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Berger, Thomas

DAVID W. MADDEN

Thomas Berger is a rare figure in modern American literature – a writer who has worked steadily since the publication of his first novel, living entirely by his pen. Berger has shunned publicity, granted few interviews, and devoted himself to one fictional experiment after another. Although he rejects the labels of comic writer or social critic, his novels are among the most relentlessly ironic and incisive of any modern American writer.

Thomas Louis Berger was born July 20, 1924 in Cincinnati, Ohio. His education at the University of Cincinnati was interrupted by service in the United States' occupation forces in Germany at the close of World War II. This experience was crucial to the writing of his first novel, *Crazy in Berlin* (1958), which featured a hapless protagonist, Carlo Reinhart, whom Berger returned to in three more novels – *Reinhart in Love* (1962), *Vital Parts* (1970), and *Reinhart's Women* (1981). As Reinhart ages, American culture undergoes various upheavals, and while the protagonist often stumbles and fails, he is a perfect barometer of social instability.

Jack Crabbe, another easily overlooked nobody, is the central figure in *Little Big Man* (1964), Berger's most acclaimed work. Here Berger experiments with the possibilities of a subjective narrator who speaks in a wild, unlettered, but remarkably expressive idiom inspired by a minor character from a Saroyan play. The novel is an acerbic reevaluation of the myth of the West in which Manifest Destiny presumably improves lives and a national culture. As Crabbe oscillates between the white and Native American worlds, Berger is even-handed in his treatment of each culture; however, there is no question that the relentless exploitativeness of whites will lead to the extermination of the Cheyenne and other tribes but doom America to its own worst proclivities. Berger returns to his 113-year-old narrator in a sequel, *The Return of Little Big Man* (1999), which traces more of his adventures in a rapidly vanishing frontier.

A persistent theme in Berger's works is the intrusion of crime and criminality in the lives of ordinary, unprepossessing figures. *Killing Time* (1967), modeled on a police procedural, reveals law enforcement to be as ethically bankrupt as the criminal. *Who Is Teddy Villanova?* (1977) and its sequel, *Nowhere* (1985), follow another of Berger's classic losers, Russell Wren, a former English graduate student who is equally unskilled at solving crimes and mastering the hard-boiled argot. *Meeting Evil* (1992) and *Suspects* (1996) are sinister examinations of the ways in which one's exposure to threats and violence can reveal unacknowledged capacities for violence of one's own.

Berger has also revealed a marked interest in the seemingly ordinary lives of bourgeois figures simply trying to survive life in small towns. The first of these novels, *Sneaky People* (1975), is a *Bildungsroman* in which a young boy comes to the uncomfortable conclusion that no one, including his demure mother, is precisely who he or she appears to be. The ironic dichotomy between appearance and essence is more outrageously developed in *Neighbors* (1980), a tour de force in which a complacent suburbanite, Earl Keese, has his quiet life invaded by new neighbors, Harry and Ramona, outrageous embodiments of the id who challenge everything Keese has taken for granted. *The Feud* (1983), like *Sneaky People*, is another return to the Depression era of Berger's

youth, but there is little nostalgia in this modern depiction of the Montagues and Capulets as residents of neighboring towns quickly go to virtual war over the most ridiculous of misunderstandings. Once again, a young naïf is caught in the middle and must come of age without the guidance of any mature adult.

Berger has long insisted that each of his novels is a homage to another writer, a particular style, or a distinct genre. Examples of these include *Regiment of Women* (1973; a homage to Orwell's *1984*), *Arthur Rex* (1978; Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*), *Orrie's Story* (1990; the *Oresteia*), and *Robert Crews* (1994; Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*). The imitations are never slavish or simply parasitic reworkings offered for a few cheap laughs. In every case, Berger uses his sources to create brilliant counterpoints between the sensibilities and values of one era and another.

Berger has received various awards, among them a Dial Fellowship (1962) and the Western Heritage and Richard and Hinda Rosenthal Awards in 1965 for *Little Big Man*. In 1982 he received the Ohioana Book Award for *Reinhart's Women* and was shortlisted for a Pulitzer Prize in 1984 for *The Feud*. In 1986 he was honored with a doctor of letters degree by Long Island University.

SEE ALSO: The Avant Garde Novel (AF); The City in Fiction (AF); Postmodernist Fiction (AF); Utopian and Dystopian Fiction (AF)

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Border Fictions

CLAUDIA SADOWSKI-SMITH

The existence of fictional representations of US national boundaries can be traced back to the very creation of hemispheric borders in the nineteenth century. But the production of fiction about US national boundaries has surged at the turn of the twenty-first century in the context of dramatic changes in this geography. As defined here, border fiction encompasses narrative productions about US borders that are set at the seams of the United States and one of its neighboring nations. Because its border settings are so closely interlinked with its subject matter, this fiction could not easily be moved to another place without distortion or loss of significance. Border texts thus illustrate the mutual constituency of a particular place and its representation – just as depictions of border regions are affected by the specificities of the geopolitical boundary, the border landscape itself is also shaped by human projection and (often contesting) representations.

In currently dominant critical usage, border fiction tends to be equated with literature produced by US Chicana/o writers, that is, by members of an ethnicized group that was created