

The Courage of Joseph McElroy



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What constitutes a Joseph McElroy novel? Let's start by throwing out the stupid and obvious. It's not length because McElroy can be succinct and frequently is. It's not the supposed thorny and compacted nature of the sentences because McElroy can be transparent when he wants to be. (From *Women and Men*, page 516: "Chick never had as much homework as Gordon. They did not discuss school. Chick got strapped by his mother once in a while and his mother gave him orange juice for supper instead of milk.") It's not whatever he might have in common with some of his contemporaries, the Pynchons and Gaddises, because quite honestly I don't see it. I see Proust, I see James, but not Coover or Barth. Don't let the pub dates fool you: *Joseph McElroy is not a postmodernist*. The seriousness of his mission and his concern with inner landscapes—memory, suppressed trauma—locate him closer to the modernist sensibility of Picasso and Schoenberg than the postmodern, street-beat vibe of Warhol and rock and roll.

A Joseph McElroy novel begins and ends with a serious purpose. One page into *Plus* or *Lookout Cartridge* and it's obvious the author does not take his work lightly. Joseph McElroy doesn't write breezy, freewheeling romps about Elvis sightings and runway models with

ESP. Perhaps he reads these books, I wouldn't know. But the McElroy novel supports the notion that the written word is important and that the undertaking of a novel must be important as well; not because the author thinks highly of himself but because he has accepted the lonely burden of constructing something sturdy and well engineered in a world of so much shoddy carpentry.

A McElroy novel cannot be approached passively. Other writers understand this. We don't hold it against him. It's what we admire in McElroy to begin with. It's what we try and fail to achieve in our own work. Why? Because McElroy is strong, and we are not. Because McElroy has courage, and we lack it. Even the best of us stop short while McElroy ventures ahead. Something compromises us, whether timidity or the need to ingratiate ourselves. We're such products of our times. We write in fear of someone giving us a one-star review on Amazon. We tremble at the thought of an anonymous word-sniper leaving a nasty comment on our blog. We're small, scared people, and it shows in the ephemera we produce.

Joseph McElroy transcends that. Joseph McElroy is nineteen feet tall and can crush bombproof limousines with his biceps. He will live to be four hundred and thirty-five.

Two examples of McElroy's courage: first, he's unafraid of abstractions, which automatically puts him at odds with the conventional wisdom. From high school on, we're taught to show and not tell. Describe the coffee cup—is it blue, red, striped? Is the handle chipped? Now describe the coffee inside the cup—is it black and oily or does it have a brown cream swirl?

Repeat. Enjoy your life. Die eventually.

McElroy writes: "Rent a city, if you were rich enough. Now use it. Take occupancy. Put things into it. Run it. Look at it. Keep it from others if you wish. Sublet it. Inflate it and paddle it. But if you sound funny here as if you don't mean what you say, remember to be serious. Be objective." (*W&M*, 783)

High school English teacher writes: "Who's 'you'? Rent *what* city? Can you describe what it looks like? And what do you mean by 'Take occupancy'? Be serious about *what*?"

See, I like the McElroy quote because it invokes an idea that can only be implied indirectly through the use of abstract language. The

somewhat elliptical manner of expression is a way of circumnavigating language itself, which is a filter, in favor of direct communication. Some writers describe a touch—McElroy actually touches us.

(By the way, here's McElroy on the subject of cups: "The two women, who didn't know each other except through a mutual acquaintance, raised their cappuccino cups, which were glasses in metal holders." [*W&M*, 219] Now try to forget it.)

And something else: McElroy isn't an aesthete. His writing isn't pretty but it is frequently "beautiful." Take this, from page 981 of *Women and Men*:

"Your hand's on your cheekbone, a smile on the rest of your face asking Harry—that's the detective's name—if a guy name of Ray Spence has been around, looks like a fairly well-dressed drifter, sometimes a fringe jacket, boots, pretty good clothes but he'll never make it as a person, ponytail and maybe some suspicion of beard."

Never mind the context, it's the choppy, additive quality of the sentence that interests me. It doesn't "scan" in any conventional sense; the rhythm is Varèse, not Johann Strauss. We're jamming in 11/8. We're late-Coltrane: the drummer's just playing a pulse. Get it? *It's not pretty*. It's not that horrible, treacly shit that mediocre hacks compose with a metronome and a thesaurus. Instead it's evocative, colloquial, earthy, and real. And that brings me back to that word again: courage. It takes *courage* to write a sentence like the one quoted above; to risk ugliness, arrhythmia, tonal irregularities: those moments of dissonance and rubato that cause us to doubt our own ears.

(Or, as Carl Ruggles defended Charles Ives to a quivering concertgoer who'd come expecting Brahms: "Why can't you stand up before fine strong music like this and use your ears like a man?")

So far I've mainly spoken of mechanics, word choices and sentence structures. It's an entry point but only that. McElroy does a lot more than stir up a glorious noise. What he writes about: fathers and sons, missing mothers, death and suicide, divorce, New York, New Hampshire, New Mexico, parents worrying about their children, spiritual connections between strangers, clues and puzzles, weather, water, springboard diving, technology, angels.

He writes about *humanity*, you know. People being people.

McElroy is a realist, too. Check out this paragraph from *Plus*, which

is told to us from the point-of-view of a disembodied brain named Imp Plus orbiting the Earth, recalling fragments of its past life as it grapples with its new environment:

“But the dark into which Imp Plus went through the vein of bright blur could not be her dark. True, the field of aqueous humor had been hers. For it came from folds where fibers guyed the lenses of her eyes. It flowed and singled out and filled and opened the new fold among the fissures and ridges. But like the fissures and ridges and cols and rolls that were his, this new fold was also his. It was part of all that the serum of sweet particles had spread its field upon.” (41)

Realism has nothing to do with the surface-strangeness of the writing or the apparent obscurity of the subject matter. If the point-of-view lens is distorted, as it is in *Plus*, what it conveys will be distorted as well. This doesn't lessen the quality of realism; quite the opposite. Non-realistic writing takes that which is unclear by nature and clarifies it for the sake of privileging the reader. It tells a tiny lie—harmless maybe, but maybe not. McElroy doesn't do this. If anything, his writing is hyper-realistic in its rigorous adherence to point-of-view:

“Imp Plus caved out. There was a lifting all around, and Imp Plus knew there was no skull. This lifting was good. But there had been another lifting and he had wanted it, but then that lifting had not been good. He did not want to go back to it. He did not know if that lifting had been bad. But this new lifting was good.” (*Plus*, 3)

Confused? So was Imp Plus—at first. But as he gets his bearings, so do we:

“It was the face that rolled back. Did he know *face*? The pale thing the flashlight beam had passed in Mexico not four weeks before had also been a face. Another woman's face. Pale and not California. Though when seen close up, wet like this. Though not so wet. Wept. Tear-damp.” (*Plus*, 65)

In other words, *you're right there*, walking alongside the character rather than two steps ahead. His consciousness is yours. This is daring work—risky, because readers *like* their privileges, don't they?—and a third example of McElroy's courage.

Not a postmodernist, then, but a strict realist. Hmm. Are we sure we're talking about Joseph McElroy?

Joseph McElroy's worldview, if it may be discerned from his fiction, is curious, hopeful, and humane. He's secular and science-positive but doesn't discount the invisible. He's as much a feminist as any woman I know. He's also one of the kindest, most generous people I've ever met. We should all buy him a beer or take him out for a salad. McElroy is the living embodiment of a Pete Townshend power chord—you know that loved feeling you get at the start of "Pinball Wizard"? You were lonely and afraid five seconds ago, but you're not anymore. Reading McElroy makes you feel that way. You realize you're included in something, and somebody out there cares.