

LOST IN THE MAZE OF GENRE

a review by Dale Bailey

Michael Amos Cody. *A Twilight Reel: Stories*. Pisgah Press, 2021.

Tim Garvin. *A Dredging in Swann*. Blackstone Publishing, 2020.

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In many ways, the question of genre shapes how we understand literary production in the twenty-first century. How do we pigeonhole the books we read? How do those pigeonholes influence the way we read and value them? These questions come into clear focus in the juxtaposition of Tim Garvin's *A Dredging in Swann*, the first volume in a projected series of mysteries and police procedurals set in the fictional county of Swann, NC, and Michael Amos Cody's collection of short fiction, *The Twilight Reel*, set in the Appalachian Mountains. Neither book is entirely successful (what book is?), but both possess significant merits. Taken together, they reveal some key insights into what we mean by genre as we begin the third decade of a new millennium.

Academic critics have conventionally seen genre in broad terms – poetry, fiction, drama – that can be broken down into more narrowly defined subgenres: the lyric poem is a different animal than the epic one, the realistic and naturalistic fiction of the late nineteenth century contrasts with the post-modern fiction written a hundred years down the line.

Marketing directors at publishing companies and bookstore buyers take a different tack. They shove books into commercial categories meant to goose sales. Got a hankering for spaceships and robots? Check out the sci-fi shelves on Aisle 11. Feeling randy? You'll

find the bodice-bursting heavy-panters over in Aisle 14. Looking for something gruesome? Stephen King's your man. You wanna know whodunnit? You'll find Philip Marlowe over in Mystery, keeping company with Miss Marple. Genres, in short, are a marketing tool.

As for the quality stuff, you'll find it over this way, walled safely off from the commercial ghetto. You can call it general fiction or mainstream fiction if you're feeling generous, "literature" if you're inclined to turn up your nose at lowly hackwork about elves and dwarves or pirates with a penchant for their lusty maiden captives. Lennon and McCartney may have extolled the life of the paperback writer, but it's a losing game.

It goes without saying that as an academic and as a category writer myself, I have a dog in this fight. I don't see a lot of difference between the "good" stuff and the "rubbish" the common folk read. And I think the juxtaposition of Garvin's police procedural and Cody's literary short stories drives my point home.

In *A Dredging in Swann*, **Tim Garvin** checks off the boxes of the police procedural with the requisite skill. Take Seb Creek, his hard-boiled protagonist, an off-the-shelf police detective who works the shady, gray areas at the edge of the law (he has a penchant for violence) and keeps pushing at the murder case that drives the book, kicking awake sleeping dogs his



fellow cops are more inclined to let doze. He's damaged goods (stints as a marine in Iraq have left him scarred with PTSD), but he insists on looking for true north in a world without a clear moral compass. He has a quirky side gig (he's started a singing group called Pass the Salt to help heal other PTSD-damaged veterans) and a near-death experience. He has a budding romance with an artsy type (a local pottery instructor) whom he'd like to protect from the horrors of the world around him and the horrors that bloom in his own damaged heart.

And of course he's as deeply rooted in place as the great detectives that precede him. Philip Marlowe owns Los Angeles (except for Watts, which is Easy Rawlins's turf). Spenser is to Boston as Dave Robicheaux is to the bayous of Louisiana. Tess Monaghan polices the mean streets of Baltimore, Nick Stefanos those of Washington, DC (at least when he's sober). And when he's not falling off the wagon himself, Matthew Scud-

der sees to the seedier parts of New York City. Seb Creek is a creature of the fictional Swann County, NC, but his world seems to be roughly contiguous to Camp Lejeune and its surroundings (one subplot involves the theft of a handful of Stinger missiles, another the poaching of Federally protected Venus Flytraps) and the puzzle he's set to untangle is deeply rooted in the military culture of the nearby Marine base, the local hog-farming industry (you'll never look at bacon the same way again), and the state's long history of racism. Tangled family histories come into play. Axes are wielded to horrific effect. Extortion, illegal gambling, and prostitution make cameos. There's even a gas chamber.

It's a task to keep track of all this, but by the novel's end Garvin winds it up skillfully. One only wishes he had been more careful with his language. At its best, the book's prose is workmanlike; however, it too often veers off-track, wandering down little-trodden paths

of the English language that are little trodden for good reason. When Garvin describes a lawyer making "a mouth smile" (147), one can't help wondering what other smiling options are available – nose smiles? ear smiles? what? More problematic is Seb's penchant for portentous, quasi-poetic musings. Wondering how he will respond when Mia, his potter paramour, asks him what he does for a living, Seb imagines saying, "I am the sandman. I put the past to sleep" (47). One senses that Garvin thinks it's a great line (he isn't averse to repeating it, anyway), but it's hard to imagine how Mia might respond to this pronouncement without a snicker. The line might – *might* – work in the context of a more lyrical prose style (but then again, it might not). In the context of Garvin's windowpane thriller prose, however, it's as out of place as a peacock crashing a party of house wrens. And the book hosts a chapter title that might have been plucked from a Dead Kennedys playlist: "A Really Pussy Heart Song" (102). These

A Dredging in Swann is the first volume in **TIM GARVIN'S** Seb Creek mystery series, and he has completed the second, currently titled "*Four Evenings*." The author lives near Durham, NC. He also makes pottery and porcelain jewelry.

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are only blemishes, however, on a solid, if unsurprising crime novel – a book that is enjoyable enough to read and that bodes well for enjoyable-enough Seb Creek mysteries to come.

For those novels to achieve their real potential, however, Garvin must do more than employ the conventional tropes of his genre; he must innovate within them. The pleasure of reading a fine novel in any commercial genre is not dissimilar to the pleasure one derives from reading a good sonnet: we enjoy the constraints of the form only to the extent the writer does something unique within those constraints. Frost tells us that writing free verse is like playing tennis without a net.

We watch the match not for the net, however, but for the artistry of the great player who can send a forehand rocketing over it to land an eighth of an inch inside the baseline. The same rule applies in commercial fiction of any genre. Readerly pleasures lie not in the constraints themselves, but in the writer's skill at deploying them in fresh and illuminating ways.

The same thing is true of "literary" fiction, as **Michael Amos Cody's** collection of short fiction, *A Twilight Reel*, makes clear. In "Overwinter," the book's third story, a cuckolded professor passes the long midnight hours of a blizzard with Joyce's *Dubliners* – as one does, espe-

cially if one is a character in a collection of stories meant to trace the threads of meanness and grace woven through the deeply interconnected lives of a single town's inhabitants. In short, the allusion is a bit too on the nose (it's like being blindsided with a bottle of Bud Light in a bar fight, actually); Cody might have been better to dispense with it altogether. Failing that, he might have used Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, a specifically American story cycle that sets the bar somewhat lower. If, in the end, Cody doesn't clear either hurdle, it hardly matters.

Who could?

He *does* give it a game shot, and in doing so he produces an

occasionally acute portrait of small-town Appalachia. But the allusion is a pointed reminder that "literary" stories are every bit as genre bound as their commercial cousins. With his small epiphanies, Joyce laid down the court lines of the genre wherein thousands of MFA aspirants have set stories with small epiphanies of their own. Many such stories are quite good, of course; they're the artful equivalent of low backhand smashes over the net. The less successful ones barely clear the net at all. In *A Twilight Reel*, Cody has a fair amount of both.

His Dublin, his Winesburg, OH, is Runion, NC. Runion is (or was) a real place, a mill town near Hot Springs that began to fail a century ago, when the land was timbered out. The body blows of the Great Depression and World War II finished the job. Cody, however, imagines a present-day Runion and peoples it with an ensemble cast of small-town types. The preacher who encounters a hitch-hiking eccentric who may or may not be a demon ("The Wine of Astonishment"), for instance, turns up as a bit player in "The Loves of Misty Sprinkle," the (unfortunately) eponymous hairdresser who endures his theme-appropriate sermon while pondering her romantic entanglements.

So it goes.

The weakest stories here have a paint-by-numbers quality: they deliver your standard small epiphanies about the way you'd expect them to. "Conversion" presents us with a gang of small-town Pentecostals confronting the transformation of their divided church into a mosque. This goes about as well as one would expect. Despite the friendliness of their new Muslim neighbors, the Pentecostals condemn them as "devils" up to "God-knows-what unholy business" (145) before racing off in their Dodge Rams and Chevy Silverados, flinging up rooster tails of invective as they go. The ones who stick

around have trouble distinguishing between Native Americans and immigrants from the Indian sub-continent. They are prone to saying things like, "If ya'll are gonna talk in front of me . . . you talk American" (147). Only matriarchal Big Granny looks on with mountain-granny wisdom as the "mosque's crescent moon rose above the dark mountain ridges" with "a pulsing white star in [its] silhouette-black embrace." The sight stirs her into voice. "Well, ain't that something," she says in the story's final lines. "Reckon what it might mean, Livvy?" (156). But we really don't have to reckon very hard at all, do we? The story's intent is laudable, to be sure, but it fails to



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push past self-congratulatory sentiment into the ambiguities and complexities of real-world human conflict. In challenging one set of stereotypes, it merely reinforces another one.

Other stories are drawn in similarly broad strokes. In "The Invisible World Around Them," an insurance salesman struggles to accept his gay son, Mike, who is dying of AIDS. In "A Poster of Marilyn Monroe," a lonely widower surrenders the solitary pleasures of fantasy for the possibility of love. Poor Mike turns up again in "A Fiddle and a Twilight Reel," to face down small-town bigotry against people with the "queer sickness" (250).

There's nothing inherently wrong with such stories, of course. People *do* come to terms with their gay children. Widowers *do* fall in love. Small-town big-

otry often *does* prevail. But Cody tends to lay his thumb heavy on the scale. Ben Frisby and his sons, the rednecks who burn a straw effigy of much-abused Mike in "A Fiddle and a Twilight Reel," are comically broad hill-billy villains. If Cody depicted them with more nuance, the story would gain weight and power. The genius of Southern writers such as Faulkner and O'Connor lies in their capacity to depict even their most despicable characters with a complexity that inspires our compassion. Abner Snopes in Faulkner's "Barn Burning" is a violent monster, but underneath his fury one feels the frustration and despair of a man lashing out against a crushing social hierarchy. In O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find," the murderous Misfit's spiritual agonies are palpable.

Cody's stronger stories push hard against the boundaries of the "small epiphany" genre story and move powerfully in the direction of such complexities. These tend to be longer stories, and their structural complexity reflects their more nuanced explorations of what we used to call the human condition. The two best pieces here are "Decoration Day" and "The Flutist." Both stories are built upon simple premises, but they employ shifting points of view to rove through time and space, setting up mirror mazes of revelatory reflections between worlds past and present and worlds waiting to be born. In "The Flutist," the strongest of the two stories, Jubal Kinkaid, one of the flutists the title alludes to, travels to Runion State University to interview for the position vacated by the untimely death of beloved faculty member Brian Anderson, the second flutist in question.

Cody gives us a deft and amusing overview of the faculty job search process. But the story transcends its academic focus to become something larger and more significant. Jubal's potential job offer unsettles his partner back home in Chicago, who isn't at all sure he wants to move to a southern Appalachian town that might not welcome gay men (he's right on that score, as poor Mikey can

attest). This troubled relationship finds its echo in Anderson's love affair with a European flutist named Anna, who chooses a few months with her lover in Amsterdam every year over marriage in America. Anderson's longing for Anna outlasts her death; it's reflected in his paternal affection for a talented young student who much resembles her – an affection that spills over into a tentative kiss hours before his unexpected death. These events are presented in the context of an academic department where personal friendships, marriages, and professional jealousies are held in careful equipoise. Cody, to his credit, resolves none of these complications. No one has an epiphany summing up the point at hand with a bit of tidy mountain lyricism. As the story draws to a close, we're not even sure Jubal will get the job. But by the time his plane lifts off from Asheville and turns toward home, the story has unfolded for the reader a sense of the manifold complexities of love as it ranges over gulfs of time, geography, gender, and age. In the final paragraphs, the story, like Jubal's plane, takes flight.

It's a memorable piece in part because it resists the constraints of the "small epiphany" genre that so often dominates "literary" short fiction. It's hard

to argue with Frost that watching a writer wrestle with the constraints of form, whether it's a sonnet or a space opera, can provide one of the genuine pleasures to be had from the creative enterprise. But it's also clear that it's not the only, or even the most important, pleasure. The lines drawn between and within genres – even "literary" genres that pretend they're not genres at all – may showcase a writer's dexterity in manipulating a set of conventions; but coloring inside the lines poses real dangers to writers who have the chops to step outside those lines and find new ways to tell new stories – or old stories in new ways.

Tim Garvin's *A Dredging in Swann* is engaging enough, but

it might be something more than an entertainment (to borrow Graham Greene's term) if it pushed harder against the conventions that govern category mysteries – or pushed past them altogether. The weakest stories in Michael Amos Cody's *The Twilight Reel* likewise highlight the dangers of adhering to the protocols of its literary predecessors. When Cody puts down *Dubliners* and unlocks the prison cell of the quiet epiphany, more of his stories, like "The Flutist," will find wings. It's a utopian fantasy, but indulge yourself for a moment: imagine a bookstore not cordoned off by categories, a library of dreams where you might reach up to any shelf on any aisle, take down a volume, open up its pages, and find anything, anything at all. ■



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