

The Bad News: The Litany of Saint Bob



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They are scanning the darkening sky for the lights of space ships or other unnatural and cataclysmic events, the children especially finding this an exciting adventure.

—Robert Coover, *The Brunist Day of Wrath*

We hear much of the influence of Joyce, for instance, but the influence of Joyce has been less with writers than with critics who have read Joyce without firsthand information of the lower middle-class urban society which made Joyce what he was. Joyce, for all his brilliance, had no philosophy. He could only turn and rend the society in which he was born.

—William McFee, 1942 introduction to *A Conrad Argosy*

When Robert Coover titles a book with the whimsical phrase *A Child Again*, it is of course awash in molten irony. These implied adults never left childhood behind, they are adults who have embraced things better left to children, and to childhood. They have nonetheless codified them as a way forward, bureaucratized them, raised them grotesquely up into the adult world of violence, sex, politics, art, money, high seriousness, and the rest. This is the core of his critique,

the source of the amusement and the grief. Adults believing childish things and fighting to the death for them. The highest virtues, perhaps, misdirected in service to the lowest ideals. Which brings us to religion, naturally, and Coover's Brunists: *The Origin of the Brunists*, published in 1966, establishes the end-times focused charismatic Christian cult and sets it out upon the world; *The Brunist Day of Wrath*, to be published in 2014, witnesses what the organization has wrought in only five short years, and what Coover has wrought in forty-five. An anatomy of nations, one, two, as many as you like, really, under God.

What a blessing Coover should return to West Condon. Religion is his perfect foil. *Uroboric* is a word I think I learned from Coover. In its ideals, Christianity works hard to suppress and eradicate our lower natures, and yet is always itself being undermined by the same, infiltrated, subsumed, and finally coopted by them. The snake, its tail. And here is Coover to keep us in touch with that nature, light a fire under our lowest common denominators, to celebrate them even, just as he is burning them alive. Not so much the triumph of the profane over the sacred, the sacred over the profane, as it is a complex reconfiguring of each as the other, of the two as the same damn thing. When we reach such masterful confluences in Coover's writing, the chief response is one of cathartic, vocalized laughter. The laughter of recognition, the laughter of humor, the laughter of appreciation. It becomes a challenge to sit quietly and simply read the books, there is an overwhelming urge to share. But the transaction is non-transferable. To get in on the joke one must hoist up these 2,000 pages for oneself.

Tracing the arc from each character's Humanity to their humanity, Coover moves quickly and easily, back and forth, from Richard Scarryville to Dick Scarytown. All of the drama of small town life, but with little of the Drama. This upsets some readers, critics, who see such tales as facile, an omission and a flaw. Waiting for the long day's journey into cocktails...whither the angst? they wonder, full of angst. Whencetheth the philosophy? *Busytown*; *What Do People Do All Day?*; *Cars and Trucks and Things That Go*; *I Am A Bunny*; *Naughty Bunny*; *Egg In the Hole Book*; *Hop Aboard, Here We Go!*; *Is This the House of Mistress Mouse?*; *European Word Book*; *Busiest People Ever*: these could all be chapter titles. Facile, indeed. Mere turning and rending.

Of all the wonders to be found when one settles in among the three-quarters of a million words, or so, that make up the whole of the

Brunist tale, the most persistently wondrous is that Coover loses few (but even this is a hedge, it is possible he does not lose a single one, I will never know) of the loomful of threads of character, plot, narrative specificity, thematic conundrum, location, voice, meteorology, theology, and, yes, philosophy, etcet, that weave the books together. Even the most superfluous interactions, bit character appearances, and oddball props are picked up again (some only 45 years later), and brought to bear on the work as a whole. As Coover himself writes elsewhere, in his foundational essay, *Myth, Tale, Writer*: “myth structure; tale flow.” While Coover’s tale flows through you and you become (almost embarrassingly, secretly, as it were) caught up in the everyday fates of its characters and plots, how each will meet its end, the tightly controlled narrative structure is all the while building a mythology. There are various ways the reader might position himself in relation to these three elements: the *Myth* that the book, at a distance, is writing (West Condon, the Brunists, before our eyes they are becoming iconic, archetypal, immutable cautionary tales, easily scaled up to nations and current events); the engrossing *Tale* of West Condon and its Brunists (will Sally and Tommy sleep together? is Darren sodomizing Colin? Colin Debra? Debra Ben? Ben Rocky? is Angie really pregnant? Elaine too? Bruno alive or dead, Messiah or moron? will Cunt Hill cave in or hold out? will Vince lose his house, and if so, how will he exact revenge on Ted Cavanaugh? could it possibly get any worse for these people!); and the *Writer*, Coover himself, a voice so clear and present that you never feel quite alone while reading this book, quite left to your own devices. And so we must hold in suspension throughout, the question, which is strongest: Myth, Tale, or Writer? It is this grindstone of anxiety that keeps the sharp edge on an otherwise well-rounded tale.

If he wants to bring down the whole house, Coover has to admit that most politics, though cyclical, are temporal; critical inversions of received artistic modes and forms are limited in scope; only religion, with its stoned foundation buried under earthquakes, mudslides, volcanic eruptions, floods, meteorites, billions of tons of methane gas and bullshit, has the epic geology big and strong enough to hold this whole thing in place. Maybe this is the excavation most worthy of an old master, the ironies like deep veins of red ore that overwhelm the cliff face after only a few exploratory chips with the pick. It is not enough to simply expose this cliff face and dynamite the whole

thing. It is important that Coover do the hard work of establishing the mountain first (some have forgotten it's out there, so done with religion, so long ago), rewriting first the Tale, loosing the Myth, and meanwhile planting the dynamite with a wink here and a wink there. Some exaggerated, clownish winks, mind you, others more subtle and conspiratorial, but all in the spirit of a grand, divine comedy, where the Writer looms large.

What is really so lovely about the Brunist books is that, in spite of Coover's signature ironic distance in his writing, the extraordinary breadth and depth of detail, the pitch-perfect naturalism, the rigorous adherence to narrative structure, the endless development of characters and voices, all firmly establish the doubt, in the face of overwhelming Writerly evidence, that Myth and Tale have in fact stolen the show. And so the reader's mind is able, for thousands of pages, to walk this catwalk, to see more plainly than anywhere else, how it works. Because if you're not on your toes, you too, reader, might for just a page or two take to the Brunist perspective, sing along on a song or two, wonder if West Condon may just be the right move for you—and your family. Maybe it is the bus full of young people, their refreshing optimism and innocent sexual charm that draws you in; maybe the cozy woodsy camp, with its tidy and competently managed vegetable garden, beehives, commissary, and sick bay; the down-home earnest communal well-meaning barn-raising approach to it all; maybe you yourself feel you could make a contribution, frame up some walls, do some remedial pointing, scale up the proportions of your grandma's famous lasagna; or is it the firm handshakes and forthright syntax beckoning?, the easy melodies of the heartfelt country songs?, even the climactic appeal of end-times themselves, bring it on, it all never looked better than it does in Coover's rendering. And yet we know where it's all headed, this community spirit. A bit like life, the experience of reading these books, you know how it is going to end (not well), and you do in fact have to fight your way through it here and there. You must stay awake, miss out on some shows, some games, some beers. Hope for the best.

And no, no help is forthcoming, no graceful exit. As the action winds down and Bernice Filbert (the nurse who dresses like female characters from the children's illustrated bible, and paints her eyebrows at the angle best determined to achieve her goals for the day) begins to unwind the tale yet again, for the benefit of deceiving

her paraplegic ward (no spoilers here), now telling it in reverse, with characters and events interchangeable, and the narrative possibilities suddenly infinite, one begins to wonder if after all the painstakingly maintained internal logic of the preceding narrative we are now headed through the looking glass into some fantastic inversion, the augmented reality of the present unreal. And it doesn't even end there. Bunny Down the Hole.

But if by Writer, Coover means irony, and he does, we do in the end know which of the three rivals is ascendant just as sure as we know that all those guns that show up in act one are certain to be fired in act two. But what a perspective we are granted, up there in the flies alongside the puppetmaster himself. Coover places the reader in a very privileged position in all of his works (famously, I suppose), and this interplay accounts for why his most devoted explicators have made so much of the effect of his books not only on other writers over the last half century but on readers. In one generation, the position of the reader in relation to the writer changed dramatically, across all literary forms and genres, and unliterary ones, across the pantheon of the written word. Coover is one of a handful of writers at the top of this trickle-down influence. His reader must choose, time and again, to either be out among the audience, raptured, as it were, by the tale, aloft in the myth, or to be a stage hand, working together with the writer to create an experience far less passive. It is a difficult balancing act, and this has annoyed some readers while empowering and delighting others. There is the narrative, lush with detail, nerdy authenticity, dramatic action, specific, local knowledge, dashing reportage, and literary grace. Then there is the voice, persistent in its irony, Coover's voice, his most straightforward, plain-spoken sentences his most deadly. Others more distanced, mocking, dismissive, comic. The gaze is always his, he is behind the camera, tracking the street, panning the exterior, entering the room, closing in on this face and that hand, suggesting a tang in the air or an unfamiliar burn on the tip of the tongue. But he is also breaking the silence, telling the joke, knocking the drunk off his stool and kicking him in the pants, goosing the waitress, raising the left cheek, turning the other, stinking up the room, so to speak, camera in hand. It's a wonder the cast does not just up and walk off the set sometimes, frustrated with a director set on obstructing the serious pursuit of their verisimilitudinous art. All these characters (150 of them? is it possible?) doing their best,

working hard to bring it all together, and then there is this clown, mucking the whole thing up, killing them off, ridiculing them, questioning their intelligence, maiming them, knocking off heads, dropping their strings (in which they become comically tangled), and dumping buckets of water over their heads when the script called for only tears.

Consider Baptiste. Though what some might term a highly offensive caricature of those of us hailing from bayou country (a place where Coover's little apocalypse is being acted out daily by other denominations, other ethnic tribes), the young man's brief appearance instructs the reader well. Perfunctorily introduced as a colorful latecomer to the apocalyptic motorcycle gang terrorizing West Condon -- seems to ride out a coward shortly thereafter -- shows up again with a story of redemption -- volunteers to dynamite the Catholic church -- gets a brief, if rather full, backstory (so to speak: a childhood dominated by molestations) -- is blown away by a Catholic priest (this time from the front) known as Bags -- and is set upon by a mob of Italian-American Roman Catholic vigilantes. "Baptiste needs help," Coover writes, optimistically. "He's not going to get it." Fielder's choice. End of Baptiste. Hope you didn't get too attached.

Lest they be dismissed as so much frivolity, let it also be known that the Brunist books may serve as a primer for how to build, operate, and destroy your own small town. From descriptions of the alternate schemes of city governance and the headaches of local banking, to the politics of public works and the hardships of small business owners; from how to organize a Fourth of July parade or publish a newspaper, to the pitfalls of sack races and essay contests; Coover covers it all. Religion may be the explicit target but the critique strays wantonly into all sorts of territory, as it must. Which in turn, perhaps counter intuitively, must also delimit it in curious ways, restricting it to the local, the provincial, the immediate action of the immediate territory. It is striking, for instance, that there is not a single blustery, sweat-browed, bushy-mustached, loud tie-wearing, sideburned revivalist Black man in the entire narrative. This is specifically White America the Writer is so scrupulously breaking down, busting the myths of the so-called latter-day saints of the greatest generation, and the ensuing society shaped in their image. There is a lost America depicted here and a newfound one, and neither of them is sitting pretty. Dare to visit Herrin or West Frankfort today. Or Pana or Cairo.

Just to pick on Illinois. Traveling through, one occasionally gets the feeling only Colin Meredith and the Blaurock children survived the (mostly) fictional events of 1960s West Condon and went on to people the region in their likeness. A surprising portion of small- and medium-town America is now post-apocalyptic, and Coover draws this picture for us too. It is the mystical revelation Coover's weary Wesley Edwards, aka Jesus Christ, character comes to: these fools, preparing for an apocalypse that has already passed them by, they do not yet realize they didn't make the cut. Rapture came and went without them. Here stand, if you can call it standing, *The Unraptured*.

Several times, Coover advances the idea of cognitive dissonance as the origin of Christianity, the origin of the Brunists, the key to our undoing, this willingness to simultaneously hold firm to two contradictory principles and boldly march forward. What drives us toward parenting, for instance, the very continuance of the species, pouring more love into what makes us suffer, doubling down on the failing enterprise. A suggestion that all this human stupidity is at the core of our hapless existence, mythology and symbolism put forth as the essential expressions of our essential stupidity. Sometimes, yes, it's in the book too: kill them all, fuck it. But Coover's conscientious close regard and persistent empathy, his moral weight as it were, make certain that even in West Condon there is more to this tragic tableau of sullen stupidity, spiritual degradation, physical decay, violence, and woe. If we are not cynics, worn out intellects, or shallow aesthetes, we will want to know firsthand the complex, almost indescribable situation deep America has become. Was it a sitting president who characterized certain parts of the nation that didn't vote for him as hunkering down out there in flyover land, clinging desperately to their guns and religion? Yes it was. Coover does not appear to disagree, but it is important that the picture is drawn over 2,000 pages of closely observed narrative detail. Because if you are going to take down a religion, you had better know its catechism, and if you are going to blow up a small town and kill off hundreds of its lifelong residents (or hundreds of thousands for that matter), you had best speak the language, know well its customs.

Coover knows the customs of the country so well he would seem to have written some of them into existence. The original Brunist tale might serve as boilerplate scripture for end-times assemblies to come: even now in Kansas City, Missouri, the International House of

Prayer (IHOP!), with an adjacent Bible College (IHOPU!), draws tens of thousands to maintain a 24/7 prayer vigil in an effort to empower the angels over the demons. It has an annual budget of \$30 million, a capital campaign in its aggressive growth phase, and it predicts end-times, previewed by seven years of bloodshed (has it begun?), which, it is claimed, will most likely occur, maybe, within the lifetimes of some of this church's youthful membership. "Perhaps tonight..."

Coover would say he did not write this script, that it is a formula old as the hills, a point he makes repeatedly in the books. But is there not something peculiarly Cooverish about the way these things have developed in the decades between *The Origin of the Brunists* and *The Brunist Day of Wrath*? The Coover prophecy abounds. Even in this small nation of Denmark where I live, one of the most cohesive and secular societies on earth, there remains a law on the books that would surely, if enforced as written, send Coover, and perhaps any enthusiastic reviewer of these books, to prison for four years with a \$10,000 fine. For blasphemy. It almost seems to have been written with just such a work as Coover's in mind, punishing one for "publicly mocking or deriding the teachings or worship of a legally existing religious community." And yet there remains here today a residual Christian influence so real that there is not sufficient public or political will to repeal this law. Just beneath the surface old structures lie in wait, knowing well that the carefully maintained churches will once again come to life with the arrival of hard times.

The Writer does throw the believers a bone of empathy here and there, but it is never long before he is beating them with the same. There are intimate moments of redemption for nearly everyone, generally secular. There are even moments of genuine sympathy with the religious as they suffer the indignities and disappointments familiar to the artist, the risk-taker, the outcast. Administrative, financial, and evangelical tasks overwhelm the more spiritual, ecstatic aspects of the practice. The Rapture's success as an organizational achievement, in *The Origin of the Brunists*, trumps any expectations of actual deliverance. And in *The Brunist Day of Wrath*, preparations for the Rapture disintegrate into a pretense for a proxy war between various factions well before they even get started. One sighs in recognition of the disappointment some of these characters experience. There are glimpses of a way out of this novel for a few tortured characters, and you almost feel sorry for some when they pop up again. They are

sitting ducks. In Coover's wicked, comically unsubtle foreshadowing gestures, you easily, or uneasily, smell his breath intruding upon the page, hear him licking his chops. The big, bad wolf again: there he is, tucked into bed like George Bendemann's father, decked out in grandpa's nightshirt, soon to nod off for eternity, but up he leaps, a quick flash of his upper thigh...wha?...and then...Judgment Day! Leviticus comes to the Midwest.

Further ironies abound in the parallels easily drawn between religious belief and other aesthetic, ascetic commitments. There is a continual play between these perspectives that recalls those tussles between Myth, Tale, and Writer in Coover's essay. There are many avatars of the writer and thinker in the two books, and the two most sympathetic of these come out okay, achieve fairy tale endings, find love, get the hell out of town, and disperse happily ever after. Here, Coover can't resist giving the writer some rest, some justice. There is Justin Miller and his confident, informed, undisciplined, secular clear-headedness, occasionally compromised by vice, journalism; Sally Elliott, likewise normalized by her self-educating, well-tuned guile, but separated by her creative pursuits and an unsought monasticism compromised by the need for companionship, society, sex; but then there is also Eleanor Norton's thoroughly developed narrative mysticism and metaphysical pedagogy, the complement to Ralph Himebaugh's narrative numerology, systems-based thought, and file-card specificity: two elaborate houses of cards built on arbitrary or discredited first principles; the pseudo-scholarly, equivocating, myth-peddling Lutheran, Reverend Konrad Dreyer, and his reassuring, genteel stacks of books; the Presbyterian, Reverend Wesley Edwards, begins sensibly enough with his rote, learned, and passive high-mindedness, content to be an agent of higher principles and higher powers, then, quite unexpectedly becoming this agent, not in the form he anticipated, moving by book two into an oddly angst-free lapsed enthusiasm for the mysteries of the mind and spirit, an embrace of a post-world world, an ecstatic cynicism, rising to the need to proselytize even this as he is bodily possessed by the Jesus Christ of the Second Coming, a mid-century schizoid maverick; and, of course, that master of discursive techniques, knowing always when and where to deploy which, but never quite able to get the gun out of the holster so to speak, Joshua Jehoshaphat Jenkins, whose unfortunate, sweaty nothing of a narrative opens up *The Brunist Day of Wrath*.

Careful observers of events all, so long as they are able to keep their wits about them, which is not very long as all but one are more or less undone by the events they intended to witness and interpret, and at all costs avoid participating in. So there is the question of where one positions oneself when reading Coover's books. Because we laugh with him, do we escape the satire? Is the mockery too easy? Is it the setup or the resulting pratfall we enjoy more? Uneasy questions for the careful reader. One should perhaps not laugh with complete abandon.

The lone survivor, Sally Elliott, comes through *The Brunist Day of Wrath*, coaltown grit intact, and is left to write the tale. Or many variations on the tale, as it happens, working its way through writing workshops, teachers, editors, publishers, benefactors, lovers, lawyers. Like Ishmael swirling about in the dissipating froth of recent events, Sally must dig back into the facts of what she has witnessed and what she has not witnessed. One does pause to wonder, at this advanced stage of the novel, what the hell are we doing now? Doesn't this thing end? It is not so long, however, before the answer begins to emerge: the experimental short story, the fairy tale, the bildungsroman, the mystery novel, the courtroom procedural, the Victorian romance, the Western, the documentary, the memoir. We're getting small bites of each. A medley of Coover's concerns, his works even, all the variations on the myths, the tales, the writer. The Cretins are indefatigable, and done's never quite done.

Saints Cervantes, Swift, Gogol, Dickens, Twain, Kafka, Joyce. Norman Rockwell, Al Capp, Chester Gould, they're here too. Many others. All gathered in the round as fleshy statuary gazing down upon the altar where Saint Bob holds his service. A scatter of communicants waiting in the pews. Quasimodo earnestly rings the bells, maybe the villagers will hear, wake up, and become curious. But the show must go on.

It is unfortunate that the Italians have already appropriated Sant'Ilario, and even Saint Hilario seems to be taken, so he's going to have to settle for Bob, here having dispatched another miracle attributed to him. With miracles, as with good jokes, interpretation is not really fruitful. The reason the gospels were so succinct. There is not some subtle argument being made, slipping slyly into the reader's consciousness through authorial sleight of hand, writerly magic. The argument, exhausted as it is, can be boiled down to a paragraph or

two, and Coover lets the narrative rest long enough here and there to do just that, state it plainly, get it out of his system, no room for ambiguity: your religion is a joke. He relents but slightly: a dirty joke. And then it rolls on, this grand narrative. The point is not so much the argument, pushing the heavy old philosophy cart down the road. The point is to tell the joke. Or maybe only to reveal the joke, chisel out the rough stone around it until the form emerges. To turn and rend the society. There is philosophy there all right, as Joyce and the basilica full of writers he influenced plainly knew, but also plenty more than that. These books are meant to be read, endured, lived through. Go and have breakfast. And then go and see.