

Introduction for Paul Beatty

By George Blaustein

Satire is an inadequate label for Paul Beatty's fiction. His fiction out-weirds satire, and you don't close a Paul Beatty novel with a clear sense of who or what has been skewered. Yes, he mocks pieties of all kinds — easy narratives of progress, political righteousness, racial and ethnic solidarities, spokespersonship itself. He calls every bluff and sometimes provokes. But “provocative” and “irreverent” are not the adjectives we should settle on. They're too empty.



Beatty's novels are written within and against their own time. Their plots deliver contrarian burlesques of a multicultural age. The reader enters a world of perverse loyalties and ethnic mismatch humor.

In Beatty's first novel, *The White Boy Shuffle*, we meet a grocery store owner in Los Angeles who is “half-black, half-Korean,” and therefore burns down her own store during the Rodney King riots. In *Slumberland*, which is set in Berlin, we meet a self-hating half-black neo-Nazi. (Poor Gerhard!) Absurd premises abound. In *The Sellout*, our narrator has reinstated slavery and racial segregation. The narrator of *The White Boy Shuffle* has been moved back to the hood, and has an ancestor who escaped into slavery before the Civil War. *Slumberland* centers on an avant-garde black saxophone player who defects into East Germany during the Cold War.

Commitment to absurd premises is Beatty's subject, or one of them. But the novels' commitments are deep enough to transcend their own absurdity. This is why they are not merely “irreverent.” They're about commitment - especially aesthetic or artistic commitment. Beatty satirizes inclusion and exclusion. But his novels are also about eccentricity, ugliness, and beauty.

In a profound sense, Beatty's fiction is concerned with secret knowledge: the arcane is as important as the profane. And the arcane runs deep. You might be included or excluded by the depth of allusion to jazz and avant-garde music in *Slumberland*. In *The Sellout*, the arcana are from psychology, agriculture, and animal husbandry. His books gravitate toward aesthetic experiences that are hard to capture in words. So the prose is hyper-allusive, with acrobatic run-on sentences that would be hard to read aloud without taking a breath. Games with the reader are another indication of this concern. *The Sellout* has a cameo by “noted community organizer _ _ r _ _ _ O _ _ _ _” and it is left the reader to fill in “Barack Obama” Art-for-art's-sake becomes game-for-game's-sake, or maybe strategy-for-strategy's-sake.

The novels are challenging. They're also funny, with a joke-per-page density rivaled only by *Catch-22*. The pleasure comes from being in on a joke that transcends the form of the joke.



George Blaustein is is assistant professor of American Studies at the University of Amsterdam. He is completing a book entitled *Nightmare Envy and Other Stories: American Culture and European Reconstruction*. For the John Adams Institute, he taught a literature course on *Moby Dick*.

The West Indisch Huis,
The John Adams Institute,
Amsterdam, March 12, 2017