

COMMENTARY

Elbow Room (1977)



James Alan McPherson

(1943-)

Hue and Cry, McPherson's first collection of short fiction...appeared in 1969. The volume contains ten stories, many of them rather grim in tone and most of them written during the summer of 1968. The characters McPherson portrayed were often lonely, isolated, confused, even defeated—the victims of both social forces and personal failings. Building upon his own work experiences as a grocery clerk, dining-car waiter, janitor, and law student, McPherson created stories of a stark, compelling realism. The haunting refrain of the title story—'But if this is all there is, what is left of life and why are we alive?'—sounded one of the volume's principal notes. As the book's title and epigraph suggest, *Hue and Cry* was an implicit protest against the conditions it detailed. McPherson's compassion for his characters, and their own courage and skill amid adversity, evoked sympathy from the reader...

The widespread praise accorded *Hue and Cry* was surpassed by the even greater critical success of McPherson's second collection of stories, *Elbow Room*. Published in 1977, the volume won the Pulitzer Prize the following year. In these twelve stories McPherson revealed a refreshing sense of humor grounded in folkloric traditions and a far greater optimism about the future of race relations in the United States and about the fulfillment of individual quests for identity. A comparison of the title stories from these two books, both of them treatments of interracial love affairs, demonstrates the marked shift in mood between the two volumes. In 'Hue and Cry' the interracial relationships had disintegrated, whereas in 'Elbow Room' the young couple not only marry each other but also produce a child, who represents the possibility of a new order in American society. Considered as a group, the stories in *Elbow Room* are also better crafted and more varied than those in *Hue and Cry*. McPherson's subsequent receipt of a MacArthur Foundation Award in 1981 confirmed his position as one of the most promising American writers...

Like his friend and mentor Ralph Ellison, whom he did not meet until 1970, after the publication of *Hue and Cry*, McPherson seeks to embrace in his fiction the diversity and complexity of American life, with its tensions and contradictions (not the life of any one race, class, or ethnic group). His stories subvert a range of stereotypes—racial, sexual, political, and cultural—thus insisting on the primacy of individual, not group, identity. At the same time, McPherson depicts characters who embody universal qualities; they are representative Americans, such as the black narrator of 'Why I Like Country Music,' the initial story in *Elbow Room*. His fiction is often at its best when it makes use of the speaking voice, permitting its characters to reveal themselves, or the stories' protagonists, through first-person narratives, as in 'A Solo

Song: For Doc,' 'Gold Coast,' and 'The Story of a Dead Man.' Some of his most interesting stories result from the tension he establishes between the narrator's voice and that of another central character.

While McPherson cannot be classified as a writer of social protest literature, he is keenly aware of the need for change. McPherson also records the painful personal losses that can accompany rapid social change. In 'A Solo Song: For Doc,' Doc Craft's forced retirement from his career as a dining-car waiter becomes emblematic, for McPherson, of the decay not only of the American railroad but also of the cultural and political principles the railroad had long embodied. As *Railroad*, an anthology of miscellaneous works, makes clear, the railroad in McPherson's stories symbolizes a freedom of movement and a potential for self-transformation that McPherson believes to be fundamental to a genuinely democratic society.

Refusing to subscribe to the separatist aesthetic of the Black Arts movement of the late 1960s, McPherson nevertheless remains a writer deeply rooted in the black American experience. Acknowledging both the need for and the difficulties of achieving self-definition in American society, his fiction speaks powerfully and compassionately of people, both black and white, who strive to affirm human dignity and a shared American identity."

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