

The Other by David Guterson (Bloomsbury) R209
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Like Peter Carey's *His Illegal Self*, reviewed here recently, David Guterson's latest novel also invokes Mark Twain's classic *Huckleberry Finn*, according to Ernest Hemingway the sourcebook of all American fiction. Guterson's narrator, the fifty-year old Neil Countryman, recollecting his youthful friendship with John William Barry, the scion of a wealthy Seattle family, says: "we used, as frequently as we could, to light out for the territories – to light out with all the subtext of escape implied by that phrase from *Huck Finn*."

The "subtext of escape" is what American fiction derives from Mark Twain – more specifically escape from what Guterson calls "Hamburger World", the mass-produced consumer society spawned by American affluence and materialism. By contrast, the classic British novel, for better or for worse, is characteristically intent on restoring its protagonists to a stable place in society – Pip in *Great Expectations* grows up into a respectable citizen, whereas Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye* never grows up as far as we can tell, and never finds a place in the Hamburger World.

The relevance of this to *The Other* is that Guterson almost schematically, though never in any facile way, opposes his two friends in terms of their relations with society. United as they are by their love of the great outdoors and their pursuit of extreme adventure, Neil's trajectory is towards absorption into society, whereas John William's solitary course is death-directed. We are told in the opening chapter (entitled "No escape from the Unhappiness Machine") that Neil is a happily-married English teacher ("I feel useful in the classroom," he says), whereas John William died some time ago as a hermit in the wilderness – leaving Neil a fortune of 440 million dollars.

Since we are given the outcome in the first chapter, this is not a novel of suspense; rather, it examines the similarities and differences that make these two men each other's "Other", contrasts and yet complements to each other. To simplify, one might say Neil represents the socialised self, the impulse to conformity, whereas John William represents the anarchic self, the impulse to rebellion and withdrawal.

The paradoxical bond-in-difference is established at their first meeting, in 1972, as sixteen-year rivals in an 800-meter race. Neil sums up his adversary: "like me, long-haired; like me, in earnest; like me, goaded forward by, the word might be, convictions. In other words, this runner is approximately my doppelgänger. ... This guy, running next to me, is a version of me. We both feel, romantically, that our running is transcendent. How do I know this? From running alongside him. I also have the benefit of hindsight." The shared belief in the transcendence of their activity – here, running; later, hiking and climbing -- is what unites these superficially dissimilar boys and, later, men. For the other great American theme presaged by Mark Twain is male bonding, the root of countless buddy books and movies, from *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* to its logical extreme in *Brokeback Mountain*.

Not that the bonding in *The Other* is in any way erotic. There is a kind of asexual innocence to the friendship; indeed, there is very little open emoting on the part of either man. The bond is a tacit one, albeit sealed by a rather bizarre blood-brotherhood ritual insisted upon by John William.

It turns out that the ominously-named first chapter was prophetic: there is indeed no escape from the unhappiness machine, at any rate for those who are caught in it. Guterson attempts no easy answers as to why Neil should, by and large, be happy and easy-going, whereas John William is morose and self-destructive. John William is an avid reader of the Gnostic heretics “with their dark take on God as a sinister deity ... and life as a form of entrapment”, but there is no saying whether he has been influenced by them or was attracted to them because they expressed something of his own dread in the face of existence.

Guterson’s unemphatic style is perfectly keyed to Neil’s undemonstrative loyalty to John William. Neil says “I was then and am now a believer in reserve, in brevity, and in the value of silence,” and he does not try to explain the bond between them that for seven years makes him regularly trudge all the way to John William’s remote hideaway, and not divulge his death for many years after that. All he says, about his inability to betray John William’s whereabouts, is: “I couldn’t turn him in. There was a part of me, at twenty-eight, with a wife, two kids, a dog, and a job, that agreed with him, and so I couldn’t make the call.” The part of him that agrees with John William is the product of what he calls “this lonely and acute perception of the organized world as a pathetic illusion.”

Twenty years later, when John William’s body is discovered and Neil, now very much part of “the organized world”, becomes something of a celebrity, he still feels an obscure sense of betrayal in talking about John William, as if he has changed sides, reneged on his alliance with John William against Hamburger World. Ultimately, in losing John William, he has lost part of himself: the subtext of escape has become effaced by the narrative of “home and all that attends it.”