Portions of this novel have appeared in considerably different form in the following: *Chelsea, Conjunctions, Crosscurrents, Kenyon Review, the New York Times, Parnassus, The Pennsylvania Review,* and *Sites.* One of the sections printed in *Conjunctions* was reprinted in *The Pushcart Prizes, 1987.*

THE PLACE IN FLOWERS WHERE POLLEN RESTS

Published by Voyant Publishing
Printed in Canada

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
West, Paul, 1930–
The place in flowers where pollen rests / Paul West.–1st Voyant ed.
p. cm.
ISBN 0-9665998-2-9
[LOC #]

Cover design by Sang Lee
First Voyant edition 2002

Introduction
by David W. Madden

> [PURPLE PROSE] IS THE WORLD WRITTEN *UP*, intensified and made pleasurably palpable, not only to suggest the impetuous abundance of Creation, but also to add to it by showing—showing off—the expansive power of the mind itself, its unique knack for making itself at home among trees, dawns, viruses, and then turning them into something else: a word, a daub, a sonata. The impulse here is to make everything larger than life, almost to overrespond, maybe because, habituated to life "written down," in both senses, we become inured and have to be woken up with something almost intolerably vivid. When the deep purple blooms, you are looking at a dimension, not a posy.[1]
>
> —Paul West

Paul West has never been one to shy away from the big—the big idea, the big emotion, the big novel. And as the epigraph above suggests, his notion of prose insists it should be outsized, ample, overwhelming. Such writing not only pays homage to the diversity, sensuousness, amplitude of life itself, it celebrates the inexhaustibility of the imagination and the vivifying powers of creative potentiality. *The Place In Flowers Where Pollen Rests* is one of West's grandest, most fully realized expressions of those powers of imaginative abundance.

This novel is one of West's meta-narratives, a defining book in a prodigious career. Indeed, it has its competitors in his canon—*The Very Rich Hours of Count von Stauffenberg* (1980), a chronicle of conscience in an era of abject depravity; *The Women of Whitechapel and Jack the Ripper* (1991), a recreation of the forgotten who always lie

[1] Paul West, "In Defense of Purple Prose." *Sheer Fiction.* New Paltz, NY: McPherson, 1987. 47-48.

hidden in the folds of history's spectacle; and *Love's Mansion* (1992), a paean to filial devotion and imaginative projection. For years *The Place in Flowers Where Pollen Rests* was the writer's own favorite, and for good reason, as it contains so much that is quintessentially West and defines his aesthetic as surely as any of his other novels.

At the center of this and any West novel is a protagonist with creative capabilities. In some novels, as for instance *Love's Mansion*, such a character is a writer, in *Alley Jaggers* (1966), a humble plasterer is an artisan of model airplanes, and in *The Place in Flowers Where Pollen Rests* it is a kachina doll craftsman, George The Place In Flowers Where Pollen Rests, who also prides himself on his abilities as a storyteller. Whether articulate or not, West's protagonists are word demons, creatures possessed by language who ponder the nexus between experience and verbal expression and who search for linguistic precision. All too frequently these narrators spin their tales out to audiences absent, undefined, or amorphous.

In George's case, the principal audience is the chief god of the Hopi nation, Sotuqnangu, who acts as foil for George's frustrated achievements and sorrows and inspiration for his audacious creations. The irony here is that this god of gods is actually listening, peering in on George's life, marking and responding to his proclamations and ditherings. While George believes he has been abandoned, Sotuqnangu reveals nothing could be further from the truth; he watches George with a combination of affection and impatience.

George's other audience is his nephew/son, Oswald Beautiful Badger Going Over the Hill, who has reached a psychological and emotional stalemate. He wanted off the reservation and into the mainstream of American life, only to discover Palookaville, a degraded white world and a culture based on consumption and exploitation. In fear and despair he flees back to his rocky mesa home where he submits himself to George's tutelage and attempts to master kachina carving. As they fashion statues and visit doctors because of George's failing health, mentor attempts to guide tyro in the ways of the world and the intricacies of creative originality. He insists Oswald appreciate his elaborate name instead of the Walt Badge he wants to transform himself into and to revere the world the young man so blithely takes for granted. As George counsels him:

> "It's enough to have a life, to be alive. Being alive is worthwhile thing in and of itself. There is nothing else, Nephew. And it doesn't matter how poor a life it is, it's better than what is often offered as the only alternative, which isn't an alternative at all. It is just going to the dump. Don't you go fretting about the quality of your life, you just make sure it has the quality of life itself." (159)

After George's death, Oswald fails to heed such humanistic advice and joins the army in Vietnam, where he becomes a killing machine and a perverse kachina carver, hacking off the body parts of enemies to fashion a doll of atrocity. This section of the novel is unquestionably the most grim but a seemingly necessary stage in Oswald's development of self and creative possibility. With his return to the mesa, Oswald scrambles to find his place in the tribe and stumbles into an answer when he discovers that he is an able storyteller and historian of forgotten family lore. In discovering his parentage, Oswald discovers himself, and the young man who wanted nothing of a Hopi identity transforms himself into his own makeshift kachina. Through it all he discovers the lesson that West's protagonists so often uncover—a sense of the pageantry of life, which Sotuqnangu notes when remarking that "Whatever life was, it was a blur fit to worship" (263).

The Place In Flowers Where Pollen Rests also represents West at his most postmodern, which Malcolm Bradbury has defined as a

> break with modernism in the . . . pursuit of far looser, vastly more random and more combinative structures; perhaps [postmodernists] are more appropriately to be called 'post-realist', since their persistent challenge is to the structures of plausibility, the modes of inner coherence, and the confident referentiality of realistic fictions, their assertion that they record a pretextual reality.[2]

Indeed Oswald's corpse kachina—as well as the chapters in which Sotuqnangu comments on the human activities and offers his own corrections to George or Oswald's record, and the god's gift of the star kachinas to Oswald—all strain realistic boundaries and led one reviewer to complain that such incidents were "shabby terms for so solemn a mystery."[3]

---

[2] Malcolm Bradbury. "Postmoderns and Others: The 1960s and 1970s." *The Modern American Novel.* Oxford: Oxford UP, 1984. 185.

[3] Thomas R. Edwards. "The Stars in a Suitcase." *New York Times Book Review* 11 September 1988: 7.

Early in the narrative George gives a clue as to how to perceive West's universe, and in effect how to read this novel, when he says, ". . . I knew the things I lived among were not the real world at all, but things put there instead of it. There was always something behind what was there. Nothing was quite itself. . . . It was always like that. So you always looked for what was behind what you saw, and you also looked behind what was behind what you saw, and so on forever" (119). Thus a piece of cottonwood is never a fragment of a tree but a kachina doll waiting to emerge, and the most mundane corner of creation is a universe of beauty and complexity to an imagination fully deployed. West's novel is a challenge to fictions that extol the paltry and predictable; it is deliberately, flagrantly, and joyously anti-realist. Consequently, in his fictional universe, gods can be narrators, they can dispense extraordinary gifts to mortals, and the horrors of Vietnam can be reconfigured into cruelties few may countenance. As Sotuqnangu says of Oswald, the novel stands as the "complete adversary of all things familiar" (474).

Further evidence of West's postmodernism comes in his treatment of narration itself. Gone is the comfort of a unifying point of view that resolves conflict and bestows order on the fictional world. *The Place In Flowers Where Pollen Rests* is richly polyvalent, with three narrators vying for the reader's attention. While a comprehensible narrative eventually emerges, it comes as a result of competing narratives—Oswald will disagree with and contradict George, who may rail at Sotuqnangu, who in turn will argue with each of his creations. There is no single story, but instead the interweaving of narrative with narrative until a rich tapestry of words emerges.

The reader's attention is deflected from the conclusion, or what George might call the "product." For George, the art is in the doing, the fingering of raw material and tools, just as the novel's pleasure is in the stylistic emanations, line by line, page by page, rather than in the coherency and plausibility of the story itself. The title offers a palpable clue as to how to read the book: the emphasis must be on the place where pollen rests, just as the language must be seen as the center of the narrative. These are the origins—place and language—of creative recombination, though often human attention is fixed more squarely on results—the honey and the neatly unified story.

The Place In Flowers Where Pollen Rests is a treasure, a book to be

read and reread and savored for the audacity of its vision and the incandescence of its luminous prose. As West has written:

> The ideal is to create a verbal world that has as much presence, as much apparent physical bulk, as the world around it. So you get it both ways: the words evoke the world that isn't made of words, and they as far as possible enact it too. The prose, especially when it's purple, seems almost to be made of the same material as what it's about. This is an illusion, to be sure, but art is illusion, and what's needed is an art that temporarily blots out the real.[4]

In *The Place In Flowers Where Pollen Rests* he has created that very ideal, a world so extraordinary, so arresting that readers are momentarily transported and returned to their existence with new eyes. There are not many novels that can make that claim, but this one can and does.

David W. Madden
California State University, Sacramento

[4] "In Defense of Purple Prose," 51.