

## 4 / Hick Chic, or, the “White Trash Aesthetic”

Bill Buford’s introduction of dirty realism to Britain led to two important studies of the new fiction written by British authors. The first of these, Duncan Webster’s *Looka Yonder!: The Imaginary America of Populist Culture* (1988), looked at the new fiction (as well as American movies, plays, and popular music) in relation to populist ideas both past and present. Webster’s analysis is important because it locates the new fiction not only in relation to a revival of the American short story but also to a “return to regional voices,” a movement in subject matter “away from the cities and campuses and suburbs to uncover forgotten regions and characters.”<sup>1</sup> For Webster, “[t]here is an ambivalent sense of place” to the new writing, a “transformed regionalism testifying to the relationship between the local and the national popular culture”: a regionalism, in other words, that has to admit to the presence of McDonalds and cable TV, for as Webster points out, “a South watching MTV is a long way from the world of Faulkner” (4). A follow-up book-length study is Nick Hornby’s *Contemporary American Fiction* (1992), which has chapters on the *New Yorker* short story, Raymond Carver, Anne Tyler, Bobbie Ann Mason, Richard Ford, Jayne Anne Phillips and Joy Williams, and Andre Dubus. Like Buford and Webster, Hornby is more interested in content than form, finding, for example, that nearly all of the writers he discusses “have made attempts to come to terms with the demands of topography which inevitably accompany realist fiction.”<sup>2</sup>

Return to regional voices. Ambivalent sense of place. Transformed regionalism. It is interesting to hear the British using these terms so unselfconsciously. American literary critics, by contrast, tend to look on the whole concept of regionalism with fear and suspicion. Our writers avoid such a designation like some dread disease because they know that “locale” is often read

to mean “local,” and “local” to mean “marginal” or “unimportant.” Thus the regional is taken to be the opposite of national, and regionalism is taken as minor league at best.

However, what happens when the margins become the center, as has been taking place in American writing for going on two decades now?

In March 1985, Jonathan Yardley, the *Washington Post*'s Pulitzer Prize-winning book critic, published a column in which he scanned the horizon of contemporary American fiction and found it dominated, much to his chagrin, by something he called “Hick Chic.” “Here’s a tip for trendies,” Yardley wrote: “Keep an eye out for Hick Chic. The first to spot it was my friend the ferociously opinionated novelist, who recently sent along this order: ‘Here is your assignment. Would you please write an essay explaining why in a nation full of yuppies, conservatives and materialists, with college campuses full of business students and future lawyers, rural poverty is all the rage, as in *Love Medicine* and *The Beans of Egypt Maine?*’”<sup>3</sup> Yardley’s answer was to proclaim the new rural writing a fad, the literary equivalent of disco or the Hoola Hoop. (Hence the term “chic,” which implies a certain mindless conformity to the current fashion.) As long as fickle, middle-class readers in the cities retained a taste for it, hick chic would enjoy its brief moment in the sun; afterward, it would be consigned, as all fads eventually are, to the back closet of yesterday’s fashion. After all, Yardley wrote, “[t]he urban faddists haven’t fastened on Hick Chic out of any inherent merit or interest that they discern in it, but because they see it as yet another product with which to bedeck their lives.” What urban readers were after (and for Yardley, all readers are “urban”) was not “the real life of the countryside” but “the *idea* of country” and the various consumer products that went along with it—Jeep Cherokees, renovated barns, Ralph Lauren apparel, and, yes, a few trendy rural novels to throw on their faux-antique coffee tables. Far from signaling any real return to the land, hick chic was just a slick repackaging of a worn pastoral myth.

In coining the term hick chic, Yardley lumped together a vast array of eighties cultural phenomena—everything from serious literary novels to Hollywood films to country-and-western line dancing—without ever distinguishing between their different origins and effects. Nevertheless, a broad cultural note had been struck, and several more sophisticated critics responded with analyses of their own.

The first was Ann Hulbert, whose review article “Rural Chic” appeared later that year in the *New Republic*. Hulbert began by distinguishing between Hollywood’s take on the rural—movies such as *Country*, *Places in the Heart*,

*The River, Witness*, and so on—and the more serious literary efforts of writers such as Louise Erdrich, Bobbie Ann Mason, Larry McMurtry, and Douglas Unger. “‘Hick chic,’ a craving among the quiche crowd for pure country vistas and prettified country values, helps account for the screen fad,” Hulbert wrote. “But what might be called ‘hick shock,’ the fall-out from recent decades of change in rural America, lies behind the more serious literary rural renaissance.”<sup>4</sup> For Hulbert, the deeper inspiration for hick chic was not materialism but “populist romanticism, what [Richard] Hofstadter called the ‘soft’ side of America’s agrarian ethos” (25). This “soft” version of the agrarian myth, which typically features a rugged, embattled individual (or family) standing up to a corrupt, eastern power (the banks, say, or the government), has always existed alongside a less popular, “harder” version, which doesn’t “invoke a golden agrarian age destroyed by a capitalist conspiracy” but instead emphasizes “a sense of isolation, interrupted by crises that promote a tenuous, not triumphant, solidarity” (29). What Yardley had been calling “hick chic” was about romanticism, pure and simple; whereas “hick shock”—its dark, literary other—was more about realism, the grim realism of the countryside, “where discontent and disorientation have long been as common as dirt” (29).

Diane Johnson added her voice a few weeks later in a November 1985 *New York Times* review of Mason’s *In Country* and Anne Tyler’s *The Accidental Tourist*. Johnson, like Hulbert, distinguished between the two dominant takes on the rural, the one tending toward romanticism, the other toward a grim, Tobacco Road–style realism. But for Johnson, what was at issue in the new fiction was not just the question of content and its interpretation. There were formal questions to be raised as well. Novels like Mason’s and Tyler’s shared a “meticulous, literal description, the faintest hint of caricature, and a long narrative distance in which the author is very detached, a viewer rather than an interpreter.”<sup>5</sup> Gone from the American literary landscape were the subjective, writer-as-hero novels of the 1970s “in which the character is identified with the real life of the author.” In place of this “fiction of the self,” Johnson wrote, the new fiction had constructed a “fiction of the ‘other,’ in which the authors, very detached, describe mostly what can be seen, and the clarity of the visual detail strangely objectifies the characters.” Of course, it was not as if such a technical shift could be achieved without serious consequences for both content and interpretation. Books like *In Country* or *The Accidental Tourist*, with their long authorial distance and brand-name realism, were effectively empty of any real substance, Johnson implied. They were “Reaganesque dream novels,” Norman Rockwell–like

takes on the country life that lacked “confrontation” with “the real world” and offered, in the end, only a sort of “folksy escapism.” Nevertheless, as such they were “books of our times,” dull reflections of the “national mood,” which was also, in the mid-1980s, lacking in “confrontation.”

Writing in the *Nation* in May 1986, Jack Killey found fault with the new fiction for exactly the opposite reason. For Killey, a self-proclaimed “rube” from Hiram, Ohio, the “perpetrators of hick chic”—Carolyn Chute, Bobbie Ann Mason, Anne Tyler, and others—had “loosed upon the serious reading public a menagerie of troubled, gloomy hayseeds and ruminative rustics” who had nothing in common with their real-life counterparts in places like Hiram, who were for the most part stable and satisfied, having not “read enough modern fiction to know that they should be unhappy.”<sup>6</sup> “These are the sins of the country,” Killey concluded: “smooth diurnal rhythms; relatively stable social institutions; a propensity to cure rather than court ornamental disease; indifference to self-flagellation and neurotic self-examination; above all, flat rejection of oppression as the universal human condition. For these sins, the country is being ravaged by writers whose pleasant and rather tame surroundings cannot provide the emotional pain and the Dostoyevskian troika traces that their craft and their readers demand.” The “wimps, losers, sociopaths, psychopaths, drunkards, malcontents and sleazebags” of contemporary rural fiction were simply not drawn from real life, Killey argued, but were the self-conscious creations of the “jangled minds of attitudinizing, cosmopolitan authors who have run out of asphalt and crabgrass on which to park their garish sound trucks.”

These separate meditations on the meaning of hick chic foreground some of the problems readers in the mid-1980s had when encountering the new fiction. For despite their differences, which are really more political than aesthetic anyway, all three reviewers were pointing to essentially the same problem: a certain discrepancy between the avowed *content* of the new fiction, which was regional in orientation, and the *form* it tended to take, which, while realist at its core, was also disturbingly minimalist in its assumptions about narration (“long narrative distance”) and character (“the faintest hint of caricature”). It is not surprising that a literary development that followed so closely upon the heels of minimalism (and for some critics was indistinguishable from it) would display a certain residue of minimalist technique. Writers like Bobbie Ann Mason, Jayne Anne Phillips, and Richard Ford are in some respects strayed minimalists for whom place, region, and landscape became far more important than it ever was for Raymond Carver or Ann

Beattie. However, their subject, especially in the case of Mason, is not popular culture per se, but how pop culture intersects with, and sometimes overwhelms, regional cultures once thought to be isolated and unique.

*In Country* (1985), Mason's first novel, is a case in point. It would be difficult to think of another novel as thoroughly concerned with the world of popular culture as this one is. Samantha Hughes, the novel's seventeen-year-old protagonist, is characterized far more by what television shows she watches (*M\*A\*S\*H*) and what popular music she is obsessed with (Michael Jackson, Bruce Springsteen) than by the fact that she lives in Kentucky or has a grandmother she calls "Mamaw." Yet *In Country* is a long way from being a typical minimalist story in which brand names and other references to popular culture are carted out as mere surface details.

Mason has worked hard (too hard, probably) to document not just a particular era or year, but a particular summer. The songs her characters hear on the radio, the movies they see, the episodes they watch on television (including the reruns), the events they hear about on the nightly news—all of these are as faithfully reported as the details in a work of nineteenth-century naturalism. But more than this, Mason has also endowed these details with a certain metaphorical power. The novel is above all about Samantha Hughes's attempts to come to terms with the death of her father, who was killed in Vietnam, and the deteriorating condition of her uncle Emmett, who has begun to show signs of exposure to Agent Orange. The *M\*A\*S\*H* episodes Samantha and Emmett watch throughout the novel work as constant reminders of the lingering effects of the Vietnam experience (*M\*A\*S\*H*, as pop culture critics have long noted, was always more about Vietnam than Korea), as do the Michael Jackson *Victory* tour and the Bruce Springsteen *Born in the U.S.A.* tour.

Ultimately, there is even a kind of historical resonance in the fact that this novel is set in the South, for as Fred Hobson points out in *The Southern Writer in the Postmodern World* (1991), "*In Country* is a novel very much concerned with history, and Sam a character nearly as single-minded as Quentin Compson and Jack Burden in her attempts to unlock the secrets of the past."<sup>7</sup> Hobson goes to great lengths to show how similar in spirit were the South after Appomattox and America after Vietnam, but what concerns us here is just his underlying point: that minimalist fiction of the sort represented by *In Country* "requires a nonminimalist reader" (19). That is to say, if we are to get beyond the problems experienced by readers like Diane Johnson and Ann Hulbert in the eighties, we must bring to our reading an understanding of how the

minimalist idiom is forever limiting, sometimes interestingly, sometimes not, the content it would nevertheless have us explore in depth.

Larry Brown’s *Father and Son* (1996), to take a more recent example by an otherwise excellent writer, notably fails in this regard. Set in 1968, the novel traces the doings of “bad seed” Glen Davis in the five days following his release from Mississippi’s Parchman Prison. Glen drinks, he rants, he rapes and murders. When not raping or murdering, Glen drives around in his beat-up car, visits family in the backwoods, goes fishing, drinks some more. In pursuit for most of the novel (although not when it counts), is right-minded sheriff Bobby Blanchard, Glen’s half-brother. Bobby is light to Glen’s dark, a good man disgusted by evil. He’s also, quite naturally, in love with Glen’s girl, Jewel.

Depending on how you look at it, Brown has either created a hopelessly clichéd plot or made a heroic attempt to take on big themes and trade in powerful archetypes. The situations depicted in the novel, and the aura pervading its every word, remind one of Faulkner’s *Sanctuary* (1929) and Cormac McCarthy’s *Child of God* (1973), which is another way of saying that *Father and Son* aims for inclusion in a very exclusive tradition of southern Gothic. But in the end, *Father and Son* feels like a decidedly small creation. Its frame has been built to bear the weight of epic tragedy, but the characters at its center have been lightly, even shallowly conceived. Unlike Faulkner’s great villains, Popeye and Joe Christmas, there is nothing about Glen Davis to make the reader think, “There go we all, but for the grace of (God/education/upbringing/economic advantage, etc).” Nor is there anything about the town—Faulkner’s old stomping ground, after all—to make us think this is our town, all towns. Instead, we are made to respond as we do to the pointless violence of so much recent cinema; we are merely appalled.

The problem, as I’ve hinted above, is the small arsenal of technique with which Brown goes after his subject. The action is divided into short sections, each either objectively reported or seen from the point of view of a particular character. Thoughts are rarely reported, and background information is fed to us primarily as images, never in full-blown flashback—a technique that keeps the book moving, to be sure, but finally leaves the reader disappointed in the terrain that’s been covered. The prose is spare and unadorned, reading very much like the descriptive passages in a screenplay. The whole book, in fact, has a decidedly cinematic feel; what’s been lost is a certain richness in the depiction of inner and outer motivation we expect when reading a novel. Glen’s actions are indeed horrible, and Brown does not flinch in delivering

them to us, but in the few times when the narrator does attempt to account for them, either by letting us catch glimpses of Glen's past or by recording the jumble of his thoughts, the effect is to create more distance between reader and characters, not less.

Take, for example, the method by which we are given to understand that Glen accidentally killed his own brother in childhood. The information comes to us not through Glen himself, but through his father, Virgil. Even when ideas do come to us through Glen, as when he thinks of his dead mother in the moment before he commits his second rape, the effect is almost cartoonish in its sparseness and the depth of feeling it insists upon: "She was almost as beautiful as his mother, and he began to undress slowly, quietly, taking great pleasure in it, thinking of how it was going to be, how fine to finally join with that flesh."<sup>8</sup> Moments like these seem contrived, insisted upon, precisely because the technique used to register them is at odds with the gravity of what's being registered. Throughout *Father and Son*, it is as if Brown has gone hunting big game with the smallest caliber of rifles; again and again, he strikes out at his subject, but in the end it merely limps off, wounded but never fully laid to rest.

In truth, hick chic caused more problems for book reviewers than just its mixing of minimalist techniques with regional subject matter. Another problem reviewers like Yardley had in assessing the new fiction—one that they rarely confessed to in their reviews but that became obvious once they began to grapple with content—was that, by the mid-1980s, American literature was being authored increasingly by just the sorts of people who once only appeared as characters. I refer, of course, to the "great unwashed": the legions of southern "white trash," Appalachian poor, reservation Indians, and barrio Hispanics who, through government loans and the presence of the writing programs, had gained for the first time in American history not only literacy in the sense of being able to read the newspaper but also the expertise and knowledge to write books about who they were and where they came from. (African Americans, with their long history of authorship in this country, are clearly a separate category altogether.) Larry Brown is a case in point. The son of a sharecropper and poorly educated, Brown became a writer largely through a tremendous act of will.

Consider also the case of Dorothy Allison, author of the short story collection *Trash* (1988) and the amazing first novel *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992). There was a time, not so long ago, when it would have been unthinkable for someone of Allison's background—grinding, "white trash"

poverty, by her own description—to have read much in the way of American literature, let alone to have written it. In cases where it did happen, the odds were high that the writer in question would attempt to write about the class into which she had just risen, not the one from which she had just escaped. Today, just the opposite is true. Writers are, if anything, downwardly mobile when it comes to the kinds of characters they choose to populate their fiction.

As are, apparently, Americans in general when it comes to the style they have come to emulate in the 1990s. In a 1994 article in *New York Magazine* that in many ways echoed Jonathan Yardley’s “Hick Chic” essay, authors Tad Friend and Anya Sacharow argued that all eras in American history have been dominated by “charismatic stock figures” such as the cowboy, the robber baron, the flapper, and so on, figures that “bestride the popular imagination by sheer bravado” and become, “for a time, the lodestars by which the rest of the country defines itself.”<sup>9</sup> Our own era is no exception. According to Friend and Sacharow, we are now (and have been since the mid-eighties) in “the age of white trash.” Citing television shows such as “Cops” and “Hard Copy,” movies such as *Natural Born Killers*, *True Romance*, and *A Perfect World*, “media celebrities” such as Tonya Harding and John Wayne Bobbitt, and advertising campaigns such as those for Guess jeans, Friend and Sacharow argue that America has become obsessed with what they call “the white trash aesthetic”:

The Guess? jeans ads have been only the most visible manifestation of a whole white-trash fashion movement: candy-apple lipstick, chipped cherry-red nail polish, fishnet stockings, rhinestone earrings and dime-store barrettes, Candie’s mules, tattoos—of which Drew Barrymore alone has five.

Courtney Love’s dark roots and dirty baby-doll dresses are as sophisticated an appropriation of the childlike white-trash aesthetic as was the Rolling Stones’ homage to black urban style; Love’s delight in looking like “a 14-year-old battered rape victim,” a “kinderwhore,” is a nutshell of white-trash chic. . . . The slumming well-to-do believe that by affecting trash poses they are tapping into authentic despair and alienation, just as certainly as if they had styled a beret and black turtleneck in the fifties. (22)

“The form of trash is attractive,” Dorothy Allison herself is quoted as saying, “but the content is not. Americans are into form without content” (22).

Whatever the truth of such observations, the revolution in the class origins of so many of our writers has led to a fundamental change in the way different regions are represented. As Fred Hobson has noted, authors like



Bobbie Ann Mason, Jayne Anne Phillips, and Richard Ford “write about rural and urban working-class people unselfconsciously and, more to the point, approvingly” (21). Not only do writers like Ford approve of their characters, in a very real sense they identify with them, a change that naturally begets other changes. While it is true, for example, that the new southern writers are less likely to celebrate the same qualities the Agrarians did, such as an awareness of history, a regard for tradition and hierarchy, a reverential sense of place, and so on, that is only because southern fiction as we have it today “is written by *different* Southerners, not only black Southerners (who *do*, curiously, often embrace these qualities) but white Southerners whose families had little past to hold on to, little history in which ancestors had played important parts, little reason to live dramatically, little high culture to protect” (22).

Allison’s novel *Bastard Out of Carolina*, a finalist for the 1992 National Book Award, is a perfect example of Hobson’s point. The book is narrated by Ruth Anne “Bone” Boatwright, the bastard of Allison’s title, and features a cast of characters that includes a snuff-taking Grandma, a mother who has her first child at fifteen and is on her second marriage by twenty-two, and a virtual horde of aunts, uncles, and cousins, all poor, who are either unemployed or, more often, working the sort of backbreaking, low-paying jobs that are killing them just as surly as the whiskey they drink, the cigarettes they smoke by the carton, and the beatings they take from one another and the law. Yet each of these characters, though derived from a stereotype, comes vividly to life in Allison’s plot, which turns on the abuse and then molestation Bone receives at the hands of her stepfather, “Daddy Glen.”

As George Garrett noted in his review of Allison’s novel, material such as this is explosive and dangerous, “strewn with booby traps where the least false step could lead to disaster.”<sup>10</sup> To begin with, there is the danger of turning poor characters into “case studies” and thus leaving readers “relieved by that abstraction from the pain of felt experience.” A second danger, just as serious, is that of dealing in sentimentality, which plays too much on readers’ emotions and in the end creates a similar distance.

In *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Dorothy Allison falters in neither of these directions. Her depiction of the extended Boatwright clan is precise and “typical,” in the old Balzacian sense, without ever becoming stereotypical. Take, for example, her extended description of the dynamic at work between the men and women in the Boatwright clan. “I worshipped my uncles,” Bone says:

They were all big men with wide shoulders, broken teeth, and sunken features. They kept dogs trained for hunting and drove old trucks with metal toolboxes bolted to the reinforced wood sides. They worked in the mills or at the furnace repair business, or sometimes did roofing or construction work depending on how the industry was going. They tinkered with cars together on the weekends, standing around in the yard sipping whiskey and talking dirty, kicking at the greasy remains of engines they never finished rebuilding. Their eyes were narrow under sun-bleached eyebrows, and their hands were forever working a blade or piece of wood, or oiling some little machine part or other.

“You hold a knife like this,” they told me. “You work a screwdriver from your shoulder, swing a hammer from your hip, and spread your fingers wide when you want to hold something safe.”

Though half the county went in terror of them, my uncles were invariably gentle and affectionate with me and my cousins. Only when they were drunk or fighting with each other did they seem as dangerous as they were supposed to be. The knives they carried were bright, sharp, and fascinating, their toolboxes were massive, full of every imaginable metal implement. Even their wallets bulged with the unknown and the mysterious—outdated ID cards from the air base construction crew, passes for the racetrack, receipts from car repairs and IOUs from card games, as well as little faded pictures of pretty women who were not their wives. My aunts treated my uncles like overgrown boys—rambunctious teenagers whose antics were more to be joked about than worried over—and they seemed to think of themselves that way too. They looked young, even Nevil, who’d had his teeth knocked out, while the aunts—Ruth, Raylene, Alma, and even Mama—seemed old, worn-down, and slow, born to mother, nurse, and clean up after the men.

Men could do anything, and everything they did, no matter how violent or mistaken, was viewed with humor and understanding. The sheriff would lock them up for shooting out each other’s windows, or racing their pickups down the railroad tracks, or punching out the bartender over at the Rhythm Ranch, and my aunts would shrug and make sure the children were all right at home. What men did was just what men did. Some days I would grind my teeth, wishing I had been born a boy.<sup>11</sup>

The details here—from what the men had in their wallets to how they swung a hammer to how the women, with their tired shrugs, responded to their antics—testify to Allison’s intimate knowledge of the world she depicts. But what is more impressive is how these details of her characterization inform the plot. Perhaps the most harrowing (and finely handled) aspect of *Bastard Out of Carolina* has to do with the failure of the Boatwright family to deal adequately with Daddy Glen’s abuse of Bone. Their response, a common one, is to ignore the outward signs, pretending that it isn’t happening; all they can

think to say to Bone is, “Oh, honey, what are we gonna do with you?” Even Anney, Bone’s mother, responds this way. Though Anney knows she should leave Daddy Glen, she is never able to break away, and in the end she chooses him over her own daughter. Gradually, as a result of her family’s response to her abuse, Bone comes to believe that it is her fault, that she has somehow “asked for it,” and her mother does nothing to dispel the idea. As for her uncles, when finally confronted with the truth, they respond in the only way they know how—with violence. Yet so perfectly is this novel realized, so fully developed are its characters, that when this terrible beating of Daddy Glen finally does take place, the reader is forced to feel sorry for him and to want the beating to stop.

One of the more interesting things about a book like *Bastard Out of Carolina*—and this could be said about most so-called hick chic writing—is the full and complex way in which the characters respond to their position in society, their designation as “poor white trash.” While most of the older characters in the novel, especially Anney Boatwright and her sister Raylene, attempt to deny this position or to make excuses for it, insisting that “people are the same” and “everybody just does the best they can,” Bone, as a child, is acutely aware of “what the neighbors called us, what Mama wanted to protect us from[,] . . . who we were” (82). “Other people don’t go beating on each other all the time,” she tells Raylene. “They don’t get falling-down drunk, shoot each other, and then laugh about it. They don’t pick up and leave their husbands in the middle of the night and then never explain” (258). When Bone reads *Gone with the Wind*, she has no trouble recognizing herself and her family: “Emma Slattery, I thought. That’s who I’d be, that’s who we were. Not Scarlett with her baking-powder cheeks. I was part of the trash down in the mud-stained cabins, fighting with the darkies and stealing ungratefully from our betters, stupid, coarse, born to shame and death” (206). The thought fills her first with shame, then with anger, and finally with hate. “Anger was like a steady drip of poison into my soul,” Bone observes, “teaching me to hate the ones that hated me” (262). By the middle of the novel, she has come to accept Daddy Glen’s characterization of her as “cold as death, mean as a snake, and twice as twisty” (111). It is only after surviving the novel’s horrible climax—in which she is brutally raped by Daddy Glen and then has to watch as her mother leaves with him—that Bone comes to her final conclusion: “It wasn’t God who made us like this, I thought. We’d gotten ourselves messed up on our own” (306).

Such a message, with its overtones of neoconservative ideas about

responsibility, would scarcely be palatable (and perhaps not even possible) coming from a novelist who did not share with his or her characters the same class or ethnic origins. Yet this is precisely the realism underlying almost all hick chic writing. Take, as another example, some of the stories in Chris Offutt's first short story collection, *Kentucky Straight* (1992), which earned Offutt the 1993 Jean Stein Award for fiction. The collection opens with a story about a young man in the Appalachian hill country of eastern Kentucky who decides, for private reasons, that he wants to take the GED high school equivalency exam. The exam is given in the local VISTA office, which is presided over by outsiders come "to help you people."<sup>12</sup> From the first, everyone on the young man's "home hill" is against the idea, including his own brother, who ridicules him by saying he's been "eat up with the smart bug" (9) and that GED really stands for "Get Even Dumber" (10). "Not a one on this hillside finished high school," the narrator observes. "Around here a man is judged by how he acts, not how smart he's supposed to be" (3). In these hills, people are held down not only by "outside forces" but by their own families and neighbors. Yet far from making the small, stunted lives of the people Offutt writes about seem to be ultimately their own fault, this admission actually makes the very real, "outside" oppression they suffer all the more convincing. In another story, "Horseweed," a hill man named William is determined to make a better life for himself and his family, yet when he saves his pay from a construction job for three months and buys his own tools instead of getting drunk every night with the other men, the foreman on the job responds by laying him off with the excuse that "he didn't mix well" (63). The message he receives from this, that "trash" does not rise, is the same message his father and grandfather, both miners, had received before him. William's grandfather had reacted to his situation by making moonshine. William's father had worked an illegal mine and died doing it. William grows pot in a hollow abandoned by the mining companies, and guards his plants with the same rifle his grandfather and father had used.

Offutt's theme here—that some things don't change—would seem commonplace were it not for the fact that the *method* for such a theme in fiction has itself changed dramatically, particularly with regard to character. If Bone sees herself and her family in Margaret Mitchell's characterization of Emma Slattery, that is not because she *is* Emma Slattery any more than her uncles could be contemporary Snopeses in some late Faulkner novel. Characters like Emma Slattery and the Snopes family were conceived from the outside and *above*, by authors from a very different social class than their

characters. Bone, and in their own ways Sam in Mason's *In Country* and William in "Horseweed," are neither Slatterys nor Snopeses but contemporary renderings of Twain's Huckleberry Finn. They speak to us directly, in their own voices, and the tales of survival and development they tell are "triumphs of vernacular voice and tone" (77), as Fred Hobson has noted about a number of other "contemporary Huck Finns" in southern fiction, from Carson McCullers's Mick Kelly to the eleven-year-old narrator of Kaye Gibbons's *Ellen Foster* (1987). For Hobson, writers like Mason, Allison, and Offutt are themselves Huck Finns of a sort, "finding it difficult to accept received values, old notions of honor and hierarchy, or—as Huck called Tom's romantic ideas and schemes—"Tom Sawyer's lies" (77–78).

Ultimately, writing of the sort I've been discussing above relies on the authority of its narrative voice and the power of its rendered details, which is why hick chic fiction that goes astray goes so far astray. Only consider a book like Dale Peck's *Now It's Time to Say Goodbye* (1998). Peck's first two novels, the highly acclaimed *Martin and John* (1993) and *The Law of Enclosures* (1996), were both highly autobiographical, took the form of coming of age narratives, and dealt with the highly charged subjects of gay love and AIDS.

Born on Long Island in 1967, Peck lived there until he was seven years old, at which time his abusive, alcoholic father packed up a family already devastated by the death of Dale's mother three years before and moved them out from under the cultural canopy of New York City and, horror of horrors, onto the harsh, exposed plains of western Kansas, where in time the boy would discover that he was different, gay and talented, a born outcast, all against the violent backdrop of Dale Peck Sr.'s subsequent marriages and divorces and drunken rampages. It was the kind of story that played well back East, as Dale Peck discovered when he returned there (first to Drew University, then to Columbia) and made himself into a writer who demanded the attention of publishers and the gay press and, eventually, a world eager to show its good will in the face of the AIDS epidemic.

After *Martin and John*, which mixed the unvarnished details of the author's early life with the story of a lover dying of AIDS, Peck turned his attention to his father's tormented life and the lives of the four women foolish enough to marry him. The result was *The Law of Enclosures*, which critics praised as an even greater feat of virtuosity than the first book. As the first flush of praise faded, however, one began to hear whispers that gradually turned into questions. What would happen after Peck had raided every detail of his emotional and sexual history, when he had exhausted autobiography? What would he write about then? Would it be any good?

*Now It's Time to Say Goodbye*, Peck's answer to these questions, attempts to paint the portrait of an entire town, and to do so from multiple points of view. As Justin Time, one of the book's multiple narrators, puts it, “[T]he story you are about to read is the story of a place, not a person. It is like a parade: though one marcher after another will step forward and claim to be the star, it is, in the end, the spectacle of stardom itself that lingers in the memory.”<sup>13</sup> This is a tall order, to be sure, and Peck's failure in this book demonstrates, if nothing else, how easily shoddy hick chic writing can fall into just those stereotypes Dorothy Allison so skillfully avoids in *Bastard Out of Carolina*. Compared to Allison, Dale Peck comes across in this book as the worst kind of hack, a writer who not only gets the individual voices in his story hopelessly wrong, but also manages to give a false impression of an entire region.

The novel concerns the past and present life of two small towns in Kansas, one populated entirely by blacks and bearing the name Galatia, the other populated entirely by whites and bearing the name Galatea. The two are divided by a highway, but also by history. Galatia, the older of the two, was founded before the Civil War by free blacks who hoped to bring Kansas into the union as a free state. Galatea, by contrast, was not incorporated until 1976, in the aftermath of a grain elevator explosion that leveled a nearby town and caused three hundred of its former inhabitants to relocate onto land owned by a transplanted southerner named Rosemary Krebs. From the first, the two towns live in uneasy proximity to each other, a situation that is only made worse when, in 1984, an albino black boy named Eric Johnson is accused of molesting a seven-year-old white girl named Lucy Robinson—and is subsequently lynched by a group of masked white men. It's ten years later when a couple of refugees from the AIDS epidemic, the New York writer Colin Nieman and his lover Justin Time, wander into town, take up residence in an old limestone house, meet most of the towns' quirky inhabitants (including, improbably, a gay painter named Painter and a black male prostitute named Divine), and are thus present for the book's second horrific event and principal plot engine, the brutal rape and kidnapping of Lucy Robinson, now a high school cheerleader.

If any part of this sounds oddly familiar or like a cartoon version of the whole southern Gothic line of Faulkner, Carson McCullers, Tennessee Williams, and others, that's because *Now It's Time to Say Goodbye* is nothing so much as a pastiche of different styles and influences, a strange brew of farm novel clichés (MAN EATEN BY HIS OWN HOGS!), Deep South plot machinery (ALBINO NEGRO RAPES WHITE GIRL, GETS LYNCHED!), and, above all, different voices, for Peck has taken Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* as his chief model here,

employing over a dozen different narrators—none of them to much effect. However, the biggest influence on this novel by far is not literature or even film but television—and very lowbrow TV at that. Sheriff Eustace Brown, who muddles through his investigation of the book's multiple murders without ever thinking of calling the Kansas Bureau of Investigation, resembles no one so much as Deputy Roscoe from *The Dukes of Hazzard*, just as rich Rosemary Krebs comes across as a kind of female Boss Hogg. As for the book's dialogue ("Sheriff! This here man done hit my Charlene!" "Fraid there ain't much I can do for you, Howard. People done told you time and time again, busy street's no place for a napping hog"), it's *worse* than *The Dukes of Hazzard*, if that's possible.

There are other problems with the book, too—problems with the plot, problems with the prose, and so on. It would take more pages than the book is worth to list them all. In the end, one simply wonders how, given his years growing up there, Peck could have gotten his former state so wrong? Or why, faced with representing its people, he instead imports southern stereotypes? Has he been gone that long? On one level, of course, this book and its failures mean very little. After all, Dale Peck is still young, barely thirty years old, and obviously has many more books in him. But on another level, the failure means a lot. Nicodemus, the very real town upon which Galatia is based, deserves better—as does Kansas itself, which still quietly awaits, Dale Peck or no Dale Peck, its first true voice since Truman Capote.

Which is but another way of saying that there are no shortcuts to doing regionalism right.

Taken as a whole, the work of these writers demonstrates not only a persistent hick chic impulse in recent American writing but also the general direction of contemporary American fiction as a whole, which by the end of the 1980s was developing in a way that recalled past traditions even as it broke new ground. Regional in subject matter and realist in bent, this fiction was also somewhat minimalist in style, especially in its attention to the surface details of prose. Written by a new breed of writers, who were often from humble origins (and also very highly educated), it took seriously its representations of locale and work and sought to accurately portray a changing America as seen through the example of small, forgotten places. No longer could it be said, as Tom Wolfe had complained of both postmodernism and minimalism, that the characters in the new fiction had "no backgrounds," that they "came from nowhere," that they "didn't use realistic speech," or that nothing they "said, did, or possessed

indicated any class or ethnic origin.”<sup>14</sup> Instead, this fiction often displayed precisely the kind of meticulous research and reporting Wolfe called upon for the new social novel.

A good example of the kind of novel I’m thinking of is E. Annie Proulx’s *The Shipping News*, which in 1994 won the Irish Times International Fiction Award, the Pulitzer Prize, and the National Book Award. Proulx had begun her career very much in the hick chic mode with the story collection *Heart Songs and Other Stories* and the novel *Postcards*, which won the 1993 PEN/Faulkner Award. In preparing to write *The Shipping News*, the story of one man’s return to his ancestral Newfoundland, Proulx visited the island eight times over a six-year period, staying for a month or longer on each visit. To get the speech patterns of Newfoundlanders right, Proulx read the entire *Dictionary of Newfoundland English*. “I literally slept with that book for two years,” Proulx has said. “I’d fall asleep while I was reading it. This is the point in the work. You get it right, or you don’t do it. Everything depends on your getting it right.”<sup>15</sup>

Such attention to detail is a trademark of much contemporary American fiction and one of the more enjoyable things about it. Read Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* (1985) and you’ll see how gunpowder is made from a mixture of nitre, saltpeter, charcoal, brimstone, and sulfur. Read Barbara Kingsolver’s *Animal Dreams* (1990) and you’ll not forget how a train is taken over a mountain pass. Read Proulx’s *Postcards* (1992) and you’ll understand the pains that must be taken to remove human scent from fox traps. Read Charles Frazier’s *Cold Mountain* (1997) and you’ll learn why firewood should be cut in the old of the moon and why corn should be planted “when the poplar leaves are about the size of a squirrel’s ear.”<sup>16</sup>

For Proulx and writers like her, the accumulation of such detail is just one part of a process that is ultimately aimed at depicting change, the lifeblood of all fiction. “There’s a particular kind of personality and social situation I’m attracted to,” Proulx has said, “and that is the individual, or group, or region, or place, or time that’s caught in change, that’s caught in flux, that balances on some kind of edge that’s either disintegrating or coming together or both.”<sup>17</sup> This idea, which echoes those expressed in Wolfe’s essay, harkens back to theories of the novel developed by Sir Walter Scott and Balzac, among others, and might also be taken as the mantra of much American fiction after postmodernism, which is in the process of returning to its roots.