

Written Notes Inspired by Watsky interview:

Q: This work would seem to qualify as experimental. What is your understanding of this term and how it relates to your novel?

A: One of my teachers prefers the word "formal" to describe writers playing with different forms to express what they want to say. "Formal" isn't completely a fit for me, as it sounds more rigid than I'd like. I'm very into coloring outside the lines! But I do see the utility of the word. The "experiment" is the effort to discover a good way to express what the work is about.

Snakes is a mid-life crisis novel, and the germ of it was the story of a youngish woman, unhappy in her marriage, traveling to Chicago for a translating job. But I found that after considerable effort, I could not get the story to be as expressive as I wanted.

A big pressure that produced this new form was the feeling of inarticulateness — my own and my character Hanna's. Rather than keep struggling to be more articulate, there was a desire to find some way to work that did an end run on words, that involved an artisanal attention to building blocks such as paper, tape, scissors, images, layout.

So, on a residency at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts in 1998, I took out scissors and scotch tape and began adding to the novella, both images and a different narrator, neighbor, N. of *Snakes*. This scrapbook form was much more helpful to me, and the two narrators, images, and design elements expressed the multivalent reality I experience in the world, the plethora of it. This seems to me to apply to both the interior of any one individual, and to the world that surrounds them.

The novel's original subtitle was "a commonplace novel," a reference to the commonplace books kept from antiquity by educated people, for instance John Milton and George Washington. As the form evolved, these scrapbooks became more individual in nature. Often, copied-over passages were interlaced with personal reflections and diary-like entries.

All or most novels are mystery novels, and one thing really crucial to me was that my new form gave me a way of investigating, learning, working — so that I could be expressive of something different than what I started out with.

Another really important aspect of my new form was the use of color. In this, I'm very influenced by illustrated children's books and chapter books. The color, to me, affords a sense of the opulence and wonder of the world, an ecstatic impulse.

A friend just acquainted me with Vico's phrase *verum esse ipsum factum* = we can only completely understand something we make ourselves. An example, the Wiki says, of "constructivist epistemology." So, I would say this form and way of working that I arrived at was not only a way of expressing myself, but of finding a way to understand better the world I was encountering inside and outside, a process for me to learn something. So what did I learn in the course of the four volumes? The basic solutions of gratitude and love, but of course the devil is always in the details, and those end points are more aspirational than fully realized. They are verbs rather than nouns, as Nathaniel Mackey would point to, some way to go, to act, to be on the path of.

At the same time, there's a tension between the sense of play that a scrapbook can involve, and the seriousness of life's challenges, which are both personal and societal.

Note that my tendency is to be additive rather than subtractive. So I did not leave out words entirely, or leave out my first germ of story. Obviously there is a point when you have to delete, and there was significant amount of that as well over time.

Q: What kind of attitude would you like a reader to have going into the book?

A: I'd hope for a sense of adventurousness, some curiosity about what I'm trying to do, willingness to give it a chance. On receiving the book in the mail, a friend referred to it as a jungle, which I thought was a fair description. After leaving it around on a table for a while, she gave it a whirl and found it more to her liking than she expected.

At the same time, I'd say that as I have the opportunity to talk to people about this work, I find there's a lot of varied responses, which I really enjoy. It's a lot like the proverbial elephant, that, approached from various perspectives, presents many different, even inconsistent, aspects.

Further into the jungle aspect though: as a description of a mid-life crisis, the sense of being besieged fits into that metaphor: for Hanna, N., Lev Tolstoy and his Anna: tangled in vines, confusion and barragement. A reader could perhaps find a kind of chord with their own experience. There could be both a recreation of that dilemma, a kind of honesty about it, but also solace and celebration, an appreciation of the journey into and with this reality.

Q: With all the fine print plethora (including an important text that is occluded by a leaf on the second page) what expectation do you have of how carefully a reader reads (every line) of this? There seems to be an intention both to tell and to hide.

A: I appreciate readers who find a way to read the book that satisfies them. So: skipping all or some of the interpolations, footnotes etc. could work, or reading them all could work. One great thing that emerged in making the video was the ability to lavish attention on all the material — the detritus and plethora, as well as the narrations, of the opening pages. Nathaniel Mackey talks about all the *noise* in the world. Rather than edit that out, I've included it, much possibly useless, but also conveying the many rich webs of interconnection and resonance that occur. Also, the tragedy and horror of life, its mess. As far as hiding, yes, I do think I want to both hide and reveal, that the hidden is so much a part of life.

Q: There seems to be a kind of bias toward the outsider or underdog in the text. For instance, in the *Readers Digest* quote the dominant bird is trying to drown out the songs of other birds, but they are still there. Or the townwith its student population"like prey visibly balled up inside." Does this fit with your understanding?

A: Perhaps the key aspect of the book is both narrators' desire to find a voice of some kind, related to finding a way forward, lost as they are in the dark woods of middle age, as Tolstoy and his Anna are. But this sympathetic motivation extends to a whole host of other voices — the Native history below the surface of Hanna's hometown, Tolstoy's wife, Charlie Parker, Cecil Taylor, husbands and lovers, parents, siblings. It seems to me we are made up of those voices and energies that are both outside and inside us.

It is necessary to mention that both narrators are women, and women are often considered and treated as *outside* of the important action in the world. Their opinions and realities are devalued, and they are subject to violence all over the globe. Interestingly, in many species, only male birds have song. There is very much a feminist impulse in this work.

Relatedly, I'd say that often so much is left out of stories in efforts to get to some reductive bottom line. And of course there's ubiquitous outright suppression. All can never be fully told or understood, but being interested in learning more, widening our understanding, is of great value.

Q: The opening material suggests that there is a philosophical bent to this novel. The work's formalism might suggest an idealist philosophical impulse, as empiricists rely on experience and how the passage of time and events constrain what is told or known or believed. The formalist shakes this up, implies an ideal. It *imposes* on experience, distorts it. How does this fit with your understanding?

A: I think writers are often interested in philosophy because they have to create a world, and it becomes very clear that they are making assumptions about the world in order to create this world. And perhaps even more deeply, they write to find out more about the world, to investigate it.

To go to your proposal that the novel is essentially idealistic, I think that's useful and true. It's funny, when I was assigning an ISBN to the book, I had to pick a genre. They didn't offer "Experimental Fiction." I was really drawn to "Visionary and Metaphysical," but I knew that it would be false advertising to choose it, as it referred to a body of work that I didn't fit into.

Hannah Arendt wrote her dissertation on St. Augustine's concept of love, and that focus on a communitarian idealism proved to be central to her life and work. My hodge-podge is engaged in the same activity, gestures toward a salvation always out of reach, where the expulsion from the garden of Eden does not take place, where snakes can carry wisdom as well as represent a valued part of the world's ecology.

In addition to a communitarian impulse, I'm also very interested in how we're each individual, and how we have to "negotiate difference" to work toward any kind of peaceable kingdom.

The formal solutions that I have come up with present a desire for some solace and hope in a difficult and impossible world — a fabricated object that is made through a process of both constructing and deconstructing, opening to noise as well as song, that has the intention that nothing and no one will be left out.

Two lines from the poem "Sandokai" have stayed with me, from 8th century Chinese Zen master Shítóu Xīqiān: "Lo! With the ideal comes the actual. Like two arrows that meet in mid-dair."

Q: When did you start putting images in your work?

A. I started down this road towards the end of my college years. I illustrated a paper on Soviet industrialization with photographs (not well received), and my BA thesis, for Martin Marty, on missionaries to the Southwest in the 19th century, was a huge warren of illustration plus text. Much gratitude to Dr. Marty for his wideness of spirit, in the encouragement and respect he accorded me. But I didn't have a sense of how to go forward in this direction. A return to form occurred with my story "News," published by *The American Literary Review* in 1996. The narrator is a jewelry maker, and I disturbed the text with a number of different fonts, and also various wingdings and dingbats, not all of which were captured in the published version of the story, but are present in the version I have posted on my website. Then in 1998, in the desperation previously mentioned, I went whole-hog in this direction.