

The Sellout by Paul Beatty: A Review

Shortly after Bob Dylan won the Nobel Prize in Literature, the Booker Prize was awarded to fellow American Paul Beatty for his novel *The Sellout*. It seems Americans are having a moment in the world of literary prestige, maybe to counterbalance the current political nadir. Dylan was the first American to win the Nobel in 23 years, and Beatty is the first American ever to win the Booker Prize, the pre-eminent prize in Anglophone letters. Originally the Booker Prize had been limited to British writers, then eventually to English language writers from the larger British commonwealth, now to any writer in English. I have read a few handfuls of the past winners and candidates, and I can say that Paul Beatty's win is well-deserved and ranks among the best of them.

The Sellout is a satire on race in America. It is not only one of the funniest and most intelligent books I have read [about race](#) in America (a relatively limited number for me), but one of the funniest and most intelligent books I have read, period. The novel is told by a Black urban farmer with the surname Me in a fictional South-Central Los Angeles slum called Dickens. This impoverished locality, "the murder capital of the world", was an embarrassment to L.A. and the U.S.A. and was disincorporated by the authorities. One of the central plans of Me is to reconstitute and delineate his hometown of Dickens. He also begins to slyly reinstitute segregation, first on his girlfriend's bus, then in shops, the library, and the school. After this gambit, crime plummeted and student test results skyrocketed.

The main character was raised and home-schooled only by his father, a prominent psychologist and intellectual who made his son's life into one long racial sociological experiment. The farm they inhabit takes on Garden of Eden-like qualities, with

an impossibly wide-range of exotic fruits that are well-known around town, and delicious enough to make rival gang members put away their Glocks to lick up watermelon juice. One of the members of the local donut shop intellectual club is a Black media impresario named Foy Cheshire, who steals Me's father's best ideas to get rich, and calls the main character "the Sellout" for most of the book.

The funniest and most controversial character by far is an aged television actor named Hominy Jenkins, who played a minor role in the old Little Rascals TV series of the 1920-40s. Hominy rejoices at all signs of overt racism, and happily enlists himself as the Sellout's lazy and unwanted slave. The eventual discovery of this relationship and the resegregation scheme puts the main character behind bars, and eventually in front of the Supreme Court.

There are numerous mentions of real-life African-Americans, often unnamed for legal reasons, throughout the novel, including Barack Obama, Clarence Thomas, Colin Powell, and Dave Chappelle. The novel makes use of the author's detailed knowledge of Los Angeles, as well as Black pop culture, intellectual culture, language, film and TV, and literature. The plot is very engaging from the first page to the last, as well as being chock-full of new ideas in almost every paragraph. The author never seems to run out of interesting and funny new formulations about race and life in America. It is a very difficult book written with frankness and irreverence, not worried about upsetting any sacred cow or offending overly sensitive readers. It appears at a time when just such blunt discussions of race are needed.

One instance of how biting the book can often be is this passage about all of the miserable cities of the world that rejected Dickens as a potential sister city. The last of these is the Lost City of White Male Privilege:

"The Lost City of White Male Privilege, a controversial

municipality whose very existence is often denied by many (mostly privileged white males). Others state categorically that the walls of the locale have been irreparably breached by hip-hop and Roberto Bolano's prose. That the popularity of the spicy tuna roll and a black American president were to white male domination what the smallpox blankets were to Native American existence. Those inclined to believe in free will and the free market argue that the Lost City of White Male Privilege was responsible for its own demise, that the constant stream of contradictory religious and secular edicts from on high confused the highly impressionable white male. Reduced him to a state of such severe social and psychic anxiety that he stopped fucking. Stopped voting. Stopped reading. And, most important, stopped thinking that he was the end-all, be-all, or at least knew enough to pretend not to be so in public. But in any case, it became impossible to walk the streets of the Lost City of White Male Privilege, feeding your ego by reciting mythological truisms like "We built this country!" when all around you brown men were constantly hammering and nailing, cooking world-class French meals, and repairing your cars."

In the final anecdote in the novel the main character tells about a long-ago visit to a local comedy club featuring open mic night for black comedians. Halfway through, a white couple walks in and begins joining in the laughter. The comedian confronts the white couple and asks them to leave. "This is our thing," he says. The main character then expresses regret that he did not stand up for the couple's right to be there. It's a serious end to a powerful, nuanced, and funny book. As all satire, it punches up at an entrenched system of power—racism and bigotry, in this case. Most of the blows landed. In "post-racial" America, though, it will take a lot more people punching to topple the system in question. And a lot more people reading and writing and engaging in open dialogue with each other, and defending each other's rights to

live and laugh freely.