized their youthful desolation, their urge to flee the sodden, poverty-stricken mill towns in which they live. "I don't want to be dead any longer," says William McArdle, the most sensitive, most desperate of Cantwell's characters, as if reciting the lyrics of a Nirvana song.

Robert Cantwell (1908-1978) was born in Little Falls (now Vader), Washington, a town founded by his grandfather. He grew up in Onalaska, where his father ran a Carlisle lumber mill, and eventually moved with his family to Aberdeen, where he graduated from high school. After one year at the University of Washington, however, Cantwell returned to Gray's Harbor and went to work in a plywood factory in Hoquiam. Though neither town is named, Aberdeen is generally acknowledged as the setting of Cantwell's first novel, *Laugh and Lie Down* (1931), and Hoquiam the setting of his second novel, *The Land of Plenty* (1934).

The hopelessness of insurmountable debt plagues the lives of the characters in *Laugh and Lie Down*. Following his father's death, William McArdle moves with his mother and brother to a new town to escape the family's debts. William works the night shift at a local factory, hoping to get ahead, but soon realizes he's on the same path as his father, who "killed himself with overwork, only in an effort to save [his family] from the poverty in which his death left them." William soon becomes involved with a hustler named Biddle who starts a collection agency

to deflect his own enormous debt. "At my present rate," he tells William, "I'll be out of debt in about forty-five years," and then tries to enlist him in various money-making schemes, including robbing two loggers who have come to town to cash their paychecks.

The only person keeping William from total despair is Berenice. He remembers how she first appeared to him through "the gray afternoon, the gritty pavement, the nut-like smell of sawdust in the air," and how Kenneth, his alcoholic older brother, stole her from him shortly after. From then on, and still in love with her, William can only watch Berenice's tortured relationship with Kenneth, until one rainy afternoon, listening to the mournful whistles of the mills echo across the harbor, he resolves

to leave town. In a final act of magnanimity, he invites Berenice and Kenneth to join him, yet as they drive south through the clear-cut terrain—"a hint of wilderness in the bleached stumps and the clusters of firs"—he nods off at the wheel and the car careens off the road.

As the critic Merrill Lewis says, "William is the antithesis of the traditional Western hero."

His is not the story of pioneer self-reliance, the kind that's based on the "spots of historical interest" marked by roadside plaques. Rather, it's the story of the dehumanizing consequences of the industrialized West—a story given even greater edge in Cantwell's second novel, *The Land of Plenty*.

Often classified as "proletarian fiction," *The Land of Plenty* offers a subtle, sometimes droll view of relations between

workers and management. While Cantwell shared the left-wing politics of literary contemporaries like John Dos Passos, *The Land of Plenty* resists political dogma as it sorts through the psychological and ideological implications of worker unrest. The novel opens with the line "Suddenly the lights went out," and for the next 200 pages the factory workers and their supervisors, in Brechtian fashion, grope through the dark trying to figure out what to do next.

The novel is told through multiple perspectives, including Carl, the foreman and "efficiency engineer," and Hagen, the head machinist. The factory blackout foregrounds the antagonism between the two characters, and Carl's ultimate firing of Hagen sparks the strike that takes place in the second half of the novel. Other pivotal characters include Winters, an Indian worker whose wife lies dying in the hospital; McMahon, the dim and overwrought superintendent; Walt, a college student working in the factory who sides with Carl; and Johnny, Hagen's son, who simply wants to do right by his father and fellow workers.

Set prior to passage of the 1935 National Labor Relations Act (or Wagner Act), which encouraged collective bargaining, *The Land of Plenty* is not a union novel. Long-simmering outrage over their exploitation leads the workers to strike, and while they hope their walk-out will spread to neighboring factories and mills, they lack the organization to bring this about. They also lack the clout to garner local support, as evidenced by the misleading newspaper reports that condemn the strikers as a violent mob.

The Land of Plenty sympathetically depicts the plight of American workers in the early 20th century while recognizing the moral uncertainties—and




Robert Cantwell

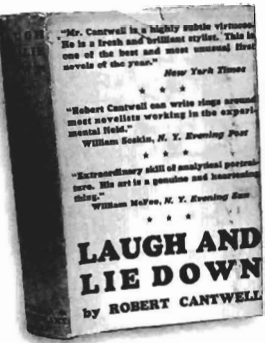
mortal danger—of attempting to redress the wrongs done them. As the strike devolves into a riot that results in several deaths, Johnny, seeking reassurance that all has not been lost, “hugged the memory of that first sweet hour when they danced out of the factory; it was a lamp that kept him warm.”

Robert Cantwell’s writing propelled him out of Aberdeen to New York City, where he worked for nearly half a century as a writer and editor for *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *Sports Illustrated*, and published several works of literary biography, including an important treatment of Nathaniel Hawthorne. In 1972, returning to where his writing career began, he published *The Hidden Northwest*, an unusual yet insightful study of Northwest history and culture.

The Hidden Northwest reexamines figures such as Alexander McKay, David Thompson, Theodore Winthrop, and Cantwell’s own pioneering ancestor Michael Troutman Simmons, who served as an Indian agent for territorial governor Isaac Stevens. The work is rich with such revealing material, underscored by Cantwell’s recognition that the Northwest is a region “whose history was shaped by

ideology”—a view that also pervades his two remarkable novels, *Laugh and Lie Down* and *The Land of Plenty*. 

Peter Donahue’s new novel, Clara and Merritt, about longshoremen and Teamsters in Seattle in the 1930s and 1940s, was published in June.



Additional Reading

Interested in learning more about the topics covered in this issue? The sources listed here will get you started.

“Hurry” Cain

“Raising Cain,” by Robert Justin Goldstein. *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 98 (Spring 2007).

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Courage in a Dangerous World: The Political Writings of Eleanor Roosevelt, ed. by Allida M. Black. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000.

Day of the Dragon

The Settlement and Diffusion of the Chinese in Seattle, by Doug and Art Chin. Seattle: Shorey’s Books, 1974.

Straw Hats, Sandals and Steel: The Chinese in Washington State, by Lorraine Hildebrandt. Tacoma: Washington State Historical Society, 1977.

Reflections of Seattle’s Chinese Americans: The First Hundred Years, by Ron Chew. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995.

Scandal at the First National Bank of Vancouver

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Half Starved

River of Promise: Lewis and Clark on the Columbia, by David Nicandri. Bismarck, North Dakota: Dakota Institute, 2010.

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Undaunted Courage: Meriwether Lewis, Thomas Jefferson, and the Opening of the American West, by Stephen Ambrose. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996.

Lewis and Clark Among the Indians, by James P. Ronda. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002.

A Crofter’s Tale

The Blackhouse Families, edited by Mairi Macritchie. Isle of Lewis, Scotland: Gearrannan Trust, 2000.

Memoirs of Nisqually: Joseph Heath, edited by Lucille McDonald. Fairfield, Washington: Ye Galleon Press, 1979.

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Journal of Occurrences at Muck Station, 1858-1859, by Edward Huggins. Tacoma: Tacoma Public Library, 1984.