

REVIEW

In the Shadow of War (2006)



Patrick Garry

Patrick Garry is a professor of law and the prolific author of both scholarly books and allegorical novels in the tradition of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Flannery O'Connor, and Marilynne Robinson. Allegory is a rare achievement that distinguishes the most evolved literary fiction and is characteristic of many classics.

The narrator Glen begins *In the Shadow of War* by inviting the reader to participate with him in trying to understand the meaning of his brother Ricky, which turns out to be the meaning of life. When the reader learns that the story is going to be about the narrator's relationship to a retarded brother—"Who wants to read about a retard?"--it is both a straightforward forewarning on page 1 and a test. Like Bartleby in Melville's great story, Ricky is a mirror reflecting the nature of other characters (most of whom are retarded in various less visible ways) and of the reader as well: Glen says, "That was how I often judged people--by how I thought they would react to retards."

We do not blame Glen in the least for what happens to Ricky, because he is so young, because he tries so hard and obviously loves Ricky, because he is so honest and critical of himself, because we (most readers) would never be able to do as well by Ricky as Glen, and because Glen is the one who actually has the responsibility. We admire him all the way because he is so much better a person than we think we would be in such a situation. He has humility. He confesses to his mistakes and dramatizes his false perceptions. He is always working, helping others, taking responsibility and blaming himself for not standing up for his brother, which parallels standing up for our allies in Vietnam. This is one of the great strengths of the novel, the irresistible narrator and the irresistibly sympathetic Ricky. We know we should at the very least be sympathetic to a handicapped person, even though most of us also know that, in their positions, we would probably feel and act too much like his Mom or Dad do and not nearly as well as Glen.

Ricky calls his fantasizing "shitwishing." He is obsessed with invaders from outer space, who become analogous to antiwar protesters when they invade his home town of Corcoran. His speech is delightful to a reader who enjoys irony, malapropisms and double meanings: "You musht not be afraid. I know how to beat them. I will shave you." And "I'm shitting here, Brosher Glen." And "come shit wish me." In his classic *The Sound and the Fury*, William Faulkner gives the retarded brother Benjy a comparable role as a

redemptive mirror figure with much to teach us about what is missing or undeveloped in ourselves. Benjy has the mind of a three-year-old and is rendered mostly from the inside in stream-of-consciousness. In a lesser known story called “He,” Katherine Anne Porter similarly uses a retarded boy, mainly to show how insensitive and ignorant his own family is about what he feels. Like Ricky, these characters, because they are redemptive, evoke Christ. Glen’s “The thing about...” becomes liturgical, yet not repetitious, as each lesson is different, enlarging the significance of Ricky.

Corcoran is an archetypal American small town, representing the past, and “core” values—“a good place to be retarded.” Early in the 20th century, Sherwood Anderson and the urbane Sinclair Lewis portrayed small towns as mostly backward and stultifying. Now that American cities are rotting at the core, the suburbs and small towns are becoming pastoral retreats. Garry has redeemed small town Minnesota from Lewis’ Sauk Centre. Anderson wrote from the heart and his Corcoran was Winesburg, Ohio. Although he left it, at least he had an appreciation for core values. A reference to *The Grapes of Wrath* links Corcoran to the quest for a promised land and Steinbeck’s affirmation of simple people and core values, although as Glen says, “What I should have learned from my grandfather is that starting over is a state of mind, not a place.”

Garry’s style is modest and appropriate to the humble narrator, with many unifying parallels, motifs and renderings of feeling and sensation that make the story come alive: “It was the kind of mood that kept people from sitting back in their chairs and crossing their legs”; and “I thought that anyone who could make you think about kissing in the midst of a burial was probably someone you loved.” Similes and metaphors are abundant: “corralling the stampede of words that was rushing toward my mouth”; “The questions were all bunched up in my throat like children rushing for the door at recess”; “dipping my toe into the waters of her conviction”; “The sound of her breathing was like a hypnotist’s watch”; and “when you’re in the shadows, you’ve got to rely on your own light.”

In Corcoran, the state of religion is represented by The Church of the Sagging Roof, “where I became most like Ricky.” The town’s Interlachen Ballroom evokes the heights, emotional and moral peaks attained by characters living in and trying to revive the community, a place of the heart contrasted with Sisseton (sissy town) Heights, a toxic dumping ground. Talk of development in the novel is ironic because the more important development going on is internal. Ricky, embodying divinity itself, does not develop at all. It is Glen who does the most impressive developing--the one most critical of himself. The ending of his story is poignant and deeply moving. Everything that has come before contributes at the end to a mood of humility, transcendence and peace that elevates the soul.

Michael Hollister (2015)

