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## Brautigan, Richard

DAVID W. MADDEN

Richard Brautigan is a controversial figure — remembered by some as a symbol of the hippie movement, by scholars as a serious literary figure, and by many critics as a benign mediocrity. He published 11 novels, nine volumes of poetry, and one collection of short stories and developed a distinctive style that was unmistakably his own.

Brautigan was born on January 30, 1935 in Spokane (some say Tacoma), Washington to Bernard F. and Lula Mary Brautigan. He never

attended college, and there is some dispute as to whether he even graduated from high school, but in 1956 he moved to San Francisco and hovered on the edges of the Beat movement, writing poetry. He turned to writing fiction in the early 1960s and later became a frequent contributor to the fledgling *Rolling Stone* magazine.

The identifiable Brautigan style was a combination of poetic concision and Hemingwayesque minimalism. He typically relies upon strong, eccentric images arranged in a seemingly random, associative manner. His narratives are divided into multiple, brief chapters with often curious titles that emphasize the mundane, commonplace, or trivial.

His first completed novel, *Trout Fishing in America* (1967), established his reputation and marks the zenith of his creative abilities. Although it was originally published by a small press, the book found an audience with young readers and catapulted Brautigan to international fame. On the surface the 47 abbreviated chapters seem random and the plot discontinuous. However, there are a number of interrelated narratives, the most conventional of which is a camping trip throughout Idaho where the narrator and his family stop at various fishing locations. The book is also a meditation on the American pastoral myth and the prospects for renewal in a landscape that is rapidly vanishing or abused.

*A Confederate General from Big Sur* (1964) offers a more conventional plot with a wild misfit, Lee Mellon, inveigling the narrator, Jesse, to visit him in Big Sur. They live in abject poverty, romance a pair of women, and generally wreak havoc. Brautigan has always championed misfits and oddballs, and Lee Mellon, who believes himself descended from a Confederate general, essentially secedes from the competitive quest for success to live a spontaneous, untrammelled life. As Terence Malley argues, Mellon is a parody of the self-reliant American hero.

*In Watermelon Sugar* (1968) is an adult fantasy of a commune, existing some time after a cataclysm that has obliterated all signs of civilization. Another subjective narrator relates the community's efforts at survival against tigers and an absurd outlaw gang in a place called iDeath, where inhabitants lead simple, uncomplicated lives. *The Abortion: An Historical Romance* (1971) also centers on a recluse who works in a library housing

unpublished books until he is rocked from his routines and must help his girlfriend obtain an abortion in Mexico. The narrative is diffuse and often uneventful and marks the beginning of Brautigan's artistic decline.

In the 1970s he turned to genre fictions – *The Hawkline Monster: A Gothic Western* (1974), *Sombrero Fallout: A Japanese Novel* (1976), and *Dreaming of Babylon: A Private Eye Novel, 1942* (1977) – which have moments of inspiration but lack much seriousness. The exception is *Willard and His Bowling Trophies: A Perverse Mystery* (1975), which revolves around three parallel narratives that coalesce in tragedy at the novel's close. *The Tokyo-Montana Press* (1980), with its 31 sections, appears to be a reprise of *Trout Fishing*, but with little success. The book has no clear narrative thread, and the observations, while whimsical and abrupt, are often banal and trivial.

The last novel published in his lifetime, *So the Wind Won't Blow It All Away* (1982), is the best of his later works. It centers on a narrator's reflections about poverty, marginalization, and an accidental shooting, all of which haunt him throughout his life. The elegiac tone and tight construction are impressive, though the book garnered little critical attention and sold poorly. His last novel, published posthumously, *An Unfortunate Woman: A Journey* (2000), offers another meditation on mortality, isolation, and the failure of intimacy.

In October 1984 Brautigan committed suicide, leaving no note but clearly despondent over his life and diminished career. He will, however, be remembered for his audacious imagination and insistence on creative potentiality and personal freedom. His novels stand in the forefront of postmodern metafictionality and consistently feature a bevy of self-reflective techniques. The subjective narrators, lonely outsiders, frequent asides to the audience, and self-conscious comments on the novels' construction all remind one of contemporaries such as Kurt Vonnegut and Donald Barthelme. *Trout Fishing* has sold over 3 million copies and shows no signs of vanishing from the literary landscape.

**SEE ALSO:** Barthelme, Donald (AF); Hemingway, Ernest (AF); Minimalist/Maximalist Fiction (AF); Postmodernist Fiction (AF); Vonnegut, Kurt (AF)

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## Buck, Pearl S.

JAIME HARKER

Pearl S. Buck continues to inhabit a kind of critical purgatory. A beloved, bestselling novelist whose writing career spanned over 40 years and 100 books, Buck has remained in print, and refused to fade away into hellish obscurity like so many interwar popular novelists. Her 1938 Nobel Prize keeps her just on the edge of critical acceptability.