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Review of Berry's "Andy Catlett: Early Travels"

Bill Jolliff

George Fox University, wjolliff@georgefox.edu

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REVIEWS

Wendell Berry. *Andy Catlett: Early Travels*. Emeryville, Calif.: Avalon-Shoemaker & Hoard, 2006. 140 pages. Hardback, \$23.00.

REVIEWED BY WILLIAM JOLLIFF

Andy Catlett: Early Travels is the latest chapter in Wendell Berry's intertextual narrative of Port William, Kentucky, a fictive region destined to stand alongside Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County as one of the most thoroughly developed in American literature. This brief novel takes place the year before the murder of Andy's Uncle Andrew in *A World Lost*.

The book's title suggests a gentle irony: nine-year-old Andy's "travels" consist of his first unaccompanied bus trip—the ten miles from Hargreaves to Port William—to visit each set of grandparents for a few days. He spends time first in the horse-powered world of the Catletts, then with the more modern but still self-sufficient Feltners. In each context, Andy details the home side of life during ww ii and relates his youthful interactions with the men and women of those households and communities, both black and white.

And that's the story—a boy's bus ride and an uneventful visit. So the question arises, should *Early Travels* be read simply as an appendix for readers already engaged in the Port William saga? Or does this novel—or novella—stand alone?

I believe it does. Berry's great skill is to pose the weightiest questions, but to do so while maintaining accessibility, engagement, and a graceful simplicity that belies the complexity of his intention. With this in mind, it becomes clear that *Early Travels* is as technically accomplished and thematically compelling as the author's best work. For while the book is about a child's experience of Kentucky farm life during ww ii, it is also an invitation for us to consider how an individual's knowing changes with the passage of life and time. Berry suggests his theme during an important scene in the Catletts' tobacco-stripping barn. As men reminisce about the fate of war casualty Tom Coulter, the usually boisterous Rufus Brightleaf reflects quietly,

“Boys, he’ll be a long time gone from here.” As he spoke he had again that look on his face that I had seen before, that did not look like him, and he did not sound like himself. *In my brief knowledge, I thought I knew what he meant. And now, in my long knowledge, I know what he meant.* (47, reviewer’s emphasis)

The difference in these two claims about knowing is the novel’s center. For young Andy does know what Rufus means, and the elder Andy does know too, yet what the two know is different. And the difficult ground between their ways and degrees of knowing presents the greatest narrative challenge for the author and compels the greatest interest in the reader.

Berry’s masterful manipulation of this space guarantees the novel’s weightier success. Because *Early Travels* is ostensibly the first-person account of young Andy’s trip, we follow the immediate perceptions and misperceptions of his point of view, his knowing, with all the engaging and rewarding irony that naïve narration offers. But the narrative voice proper is not young Andy, but Andy in his seventies. His telling, therefore, his knowing, is that of an experienced, socially and psychologically insightful narrator, one who guides our understanding while simultaneously enjoying Andy’s naïve perceptions with us. This multi-voiced narration has another distinct advantage, given Berry’s well known countercultural turn: by casting the narrator as a wise old man, Berry creates space for jeremiads on the author’s familiar concerns. In such a narrative construct, they don’t detract from the surface narrative, but, on the contrary, complement it—the brief diatribes, and the insights they relate, serve to characterize more deeply the narrator.

Not surprisingly, Berry uses the space thus created to challenge easy political etiquette. For example, he presents—with love and admiration—a world in which gender roles are often strictly defined; he presents the growing and first-stage preparation of tobacco (now a much despised substance) as good work that brings men together; and, most dangerously, he presents—with sympathy and understanding—a subculture engaged in racism. While he clearly condemns the institution of racism, he refuses to bless or condemn,

with the ease of most contemporaries, complicit individuals. On the contrary, his more nuanced approach creates space for respecting individuals while damning the evil in which they play a part. In the complex world of Port William, individuals may be complicit in a perverse practice while simultaneously making for themselves and their households, both black and white, a good—even an admirable—life. This is as dangerous a walk as a contemporary novelist can take, and Berry takes that walk with considerable success. Whether we agree or disagree with his perspective, it is difficult not to respect his faithful and reasoned insistence.