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The Problem with Weirdness: A Review of D. Harlan Wilson's Bizarro Campus Novel *Primordial*

Primordial, by D. Harlan Wilson. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Anti-Oedipus Press, 2014.

The campus novel is a problematic genre. Perhaps it's the timeworn, yet unshakably persistent idea that life within academia is out of sync with the "real world." The idea of the *ivory tower* is etymologically Biblical, and imbued with our current negative connotations since at least the early twentieth century, yet holds special resonance in today's landscape, where books like Mark McGurl's *The Program Era* and Chad Harbach's *MFA vs. NYC: The Two Cultures of American Fiction* reflect a growing criticism of the modern-day inseparability between writers and college campuses.

Which brings us back to the campus novel. In a 1985 interview with Don Swaim, writer and Stanford professor Tobias Wolff defends creative writing in the university by arguing that "writing requires freedom, space to dream, and however you can get that you should be grateful for that as a writer." The campus novel, that most professorial and tweed-jacketed of genres, is the manifestation of Wolff's dream space, as well as its purest *romanticization*. Emerging in the middle of the last century, the campus novel is interested in, above all else, the inner life of the university and the academics housed within its ivory walls. Notable examples include Vladimir Nabokov's *Pnin* and John Williams's *Stoner*, or the deconstructionist campus allegories of John Barth's *Giles Goat Boy* and Julie Schumacher's recent novel-in-recommendation letters *Dear Committee Members*. Into these hallowed grounds arrives D. Harlan Wilson's strange, hallucinatory, violent new book *Primordial*, which is not only perhaps the most disturbing novel set on university grounds ever to be published, but is also the world's first Bizarro campus novel.

Primordial follows an unnamed, virulent professor, whose PhD

has been revoked for "practicing a questionable mode of pedagogy" (11). He returns to his alma mater to re-earn his degree by any means possible, and finds the university suffering from the "social fallout from the extinction of culture" (14). The university has become an insane, Fallujah-esque place, where random, sudden violence can erupt at any turn between students who have devolved to a primordial state through massive quantities of psychedelics and weight lifting. Wilson's vision presents us the campus as *Mad Max*-like, post-apocalyptic wasteland—a landscape the narrator runs amok through, his rampage of violence reflecting a *Grand Theft Auto*-type video game more than any sort of reality-based world.

A typical scene: upon his arrival at the university, our "retrograded" narrator is beset upon by a man who reminds him of his dissertation advisor. The narrator runs him over with his car, probably murdering him, and goes on his way without another thought on the matter. Then there are the classes he attends, which are more gladiatorial than academic, the narrator's beating of professors before their classes eliciting whoops and hollers from the other students. He reigns over his dorm room like a despot, "flogging my roommates until I draw blood and they are sufficiently terrorized, i.e., happy" (73). He takes similar relish in the fact that the school is awash in pornography, the students shooting pornos in the library stacks and incessantly gazing at 8-bit porn on old university computers. This obsession with pornography includes: "Buckwheat porn. Refrigerator porn. Entropy porn. Diglossia porn. Black supremacy porn. Arch-donkey porn. Evil genie porn. Apornal porn. No bones-or-joints-in-corpses porn. Synchronic analytical dithyrambic bad motherfucker porn. So forth" (34).

The perfunctory insanity of the world Wilson creates over the novel's 167 spare pages is at first jarring, then infectious, before finally inducing a kind of stultifying mallet-over-the-head effect. Such, perhaps, is the nature of the genre Wilson's work is primarily identified with: *Bizarro*, the underground literary genre based out of Portland, Oregon, whose only defining characteristic is weirdness and lots of it. The Bizarro Central website summarizes the genre as thus: "Bizarro is literature's equivalent to the cult section at the video store." Wilson's very biography seems to reflect the inherent weirdness of Bizarro (novelist, professor, amateur bodybuilder) and the psychedelic, mind-numbing process of reading *Primordial* is as Bizarro as anything most readers of fiction, experimental or otherwise, will experience.

There are times where the novel's wild experimentation with form and content, as well as its metaphorical use of arcane academia and institutionalized knowledge, bring to mind a writer like Jorge Luis

Borges. But the Bizarro plot compressions and Gonzo acid flashbacks place Wilson in a much more dangerous, nihilistic landscape than anything found in Borges.

The question of whether *Primordial* is, in the end, successful or not is difficult to answer. There is, for instance, the slimness of the book, how it uses the white space on the page like a book of poetry. Entire chapters of the book are composed of a single sentence or word. Successful examples include chapter fourteen ("The semester (un)folds like an origami in flames." [30]) or chapter seventy-one ("A fight breaks out during the midterm. I start it." [137])—these are effective, tightly controlled lines that gesture toward a larger world while simultaneously aiding the plot and tone of the book.

But, as a counterpoint, take chapter eighty-three: "Berserk pail-lase of violence" (157). The words *berserk* and *violence* are apt here, full of tonal and thematic referents, but what do they tell us that we don't already know? Or what about the word *paillase*, which is French for *straw mattress*. What could that possibly mean within the context of the sentence? Is it meant to be a play on the word *malaise* and the word's meaning of *unease* or *discomfort*? Is there no point to the use of *paillase*? Is that the point? The difficulty with Bizarro is that in looking for meaning beyond the surface aesthetics of its weirdness, a reader finds only white noise and absurdist wordplay.

One might surmise that *Primordial's* thesis is that everything is in decline. The university is in ruins. There's a pervasive futility to the whole academic process. In the MFA vs. NYC debate, Wilson sees only a "horde of writers . . . careworn manuscripts in one hand, creative writing degrees in the other, they stagger back and forth in search of fresh meat . . ." (122).

Which is certainly interesting, because the role of the campus novel has been to immerse us in book-lined hallways and the reflective shade of autumnal trees—"the space to dream," in other words, to return to Tobias Wolff. But the Möbius strip-like circularity of graduate-level academia fits many of the definitions of a Ponzi scheme, and Wilson seems to be arguing that the extinction of this culture is necessary for us to "reboot" and "revert" back into a "natural primitive state" (21), where meaningful connection would be possible once more. Or maybe that's not it. Maybe *Primordial* is about nothing at all. Such is the problem of Bizarro and its inherently meaningless chronicle of the human experience. After all, "Most of adult life," Wilson reminds us, "is spent discovering the mystery of how very little you matter" (64).