

## ANALYSIS

*Panama* (1978)



Thomas McGuane

(1939- )

“Thomas McGuane in *Panama* (1978) writes of many things that are not Panama or Panamanian, and the place may not even exist in the novel. *Panama* takes its themes from its locale, Key West, which recalls to us the Southern California settings of Didion’s fiction or the city landscapes of Barthelme’s short stories. Waste matter is a key to it all, key to Key West, to Far West, to East. Like Wurlitzer in his three novels, McGuane works by what we may call ‘negative accretion.’ Instead of gathering facts and feelings, the minimalist novelist doles them out. The more that accumulates, the less there is.... Warhol, Barthelme, Johns, Lichtenstein...have combined to turn energy into nonenergy or into non-heroic acts: as adversary response to the Vietnam War, American military and industrial energy, waste itself....

*Panama* takes place in Key West, the new frontier where bizarre event, lost memories, drug-induced hallucinations come together. Adding to that sense of a paradise irrevocably lost is McGuane’s prose style: a terse, almost epigrammatic pithiness, rapid cutting, acts of violence juxtaposed to diminution. ‘When I’m tired and harmless, I pack a gun, a five-shot Smith and Wesson .38. It’s the only .38 not in a six-shot configuration I know of. How the sacrifice of that one last shot makes the gun so flat and concealable, so deadlier than the others. Just by giving up a little!’ The six-shot .38 turned into a five-shot weapon is emblematic of the situation: take something away, make it flatter, easier to conceal, and we have the lost paradise of Key West. Featured is Chet Pomeroy, the once famous, now lost protagonist, full of violence, capable of martyrdom (he nails his hand to the door of his ex-wife’s house), and possibly of murder.

McGuane, like [Joan] Didion, another specialist in spare parts, is excellent at catching the deadness of flesh. ‘I am a congestion of storage batteries. I’m wired in series. I’ve left some fundamental components on the beach, and await recharging, bombardment, implanting, *something*, shall we say, very close to the bone.’ The strongest parts of the book derive from Pomeroy’s descriptions of himself as someone close to waste matter, rotting along the edges of a failed career as stunt man, acrobat, performer, in the waste lands of Key West. The novel is of flotsam and jetsam, lost souls well below the lostness of Tennessee Williams’s characters. (Williams, who had a home in Key West, hovers over the novel.) The Panama of the title has little to do with any of the activity, but with the felt sense, with the possibility Pomeroy and the woman he considers his wife may have been married there, which he only dimly recalls. A land mass made meaningful solely because it houses a thin trickle of water between two continents, Panama is a dim place.

The nature of that in the past, like the nature of Key West in the present, negates certainty. [Panama extends further south the traditional symbol of Mexico in American literature as a symbol of the primitive and the unconscious mind.]

The novel as method or structure, most of all as prose, is more interesting in part than as a whole. One problem with minimalist fiction is that a protagonist, or even minor characters, may seem pallid, thin. McGuane can generate no positive energy in Pomeroy, since the novel terminates before we learn much about him. He is like Camus's Meursault, moving...toward total negation; but Meursault has around him a large ideological presence. Pomeroy has none; he moves without a net, as he admits. As a 'walk-through' or a 'simple occupant,' that unnamed resident, he has not 'affect,' as in a Didion novel. Minimalist techniques drag characters toward cipherdom. Thus, minimalism establishes an atmosphere in which nothing can live, no less thrive; and we find no empathetic relationships, no associations, nothing but mechanical responses. Comparably, [Andy] Warhol [pop painter of soup cans]...thrives in such a milieu, for it is already tape-recorded, outside human connection, part of a mechanical process."

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Michael Hollister (2015)