

INFORMATION TO USERS

This dissertation copy was prepared from a negative microfilm created and inspected by the school granting the degree. We are using this film without further inspection or change. If there are any questions about the content, please write directly to the school. The quality of this reproduction is heavily dependent upon the quality of the original material.

The following explanation of techniques is provided to help clarify notations which may appear on this reproduction.

1. Manuscripts may not always be complete. When it is not possible to obtain missing pages, a note appears to indicate this.
2. When copyrighted materials are removed from the manuscript, a note appears to indicate this.
3. Oversize materials (maps, drawings and charts are photographed by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps.

UMI

ProQuest Information and Learning
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346 USA
800-521-0600


PREVIEW

**PAINTING ALABAMA
AND OTHER STORIES**


PERRIN ASHLI PATTERSON

Department of English

APPROVED:




Benjamin Alire Sáenz, Chair



Leslie Ullman



Cynthia Farah



**Associate Vice President for
Graduate Studies**

For mom and dad.
Thank you.

PREVIEW

**PAINTING ALABAMA
AND OTHER STORIES**

by

PERRIN ASHLI PATTERSON, B.A.

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at El Paso

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

English Department

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

May 2000

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Buckets and buckets of thanks to the following:

Benjamin Alire Sáenz for his sage advice.

Leslie Ullman and Cynthia Farah for their guidance and suggestions.

Rick DeMarinis for his wisdom and his writing.

Richard Turcotte and Molly Polk for listening to my stories and keeping me sane.

Laura Hayes for movie watching, Frisbee tossing, advice on my writing and some vicious games of backgammon.

Georgie Donovan and M. Mueller for endless chats about literature and all things non-literary.

Rachel Anne Lane and Elizabeth Stasney for their editorial expertise.

And Wayne, Janie, Shawn and Andrew for putting up with their sometimes crazy but always loveable daughter and sister.

March 3, 2000

Preface: The Bluegrass in Fiction

Humanity is immense, and reality has myriad forms; the most one can affirm is that some of the flowers of fiction have the odour of it, and others have not.

Henry James

The first time I heard bluegrass music I was at the Station Inn in downtown Nashville. I'd lived in Nashville for three years by then and had stumbled across many a folksy band strumming on guitars and picking on fiddles, but my trip to the Station Inn was the first time I'd listened to the interworkings of the music, the first time I realized how complex the tunes were when an entire band came together to play. The instruments, by themselves, were hardly melodic, but together, that missing melodic sound gave the music its edge. The music of bluegrass sounded similar to the country tunes Nashville is famous for; however, it was less predictable and less safe. It sounded rawer than the tunes I heard on the radio, as if it had been lucky enough to escape being picked over and touched up in a studio until it came through speakers and microphones as something sterile. I listened to the bluegrass that night with two musicians who played Southern, college-band rock and roll but wanted desperately to find something that stretched musical boundaries more than covers of Little Feat and the Eagles. They found it in the twang of bluegrass. Though I didn't know it at the time, bluegrass would help me find the same thing in writing.

In my opinion there's twang that works and twang that fall short. Failed attempts at twang can set one's teeth on edge. It's the sound of fingernails on a chalkboard, the feel of tearing Styrofoam, the taste of metal. I suffered through an eager roommate's first

attempt at the violin, I witnessed others suffering through my foibles with the mandolin and I watched the uncertain fingers of aspiring guitarists stretch and grope and stumble over the strings. We all were experimenting with sounds and instruments new to us; and, while we knew what the instruments could sound like, we didn't have the skill or the knowledge to make them do what they needed to. We were all propagators of failed twang.

Successful twang in bluegrass exists when all the seemingly cacophonous sounds—the fiddle, banjo, mandolin and dobro and even grown men and women's less-than-melodious voices—all find that harmony. A bluegrass band hitting that good twang makes me sit down and sigh. All the components fit together so tightly the sound shakes through me to the center of my chest and rests there, humming slightly, even after the music stops.

That night, at the Station Inn, bluegrass legend Bill Monroe walked through the door unannounced and gingerly stepped on stage. Although none of us knew it at the time, he only had a couple more years left in him then, and he wore his genius and his talent and the hard work of a lifetime in his walk, his eyes and his presence on stage. He picked up a mandolin, adjusted his white cowboy hat, shook out the wrinkles from his white sport coat and matching trousers and gave a nod to the musicians he had interrupted. With this small gesture, the musicians were off, following Bill Monroe's mandolin—sometimes leading it, always together. When the legend finally set the mandolin down and exited the stage, the audience, all of us, sat there in silence. No beer

bottles clinking, no laughter, no idle chit chat. We knew we had witnessed something close to perfection. We'd heard twang, and none of us were willing to let that humming sound go just yet.

I was introduced to bluegrass that night by a friend who had convinced me that we needed to write a story about musicians. In our months of research we never did any actual writing on the subject, and I have a sneaking suspicion the whole "story" idea was just my friend's excuse to visit as many Nashville honky-tonks as possible. However, as I walked into different bars, pen and paper in hand, ready to research our story, I began to see similarities between bluegrass and storytelling. I began to realize what it was I looked for in a story.

In the stories I read, I need something different, something that, at first glance, appears slightly off balance but ends up coming into focus more clearly than a work that reads like it spent far too much time in the literary equivalent of a Nashville music studio. I need to hear that good twang, where all the components—the storytelling, the characters, the words themselves and how they flow together on the page—come together and feed off each other. I've written stories that didn't twang, and I've written stories where the sounds are stranger yet sharper, clearer, at the same time. And when I hit those sharper, clearer notes, I know I'm moving closer.

In *Mystery and Manners*, Flannery O'Connor discusses the "grotesque" in Southern fiction and states that the writer of the grotesque in fiction creates characters whose "fictional qualities lean away from typical social patterns, towards mystery and the

unexpected” (41). Twang, to me, exists in this movement beyond what is accepted by society as typical, and therefore embraced. Twang, in literature as in music, struggles to tap into what is unknown and mysterious, instead of accepting the way things appear on the surface and retelling another version of that acceptance.

Because twang steers away from what has been tested and deemed safe by conventional thought, it is always volatile. One missed note, one voice off key and the music grates against listening ears; but, when the tune—stretching musical boundaries—hits its notes clearly, listeners realize they have encountered something more than basic entertainment. In the forward to *The Best American Short Stories of 1996*, John Edgar Wideman writes, “Stories that don’t acknowledge the mystery at the center of things, don’t challenge the version of reality most consenting adults rely upon day by day, are stories that disappear swiftly into the ever-present buzz of entertainment” (xx). The entertainment Wideman mentions blooms from societal conventions. While a story that exudes twang is always “pushing its own limits outward towards the limits of mystery” (O’Connor 41), stories that fall short remain trapped within the boundaries imposed on them.

Wideman also writes that “good writing teases us with the possibility/impossibility of sharing the intimacy and power of someone else’s invisible vision. Mediocre writing works similar turf but compromises the invisibility, the mystery, the distance, the integrity of the ‘other’ with the promise and pretense of delivering a final revelation: the last veil discarded” (xix). Twang isn’t interested in discarding veils;

it is interested in exploring the blur within the veil, not to uncover what lies underneath, but to acknowledge that the unknown exists just beyond what we, as writers, as people, believe we can see. A story with twang suggests that the lifting of veils does not offer revelation in literature (or in music). Instead, it offers a reminder that underneath each veil removed is another blurred hint at the mystery that lies beneath the surface. “You can’t have creativity,” Joseph Campbell states, “unless you leave behind the bounded, the fixed, all the rules” (156). This is the goal of writers, to stretch all the boundaries they can and keep stretching them. In doing so, they come closer and closer to finding whatever that piece needs to make it twang.

What keeps a text with twang from becoming little more than a colorfully decorated bottle of snake oil is the knowledge that, when writers finally grow accustomed to hitting what they think are the perfect notes, the finished products cease sounding as twangy as they have in the past, and they have to begin again, searching for that combination of sounds that brings a story into balance. When Toni Morrison sat down to write *Paradise*, she wasn’t sitting down to write *Beloved* 2. She wanted new themes, new characters, a different approach to the telling of the story. To tell the same story again and again is not why writers—people who truly immerse themselves in their craft—write. When writers believe they have figured out the formula for twang and try to bottle it up and sell it, the twang they hold under cork or bottle cap loses its twang and becomes expected, typical. Industry-driven country music blooms, boy bands take over rock and roll. Hollywood releases ten natural disaster flicks in one year, and authors start writing

fictional accounts of global tragedies because they know their work will sell based on topic alone. Right now, good bluegrass offers an escape from the expected, and so does good writing—good stories.

Bluegrass music may not always entice me the way it does now. I may listen to enough Bill Monroe and Flatt and Scruggs imitators that the music becomes convention instead of invention. But there will be other forms of music to try and there will be musicians in bluegrass who will search out that invention again and create something new from the old. A writer must do the same. She must always be searching for new ways of seeing things, describing things, expressing things. To do so is to stretch the boundaries of the conventionally accepted and to ask those who read the texts to consider these stretches too.

Writers I admire stretch the boundaries of what is supposed to work in the same way that great athletes break the rules of their sports and, in so doing, carry their sports along to completely new and, until they came along, unfathomable places. The twangy texts I read make me slow down when the pages I haven't read no longer outnumber the ones I have. Each one makes me want to pick it up and read instead of participate in a life outside the one happily trapped within the pages of the story. Each text makes me love the way the words place themselves on the page, even when I question what some of those words are saying. Each time I come back to "The Bear," *Huck Finn* or *The Great Gatsby*, I find some new meaning, some new insight, a different story than before.

When I first read Morrison's *Jazz*, I read it for the story of the characters. I followed the lives of Joe, Violet and Dorcas as they wove around each other and as their actions towards and because of each other brought out personal demons and strengths. The story itself is an intricate one, so I studied it more than I did the language. However, on my second reading, I knew the characters and their story, so I focused more on hearing the jazz embedded in the words Morrison writes. Her descriptions and her dialogue pick up and play off of the rhythm of *Jazz*, and her opening lines clue the reader into this feel. When I read, for the second time, "I know that woman. She used to live with a flock of birds on Lenox Avenue. Know her husband, too. He fell for an eighteen-year-old girl with one of those deepdown, spooky loves that made him so sad and happy he shot her just to keep the feeling going" (3), my foot started tapping out a beat for the words. The foot never stopped tapping until I reached the final word on the last page.

Morrison plays with sentence structure and word usage in the same way a Jazz musician plays with tempo or the notes of his instrument. While she always tells a good story, complete with interesting characters and plot, Morrison's experimentation with the way she presents her material creates writing that transcends convention. When she includes phrases like "one of those deepdown, spooky loves," Morrison finds her twang. "Deepdown" and "spooky" may sound awkward if they stand alone as adjectives for love, but together, in Morrison's sentence, they resonate. Her stories combine her interest in words and their sounds with her interest in the oral tradition and strong character

development. This combination is what makes her writing so intriguing to read over and over again. I am constantly finding something new within the pages of each of her texts.

Writers that fill their pages with such an abundance of material—words, ideas, images—challenge the “norm” of writing, and in so doing reshape that norm for the better. When they achieve this and tell a good story at the same time, whether I agree with the subject matter or not, then I study these writers and try to learn from them. I have studied the storytelling prowess of Morrison and Faulkner. I’ve contemplated Cormac McCarthy’s wordplay (he is perhaps the only person who can write about spittle dangling off the gnawed-on end of a cigar and make it sound like poetry). I’ve admired the risks Jane Austen took in her writing during a time when women’s roles in society relegated them to, at best, little more than decorative centerpieces in Victorian homes. And I have wondered how Raymond Carver can pack so much information into so few words. All these authors have taken writing and twisted it into new and unique shapes, and in doing so these authors have created twang. Though I’m a ways from finding it steadily in my own work, with each new story I read that creates that little hum in the center of my chest, I am reminded that the possibility of finding it does exist and is worth struggling to obtain.

There will always be readers and listeners and writers and musicians who prefer more melodious tunes—Louis L’Amour westerns and bubblegum pop—words and music that don’t make them struggle for meaning or with form. And there is nothing wrong with just enjoying a tune because it’s catchy and you can hum along to it while you push your

grocery cart down the aisle. However, music that challenges conventions in any way—be it the songwriting or the experimentation with rhythm, harmony, tempo, or subject matter—asks the listener to think about what is happening in the song, and hopefully it brings the listener back again and again to try and discover more. This is what writing should do.

Works Cited

- Campbell, Joseph and Bill Moyers. *The Power of Myth*. Ed. Betty Sue Flowers. New York: Doubleday, 1988.
- Morrison, Toni. *Jazz*. New York: Plume, 1993.
- O'Connor, Flannery. *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*. Ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald. 1969. New York: Noonday Press, 1997.
- Wideman, John Edgar. "Introduction." *The Best American Short Stories 1996*. Ed. John Edgar Wideman. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	iv
Preface.....	v
Le Mort de Barbie.....	1
Roadside Assistance.....	14
Migration.....	41
Silence.....	48
Bionic Spin-Out.....	59
Blue Wool.....	66
Painting Alabama.....	76
The Mole.....	102
Fishing Lessons.....	119
Me and Hank.....	141
Roadkill.....	152
<i>Curriculum Vitae</i>	165

Le Mort de Barbie

When I was ten, I asked my mother for a Wonder Woman doll. She gave me Barbie instead. This was just like my mother. When I tried to put on my faded, grass-stained blue jeans and my ratty old brown-and-white cowboy boots, she stuffed me into a ruffled dress that left a wrinkly, circular indentation around my waist when I finally got it off at the end of the day. When I started collecting Star Wars action figures, she bought me Madame Alexander dolls dressed up to look like Scarlet O'Hara, Cinderella and the Little Women. They all wore dresses too, just like Barbie did, unless she came dressed in her pink tutu ballerina outfit, which made me queasy at the sight of it. Wonder Woman, however, came dressed in an air force uniform—the outfit for her Diana Prince alias—and her stars-and-stripes, make-you-proud-to-be-an-American crime fighting suit lay underneath. All you got when you removed Barbie's pink gown was a frightening, anatomically improbable mass of peach colored plastic.

"All little girls like Barbie," my mother told me, after I'd opened the box and frowned up at her.

"Then I wish I was a boy."

My little brother giggled.

"What's so funny?" I asked.

"Boys don't like stupid Wonder Woman dolls," he said, pulling his new, bright yellow Tonka truck from its box. "They like trucks." He set the truck on the hardwood and gave it a push that sent it careening across the floor until it smashed into a wall.

"Clay, dear, play nice or we'll have to put your dump truck away."

Clay, dejected, stood up and retrieved his new toy from across the room. "I'll play nice," he said and wiped his arm across the truck to polish it. Clay liked his toys new and shiny. When the rust eventually settled into the corners of the dump truck and slowly ate tiny pocks into the thin metal, he would abandon it for something newer and shinier. And there were always newer, shinier things to covet. We saw them every day on t.v. After school while we sat watching Scooby Doo and Johnny Quest and the Fantastic Four. Commercial after commercial telling us which toys were the coolest, which toys would make us the envy of the neighborhood, and we asked our parents for every one. However, we received only a select few of our requests each year, so, when I opened up my Christmas present and that familiar Barbie trademark flashed in front of me like a neon sign down a dark alley, I realized I probably wasn't going to be getting a Wonder Woman doll that year.

This upset me. You see, Wonder Woman was cool. She battled the forces of evil, deflected speeding bullets with her magic wristbands, made liars tell the truth with her magic lasso and flew around in an invisible plane that you could always just trace in the sky, though no one on the show ever seemed to be able to.

Barbie, on the other hand, didn't do anything except lounge out by the pool at her Dream House, try on new outfits—like her dream wedding dress and her enchanted evening gown and her airline stewardess uniform—and chase after Ken in her pink Corvette. And she was always standing up on tip toes because her feet were molded that way to better fit all the stiletto heels she wore. Just looking at her feet made me cringe. Why would anyone choose to wear those rickety, uncomfortable high heels when they could wear a perfectly comfortable pair of sneakers? My mom said that sneakers don't look good with everything, but it seemed to me the things they didn't look good with were the things I'd rather not wear anyway.

One day my cousin Melody came over to visit. She brought along her Barbie in her Barbie carrying case, which looked like a wardrobe and was filled with enough outfits for hours of Barbie-dressing fun.

"Let's play Barbie," she proposed, setting her case down on the living room floor and opening it.

"Let's play hide and seek outside instead," I said. I could hear my little brother playing Star Wars in the front yard with the O'Malley kids from down the street.

"My mommy says I can't play outside when I'm wearing my Sunday school dress because I'll get it dirty."

"So?" I didn't see the big deal. Everything gets dirty when you play outside. You just wash it when you get through playing. I began to suspect my cousin was a sissy. And

I didn't take to playing with sissies. I was about to tell her so when my mother walked into the room.

"Look what I found when I was cleaning up your closet, Kate," she said in mock surprise. "Your new Barbie." It shouldn't have been too hard for her to find since I'd hung my new Barbie from the light string. Before I'd gotten Barbie as a gift, I'd had to jump for the string to turn on the light. Now, I just reached up and gave Barbie's legs a quick tug.

My mother held the doll out in my direction, but I didn't make any move for it. "She's beautiful," Melody said, reaching for it and stroking Barbie's hair once she had her in her hands.

"Why don't the two of you go into your room and play Barbie, while I fix dinner," my mother suggested.

"Yea!" Melody shouted.

"Yea," I mustered, but only because my mother shot me one of her looks.

"Let's get them ready for a date with Ken," Melody suggested, sifting through her carrying case. Her imagination was really working overtime now. Getting ready for a date with Ken. Stop the presses. What a novel idea. I sat there and watched her pull out simulated taffeta and silk and gingham (which must have been for the Little House on the Prairie Barbie). "Well," she said, "aren't you going to dress yours up?"

"I only have this outfit," I said.

"Oh. Well, just borrow one of mine. I've got plenty." Tiny, cute Barbie clothing seeped from every inch of the wardrobe.

"I hate borrowing," I announced and looked outside. My little brother and Sam O'Malley were swinging from the thick branches of our neighbor's huge Magnolia. Every now and then, one would swing off, land on the ground and climb back up the branches again.

"What's wrong with this dress?" I asked.

"Silly," Melody scolded. She was pretending like her Barbie was talking to my Barbie now. She made her Barbie, naked except for a hoop skirt and a sun hat, bounce over in my Barbie's direction. "You wore that the last time you went out on a date with Ken," her Barbie said, waving a dainty plastic hand in my Barbie's face. "Do you want him to think you only have that one stinky old dress? He won't like you if he thinks that." She turned back to her Barbie and continued dressing her.

I looked down at my Barbie's dress. It didn't look old and stinky to me. I held the Barbie up to my nose and sniffed. It smelled like cloth and plastic. I looked at it again and scratched my head. Why'd she say it was old? It was new. I studied it more closely. The pink fabric had wrinkled a little. I tried to smooth it out and wondered if using Barbie as a tool for turning on the light switch had made her dress look old.

"There, all done," Melody beamed, admiring her handiwork. I looked down at her doll and then back at mine. Hers did look better. Melody had dressed her in a poofy baby-

blue chiffon number. She looked like Cinderella at the ball. Melody started with the bouncing again, making Barbie “walk” around the room. Soon her Barbie was talking.

“La la la la. Oh, I can’t wait for my date with Ken. He should be here any minute. Are you going out on a date with your Ken?” She pointed her Barbie in my Barbie’s direction.

“I don’t have a Ken,” I said.

“Well, then I guess you’ll just have to sit here at home and baby-sit tonight,” her Barbie said, flipping around and away from my Barbie with a toss of her long, flowing, blond hair.

“That’s not fair,” I said. “I won’t get to play.”

“Well, you don’t have a Ken, so you can’t go out on a date. Barbies who don’t have Kens stay at home.”

“I have a Luke Skywalker,” I said and reached under the bed for it. He stood about five inches shorter than Barbie. Luke Skywalker was my favorite Star Wars action figure. He had a lever built into his arm, and when you slid it down, his light saber slid out into his hand, which was a good thing because then Luke didn’t have to worry about losing it. After all, what kind of battle could Luke have with Darth Vader if he didn’t have a light saber?

Melody looked up at me as if she didn’t know what to do with me. “Luke Skywalker can’t take Barbie out on a date.”

“Why not?”

"He's too short, dummy."

"Come on," I pleaded.

"Nope. You'll just have to stay in tonight. Ding dong. Oh, there's the door bell. It must be Ken. Bye." Melody pulled Ken out of the carrying case. He was buried underneath a pile of clothing; and, when he finally surfaced, he had Barbie's poodle skirt stuck around his head. Melody shook it off and stood him next to her Barbie. Barbie and Ken started walking down the carpet together.

"Where are we going, Kenny-poo?" Melody made her Barbie ask.

"I'm taking you to the best restaurant in town. Only the best for my princess," Ken said in Barbie's voice, one octave lower.

"Oh Ken, you're so romantic." Melody bent Barbie's legs at the hip and sat her down on the carpet. Then she did the same with Ken.

"Waiter, bring us a bottle of your best champagne," Ken demanded.

I looked back out the window again and wondered if my aunt would pick up her Barbie-loving daughter before it got too dark outside to play.

Melody's couple had ordered dinner, and they were now pretending to eat. "It's too bad other Barbie couldn't come with us, but she didn't have a date," Melody's Barbie said in between bites.

"Yes. That is too bad," Ken replied. "Mmm. This steak is delicious!"

I was growing restless sitting around staring at my stupid, single, baby-sitting Barbie. There wasn't even anyone to baby-sit, unless I counted Luke Skywalker. But,