

ANALYSIS

A Cool Million (1934)

Nathanael West

(1903-1940)

“Perhaps the first thing to be said about *A Cool Million* is that it is not very good. By itself, it has no more claim to our attention than several dozen properly forgotten books of the thirties.... The burlesque in *A Cool Million* is consistently heavy and only intermittently funny. Worse, it largely isolates the reader from the force of its satire. In a world so dominated by moronic gullibility, a reader can neither identify with the characters nor feel much complicity in the folly and evil they represent. West’s typical mixed vision is here entirely absent. It is replaced by an odd jumble of travesties, few of which are impressive and all of which combine to destroy even the effect of simple bitterness. The book is as crude as a political cartoon but not as coherent....

The Alger stories it travesties are so ridiculous that they defy parody; burlesque is the only way to handle them, and burlesque...did not come easily to West.... The basic strategy of *A Cool Million* is to impose the pattern of *Candide* upon Horatio Alger materials. The strategy is, I think, clearly a mistake. It immediately sacrifices the qualities of style upon which *Candide* depends. It also abandons West’s own gift for parody—the condensed and suggestive summary—in favor of extended imitation....

The most distinctive feature of *A Cool Million* is its meticulous descriptions of American décor.... The tastes of the dandy are the tastes of American vulgarity. The aesthete whose whole career is an exercise in contempt for the masses is actually indistinguishable from them. He shares their lust for illusion, for elaborate artifice and novelty, and his irritable ennui is only an attenuated form of their latent violence. His psychology, like theirs, derives from frustration, irritation, and exhaustion; and his desires, like theirs, issue forth in dreams and fitful destructive acts.”

Randall Reid

The Fiction of Nathanael West: No Redeemer, No Promised Land
(U Chicago 1967) 106-08, 111, 114