

☐ Contemporary
Literary Criticism

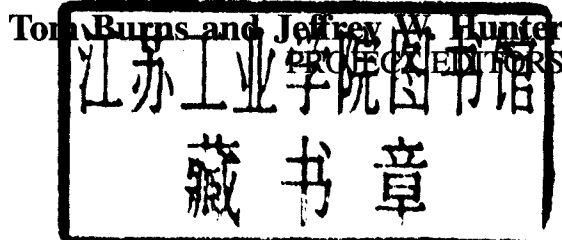
CLC

187

Volume 187

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and
Other Creative Writers



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Preface

Named “one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years” by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1999. Volumes published from 1973 through 1999 include authors who died after December 31, 1959. Previous to the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC*, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially important to today’s reader.

Scope of the Series

CLC provides significant passages from published criticism of works by creative writers. Since many of the authors covered in *CLC* inspire continual critical commentary, writers are often represented in more than one volume. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign authors, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

Each *CLC* volume contains individual essays and reviews taken from hundreds of book review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning from the beginning of an author’s career to the most current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other published writings that offer insight into the author’s works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the general critical and biographical material in *CLC* provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete biographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

Organization of the Book

A *CLC* entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author’s actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the original date of composition.
- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.

- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 14th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- Whenever possible, a recent **Author Interview** accompanies each entry.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

Indexes

A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors that appear in a wide variety of reference sources published by the Gale Group, including *CLC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

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An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *CLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale also produces an annual cumulative title index that alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in *CLC* and is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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Russell Banks

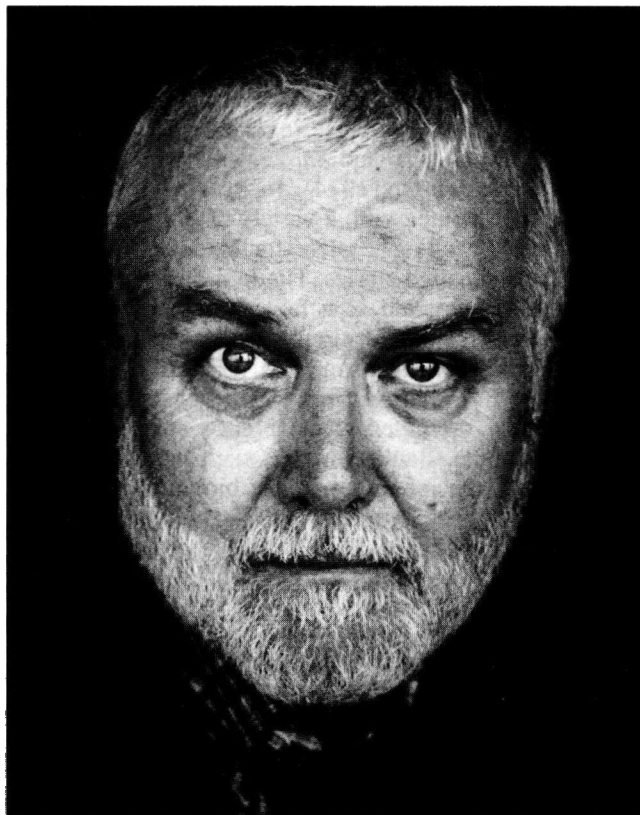
1940-

American novelist, short story writer, poet, and editor.

The following entry presents an overview of Banks's career through 2001. For further information on his life and works, see *CLC*, Volumes 37 and 72.

INTRODUCTION

Banks is best known as a naturalistic writer whose works address the psychological effects of poverty, child abuse, and alcoholism on working-class individuals. He has earned praise for his candid prose and trenchant evocations of the anxiety and hopelessness associated with life in economically depressed regions of the United States. Attempting to circumvent what he considers the artifice and didacticism of omniscient narration, Banks employs narrators who speak directly and intimately to the reader. Primarily known for his novels *Continental Drift* (1985) and *The Sweet Hereafter* (1991), Banks has developed a firm literary reputation for his vivid ruminations on the insidious effects of alcoholism, the tenuous relationships between fathers and sons, the changing patterns of community life, and how racism affects modern American identity.



BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Banks was born on March 28, 1940, in Newton, Massachusetts, the first of four children to Earl and Florence Banks. His father was a plumber who left school at sixteen to help support his family during the Great Depression. In 1952, when Banks was twelve, his father took up with a girlfriend in Florida, abandoning the family. His mother found work as a bookkeeper, and Banks assumed his absent father's role as male head of household. A strong student throughout his life, Banks obtained a full scholarship to Colgate College in 1958, but left after only eight weeks. After spending several months at home, Banks decided to travel to Cuba to join Fidel Castro's revolution against the Cuban dictator, Fulgencio Batista Zaldívar. However, his funds only took him as far as St. Petersburg, Florida, where he lived in a trailer park, worked a variety of odd jobs, and began writing poetry and short fiction. In August 1963 Banks attended the Breadloaf Writers' Conference near Middlebury, Vermont, where he worked under the tutelage of the noted proletarian writer Nelson Algren.

Banks left Florida in the mid-1960s and traveled to the Yucatán and Jamaica, experiences he would later incorporate into several of his works. Deciding to continue his education, Banks enrolled at the University of North Carolina, earning a B.A. in English in 1967. During this period, Banks and William Matthews cofounded Lillabulero Press, a publishing group devoted to releasing poetry chapbooks and a literary magazine called *Lillabulero*. Contributors to *Lillabulero* included Gary Snyder, Robert Creeley, Nelson Algren, Malcolm Cowley, Diane Wakoski, Margaret Randall, and Andre Codrescu. After graduating, Banks began teaching literature at such institutions as Emerson College, the University of New Hampshire, Columbia University, Sarah Lawrence College, and Princeton University, among others. Two of Banks's novels—*The Sweet Hereafter* and *Affliction* (1989)—were both adapted into award-winning films in 1997, by directors Atom Egoyan and Paul Schrader, respectively. Banks has received numerous awards for his body of work, including a Guggenheim fellowship in 1976, the American Book

Award from the Before Columbus Foundation in 1982 for *The Book of Jamaica* (1980), the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters Award for work of distinction in 1986, and the John Dos Passos Award in 1986. He was also a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for *Continental Drift* and *Cloudsplitter* (1998).

MAJOR WORKS

Banks began his literary career as a poet, publishing early selections of his verse in *15 Poems* (1967), *Waiting to Freeze* (1969), and *Snow: Meditations of a Cautious Man in Winter* (1974). In his first prose works, Banks experimented with a variety of literary forms and techniques, revealing a talent for blending fantasy into realistically detailed stories. His first novel, *Family Life* (1975), is constructed as a fable and satirizes conventional family histories by replacing the traditional roles of father, mother, and son with those of king, queen, and prince. In *Hamilton Stark* (1978), whose protagonist is alternately presented as a violent alcoholic and as a benevolent man, Banks parodies such literary genres as the mystery, the memoir, and the biography. His short-story collections *Searching for Survivors* (1975) and *The New World: Tales* (1978) subtly merge extraordinary elements with aspects of everyday life. For example, in the story "The Conversion" from *The New World*, Banks introduces a vision of Jesus Christ into his portrait of an emotionally confused adolescent. *The Relation of My Imprisonment* (1983) also evidences Banks's penchant for fictional experimentation. The novel, in which a prisoner publicly recants his sins against God and the religious community, is an allegorical tale modeled after a seventeenth-century literary genre popular among the Puritans known as the "Relation."

In the early 1980s, Banks began to focus on social problems, including poverty and racial and class discrimination, in his fiction. *The Book of Jamaica* chronicles the experiences of a New Hampshire college professor who travels to Jamaica to write a novel and is appalled at the destitution of the country's native inhabitants. The professor eventually befriends the Maroons, descendants of renegade African slaves who fight to preserve their way of life. In the short-story collection *Trailerpark* (1981), a work comprised of thirteen interrelated stories, Banks examines how the poor, uneducated residents of a trailer park community in New Hampshire contend with alcoholism, greed, and loneliness. Banks's fifth novel, *Continental Drift*, was the first of his works to attain critical and commercial success. Regarded as one of Banks's most naturalistic novels, the plot of *Continental Drift* shifts between Bob Dubois, a furnace repairman from New Hampshire, and Vanise Dorinville, a Haitian woman who suffers numerous abuses as she flees her country for the United States. After separately attempting to better their lives, Bob

and Vanise accidentally meet in a squalid region of Southern Florida where they are both manipulated and betrayed. In the short-fiction collection, *Success Stories* (1986), Banks reveals the anxiety and despair in a small, working-class town. In one story, a twelve-year-old boy desperately writes letters to a television program called *Queen for a Day*, hoping to secure a place on the show for his mother, who has been emotionally and physically mistreated by the boy's father. The novel *Affliction*, whose protagonist is a middle-aged man who was abused as a child, addresses the profound influence of childhood memories on adult life, the cyclical nature of familial violence, and the devastating effects of alcoholism.

Banks further explores how people respond to hardships in his seventh novel, *The Sweet Hereafter*. This work differs, however, from his earlier novels in that it delves into the motivations and behaviors of an entire community. Tracing a small town's reaction to a school bus accident in which fourteen children are killed and many others are severely injured, *The Sweet Hereafter* examines the dynamics of grief, guilt, resentment, and recovery. In *Rule of the Bone* (1995), Banks chronicles the adventures of a fourteen-year-old boy from upstate New York named Chappie who runs away from his abusive, dysfunctional family and falls in with a gang of bikers. Later, Chappie travels with a gentle Rastafarian named I-Man to live on a Jamaican commune, renaming himself "Bone." Critics have frequently compared Banks's narrative style in *Rule of the Bone* to Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. Banks presents an imaginative retelling of the legend of the radical abolitionist John Brown and his siege on Harper's Ferry in *Cloudsplitter*. Told from the point-of-view of John's surviving son, Owen, the text explores the deleterious effects of slavery on the United States and its territories and John Brown's religious fervor and moral righteousness towards his family and community. In 2000 Banks published *The Angel on the Roof: The Stories of Russell Banks*, a comprehensive collection of his short fiction throughout his career.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Critics have praised Banks's realistic investigations into the oppression, alienation, and hopelessness often associated with modern American life. Moreover, reviewers have applauded his insightful and poignant depictions of working-class people struggling to overcome poverty, alcoholism, spiritual isolation, self-destructive relationships, and overwhelming despair. His fiction has been lauded for its lyrical prose, well-defined characters, powerful voice, and narrative techniques. For example, commentators have argued that by introducing four separate narrators in *The Sweet Hereafter*, Banks is able to pervasively and poignantly depict the complex and

conflicting feelings that arise in the aftermath of tragedy. However, *Rule of the Bone* has received a mixed assessment from readers, with some faulting the implausibility of the plot and Banks's lackluster attempt to construct a modern retelling of Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The autobiographical aspects of Banks's work have also attracted critical interest, inspiring several reviewers to posit that his novels and short stories function as attempts to process the traumas of his youth. Scholars have variously compared Banks's fiction to the works of Raymond Carver, Richard Ford, and Andre Dubus. Christine Benvenuto has commented that, "Banks writes with an intensely focused empathy and a compassionate sense of humor that help to keep readers, if not his characters, afloat through the misadventures and outright tragedies of his books."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

- 15 Poems* [with William Matthews and Newton Smith] (poetry) 1967
30/6 (poetry) 1969
Waiting to Freeze (poetry) 1969
Snow: Meditations of a Cautious Man in Winter (poetry) 1974
Family Life (novel) 1975
Searching for Survivors (short stories) 1975
The New World: Tales (short stories) 1978
Hamilton Stark (novel) 1978
The Book of Jamaica (novel) 1980
Trailerpark (short stories) 1981
The Relation of My Imprisonment (novel) 1983
Continental Drift (novel) 1985
Success Stories (short stories) 1986
Affliction (novel) 1989
Brushes with Greatness: An Anthology of Chance Encounters with Greatness [editor; with Michael Ondaatje and David Young] (nonfiction) 1989
The Sweet Hereafter (novel) 1991
Rule of the Bone (novel) 1995
Cloudsplitter (novel) 1998
The Angel on the Roof: The Stories of Russell Banks (short stories) 2000

CRITICISM

Howard Frank Mosher (review date 8 September 1991)

SOURCE: Mosher, Howard Frank. "The Lost Children." *Washington Post Book World* 21, no. 36 (8 September 1991): 3, 14.

[In the following review, Mosher praises the accessibility of Banks's characters and narrative in *The Sweet*

Hereafter, calling the novel "Banks's most accomplished book to date."]

A nobleman once asked a Chinese philosopher to bestow a blessing on his family. The famous scholar reflected briefly. Then he said, "Grandfather dies, father dies, son dies." When the nobleman indicated his distress, the philosopher shrugged his shoulders. "What other way would you have it?" he said.

Of course, any alternative to the natural progression of life and death from one generation to the next seems nearly unthinkable. Yet it's exactly such a tragic reversal of human mortality that Russell Banks confronts in *The Sweet Hereafter*, his latest and best novel to date, in which the Adirondack town of Sam Dent is devastated by the loss of 14 of its children in a freak schoolbus accident. As Billy Ansel, an articulate local garage owner and father of two of the victims, says: "It's almost beyond belief or comprehension, that the children should die before the adults. It flies in the face of biology, it contradicts history, it denies cause and effect, it violates basic physics, even. It's the final contrary. A town that loses its children loses its meaning."

The Sweet Hereafter begins with Dolores Driscoll, the town's long-time schoolbus driver, describing the fateful day of the accident. It's immediately apparent from her account that she is a first-rate driver: reliable, cautious, comfortable behind the wheel and good with the children, from the "fieldmouse poor" Lamston kids to Nichole Burnell, the local beauty queen and a straight-A student who will be permanently paralyzed by the accident. "It's almost impossible to say how important and pleasurable that job was to me," Dolores says—until that terrible snowy morning when she saw, or thought she saw, something dash in front of the bus on the steep downgrade above the town's abandoned sand-pit:

For the rest of my life I will remember that red-brown blur, like a stain of dried blood, standing against the road with a thin screen of blown snow suspended between it and me, the full weight of the vehicle and the thirty-four children in it bearing down on me like a wall of water. And I will remember the formal clarity of my mind, beyond thinking or choosing now, for I had made my choice, as I wrenched the steering wheel to the right and slapped my foot against the brake pedal, and I wasn't the driver anymore, so I hunched my shoulders and ducked my head, as if the bus were a huge wave about to break over me . . . [and] the children of my town—their wide-eyed faces and fragile bodies swirling and tumbling in a tangled mass as the bus went over and the sky tipped and veered away and the ground lurched brutally forward.

Russell Banks seems inexorably drawn in his fiction to the darker side of contemporary American life. Most recently, for instance, he's explored the horrific plight of Haitian refugees (among other matters) in *Contin-*

tal Drift, and the tormented psyche of a self-destructive small-town policeman in *Affliction*. Now a schoolbus catastrophe! Yet the characters of Banks's new novel are rendered with such clear-eyed affection, the central tragedy handled with such unsentimental artistry, the wonderfully named mountain hamlet of Sam Dent described in such precise (and often very funny) detail, that *The Sweet Hereafter* is not only Banks's most accomplished book to date, but his most accessible and, ultimately, affirmative.

Structurally, the novel is narrated from the successive viewpoints of three townspersons and an out-of-town negligence lawyer. Billy Ansel, who picks up the story where Dolores Driscoll leaves off, has lost twins in the accident. In his implacable anger and stubbornness, Billy reminds me of a much more mentally intact and understandable Wade Whitehouse, the dangerously unstable lawman in *Affliction*. Yet somehow Billy has the resilience to endure his terrible ordeal (he's already lost his wife to cancer) and the eloquence to convey, as well as anyone can, what he and the town have suffered. More than anyone else in Sam Dent, Billy Ansel is aware of how the accident has altered the town and its residents forever. "From then on we were simply different people," he concludes at the end of his account. "Not new people; different."

When the divorced, constitutionally outraged and oddly likable New York City lawyer Mitchell Stephens arrives in Sam Dent, Billy wants no part of him or his whopping big lawsuits against the state and town for various safety violations. But just beneath his veneer of big-city cynicism, Stephens is an idealist with a mission as relentless as a three-day Adirondack blizzard. His determination to prove that "There are no accidents" drives the plot of the book forward to its climax in one of the most unpredictable and dramatic court scenes in contemporary fiction.

Courtroom depositions, negligence suits, the color of a winter dawn behind high northern peaks; models and makes of cars, the ineffable rural mystique of demolition derbies and county fairs; what men talk about in a backwoods bar; what kids talk about while they're waiting for the schoolbus—Russell Banks knows everything worth knowing about all these and much, much more. Only twice, in my opinion, does he introduce extraneous material. Although it's perfectly believable that Mitchell Stephens's runaway daughter may have AIDS and that Nichole Burnell may have been subjected to childhood sexual abuse, *The Sweet Hereafter*, like a lovely and mature Adirondack birch tree, is more noteworthy for its grace and economical elegance than for its bulk. The theme of the lost children is powerful enough to carry the story.

Outstanding novels—and *The Sweet Hereafter* is the most outstanding American novel I've read since Joyce Carol Oates's *Because It Is Bitter and Because It Is My*

Heart and John Updike's *Rabbit at Rest*—don't, thank heaven, always have obvious points or messages. Like Oates and Updike at their best, however, Russell Banks is a strictly realistic writer with a remarkably comprehensive and sympathetic vision of the human condition and its hardest realities. Banks's vision of these realities in *The Sweet Hereafter* is at once sad and ennobling. The novel is a hard-won affirmation of mankind's potential for dignity in the face of just about the worst life has to offer.

Jeff Danziger (review date 24 September 1991)

SOURCE: Danziger, Jeff. "Small Town Tragedy." *Christian Science Monitor* (24 September 1991): 15.

[In the following review, Danziger compliments the philosophical depth of *The Sweet Hereafter* and notes that Banks's fiction is improving which each subsequent work.]

Russell Banks's third major novel [*The Sweet Hereafter*], after *Continental Drift* and *Affliction*, is a work of wonderful tenderness and strength, told with his unique skill of keeping a fundamental philosophic question just below the surface of everyday events. Given the declining quality of American novels, Banks could be at the top by remaining the same. Instead, he improves.

The story is told by four people: Dolores Driscoll, a school-bus driver in a small town; Billy Ansel, father of two of the children on the bus; Mitchell Stephens, a lawyer; and Nichole Burnell, a student. In the accident on which the story is centered, Ansel loses his children and Nichole is paralyzed. Dolores survives the accident—the plunge of the bus through the guardrail and-into the water-filled quarry—and then tries to survive survival. Mitchell Stephens becomes the attorney for the group of parents who mount a lawsuit.

As in Banks's *Affliction*, the events take place in a small town—a small, unlovely stretch of road in upstate New York somewhere north of Albany. Banks has worked hard to understand this place. It is a place where life clings to highways, a place of short summers, long winters, and borderline poverty that never quite qualifies for official recognition. Good, unassuming people such as Dolores Driscoll work at what there is to do in the fragile economy.

Driscoll's accident, after years of driving children safely through the worst of northern New York winters, is an event of undeservedly cruel caprice. She has, through the years, earned the affection of the town. The accident ruins her life and forces the townspeople—most of whom are unaccustomed to deep thinking—to weigh their living options against their losses. Into the middle

of this conflict comes the lawyer, Stephens, who is portrayed as a fair and considerate man, but driven by an internal anger to assign blame and liability. Practicing law, he says, is "like a discipline; it organizes and controls us; probably keeps us from being homicidal." He offers a promise of action to the townspeople who are stunned into helplessness.

In his explanation there is fault and remedy; the guardrail was too weak, the road hadn't been plowed, the quarry hadn't been drained. But the rumble you hear growing behind Banks's story is the dispute between the weak majority and the strong minority over his basic promise that there is a remedy for their loss.

The book hinges on the maddening nature of inexplicable tragedy and tragedy's quivering aftermath. Stephens offers the protection of an explanation, something to wrap around oneself to ward off the cold winds of the unknown. For some of the townspeople this is worth more than the money they might gain from the lawsuit. But not for all.

It's left to the most unlikely of the victims to realize that blame can't be affixed to nature's caprice, not if one wants to continue to live sanely. Part of the explanation is that there is no explanation, and in most cases you're better off not equating life with money. The book closes on a note of forgiveness generated by those who must forgive Dolores Driscoll and, with an odd twist, by Driscoll herself, since she has to forgive those who have forgiven her.

Banks is making the best literary use of small northern American town life of any working writer these days, and he gets far sharper focus in the cold upstate New York air than any of the endless Southern writers do in the sultry haze below the Mason-Dixon line. He uses characters from the area—people who have grown up and remained there, usually living lives without advantages—and he has affection for such people.

Donna Rifkind (review date 17 April 1992)

SOURCE: Rifkind, Donna. "A Town Divided." *Times Literary Supplement*, no. 4646 (17 April 1992): 20.

[In the following review, Rifkind provides a stylistic and thematic examination of *The Sweet Hereafter*, praising the novel's subtle realism.]

"Gritty", "muscular" and "vigorous" are the words most commonly used to characterize the writing of Russell Banks, whose blue-collar American tragedies have earned him big prizes and teaching positions in leading American universities. Much of the grit in Banks's work comes from autobiographical sources. The heroes of

Continental Drift (1985) and *Affliction* (1989) hail from the same kind of wintry, disintegrating New Hampshire town in which he himself was brought up. His father, an alcoholic plumber, was surely a model for the abusive father in *Affliction*. And the seedier parts of Florida, where Banks lived for a time, serve as settings for *Continental Drift*, and for some of the short fiction in *Success Stories* (1986).

Banks's latest novel, *The Sweet Hereafter*, has no apparent autobiographical basis. The story, which is based on several real-life news items, begins in a snowstorm with a full school bus descending a hill in the fictional town of Sam Dent, in upstate New York. When the bus swerves, smashing through a guard rail and plunging into a sandpit filled with icy water, fourteen of the thirty-four children in the bus are killed.

Once one knows that this novel is going to be about dead children—and Banks doesn't waste any time making this clear—it is very difficult to keep reading. Yet the author's sympathetic imagining of the events following the accident is so skilful and complex that one is compelled to continue.

His technique is to provide a series of testimonies by the following characters: the bus driver, a woman of sterling character named Dolores Driscoll who sustained no physical injuries; Billy Ansel, the father of two of the dead children; Mitchell Stephens, a slick New York City lawyer looking for a lawsuit; and one of the survivors, a beautiful fourteen-year-old cheerleader named Nichole Burnell whom the accident has left paralysed and wheelchair-bound.

The point of these testimonies is not to display discrepancies in shifting points of view. In fact, Banks's motive here is just the opposite. Each character takes up the action where the previous one left off, avoiding both corroboration and argument; the result is to make everyone appear more and more alone in their grief. "A town needs its children, just as much and in the same ways a family does", says Dolores Driscoll. "It comes undone without them, turns a community into a windblown scattering of isolated individuals."

This is precisely what happens in the months following the tragedy: marriages break apart, friends turn against each other, respected citizens retreat into perpetual drunkenness. As one of these, the former local hero Billy Ansel, comments: "it was as if we, too, had died when the bus went over the embankment and tumbled down into the frozen water-filled sandpit, and now we were lodged temporarily into a kind of purgatory, waiting to be moved to wherever the other dead ones had gone."

No healing or redemption seems possible here, partly because the town has no one to blame. Dolores, who had been driving the bus safely and responsibly for

twenty years, is more or less beyond reproach (though some refuse to see it that way), and her anguish over the event leaves permanent emotional scars. The New York lawyer, after stirring up some initial support for a lawsuit, finally goes away disappointed, for the hard truth is that this catastrophe was villainless: it was a cruelly whimsical event, beyond control.

This fact, and Banks's subtle handling of it, are what lift the novel up out of ordinary gritty realism toward something approaching the sublime. After the bus crash, there are two communities in the town of Sam Dent, as Dolores notes at the novel's end: "All of us—Nichole, I, the children who survived the accident, and the children who did not—it was as if we were the citizens of a wholly different town now, as if we were a town of solitaires living in a sweet hereafter, and no matter how the people of Sam Dent treated us, whether they memorialized us or despised us, whether they cheered for our destruction or applauded our victory over adversity, they did it to meet their needs, not ours."

The book's final image, of a county fair seen from a distance, manages to unite these two sets of citizens in a heart-stopping passage, one that reaches for the same painful beauty as the end of Joyce's "The Dead" or parts of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*. It is Russell Banks's last, best word on the subject: that not even art may be able to explain or redeem the unspeakable event that wrecked this town, but it can at least try.

James Finn Cotter (review date 2 May 1992)

SOURCE: Cotter, James Finn. Review of *The Sweet Hereafter*, by Russell Banks. *America* 116, no. 4157 (2 May 1992): 391.

[In the following review, Cotter asserts that the driving thematic focus of *The Sweet Hereafter* is Banks's "relentless quest to plumb the mystery of tragedy as it affects individuals and communities."]

A school bus runs off the road into a frozen water-filled sandpit and 14 children are killed. *The Sweet Hereafter*, by Russell Banks, narrates the bitter aftermath that envelopes the upstate New York community of Sam Dent in the months that follow. Sorrow, anger and recriminations divide people already isolated by vast space and cold climate. Lonely lives turn inward and winter locks in spring.

Banks, the author of ten other books including *Continental Drift* and *Affliction*, describes the barren but majestic landscape of mountains and forests with a painter's eye and captures the painful yet noble lives of the townspeople with a storyteller's art. Scenes on the

snow-covered highway where the accident occurs, desolate homes and motel rooms, garage backlots, bars and the demolition derby stands where the final confrontation takes place print themselves on the mind like scenes from a film.

Banks also gets under his characters' skins and into their hearts and heads. Four of them narrate the tragedy and the events of the following year: Dolores Driscoll, the busdriver whose sturdy self-reliance is shaken but not shattered by the crash; Billy Ansel, a Vietnam veteran who lost his wife four years before and who watches his twin children die in the accident; Mitchell Stephens, a New York lawyer who originates a negligence suit on behalf of the victims not for money but for revenge against a system of government he despises, and Nichole Burnell, a popular teenager who survives the crash but remains permanently crippled.

The way the stories of these four characters crisscross and interconnect is skillful, fascinating in its details and challenging to the reader. The midnight conversation between Ansel and Stephens, for example, in front of the wrecked shell of the abandoned yellow bus is exactly the same in both their accounts but charged with opposite emotions. The father's haunted heart and the lawyer's coolly observant mind completely change the sense of the words exchanged. Both men are themselves, bound by contrasting experiences and moral values.

Banks creates a community's consciousness in the face of crisis from the mournful funerals to the crazy escapism of a demolition derby. Ansel sees the bus as "a beast that had killed our children and then in turn been slain by the villagers." Dolores's husband Abbot, a stroke victim who has himself faced death, speaks in oracles translated by his wife. "Blame creates comprehension," he observes, summing up the paradox that Sam Dent's residents and the book's readers must learn to resolve. "No one can raise the dead" becomes another refrain. But the survivors in whom the dead live in real memory make up a "sweet hereafter" of "shared aloneness" that transcends death.

This is a powerful novel in its relentless quest to plumb the mystery of tragedy as it affects individuals and communities. None of the narrators turns to religion for answers: none finds consolation in conventional faith. Some others do find solace in church, but they appear to be escaping the tragedy rather than confronting it. Yet the quest for meaning rejects materialism and money as offering nothing but dissension and despair. As the title implies, those who died or survived are "citizens of a wholly different town." At the end, death is no more: It cannot touch those who now share the terrible loss and the new life it bestows. The story itself is its own bittersweet hereafter.

Moral ambiguities play an important part in the development and resolution of the plot. Is a lie superior to the truth? Do ends justify means? The author works out his dilemmas through character and circumstance, weaving a novelist's design with reasonable realism and skill. Not every reader will agree with the way these moral threads are woven or with the pattern that results, but anyone who picks up this novel will be a wiser person when he/she puts it down. It stays in the memory long after.

Ross Leckie (essay date summer 1994)

SOURCE: Leckie, Ross. "Plot-Resistant Narrative and Russell Banks's 'Black Man and White Woman in Dark Green Rowboat.'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 31, no. 3 (summer 1994): 407-13.

[In the following essay, Leckie investigates how the narrative minimalism of Banks's short story "Black Man and White Woman in Dark Green Rowboat" functions to explore issues of cultural diversity.]

If much of contemporary literary theory emphasizes the cultural production of class, race, and gender in American fiction, contemporary fiction that utilizes the resources of narrative minimalism to explore issues of cultural division—fiction by such writers as Raymond Carver, Toni Morrison, Susan Minot, and Russell Banks—increasingly provides the context for critical debate. The refusal to elaborate plot or to use plot to suggest a narrator who controls interpretation, becomes itself a strategy that allows the reader to observe clearly the boundaries between the story's minimal plot and the way the socially produced narratives invoked by the story enforce cultural division. If we conceive of narrative as the establishment, for the reader, of a network of expectations within a frame of contingency, then perhaps no expectation is more fundamental than that of intelligible action: the progression of story through chronological time, which we commonly refer to as plot. In a world where the possibilities of plot express unattainable desires on the part of a narrative's characters, however, the reader's desire for a resolution of plot into meaning is thwarted, and the resultant anxiety the reader feels underscores his or her complicity with the frustrations and incoherencies of the characters' lives. These incoherencies resist sentimental assimilation into the reader's aesthetic imagination. The resultant daydreams and wish-fulfilling fantasies display, as Fredric Jameson argues, the otherwise inconceivable link between history and desire. (182). Russell Banks's "Black Man and White Woman in Dark Green Rowboat" presents precisely such an evasive narrative, one whose very evasion establishes a dialogic relationship between the reader and a cast of characters whose lives

display the wreckage of the larger cultural narratives that marginalize them. In effect, Banks's minimalism accentuates the missing cultural narratives that have written the characters into the margins.

"Black Man and White Woman" does, of course, present things that happen. The story opens with an apparently random variety of people who live in a trailer-park commencing their days. The reader is not immediately aware that the black man and the white woman are the focus of the story. They gradually emerge from the narrative background, and the story follows them as they row onto the lake, converse laconically, and row home. The sense of nothing happening is created in the context of their desire, both their physical desire for each other and their desire to construct plots that might provide a meaningful structure to their lives. The two potentially significant events—their sexual encounter and her abortion scheduled for later in the afternoon—remain outside the story, framing the story's temporal sequence. The reader expects that the narrator will center on the gravity of these events as a way of interpreting the characters' lives, but they remain unnarrated. Possible narratives of tragic youth are suggested, but the sexual encounter and projected abortion collapse into the sequence of isolated meaningless events. The black man and the white woman are simply incapable of incorporating them into a desired pattern of meaning.

The failure of meaning is in part due to the fact that the plot trajectories each character envisions are at cross-purposes. She values him for his totemic significance—he is an exotic. She calls him "a sheik." Toni Morrison, in her recent book *Playing in the Dark*, describes this as a process central even to American fiction not ostensibly about race relations. It is a process of fetishization by which African Americans can be given value in the context of a white culture that excludes them (68). By having the abortion, the woman wishes to recuperate their relationship into her respectable white world of family and friends. The man wishes to yank the woman out of just this "nigger-hating" social network and give her identity as the object of his sexuality—she should have the baby and live stranded on an island in the lake. That the "his and hers" plots are at cross-purposes, however, is part of the way in which both characters are left inarticulate by the social structures to which they belong. The "functional illiteracy" of the characters, their inability to read and interpret social narrative, does not affect the shape of their desires, desires that adhere to conventional and grossly inadequate narratives provided to women and blacks of the underclass. Her plot can only fail, as their courtship, now sanctioned by her mother, becomes exposed to economic uncertainty and a quiet yet insidi-