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Book Review: Flowering of the Cumberland, and: Ransom Street Quartet: Poems and Stories, and: Johnny's Cosmology

Bill Jolliff
George Fox University, wjolliff@georgefox.edu

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struggles over slavery and abolition. As it turned out, some of Fee’s northern friends, previously so outspoken on behalf of blacks and so important in the utopian experiment during the early years, did not truly accept Fee’s ideas. Objections to social equality for blacks and questions concerning doctrinal differences resulted in a steady exodus northward; new workers seemed even less convinced of Fee’s goals. Nevertheless, Fee’s hopes for a fully integrated college and community seemed within his grasp until 1890, when changes in leadership quickly undermined his utopian dream. In the end, Sears reminds us, the entire experiment lasted a mere twenty-five years. After 1892 Fee, relegated to the sidelines, watched his experiment wane.

Thoughtful and provocative, *A Utopian Experiment in Kentucky* is Sears’s best book, and required reading for those interested in the early days of the Berea experiment.

—Marion B. Lucas


York, John. *Johnny’s Cosmology.* 38 pages. $8.95. May be ordered from The Hummingbird Press, P.O. Box 7301, Winston-Salem, North Carolina, 27109-7301.

The University of Nebraska Press has given us a gift by republishing Harriette Simpson Arnow’s *Flowering of the Cumberland.* Though much has changed in the fields of history writing and literary non-fiction in the intervening decades, rereading Arnow reminds us that good prose is always in style and that good stories never die.

And her story is a good one. In this volume, Arnow’s purpose was to continue telling the saga of the pioneers who settled the Cumberland Valley during the period of 1780 to 1803 (with a liberal spillover before and after). Her 1960 volume, *Seedtime on the Cumberland*, had already related the stories of the individual men and women who made that trek and lived the frontier life; this companion volume is not a sequel, but a different kind of history. Though many of the same persons appear, this
work centers on the society that was developing, the social history of that time and place. As the author states, it deals with “the pioneer as a member of society engaged in those activities which, different from hunting or house-building, could not be performed by a lone man or family.”

Thus we learn about the Cumberland pioneers in such areas as industry, trade, local politics, culture, education, and recreation. Drawing on inestimable hours spent poring through court records, bills of sale, traders’ inventories, early newspapers, unpublished manuscripts, and a variety of other documents, Arnow reveals the day-to-day interactions of what were apparently—despite their frontier isolation—a very social people. The gathering of facts is truly impressive, and she does at times tend simply to catalog them, but that rarely. For the most part, she manages to create a highly readable narrative account of life on the Cumberland around 1800, an account that offers something surprising and engaging on every page.

Her descriptions of life on the frontier at times make the work a kind of historical Foxfire book. We learn in detail how corn was made into whiskey, how flax was made into linen, how trees were made into barrels, how wells were drilled for salt water—and how all these along with scores of other activities entered into the local economy. We learn how the pioneers educated their children, recorded—sometimes unsuccessfully—their legal ownership of land, and even, in a section that might surprise many champions of free enterprise, how the early governments regulated commerce in ways determined to protect the consumer, governing everything from the size of pork barrels to the fee a ferry operator could charge for passage—and demanded that said operator must by law keep a tavern as well as a ferry.

As extensive and often as fastidious as Arnow’s research tends to be, it is not equally strong in all aspects of the social landscape. Her treatment of religion is often perfunctory. She does not find the subject itself sufficiently important for a chapter, and when she does address the topic, one does not sense much expertise. For example, in contrasting the Cumberlanders with the New Englanders for whom, Arnow would contend, business success was a mark of true religion, she states that most Cumberlanders, “[r]especting religion too much to try to prostitute it, hating hypocrisy, but unable to live without business...joined no church at all, or like [Andrew] Jackson waited until the need for the dirtier businesses of life was ended, and then joined the church.” Statements like this one read like too easy generalizations of an important social institution; and when in her rather offhand discussion of hymnody she
remarks on the popularity of Watts and Wesley, then proceeds with examples of believers and unbelievers together joining in on “How Firm a Foundation” (by George Keith) and “Amazing Grace” (by John Newton), it becomes apparent that Arnow, in some matters of Christian faith and practice, is not working in an area of great depth.

At such places in the text, we begin to understand more of Arnow the unique individual than of Arnow the social historian. And though at times this casts a shadow over the work as history, far more often the melding of writer and historical material pays literary benefits. Usually Arnow is forthright about having drawn on her own experience in the Cumberland Valley—after all, she is a descendent of these pioneers with whom she feels such close affinity, and whom she persuades us to admire. Present in the text as well, in addition to her own Cumberland history, are the fruits of Arnow’s reading in what would at times seem to be unrelated fields. Dr. Johnson is a favorite author, and his writings make many appearances from across the sea. Why? Possibly she uses him for an eighteenth-century reference point. But a more important reason, I suspect, is that Arnow happens to like Dr. Johnson, and because his works are a part of her. One may make the case, I think, that Arnow was a pioneer herself: for what began as social history has become, through her interpretive lens, what graduate English departments now offer as literary or creative nonfiction. In other words, Harriette Arnow is a social historian in the way that Annie Dillard is a scientist. Just as Dillard’s reading and living on Tinker Creek affected her observations of that ecosystem, Arnow’s reading and her own experience color her telling of the Cumberland tale; finally, that is what makes the book most worth rereading.

Along these lines, the republication presents an opportunity for a unique kind of literary gratification and study. For while the book is a work of social history, it is now in fact an artifact worthy of study by the social and literary historian. True, it is only thirty-three years old; but consider the changes in the American ideological landscape in those years. Arnow’s vocabulary did not contain words like “feminism” or idioms such as “substance abuse” or “Native American.” As might be expected by those familiar with her other work, Arnow’s writing is refreshing in its complete lack of “politically correct” (another phrase nonexistent in 1963) toadyism, but sometimes stunning in its ethnocentricity. Indeed, the strength, and sometimes the weakness, of the work is Arnow’s complete identification with her Cumberland ancestors. As a displaced Appalachian, she identifies too easily and even sentimentally with the subjects of her study; we discover that things were better back
there, back then: people worked harder, fought more bravely, read more broadly, met challenges more creatively, beat odds with more bravado, went broke more often, and even recovered with considerably more ease than people do now. We suspect that, in Arnow's mind, humans were all a little taller and even a little better looking two centuries ago. For the most part, we may infer that she is aware of her particular variety of ancestor worship, and we can enjoy it with her.

We enjoy the journey less when she tells us, straight-faced, that pioneer women whose husbands slept with slaves were little bothered by such infidelities, implying that they were simply too busy to worry about it. Nor do we find her evaluations believable of slaves who were happy in their place and their work; so genteel were the Cumberlanders, we are told, that "the use of the word slave was avoided; people spoke instead of the help, the blacks, or the black family." Equally dubious are her accounts of a happy, healthy population that consumed a half-pint to a pint of whiskey each day, but suffered no alcohol addiction and little drunkenness. Even more obviously problematic is the ease with which she approaches the Native American situation. Arnow tells us that "in general the Cumberland pioneer gave the Indian better treatment than he got from him." The Native Americans were, it would seem, one more challenge of frontier life, like the trial and expense of transporting produce, the summer heat, and the spring floods. She is not troubled by the fact that the Cumberland region was far from empty of human inhabitants when the Euro-American pioneers came, or that nations of Native Americans were displaced by Cumberland settlement.

Given its assortment of strengths and weaknesses, we can no longer accept Flowering of the Cumberland as did one early reviewer as "perhaps the most intimate picture we have of society in the trans-Allegheny phase of the Westward Movement." But it does remain a solid, if dated, work; its intimacy is still compelling; and in addition, it now seems to be a prototype of the genre we call "literary nonfiction." And Arnow's style is often as fresh—and her story as consistently engaging—as anything more recent practitioners of that evolving genre have yet produced.

Juanita Brown Tobin's Ransom Street Quartet is a half-successful book of poems. And since the other half is less a failure than a curiosity, the whole is worth reading. Fortunately the book leads with its strength.

The first section, "In the Beginning," is a collection of about fifty poems (enough for a typical book of poetry) set more or less in Tobin's North Carolina: more because the region is so present in speech, geog-
raphy, and customs; less in that Tobin’s ties to reality seem at once weighty and tenuous. Her favorite forms are immediately apparent: most poems feature a local character with something wise to say—a colloquial one-liner for which the rest of the poem serves as frame; or the narrator—usually in a voice as confabulatory as that of her characters—relates some event, habit, or practice that works as the poem’s metaphorical center. Usually her technique works, and her regionally textured surface is consistently engaging. We find ourselves glad to have heard the stories of Grandpa, who “never smoked, drank or went out with women until [he] was twelve years old”; Bunk Dawson, who “said our government was the only insane asylum run by the inmates just before he got shot in the back”; Mr. Foster, who in reference to his fellow church people, observes, “If Jesus Christ came down here and cleaned a chicken, somebody would find fault with it”; and the preacher Earl, who cried “There’s one Lord, one faith, one birth, one baptism, and seven women for every man.” Just beneath the comic surface, though, hangs a subtle counterbalance; Tobin’s description of an “Ancestor Portrait” tells us that Grandpa “didn’t think this was such a bad world once you got used to being nervous about everything.” We’ve all seen such portraits, and doubtless Tobin, a psychiatric nurse, has seen more than most. It’s in this darker mode, too, that Tobin lets us visit “The House of Memory [where] Memorials are eaten with voices long vanished and washed down with tears.”

Section II begins with an epigraph from Baudelaire—“Each new poem meant one less erection”—a quotation that appropriately sets the tone for a collection of poems involving “Simon.” Though his name calls to mind the apostle or the mythical master of the child’s game “Simon Says,” these pieces seem more likely to reflect either the persona’s uninhibited lover or the poet’s erotic animus. While at their best many of these pieces are witty and even tender, the vulgar aspects occasionally cause the wit to fall flat.

But redemption comes quickly. Section III, “At Work,” is an emotionally demanding set of poems in which Tobin draws not simply upon her experience as a psychiatric nurse but upon the insight that comes from long-term contact with desperately unconventional minds. It’s instructive here to compare Tobin’s work with that of other poets of her generation (Tobin was eighty when this volume was published), such as Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, who also used psychological distress in their work, but for whom the focus was inevitably inward. While Tobin’s craft may not approach theirs, her final rhetorical effect is, if less con-
trolled—and maybe because it is less controlled—far more disturbing. Distance dissolves. Despite the separation inherent in her chosen form—there is little apparently confessional in this section—we nevertheless sense Tobin's persona collapsing into the troubled personalities she portrays, those of a variety of psychiatric patients. Their actions and words begin to make a terrible sense to us, too, even as we wish that they didn't. The occasional moments in Sylvia Plath, for example, that display madness in its most belligerent forms, are here the stuff of every working day: an abused young girl with "sweet and sour"/tattooed on her breasts and "I LOVE YOU on her knuckles"; a client, who, on an outing in a mall "tore off her sweater and dress" so that "[t]here she was with nothing on/except her panties and tennis shoes./She took one step back/put her hands on her hips/and looked eight feet tall"; and the woman who hears "voices" since "[t]he day her daddy broke her nose" and "she pulled up all the flowers/and worked puzzles in the paper/to help her put the pieces together." Tobin never portrays mental illness as an unfortunate upper-middle-class adventure—these quick case studies make much contemporary poetry dealing with mental illness look pale, even self-indulgent, by comparison.

The final section is probably the weakest. "Bedtime Stories" is a set of poems primarily on light themes, mostly cats. While they are comparable to the better stuff found in the kind of little magazines we often associate with local literary societies, we are not, after the emotional rigors of Section III, in the mood for anything less serious. Even in these pieces, however, Tobin's craft is worth noting; in fact throughout the book her subtle technical prowess is a pleasure. Especially in the final section, and occasionally throughout the volume, she uses a three-line stanza with something like William Carlos Williams's variable foot, but more often her line and stanza breaks are simply rhetorical. And though she includes a few successful prose poems (she calls them "stories"), most of the pieces are straightforward free-verse lyrics of about a page. Such simplicity is deceptive: clearly tremendous effort has been expended on making the craft appear so effortless.

Nevertheless, the book has two significant weaknesses. The first could have been fixed by cutting out the fifty weakest pages; what remained would still have been a generous volume. Mending the second, however, would have taken more than greater selectivity. For despite its strengths, Tobin's work too often fails to accomplish the kind of metaphorical or anagogical suggestion that moves beyond the myriad of careful particulars to something more suggestive of a universal. The poet has lived a full and alert life in the particulars, often in the particu-
lars of deeply troubled settings. Ultimately her poetry pays a price for that close engagement: a lack of reflective distance. But what she has gained in the trade makes this a book worth reading.

In *Johnny's Cosmology*, North Carolina poet John York presents his own engaging angle of the Appalachian vision—an angle that continually modifies and changes its focus as the book progresses. That he achieves a consistent aesthetic effect through such broad variations in voice and persona testifies to the poet's craft and the volume's success.

Section I, “The Death of Superman,” appears to be a chronological portrait of the artist. Beginning with “Bathroom Music” and progressing through “Eleventh Grade: 1971,” York’s angle evolves from the point of view of a noisy baby in the tub of “Granny’s bathroom” to that of a high school junior discovering his poetic gift. A teacher’s favorable response—“This image is strong / this one flies”—brings about a change in the young artist: “I’ve been alerted, thawed, / charged, aimed, fired, called / to march at last.” Whether the work here is confessional or fictive, the progression is convincing, a *rite de passage* that carries readers believably through boyhood. It is fitting that this section ends with a kind of requiem, “The Death of Superman.” In this piece, York uses pop cultural figures and a catalog of social ills to set up his final metaphor, a figure that pulls together the painful disappointments of childhood and the disillusionment of marriage:

And Superboy, Supergirl seem to be dead,
We hardly move in, behind closed blinds.
Sunrise brings vertigo, morning sickness:
If we touch at all, we only hold hands.

Section II is, from a craft perspective, more challenging yet. In it, York not only creates a chronology, but also assumes the voice and perspective not of a single child but of people from many backgrounds and socioeconomic conditions. The risk is considerable: if the seams begin to show in either voice—whether by a lack of authenticity in the assumed voice(s) or the least hint of condescension in the poet’s “natural” voice—readers may rightfully dismiss the work. But again, the poems here withstand scrutiny and consistently engage us. The chapter’s first narrator tells the story of “Katy’s Sunfish”; in spite of her father’s assurance that “there ain’t no fish in that creek,” Katy proceeds to feed them—and more. She states, “He worried me a bit, but last / night a
granny came to my window, / told me what to do to save my creek.”
As a result of the “granny’s” direction, the key to the tractor which has
“churned [the creek] to mud” is thrown in the water. Equally convinc-
ing is “Bobby Jester’s Dandelion Blues.” Bobby, while mowing dan-
delions with his college groundskeeping crew, learns that his “sweetie”
is about to take off in a “packed” car with “an ugly, hairy-faced boy.”
Bobby’s reaction is the focus of the poem, and it takes the form of a
change in the music he plays:

Now that I know what it’s like to be mowed, blowed,
bagged and dumped, music that buzzes and growls
gives me no satisfaction. I turn off
the Fuzz Face, the Fender amp, put away
the Stratocaster, lock it in its case.

I pick up Daddy’s old Martin, pick out
a song about sleepless nights. . . .

Like the “granny” who serves Katy and her sunfish, “Daddy’s old
Martin” becomes the sustaining link between Bobby and a world that
preceded creeks too dirty for fish and other contemporary infidelities. As
he plays, Bobby too hears the voice of his own granny: “Remember your
roots boy.” Possibly the most compelling portrait, though, is that of
“Millie Greenwood, Deciding How To Play.” Crises in her family—the
loss of the farm, her daughter’s difficult pregnancy, and her son-in-law’s
drinking—have left her watching the blinking “towers on Calvary Moun-
tain,” wondering, “Should I broadcast or should I receive?” And then,

I am wondering if I’m like an old radio,
a receiver with no antennas, there’s so much static.
I know in my heart there is a light,
pulsing, pulsing, beckoning my false true lover.

These lines not only allow us to feel Milly’s situation, but do so in
a way that suggests the radio motif that held an important place in early
country gospel music. Placed in that broader cultural context, we see
here that Milly, like Katy and Johnny, is reaching backward for some-
thing more stable: her religious faith.

In Section III York assumes no formal mask. Thus he allows himself
full syntactical and dictional liberty, and his range of image and allusion
expands as well. What is sacrificed is the tension between overt state-
ment and ironic, implied counter statement that was created almost automatically through the assumed personae of the first two sections. And yet it is in this section that some of the most beautiful work comes. “Chasing Diana Most of the Night, Driving from Wilmington to Banner Elk, NC” is a successful love lyric melded with a meditation on the night sky: “Ripe, libidinous, she rose from a live oak’s / low shoulder, heard crowds of nudging pines / making cracks. . . .” Similarly successful are the quietly contemplative “Water Lilies for Jane,” a piece that compares well with the graceful lyricism of Charles Wright; and “Highway 67 And The Old Winston Road,” a poem in which a deadly intersection is given a peaceful, mythic mountain setting. In it,

... the ancient
women in hillside houses pay no heed
to big trucks, gearing down or howling past: only
dream of loaded wagons, of their
daddies tacking north and
south, taking all
morning to get to the river. . . .

The reflective tone of this final section is typical of much mainstream, academic poetry. It is particularly welcome, however, placed after two sections in which the poet has assumed a continually shifting gallery of voices.

Much to his credit, York has managed all his voices well, and he does so through a stunning variety of character masks. The result is that Johnny’s Cosmology is a very strong and subtle form of sophisticated Appalachian “regionalism”; yet at such a level, that term itself must be reconsidered. For while York’s angle is assuredly tied to his region, that geographical and cultural awareness is no more a limitation than is Donald Hall’s New England, Harry Humes’s northeastern Pennsylvania, or Walt McDonald’s Texas. To call him a regionalist, then, is simply to admit that York has mastered one of the skills of contemporary poetry as important as the idiom or the line break: the appropriate grounding of one’s work in place.

—William Jolliff