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# Writing Lives and Letters

by Philip Beidler

*A Room Forever: The Life, Work, and Letters of Breece D'J Pancake.* By Thomas E. Douglass. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1998. 280 pp. \$32.00

*Barry Hannah, Postmodern Romantic.* By Ruth D. Weston. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1998. 136 pp. \$25.00

Book-length academic criticism is voracious. In a publish-or-perish world, scholars cast about constantly for subjects that have not been worked over. Critical theory solves the problem nicely, of course, by writing about itself. More traditional text and author-oriented criticism meanwhile finds myriad contemporaries worthy of full-scale study. Here, the subjects of two new books in question are two southern writers who came to large national prominence roughly two decades ago, with the focal figures and the studies themselves making for some curious symmetries across a range of literary and cultural topics. The first is Thomas E. Douglass' *A Room Forever: The Life, Work, and Letters of Breece D'J Pancake*. The second is Ruth D. Weston's *Barry Hannah: Postmodern Romantic*.

Pancake was a young West Virginia writer of great promise albeit slender publication who took his own life at age twenty-seven in 1979. He is remembered for his gritty but wonderfully crafted portraits of contemporary Appalachian life in a single, highly-praised collection of short fiction, *The Stories of Breece D'J Pancake*, published posthumously in 1983, with accompanying appreciations by John Casey and James Alan MacPherson, two of his mentors in the University of Virginia creative writing program. Hannah, in contrast, a Mississippian now in his late fifties, has enjoyed an astonishingly prolific career. With *Geronimo Rex*, a first novel nominated for the National Book Award, he began fast as a prodigy of southern letters and has never let up, with eleven volumes of fiction, including novels and story collections, published to date and almost always to choruses of equally prodigious praise on the part of reviewers.

On the other hand, his life and career would also seem to have some things in common with Pancake's. His breakthrough book, too, the 1979 *Airships*, was a story collection; and throughout his career, Hannah has continually been thought of mainly as a writer of short fiction. As with Pancake's troubled life, Hannah's career as well has frequently been stalked by a myth of self-destructive personality, often abetted by lionization in the critical and review media. Finally, Hannah has also spent much of his career in one form of association or another with university creative writing programs, often with personal and literary consequences he himself has acknowledged as tending to both good and ill.

Not surprisingly, since both of the scholarly works in question are, at bottom, rather conventional critical studies, it is the nature of the literary materials at hand that dictates their shapes and methods. Douglass's is best described as bio-documentary, arranged around a core of critical analysis and argument. Beginning with "A Partial Portrait" devoted to a preliminary assessment of Pancake's life and art, it moves to biographical chapters discussing his West Virginia origins, his troubled but loving relationship with his prickly, alcoholic father, his deeply nurturing relationship with a wise, supportive mother, and his eventual enrollment in the creative writing program at the University of Virginia, where even his most loyal student friends and devoted faculty mentors found him brilliantly engaging but also frequently "difficult." Two discursive chapters follow: the first covers the publishing history and critical reception of the posthumously published *Stories*. The second assesses "Pancake's Moral Vision." A final section of the book collects letters, many of them cited in earlier discussions, and literary fragments.

In contrast to the relative paucity of Pancake's literary output, Weston concedes from the outset the impossibility of covering everything in Hannah's body of work. Eschewing chronology and/or work-by-work analysis, she elects for an introduction, "The Reticent Beauty of Barry Hannah," and four topical chapters, with their individual approaches to arguments likewise spelled out in their titles: "Romance and Rage in the American Man-Child," "Battles for Identity: Debunking the Unitary Self and Story," "Storytellers and Other Interesting Monsters: From Oral History to Postmodern Narrative," and "Hannah's Comic Vision: Riffs on Language, Literature, and the 'Play' of Life." Taken together, they may be seen as the attempt to work from a set of complementary angles on the thesis contained in the work's ingenious main title—that Hannah, in theme and form, somehow at once manages to be a southern nostalgist and a cutting-edge postmodern literary experimentalist.

What, then, can the two books, so configured, be said to accomplish? Douglass finally does persuade us, both by argument and analysis, and by sending us back to the stories, that a voice of genius truly was stilled by Pancake's suicide. He also notes the publication of *Stories* rightly to be a true watershed in Appalachian fiction, and assesses its status as inspiration to other readers and writers, ranging from fellow West Virginian Jayne Ann Phillips to Pancake's own mentor, John Casey, whose 1990 novel *Spartina*, albeit about coastal New Englanders, won the National Book Award through its depiction of confused, economically and culturally disinherited working-class characters not unlike those in the *Stories*. As to the personal legend of the artist and the account of the psychological agony eventuating in suicide, analogies at once to the "dutiful achiever" Sylvia Plath and the Hemingway burdened by a taut stylistics of literature and life do not seem in the least ill-taken. And at a more immediate level, seldom has a more compelling portrait been rendered of life for the young writer of independent personality and driven genius in the university creative writing program.

At times, Douglass himself probably buys in too heavily to Pancake's self-construction as the wild man of the West-by-God-Virginia mountains and mine pits fighting for survival at Thomas Jefferson's elite (and effete) University of Virginia. To be sure, it is a myth Pancake probably needed. But when Douglass offers "class" as an issue, he is probably missing the more mundane, curricular implications of the term. Pancake may have felt himself a social outsider at the University of Virginia, but he also clearly felt burdened by the heavy content of traditional academic coursework he had to take along with his creative writing classes. If Pancake was "some sort of Appalachian primitive" among "all these mealy mouthed little graduate students," by the mid- to late-1970s, I can testify from personal experience, they were not tie-wearing secret-society members but hothouse critical theorophiles. Still, one is grateful to Douglass overall for his portrait of fascinating, tormented genius. With the stories themselves, the memorial essays by Casey and MacPherson, and the book by Douglass, the Pancake story proves to have been itself an eminently worthwhile one, worthily told.

As to Weston's more conventional attempt to "place" the prolific and wildly inventive Barry Hannah, one can in the same spirit offer both applause for the effort and basic assent to the plausibility of the case. Post-modern romantic is a good thesis idea, and for a stylistic genius frequently as protean and ungraspable as Hannah—not to mention, I can again testify from personal experience, as fond of befuddling the academic critic as he seems to be—Weston makes it stick. She does not take off the rough edges.

“Ride, Fly, Penetrate, Loiter” is the title of one of Hannah’s best-known stories. It could also be considered a kind of stylistic signature for his work at large. Hannah is surreal, jazzy, religious, bellicose. He writes about the contemporary South, the Civil War, Vietnam, the American West. Acknowledging her resistance to what seems frequently Hannah’s political incorrectness, especially from a feminist standpoint, she nonetheless applies cogently a criticism fully up-to-date in its standards of both cultural and methodological analysis. Hannah’s characters may indeed often be casual racists, sexists, or homophobes, she concedes; but they are also poor, bewildered, passed-over bastards with big aching holes in their hearts, and frequently not without a certain endearing vainglory.

At the same time, one will continue to find Mark Charney’s earlier, more conventionally organized study in the Twayne series—surprisingly, the only other book-length analysis offered to date—a useful supplement. Charney, by taking us on a book-by-book march, is the less illuminating writer in terms of sustained argument, but probably the more useful. Weston’s insights are plentiful, but they come at the expense of a tendency toward the scattered and inchoate. And finally, *pace* both Charney and Weston, one still falls back on something like Don Noble’s analysis of Hannah as essentially a genius of voice. I agree. No major American literary artist writing today puts words together like Barry Hannah or shows such a plenitude of manic invention. Further, no one continues to get reviews and blurbs the way Hannah does, least of all one so fully expected at any number of points to burn himself out—physically, psychologically, literarily. He has done none of these things. Rather, he has just kept on writing and writing, sustaining his own inimitable and seemingly illimitable qualities of voice and fictional construction. Other writers after Weston will try to “place” Barry Hannah; and for quality of argument and meticulousness of citation, they will find her a tough example to emulate. But the job will remain far from finished, even as Hannah himself remains far from finished in his various, inexhaustible career.

As to Breece D’J Pancake, given his early death and fairly slender body of work, one wonders, after Douglass’ book, save for the occasional journal article, whether there can be that much more said. As to Hannah, one wonders no such thing. There is plenty more to say. Moreover, one suspects Hannah himself, out there leading criticism a merry chase, will continue to do a great deal of the saying.