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# Contemporary American Fiction

An Introduction to American Fiction since 1970



Kenneth Millard

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Kenneth Millard

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Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP

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New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in

Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece

Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan South Korea Poland Portugal

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Published in the United States  
by Oxford University Press Inc., New York

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ISBN 978-0-19-871178-0

# Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Audrey for providing and explaining the full lyrics of Johnny Mercer's song 'Dream', and Jim for his knowledge of syncopation and the useful discussions about his favourite book; Simon for his professional advice ('The large print giveth, and the small print taketh away'), and Caroline, for teaching me how to talk to a hunter.

K.M.

*Edinburgh and Arizona*  
1999



# Contents

Introduction	1
<hr/>	
<b>1 Family Values</b>	<b>8</b>
Toni Morrison <b>The Bluest Eye</b>	10
Russell Banks <b>Affliction</b>	16
E. A. Proulx <b>The Shipping News</b>	22
Jay McInerney <b>Bright Lights, Big City</b>	30
Barbara Kingsolver <b>The Bean Trees</b>	35
John Dufresne <b>Louisiana Power &amp; Light</b>	38
<hr/>	
<b>2 Gender and History</b>	<b>42</b>
Bobbie Ann Mason <b>In Country</b>	44
Jayne Anne Phillips <b>Machine Dreams</b>	54
Jane Smiley <b>A Thousand Acres</b>	62
Alice Walker <b>The Color Purple</b>	70
<hr/>	
<b>3 The West</b>	<b>78</b>
Cormac McCarthy <b>Blood Meridian</b>	80
E. A. Proulx <b>Close Range</b>	88
Sherman Alexie <b>The Lone-Ranger and Tonto Fistfight         in Heaven</b>	96
Tim O'Brien <b>Northern Lights</b>	104
Donald Antrim <b>Elect Mr Robinson for a Better World</b>	108
<hr/>	
<b>4 Consumerism, Media, Technology</b>	<b>111</b>
E. L. Doctorow <b>Ragtime</b>	113
Don DeLillo <b>White Noise</b>	122
Don DeLillo <b>Mao II</b>	131

Don DeLillo <b>Underworld</b>	138
Po Bronson <b>Bombardiers</b>	146
<hr/>	
<b>5 Language and Power</b>	153
Gish Jen <b>Typical American</b>	155
Chang-rae Lee <b>Native Speaker</b>	163
John Edgar Wideman <b>Philadelphia Fire</b>	169
Paul Auster <b>The New York Trilogy</b>	180
Barry Hannah <b>High Lonesome</b>	186
<hr/>	
<b>6 Sport</b>	200
Richard Ford <b>The Sportswriter</b>	203
William Kennedy <b>Billy Phelan's Greatest Game</b>	213
Leonard Gardner <b>Fat City</b>	217
Don DeLillo <b>End Zone</b>	221
Robert Coover <b>The Universal Baseball Association, inc. J. Henry Waugh, PROP.</b>	225
<hr/>	
<b>7 Imagining Subjectivity</b>	231
John Updike <b>Memories of the Ford Administration</b>	233
Philip Roth <b>American Pastoral</b>	239
E. L. Doctorow <b>Billy Bathgate</b>	248
Louise Erdrich <b>Tales of Burning Love</b>	254
Conclusion	263
Bibliography	271

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# Introduction

This book is intended as a guide to late twentieth-century American fiction for the undergraduate student and the general reader. The principal objective has been to offer substantial and detailed interpretations of the primary texts, and to suggest contexts in which those novels might usefully be considered. The discussions of the novels attempt to achieve a balance between interpretation and sometimes necessary expository comments, although even exposition is interpretative in the way that it prioritizes certain aspects of narrative above others. The chapters take certain subject areas in American life and investigate their representation in fiction. This is necessarily a two-way process in which the reading of fiction conditions what the reader deems to be important in the American social text, and this relationship is one of the most difficult issues that this book seeks to tacitly manage: how does a critic move with confidence between the literary text and the social text? Clearly, it is no simple correspondence. The texts that a culture produces must in some way be a measure of its social reality because the authors of those texts are themselves products of their culture. An equally difficult issue is the one of selection; it is not claimed that the novels of this study are 'representative' of the United States, rather that they are detailed fictional enquiries into the particular subject areas. There is an important formal aspect here too: none of these novels can be limited ultimately to considerations under one subject heading only, and the chapters of this book are not discrete and exclusive categories. *The Bluest Eye* is considered here under 'family', but it also addresses issues of racial politics, of culture and nature, of gender and history, of economics and the power of the media to propagate particular ideas about aesthetic value. It is the novel's powerful synthesis of these themes that makes *The Bluest Eye* worth studying. *White Noise* is not

simply about technology, but equally about the family, and *High Lonesome* is a collection of stories not just about the power of language but which also offers an analysis of male desire. All of these works might be configured in terms of different cultural and critical rubrics to give different readings: *In Country* can be interpreted as a novel about gender and history, but equally about the power of consumerism. One thing remains constant, given that *Contemporary American Fiction* does not pretend to be value-free: all of these novels have a high degree of artistic merit; they are not simply indicative of a cultural category or social trend but stand as significant achievements as novels. In 1971 Tony Tanner wrote that *City of Words* was 'motivated mainly by a sense of admiration for the wide range of individual talent' in American fiction of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. That view is strongly endorsed here. American fiction of the late twentieth century is characterized by an extraordinary proliferation of excellent primary texts, both from established writers who are still producing remarkable works (John Updike, Philip Roth) and from younger writers whose first novels are worthy of inclusion alongside the best of their elders (Gish Jen, Chang-rae Lee). This book then is a synthesis of a number of different and competing critical agendas.

To represent late twentieth-century fiction of the United States in a single critical survey is a difficult proposition involving issues of selection which only beg more difficult questions about cultural value and ideological choices. These are matters of politics because ultimately all aesthetic issues are political issues. Students of the politics of the canon might reasonably ask, why these authors and texts, and on what ideological bases are critical decisions made about cultural value; what world-view is implicitly invoked in the selection of these texts, and what subject positions are denied or refuted when other authors and texts are silently passed over? Students should always ask what is valorized as culturally significant and why, because that question is always part of any cultural enquiry or education, and asking it of this book can only be beneficial. This book might betray its author's European origins and prejudices about what is interesting and significant in American fiction, and, of necessity, it involves anthological compromise, but the writer is confident that its authors will still be studied seriously into the twenty-first century. *Contemporary American Fiction* concentrates on the younger writers who bear the

marks of their elders, for example the influence of Thomas Pynchon on Don DeLillo. Pynchon's best and most influential work, like that of Norman Mailer, belongs to an earlier period. So does that of many of Tony Tanner's authors in *City of Words: American Fiction 1950–70* (1971): Malamud, Bellow, Barth, Hawkes, Vonnegut, Burroughs, Heller. Only two of Tanner's authors survive in this work: Updike (1992) and Roth (1997), both recently prolific.

In *The Pleasures of Babel* (1993) Jay Clayton argued that 'we certainly do not live today in a country with a single, shared culture', and he acknowledged that 'such a comforting illusion of consensus' probably never existed in the first place (9). The emergence in the late twentieth century of a post-industrial and a multicultural society has made available to American culture a wider diversity of narrative voices than ever before. Concurrently, the rapidly expanding concept of 'culture' has made serious attention to those voices more prevalent. The fiction of the United States is too multiple and diverse for any single theoretical, hermeneutic or interpretative paradigm to accommodate all of it with any degree of fidelity to the individual texts, and it is just such a fidelity to the individual texts that this book strives most to maintain. Students should be alert to the dangers of what one critic has called 'attractive but frequently reductive totalisations', especially in the context of postmodernity.<sup>1</sup> In fact, there is a heterogeneity of creative languages and of subject matter in American fiction at the end of the twentieth century which is itself worth emphasizing as a fundamental critical value of a book such as this. Jay McInerney might concur: in his 1994 *Penguin Book of New American Voices*, McInerney argued that 'much recent fiction tends to deconstruct the idea of a single national literature. Identity is more narrowly parsed by those who may not feel "the American tradition" is exactly coextensive with their own' (p. xviii). One of the questions that every interpretation of each individual novel included here tries to address is what does it mean to be American now? How might it be possible to extrapolate characteristics that could be identified as recognizably American, or is such an enterprise always doomed to superficial generalizations and

<sup>1</sup> Brian Jarvis, *Postmodern Cartographies: The Geographical Imagination in Contemporary American Culture* (London: Pluto Press, 1998), 80.

stereotypes? Gore Vidal once argued that all Americans have in common with each other is a belief in ‘something called “the American way of life”, an economic system involving the constant purchase of consumer goods on credit to maintain a high standard of living’.<sup>2</sup> But is economics the only constituent of ‘the American way of life’?

William Blake once wrote that, ‘To generalise is to be an idiot’, and this is a useful warning for Europeans who are tempted to regard the United States as having a single and universally accepted culture. The heterogeneity of the culture of the United States and of its contemporary literature is one of its most remarkable features, and now more than ever it is characterized by copiousness and diversity. This book can only hope to represent a small part of that range and variety, and give a sense of the extraordinary vitality and inventiveness of American fiction at the end of the century. As long ago as 1961 Philip Roth argued that ‘the American writer in the middle of the twentieth century has his hands full in trying to understand, describe and then make credible much of American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one’s meager imagination. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents’.<sup>3</sup> In an interview in 1990 Don DeLillo said that ‘what’s been missing over these past twenty-five years is a sense of a manageable reality’.<sup>4</sup> The United States contains enough ‘manageable reality’ to permit imaginative narratives about almost anything. This limitlessness is one of its great assets and surely enhances its literature immeasurably. Both Roth’s and DeLillo’s arguments crucially implicate various forms of media in the proliferation of America’s ‘manageable reality’, and their fiction investigates the relationship between history, media, and myths of national identity. To quote another contemporary New Yorker who has pursued his own fictional enquiry into this territory: ‘History is the present. That’s why every generation writes it anew. But what most people think of as history is

<sup>2</sup> G. Vidal, ‘Paranoid Politics’, in *United States: Essays 1952–1992* (London: Abacus, 1993), 769–70. The article was originally published in 1967.

<sup>3</sup> P. Roth, ‘Writing American Fiction’, in *Reading Myself and Others* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1975), 120.

<sup>4</sup> F. Lentricchia (ed.), *Introducing Don DeLillo* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 48.

its end product, myth.<sup>5</sup> The United States has a history in which myth and mediation were crucially involved right from the beginning, so that writing has a special place in the formation of a national identity that became 'American'.

To give them a context in earlier American writing, attempts have been made to relate this book's late twentieth-century fictions to an idea of 'America' partly by reference to earlier writers to whom they seem indebted and that students might be familiar with from the nineteenth century and earlier twentieth century. This too is fraught with difficulty involving matters of value as they concern the canon. Students should always be reminded that writing is often a response to earlier writing as much as it is to social reality, and as McNerney warns, 'Europeans are a little too eager to value American fiction for what they imagine to be its childlike freedom, as if we were all cowboys scratching our names on the tabula rasa of the great American landscape' (p. xi). American fiction of the late twentieth century has a heritage stretching back two hundred years, and this book draws on that heritage at appropriate moments.

Bradbury and Ro in their *Contemporary American Fiction* published in 1987 argued that the contemporary period 'is that since 1945'. The present book understands 'contemporary' to mean since 1970, and more especially the last twenty years of the twentieth century. Alison Lurie's *The War between the Tates* marks a watershed; published in 1974, it is set in 1969–70 and dramatizes domestic and political upheaval at the end of the 1960s. Erica Tate has a nostalgia for a pre-1970s America: '1969—it doesn't sound right, it's a year I don't belong in. It doesn't even feel real. Reality is when the children were small, and before the housing development. . . . Everything's changed, and I'm too tired to learn the new rules. I don't care about 1969 at all. I don't care about rock festivals or black power or student revolutions or going to the moon.' (200). Lurie's novel concerns conflict and antagonism on many levels as some sort of cultural 'consensus' begins to break and the Tates are seriously discomfited by social changes that disrupt their privileged WASP position; the novel ends with the question "Mommy, will the war end now?" (314) and

<sup>5</sup> E. L. Doctorow, in G. Plimpton (ed.), *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews*, Eighth Series (London: Penguin, 1988), 308.

the answer is surely 'no'. American culture is as diverse and contested now as it was in 1969, only in different ways. In 1985 the history teacher of Mason's *In Country* defines a watershed in similar terms: "the biggies in your lifetime were the moon landing, the assassinations, Watergate and Vietnam". Mr Harris said everything was downhill after Kennedy was killed' (66–7). In 1988 DeLillo's *Libra* defined the assassination of Kennedy as 'the seven seconds that broke the back of the American century' (181). The years of the Nixon administration, 1969–74, was perhaps the crucial period in recent American history, years that saw the culmination of an extraordinary period of social upheaval which had included the assassinations of John F. Kennedy in 1963, Malcolm X in 1965, Martin Luther King in 1968, and Robert Kennedy in 1968, and which also saw the Apollo moon landing of 1969, the Kent State University shootings in 1970, and the unique disgrace of the resignation of President Nixon in 1974. The war in Vietnam (1965–75) especially marked what has been characterized as 'the massive transformation in the nation's self-understanding which took place during those same years'.<sup>6</sup> Paul Kennedy expresses it succinctly:

In so many ways, symbolic as well as practical, it would be difficult to exaggerate the impact of the lengthy campaign in Vietnam upon the national psyche of the American people . . . [it] helped to cause the fissuring of consensus in American society about the nation's goals and priorities, was attended by inflation, unprecedented student protests and inner city disturbances, and was followed in turn by the Watergate crisis, which discredited the presidency itself for a time . . . [the effects] were interpreted as a crisis in American civilisation.<sup>7</sup>

Most of the novels of this book are products of that post-Vietnam civilization, and each of them is used to try to define the distinctive qualities of the contemporary.

Finally a word for the 'general reader': in 1992 Elizabeth Young and Graham Caveney in their *Shopping in Space: Essays on America's Blank Generation Fiction* wrote that 'No one should feel excluded from a passionate engagement with modern fiction; it does not belong to

<sup>6</sup> D. Pease and C. Kaplan (eds.), *Cultures of United States Imperialism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 3.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988), 404–5.

academia'. The interpretations of this book are not dependent upon a prior knowledge of American history or cultural theory, and the introductions of its individual chapters are provided to help historicize contemporary fiction in terms of both the culture of the United States and its representations in earlier modern fiction. It is the primary texts that are important here, and *Contemporary American Fiction* is a work of advocacy that hopes to stimulate a passionate engagement with them.

# 1

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## Family Values

Often with unadulterated joy  
Mother, we bent by the fire  
rehashing Father's character—  
when he thought we were asleep.

Robert Lowell, 'During Fever'

In the United States the family is the principal means by which the individual is socialized. The family is the agency through which children are brought up in the knowledge of the values of their parents and of American society. The nuclear family is widely regarded as the sacred cornerstone of the American social project and it is perceived as fundamental to the happiness and success of the individual, the nation, and corporate life. An American myth of the family is still generally subscribed to and commonly recognized as a natural ambition and primary means of personal fulfilment. Furthermore, the nation family of the United States is a governing narrative for those who purport to speak on behalf of society and is integral to their ideas of American citizenship. Both conservative and liberal politicians strive to portray themselves as the guardians of family values because they understand that it is important to align themselves with something of broad public appeal, like the flag, which signifies a wide but wholesome and homogeneous social agenda. Such values are epitomized by the family ethos of the Disney films, for example, which have remarkable and worldwide appeal, and which emphasize strongly the security and nurture that families can provide. Although it has been argued that 'Divorce is America's great contribution to marriage',<sup>1</sup> it is

<sup>1</sup> E. Fawcett and T. Thomas, *The American Condition* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 127.

also true that Americans marry and remarry with an unfailing optimism in the future, in the hope of fresh opportunities to find personal fulfilment, and the institution of marriage is still a central part of that quest. At the end of the twentieth century rhetorical obeisance to family values was as fervent as ever, and abortion and the social welfare of single parents were still explosive issues in American politics.

The late twentieth century was also a time of great pressure on the conventional family unit that was common in the 1950s and 1960s. The success of the feminist movement enabled more women to pursue career paths and to postpone having children, women's conceptions of themselves were less likely to be determined by models of domesticity, and financial pressures have made large families less common as children are increasingly regarded in terms of economic commitment. Even more recently the legal rights of children not to be subordinate to their parents in the ways that were traditionally acceptable have been widely culturally endorsed and the abuse and neglect of children has become a subject of great public concern. Much social study has sought to uncover the inhibiting and even debilitating pressures of the family, and the authority of the father especially has come under close scrutiny. It seems less likely now that the family can be relied on unequivocally as a *Haven in a Heartless World*.<sup>2</sup> In 1981 Sar A. Levitan and Richard S. Belous asked *What's Happening to the American Family?* and part of the answer was fundamental social change.

Since Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) the family unit has been used to examine the particular conditions of the wider culture to which it belongs. More precisely, American novelists have often used the histories of children and adolescents as a means to offer social criticism of American life, and the American *Bildungsroman* has an illustrious pedigree since Huckleberry Finn ran away from his drunken father in 1884. This tradition continues into the twentieth century with Holden Caulfield, for example, in *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) and his ironic and perfunctory acknowledgement of family heritage: 'If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy

<sup>2</sup> C. Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World: The Family Besieged* (New York: Basic Books, 1975).

childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap.' It is a striking feature of this chapter's novels that they are partly characterized by acts of emotional or physical violence towards children, and by the abuse or collapse of the authority of the father. In some ways these novels are close to Lowell's *Life Studies* in revealing the debilitating effects of family inheritance, and especially in the ways that they investigate ideas about culture and authority by 'rehashing Father's character'.

### Toni Morrison **The Bluest Eye**

One of the many remarkable aspects of Toni Morrison's first novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970) is that, while it centres on the harrowing and traumatic narrative of an individual, the novel contextualizes her life and the lives of those similarly brutalized around her in a way which shows that nothing happens in isolation.<sup>3</sup> One way in which *The Bluest Eye* does this is through the use of the family. Pecola is shown to be the victim of, even the product of, violent tensions within her family, the Breedloves, who perceive themselves to be ugly beyond redemption: 'They took the ugliness in their hands, threw it as a mantle over them, and went about the world with it' (28). Pecola inherits this profoundly negative self-image from her parents and it is reinforced by the absence of positive representations of black Americans in her culture. Pecola's sense of diminishment is so complete and fundamental that she becomes invisible to the white store owner, in whom she registers 'The total absence of human recognition' (36), and which she interprets as a white distaste for her blackness. These are the cultural conditions that pertain for working-class black families in Lorain, Ohio, in 1941.

Pecola's relationship with her mother Pauline is not one which fosters her self-esteem. In one of the many scenes of violence and pain in the novel Pecola accidentally spills a blueberry cobbler on the kitchen floor of the house where her mother works as a maid. Pecola receives a beating from her mother, whose love and affection are reserved for

<sup>3</sup> Page references are to the Picador edition.

the white girl she is paid to wait on. The contrast is not confined to the different physical treatment that the two girls receive from Pecola's mother: the daughter of the white family calls her 'Polly' with easy familiarity: 'Her calling Mrs Breedlove Polly when even Pecola called her mother Mrs Breedlove seemed reason enough to scratch her' (84). This alienation of the black family from one another is partly a consequence of their poverty in a steel town on Lake Erie (where they are 'Festering together in the debris of a realtor's whim', (25)), such that the best they can do is try 'to make do with the way they found each other' (25). Economic and social pressures put unbearable strains on the Breedlove family, and Sammy Breedlove has run away from home twenty-seven times by the time he is 14 (32), but Pecola is younger and a girl and must stay to endure the terrible inheritance of her parents' violent marriage: 'Cholly and Mrs Breedlove fought each other with a darkly brutal formalism that was paralleled only by their lovemaking' (32). Pecola is trapped in a turbulent and loveless family and bears the brunt of the novel's ugly denouement.

*The Bluest Eye* is careful however not to make Pecola's fate seem extraordinary or inexplicable, and this tact is a central part of the novel's political agenda. The anguish of Pecola's parents is fully contextualized by accounts of their childhoods, and their respective family histories. Pecola's parents pass on their self-loathing to their daughter, but are themselves revealed as the products of difficult childhoods. Pecola's mother Pauline Williams is a deracinated southerner who came to Ohio from Alabama via Kentucky and who, despite reminiscing about 'down home', was an outsider in her own family who 'never felt at home anywhere, or that she belonged anyplace' (86). This cultural and familial displacement contributes strongly to her susceptibility to northern urban cultural pressures that are in fact inimical to her ethnic identity. Pauline's family background also contributes to her acceptance of her role as a servant in the Fisher household. It is notable that the Fishers give Pauline the nickname, and misnomer, 'Polly', where in her childhood home in Alabama 'she alone of all the children had no nickname' (86). Pecola's father was abandoned by his mother: 'When Cholly was four days old his mother wrapped him in two blankets and one newspaper and placed him on a junkheap by the railroad' (103). Cholly goes in search of his father in Macon, Georgia, when he is 14, finds him playing

craps, and is aggressively rejected by him with the expression 'Now, get the fuck outta my face' (123), and so Cholly becomes free of all familial bonds and dangerously bereft of social responsibility: 'Abandoned in a junk heap by his mother, rejected for a crap game by his father, there was nothing more to lose' (126). In this condition of despair he meets Pauline and they become bound together in a marriage of mutual antagonism, Cholly projecting his anger on to his wife as a desperate means of self-preservation: 'He poured out on her the sum of all his inarticulate fury and aborted desires. Hating her he could leave himself intact' (31). The violence of Cholly's marital relations and his attitude to women is also derived from a formative event in his adolescence when he was surprised by two white men while having sex with a young black girl. Unable to confront the white men in his racist culture, Cholly directed his anger towards the girl 'with a violence born of total helplessness' (116). Cholly's sexual relationships are crucially informed by such scenes of painful humiliation, and his marriage was unlikely to be a happy one: 'But the aspect of married life that dumbfounded him and rendered him totally dysfunctional was the appearance of children. Having no idea of how to raise children; and having never watched any parent raise himself, he could not even comprehend what such a relationship should be' (126). This observation returns the narrative to Pecola; the important point about the compressed account of Cholly's childhood is that it immediately precedes his rape of his daughter and is therefore strategically placed to help account for his behaviour. In this way *The Bluest Eye* shows how oppression is passed on from one black family to another. Cholly Breedlove's abuse of his daughter is dramatized in part as a displaced desire for his wife, in which 'The confused mixture of his memories of Pauline and the doing of a wild and forbidden thing excited him' (128). The novel here is uncompromisingly explicit and depicts the taboo of incest in direct language, but the scene is structured to occur as an almost inevitable consequence of Cholly's brutalized life: this perspective of family history serves not to ameliorate Cholly's actions but to give a material account of how he comes to abuse his own daughter.

This strategy is repeated elsewhere in *The Bluest Eye*, where family history is shown to be a consistently determining factor in the novel's action. The best example of this is the final section of 'winter' which

culminates with the black woman Geraldine returning home to discover her son terrorizing Pecola; Geraldine casts the innocent Pecola out of the house with the words 'Get out . . . you nasty little black bitch' (72). This section of the novel begins with an account of the migration of black people from the rural south to the industrial north in the 1940s. Geraldine's assimilation into the new middle-class black urban culture is accompanied by the erasure of a vital part of her Afro-American identity: 'In short, how to get rid of the funkiness. The dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions. Wherever it erupts, this funk, they wipe it away; where it crusts, they dissolve it; wherever it drips, flowers, or clings, they find it and fight it until it dies' (64). Geraldine's identity, and that of thousands of other black Americans like her, is compromised to an idea of American aspiration which is white and middle-class and which will not tolerate the fact that she is black. Geraldine learns to eradicate all signs of her ethnic cultural identity in order to conform to white social standards and white cultural values. This prohibition against black 'funkiness' invades even the most intimate areas of her sexual life. Geraldine's self-denial is passed on to her son, Junior, who becomes a torturer of cats at an early age. His mother explains to him, 'the difference between colored people and niggers' (67) and Junior, the direct product of his mother's enforced self-hatred, becomes a bully and a sadist and a loner; he bullies girls especially, including, eventually, Pecola. The moment at which Geraldine calls Pecola 'nasty little black bitch' includes an instantaneous recognition that the little girl is everything that Geraldine has worked so hard to distance herself from: 'They slept six to a bed, all their pee mixing together in the night as they wet their beds each in his own candy-and-potato-chip dream' (72). Here then the cycle of black oppression is complete, Geraldine passes on her self-loathing to her son Junior, who internalizes it as an essential condition of his identity. This is part of the novel's criticism of white ideas of social aspiration, and it mirrors Pauline's neglect of her daughter Pecola in dramatizing the corrosive effects of parental relationships that are not loving. Geraldine's history is used to show how the low-esteem of black people is transmitted through the agency of their families. It is this family-history perspective that prevents the fate of individuals from being interpreted as isolated events, and enables *The Bluest Eye*

to offer an analysis of a whole cultural history and not simply the story of one tragic individual.

Morrison's interest in the family is shown strongly in her use of the Dick and Jane primer at the beginning of *The Bluest Eye*: 'Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick and Jane live in the green-and-white house. They are very happy' (1). This text is an idyllic representation of the white nuclear family from which the Breedloves depart dramatically, and this departure is a fundamental aspect of the novel's ideological freight. The primer text is put to two other important uses in the novel: first, sentences from it are used as section headings in order to comment ironically on the action of the novel (so that the section which ends with Cholly's rape of Pecola begins with the words 'see father he is big and strong father will you play with Jane', (103)), and second, the primer is the text by which children learn to read, so that their very knowledge of language is bound up with the ideological values that the Dick and Jane primer carries. It might even be argued that the corruption of the primer into a solid block of text without space between the words is a representation of the lack of space that black people have in the culture that produces such a text and promotes its values. This latter point is very important, because the novel is full of references to the ascendancy of white aesthetic values (such as blue eyes) and offers a cultural analysis of the way that those values are promulgated to black people to whom they are inimical. This is especially true of the twin ideas of romantic love and physical beauty, which *The Bluest Eye* describes as 'Probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought' (95). Very little escapes the debilitating and corrosive presence of a white aesthetic in *The Bluest Eye*; even Claudia MacTeer, the narrator who attacks 'those round moronic eyes' of Shirley Temple, eventually succumbs: 'I learned much later to worship her, just as I learned to delight in cleanliness' (16), and Claudia also learns to erase her anger and rebelliousness. Furthermore, it is not only Cholly who abuses his own daughter: both Mr Henry and Soaphead Church are guilty of child abuse and therefore of contravening one of the most fundamental sanctities of the family, the trust of children in fathers. This corruption of the father's integrity has one notable exception in *The Bluest Eye*, the father of Claudia, Mr MacTeer, who shoots a gun at Mr Henry when he finds out about the

interference with his daughter Frieda (77). The MacTeers are very important to the novel's concern with the role of family as a kind of microcosm of the ethnic family of Afro-Americans that must be nurtured and sustained if individual black Americans are to survive the pressures of white America. As one critic has pointed out, 'The MacTeers retain a commitment to the idea of the black community as their extended family',<sup>4</sup> and this enlargement of the concept of family is consistently fundamental to Morrison's vision of a better future for Afro-Americans.

There is a black style of aesthetic value which appears occasionally in *The Bluest Eye*, in the form of song, or the blues, which functions as an affirmative alternative to white America's value system. Claudia loves to hear her mother singing:

She would sing about hard times, bad times, somebody-done-gone-and-left-me times. But her voice was so sweet and her singing-eyes so melty I found myself longing for those hard times, yearning to be grown without 'a thin di-i-time to my name'. I looked forward to the delicious time when 'my man' would leave me, when I would 'hate to see that evening sun go down . . . cause then I would know my man has left this town'. Misery colored by the greens and blues in my mother's voice took all of the grief out of the words and left me with a conviction that pain was not only endurable, it was sweet. (17-18).

The 'blues' of Claudia's mother is an authentic black art form that both resists and is resistant to the incursions of white America's dominant aesthetic values, and is one that has its origin 'working behind a mule way back in slavery time'.<sup>5</sup> Poland too sings about 'blues in my mealbarrel / Blues up on the shelf' (38). When Cholly's aunt falls ill her sisters comfort her with 'a threnody of nostalgia about pain, rising and falling, complex in harmony, uncertain in pitch, but constant in the recitative of pain' (107), and Cholly's broken personal history is such that 'The pieces of Cholly's life could only become coherent in the head of a musician. Only those who talk their talk through the gold of curved metal, or in the touch of black-and-white rectangles and taut strings and skins echoing from wooden corridors, could give

<sup>4</sup> Denise Heinze, *The Dilemma of 'Double Consciousness': Toni Morrison's Novels* (Athens, Ga.: Georgia University Press, 1993), 74.

<sup>5</sup> Houston Baker, Jr, *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 8.

true form to his life' (125). These references to the blues and to jazz (and of course another connotation of the word 'funk') represent a black art form which emerges from suffering, which is distinctively black, which tells the story of family histories, and which is passed down as a black aesthetic through families, like the oral histories of earlier Afro-American artists. In this sense, the family might still be the repository of positive values that are both deeply personal and culturally significant. Morrison's art as a novelist also aspires to be part of a quintessentially black creative tradition; it might be argued that the novel's title *The Bluest Eye* puns on the word 'eye' to refer to the first person singular 'I' which thus designates Pecola's desperate emotional impoverishment. Pecola is 'the bluest I'. In this way the novel becomes Pecola's blues, a musical precursor to Morrison's 1992 novel *Jazz* which also appropriates black musical structures for literary purposes. This too is an important point about family, Morrison's first novel positioning itself as part of an Afro-American artistic tradition from which it draws a sustaining sense of family continuity. One critic has argued that Claudia functions in *The Bluest Eye* as a 'griot' who addresses 'a communal imperative to know what has happened to the town and to its people, thus exemplifying the storyteller's role in providing perspective on difficult periods in communal history',<sup>6</sup> and this too connects the function of the artist with their community or family.

## Russell Banks *Affliction*

Russell Banks's *Affliction* (1989) is also a novel that uses the family as a means of cultural analysis, and like *The Bluest Eye* it examines how individual family members are informed by economic conditions, by the deterioration of a particular community, and by the corruption and collapse of the role of the father, culminating in domestic violence and childhood trauma.<sup>7</sup> *Affliction* is the story of two brothers, Rolfe and Wade Whitehouse, one of whom narrates the tale of the other's psychological collapse. Rolfe is a high school history teacher

<sup>6</sup> Trudier Harris, *Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison* (Knoxville, Tenn.: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 16.

<sup>7</sup> Page references are to the Harper Perennial edition.

who escaped Lawford, New Hampshire, by going to college, and who now tells Wade's story from a dispassionate distance. The role of the brother as narrator is a crucial one and a significant contribution to the novel's investigation of family inheritance. Rolfe, who is 31, unmarried, childless and teetotal and suffers from 'periodic headaches' (5), recognizes that Wade's story is the flip-side of his own in some crucial way: 'His story is my ghost life, and I want to exorcise it' (2), and it is not until he has told his brother's story that he could imagine beginning a family of his own and ending his life of meticulous routine: 'Will I marry then? Will I make a family of my own? Will I become a member of a tribe? Oh lord, I pray that I will do those things and that I will be that man' (49). Rolfe's obsession with telling Wade's story is a cathartic and potentially redemptive one which mirrors the 'isolated explosion of homicidal rage' (354) which comprises the novel's dramatic denouement. In *Affliction*, one brother needs to tell the other's story so that he might rid himself of the same trauma, the trauma of domestic violence handed to both Whitehouse brothers by their father. In this respect Banks's novel uses the family to offer a criticism of a certain type of masculinity. Rolfe recognizes that he is 'a little weird' (137) and that in his logical and dispassionate nature he might conform to the characteristically male Whitehouse traits which he hoped to leave behind when he left New Hampshire: 'The woman had feelings. But Rolfe did not. Or at least he did not seem to have any feeling. He was the strange one, not Wade' (233). This is the anxiety that pervades Rolfe's text, the fear that although he fled the family at an early age, he might still carry its legacy with him.

Rolfe tells the story of his brother Wade's psychological and social disintegration. Wade's marriage has already collapsed, but he is desperate to maintain a good relationship with his 10-year-old daughter Jill, because fatherhood is integral to Wade's ideas of proper manhood. Wade also thinks that he can banish the legacy of his father by being a better father himself. Fatherhood has an important redemptive potential for Wade; he recognizes that 'When you take a man's child from him, you take much more than the child' (162). Jill's reluctance to spend weekends with her bad-tempered father causes Wade acute pain, and his breakdown is framed by two meetings with her which go badly wrong, partly because she no longer needs him as much as

he needs her to support his sense of identity. Wade's vain fantasy of winning custody of Jill from his ex-wife is a desperate attempt to reconstitute a lost sense of family and a failing sense of masculinity. The psychological and social functions of fatherhood are closely connected for Wade: 'That was all he really wanted. He wanted to be a good father; and he wanted everyone to know it' (158). Wade's frustration at having this aspiration blocked is a major contributing factor to his breakdown; at the end of the novel when Jill reprimands her father for drinking while driving she tells him 'You're a policeman', and he replies abjectly 'I'm not nothing anymore' (326). Wade's lover Margie, with whom he hopes to shape a new family, is already familiar with this male desire for fatherhood; her ex-husband left her when he discovered that she could not conceive, because he wanted "'a real family'", and therefore felt 'as if she were depriving him of an essential right' (205). Despite the terrible legacy of his own family, Wade is incapable of thinking of himself without a family and he married immediately upon graduating from high school. Like much in Wade's life, his ideals have a fairy-tale quality: 'He would be the good father; she would be the good mother; they would have a beloved child' (279). This is a social need as much as an emotional one, and to be robbed of it is as calamitous to Wade as losing his job as the town policeman because it is integral to his ideas of manhood and social responsibility.

The narrative of Rolfe Whitehouse is not entirely dispassionate and detached; an important part of the novel's dramatic action takes place in chapter 19 when Wade tells him that he too was beaten by his father, and beaten so badly that he was hospitalized with broken ribs. There is an interesting analogy here with Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* because Rolfe has no memory of the attack, having apparently been traumatized by it as a 6-year-old. Rolfe insists that the story (a Freudian primal scene in which the father is displeased by the son who watches his mother bathing) was told to him by his brother as a cautionary tale. Rolfe believes that the story has made him especially wary, but safe: 'at least I managed to avoid being afflicted by that man's violence'. Wade replies pointedly, 'That's what you think' (277). The implication here is either that Rolfe can never recognize himself as the subject of his father's violence and therefore the cathartic potential of his storytelling has failed, or that his caution helped him to escape: 'I was a careful child . . . now I am a careful adult' (277).

Either way the implication is clear, that Rolfe did not escape his father's legacy any more than his brother did, and that even from his position as narrator that legacy is his affliction too. Rolfe has internalized his father's violence in a way which is as self-damaging as his brother's response to it.<sup>8</sup>

Like the other novels of this chapter, *Affliction* places its family history in the broader context of an account of a culture and a community. While Rolfe has avoided the Whitehouse family inheritance only 'with excruciating difficulty' (95), his brother Wade is gradually stripped of each of his roles as a husband, a father, a lover, a policeman. Striving to attain a conception of manhood that his environment will not permit, Wade feels outmoded and redundant and has a dream in which he senses that men are peripheral because 'Men do not have babies, women do'. Wade wakes up screaming, 'What do men do?' (137). Wade's authority, position, and status as a man are each taken from him, and his sense of identity disintegrates into obsession, psychosis, and paranoia. Much of this is a consequence of ideas of manhood which no longer serve him well, by which he is trapped, and that are closely associated with being a member of a family.

Wade's custody suit never gets started because his attorney knows he has a history of violence towards his wife; this is the terrible legacy that he has learned from his father and which his brother has left New Hampshire to escape. Wade and Rolfe's father, Glen Whitehouse, is a bitter and violent man who shows no love for any of his five children because his 'impoverished family only served to remind him of his own failings' (97). The father becomes an alcoholic, threatens his wife into submission, and can only relate to his sons in terms of challenges to his authority. Glen beats the two elder boys routinely; they leave home by joining the army and are killed in Vietnam, and the father turns his attention to Wade. The scenes in the novel in which Glen thrashes Wade inexplicably are at the centre of the text's consideration of family because all the violence of the narrative originates

<sup>8</sup> This is an important point that one contemporary reviewer misunderstood when he wrote that 'Banks allows certain suspicions to arise concerning Rolfe's reliability as a narrator and commentator . . . he can be annoyingly obtrusive in his lengthy explanations of his own part in the story' (Robert Towers, 'You Can Go Home Now', *New York Review of Books*, 7 Dec. 1989, 46).

with them. The violence of Glen Whitehouse, 'a failure of individual character' (255) is socially and culturally informed; two of the most harrowing attacks take place against a backdrop of wrestling on the television, and the television series 'Gun Smoke'. This is not to say that Banks glibly accuses the media, but that Glen Whitehouse is the product of an older New Hampshire culture which measures masculinity in terms of physical strength. This is the significance of the arm-wrestling scene where the father's authority is threatened by his growing sons, so he moves to dominate and subdue them by force. The tough New Hampshire landscape produces men who aspire to a model of masculinity predicated on violence, and here it is concurrent with an American history which goes back to 'Gun Smoke'.

Wade feels the humiliation of his attacks acutely, but as a child he has no option but to accept it 'as just one more of the many brutalities of our life so far, as one small corner of the rough terrain of childhood' (182). It is worth noting though that, in sharing his family secret with his wife Lillian, Wade is conscious that 'he had left out of his account something that was crucial and filled him with shame' (109). In beginning to imagine his own future family, many key things are brought together: 'his pain and shame, his secret exhilaration and the heat and drama of it, his pathetic fear of his father and incomprehensible anger at his mother' (279). Perhaps it is this 'secret exhilaration' at his father's demonstrations of power which enables Wade to carry it forward into his own domestic life, especially in the context of the narrative when he is, like his father, most powerless.

The myth of masculinity which traps Wade has a broad cultural currency. When the brothers meet, they keep a space between them: 'That is the way we men are, we New England men, we Whitehouse men' (224). This is seen especially in sports: the novel takes place during one November hunting season, the shooting of deer characterized as 'an ancient male rite'. Wade's friend Jack Hewitt derives his sense of identity from his sporting ability: 'when he found out that he couldn't play baseball anymore, he changed' (171), and Margie points out that 'women can see the little boy in the man pretty easily. . . . It happens when he's paying attention to something else. Like watching sports on tv' (173). The outmoded idea of manhood that New Hampshire men subscribe to in *Affliction* is sharply exposed by Wade's astonishment when he discovers that his attorney is in a wheelchair;

it is a myth of masculinity learned from his family and his culture which, he knows, has always been precarious: 'this particular kind of fragility' (108).

The disintegration of Wade's family life takes place against the disintegration of the community he was raised in. Ambitious people move away from Lawford, leaving only the failures behind. This is part of the American dream of social aspiration and personal fulfilment, as Rolfe comments, 'From log cabin to President: it is our dominant myth' (202). But even Rolfe has only contempt for the people who have 'gone to Florida, Arizona and California, bought a trailer or a condo, turned their skin to leather playing shuffleboard all day and waited to die' (82-3). Ironically, Wade does escape to a new life at the end of the novel, but only as a fugitive across the border north to Toronto, and on the run for a double murder. Rolfe speculates that Wade has become 'one of those faceless fellows we see working behind the counter at our local video rental store' (354), and his narrative turns its attention to the replacement of the Lawford community by a ski resort, a story of property development, commercial enterprise, and social alienation. Just as Wade disappears from the text, so too does Lawford: 'The community, as such, no longer exists' (353). The breakdown of the family precedes the collapse of the community, and Lawford disappears as the Whitehouse family disintegrates. This is a theme that Banks pursues closely in *Rule of the Bone* (1995) a contemporary *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in which a 14-year-old boy escapes the sexual abuse of his stepfather and goes in search of a new life of self-esteem and surrogate families, 'a homeless kid pretending not to give a shit that no one wanted him' (130). This novel, like *The Bluest Eye* and *Affliction* explores the relationship between family dysfunction and social violence through the use of an outcast or victim, and Bone's tone of voice is sometimes reminiscent of Holden Caulfield. At one point Banks's protagonist imagines walking into a Pizza Hut and indiscriminately shooting dead everyone there, 'That's how far gone I was on account of my stepfather and the collapsed situation at our house and family' (199).

### E. A. Proulx **The Shipping News**

Annie Proulx's *The Shipping News* (1993) is also a novel which asks what it means to belong to a family, and investigates how the individual is informed by family relationships; the novel has a positive view of family heritage as a repository of value amid the chaos of modern society, but this is not a sentimentalized ideological perspective.<sup>9</sup> The novel is very much concerned with domestic violence and its traumatic consequences both for the individual and the community. *The Shipping News* does not necessarily idealize family, but it does suggest that coming to know one's family, even distant family, is a way to know oneself. For this novel however, family is something radically different, and the politics of family is where this novel's real cutting edge lies. The novel's protagonist, Quoye, the offspring of loveless parents who, like Glen Whitehouse, see their own failures reflected in him, feels at an early age that 'he had been given to the wrong family, that somewhere his real people . . . longed for him' (2). Quoye senses that 'some anomalous gene' has cast him as a gargantuan misfit and absurd outsider to his own family and it is this alienation that hurries him into a calamitous marriage with Petal Bear, characterized as 'a month of fiery happiness. Then six kinked years of suffering' (13). Quoye does find briefly a surrogate family in Partridge, and he momentarily glimpses the nurturing potential of being among people who accept him and care for him without prejudice. But Quoye's wife fails to provide the stable domestic life he longs for; she rejects the role of motherhood, pretends not to recognize their daughter, and when she finds herself pregnant a second time 'fumed until the alien left her body' (14). Petal too is an alienated product of contemporary American culture, 'In another time, another sex, she would have been a Genghis Khan [but] she had only petty triumphs of sexual encounter' (13). Petal perceives her only mode of conquest to be sexual, but she resents her own promiscuity, with its repeated failure to provide fulfilment; to Quoye she was 'starved for love' (23), but for Agnis she is merely 'a bitch in high heels' (24). Quoye's family disintegrates entirely when his wife deserts him, sells their two

<sup>9</sup> All page references are to the Fourth Estate edition.

children to paedophiles, and then dies in a road crash. Simultaneously, Quoyale's parents commit suicide leaving only a message for him to contact his aunt Agnis, his father concluding enigmatically, 'I don't know where the rest of them are' (19). The modern ills of contemporary society are again satirized here, Quoyale's parents contracting cancer because they live beside a power station, and Quoyale's father's final message left on an answerphone that cuts off abruptly because the tape runs out.<sup>10</sup> It is worth noting too that Quoyale's children are only narrowly saved from featuring in a paedophile video (26), and this is important because it connects the sexual abuse of children in contemporary urban America with that which the novel portrays as endemic in Newfoundland. Violent and abusive sex (sex as a weapon) is a significant theme in *The Shipping News*, and is closely associated with the novel's satirical depiction of what some American politicians like to refer to dotingly as 'family values'.

It is specifically through the agency of his aunt Agnis Hamm that Quoyale embarks upon that most American of journeys, a new life; ushered in by a reference to Horace Greely (21) Quoyale heads off not west but north for Newfoundland, 'the rock that had generated his ancestors' (1) as part of what Agnis calls 'some atavistic drive to finish up where you started' (29).<sup>11</sup> It is Agnis who tells Quoyale, 'What place would be more natural than where your family came from?' (29), and it is Agnis who takes Quoyale and his two young daughters to begin again in Newfoundland and so rescues him from the wreckage of his modern urban life: 'Quoyale hated the thought of an incestuous, fit-prone, seal-killing child for a grandfather, but there was no choice. The mysteries of unknown family' (25). Agnis provides Quoyale with a history lesson in family lineage, and they travel together to Newfoundland already constituting a new kind of family unit: the aunt, the nephew, and the two motherless daughters. This is just the beginning of the novel's exposition of ideas about family connections.

<sup>10</sup> It is worth noting that this last message is one in which Guy Quoyale offers his own narrative of a uniquely American self-determination, one in which 'I had to make my own way in a tough world ever since I came to this country. Nobody ever gave me nothing' (19). This narrative bears interesting relation to the one on which Quoyale is about to embark.

<sup>11</sup> Atavistic: 'The reappearance of a characteristic after several generations of absence, caused by a recessive gene'. This word is perhaps more pertinent to Bunny than it is to Quoyale himself.

Quoyale is compelled to Newfoundland by his aunt, who has her own reasons for wanting to return to their family origins (unknown to him) and she also has her own family demons to come to terms with. Agnis Hamm provides a further example of an individual without immediate family, and so the novel begins by positing alternative models of what a family can be, and how individuals can establish loving relationships in the absence of traditional or conventional family forms. Crucially, Quoyale's disabling passivity is broken by the emergence of family ties, the responsibilities of paternity, on one hand, and the appearance of Agnis, on the other, who tells him immediately of his likeness to his grandfather (25) and so arouses his curiosity in family antecedents.

The Newfoundland that the Quoyales discover is no pastoral retreat or rural idyll but a place of desperate hardship and historic struggles to survive, of 'the father who shot his oldest children and himself that the rest might live on flour scrapings . . . trousers made of worn upholstery fabric' (33). The poverty and suffering of Newfoundland is a function of its isolation, the barren landscape and the remorselessly severe weather, and Proulx's evocation of these aspects of northern life is as significant a part of her novel as the evocation of a New Hampshire winter is to Banks's. Moreover, the novel is littered with references to violence within local families: 'sexual abuse of children is an old Newf tradition' (218). Quoyale's job on the newspaper gives him access to this first hand and enables him to judge how widespread it is: "'This week I've the most sexual abuse stories I've ever had", said Nutbeem. ". . . The usual yaffle of disgusting old dads having it on with their kiddies, one more priest feeling up the choirboys, . . . ripped his trousers stem to stern and sexually assaulted him with a tomcod" (155). This paragraph, and the many other graphic references to sexual violence in the novel (217, 218, 221), are there to remind the reader that depravity is not simply some degenerate aberration of contemporary urban lifestyles. In this way the novel subtly and consistently avoids any simple opposition between the rural and the urban, the old and the modern.

Two of these quotations in particular are worth paying close attention. The most detailed and graphic catalogue of sexual violence in the whole novel occurs on pages 217–18: 'And here in Killick-Claw a loving dad is charged with sexually assaulting two of his sons and his

teenage daughter in innumerable incidents between 1962 and the present. Buggery, indecent assault and sexual intercourse. Here's another family lover, big strapping thirty-five-year-old fisherman spends his hours ashore teaching his little four-year-old-daughter to perform oral sex and masturbate him'. Note the language here, 'a loving dad', and 'a family lover', says Nutbeem, punning on 'family lover' to mean both a lover *of* the family and a lover *in* the family. 'It's not necessarily worse here', he adds, 'just more openly publicized' (218). But is this really true? How are we to take the dark humour of Proulx's presentation of this especially ugly aspect of Newfoundland life in the context of the novel's political agenda about family values? Surely it does seem worse, much worse, and suggests that Newfoundland is a backward and brutally violent place for many of its inhabitants. The second quotation is equally important: it is revealed that Jack gives his writers assignments that force them to confront their personal traumas from the past. Nutbeem has to cover 'the wretched sexual assaults. And with each one I relive my own childhood' (221). This is true for each of the writers. Nutbeem philosophically concludes that these kinds of confrontation with the pain of the past are therapeutic: 'it dulls it because you see your condition is not unique, that other people suffer as you suffer' (221). This is important to the theme of renewal and redemption, of overcoming the traumas of the past, and it is vital to the relationship of Quoyale and Wavey which brings the novel to a conclusion.

If the catalogue of sexual violence in Newfoundland families is disconcerting to Quoyale, then so is the family heritage that he uncovers there; it is no cosy album of illustrious forebears, but something of a curse. The Quoyales were in fact 'a savage pack' who once "'Nailed a man to a tree by 'is ears, cut off 'is nose for the scent of blood to draw the nippers and flies that devoured him alive'" (139). More than any other fabled family, the Quoyales, 'wild and inbred, half-wits and murderers' (162) represent the mythic ethos of the country. The only surviving Quoyale is old cousin Nolan: "'They say there's a smell that comes off him like rot and cold clay. They say he slept with his wife when she was dead and you smell the desecration coming off him'" (162). This is the family heritage that Quoyale has to come to terms with in Newfoundland, 'Ancestors whose filthy blood ran in his veins, who murdered the shipwrecked, drowned their unwanted brats' (174) and

whose legendary ugliness is such that local people still say, 'Nothing good ever happened with a Quoye' (182). As with *The Bluest Eye* and *Affliction*, family is something to be suffered and overcome, a form of socialization that is violent and painful, that configures children as victims, and that takes mature adults years of struggle to come to terms with.

The narrative of *The Shipping News* unfolds for Quoye in terms of revelations about family relationships, with his daughters, his aunt, and his cousin Nolan. Nolan, an illiterate fisherman but 'some kind of fork kin from the old days' (161) resents the incursion of Quoye and family and haunts them (literally) by placing witch-knots at the threshold of each room of their house. Eventually Quoye is forced to confront the wretched and starving old man who lives alone in abject squalor: 'He called, Mr Quoye, Mr Quoye, felt he was calling himself' (264). Here Quoye is painfully reminded of the family history that his father fled, and he discovers a mysterious affinity between Nolan and his daughter Bunny whose imagination has been terrorized by the fear of a dog that has been planted there by Nolan's witchcraft. Nolan, on the verge of death from malnutrition, is institutionalized in an asylum and Quoye visits him to try to lay to rest Nolan's lunatic animosity: "'Cousin Nolan". How strange the words sounded. But by uttering them bound himself in some way to this shrivelled husk. "Cousin Nolan Quoye. It's all in the past"' (296). Quoye tries to put Nolan's hostility at a distance, but the novel insists repeatedly upon the continuity of the Quoye family blood. Quoye's own talent for seeing the commonplaces of life in terms of newspaper headlines ('Dog Farts Fell Family of Four', (54) 'Phone Rings in Empty Room', (8)) is an attenuated remnant of the Quoye magical genius; it is an imaginative ability which his daughter Bunny has inherited, unable to eat apricots because they look like 'little fairies bottoms' (139) or lobsters because they remind her of red spiders. In this way the quintessential Quoye gene is passed on through generations, expressed as the father's anxiety that 'his daughter might glimpse things beyond static reality' (134). Bunny, more than her sister, carries the unique Quoye characteristic, and her refusal to believe in death is an important part of the novel's theme of resurrection. After all, is it not Bunny who brings Jack Buggit back to life, standing transfixed at the side of his coffin and