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The Iowa Review

Volume 29
Issue 2 *Fall*

Article 50

1999

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Recommended Citation

Ander, Zed. "Really Fictional Fiction." *The Iowa Review* 29.2 (1999): 160-167. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.S157>

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Zed Ander

REALLY FICTIONAL FICTION

Elizabeth MacKiernan's *Ancestors Maybe* is a very serious novel masquerading as a holiday fable.

As "holiday fable," *Ancestors Maybe* describes events from October to New Year's that happen to and involve three generations of a family and their immediate neighbors in Middletown, Connecticut. To describe *Ancestors Maybe* this way, however, is to misrepresent it, although my statement is perfectly accurate. Perfectly accurate statements might do for fiction of the Realist variety, but MacKiernan's is not of this variety, which is why I call it a fable.

Maybe holiday stories more than any others are by default Realistic: they emerge from the calendar year we know and from traditions familiar to us if not by direct experience then by media intervention. Dylan Thomas, in "A Child's Christmas in Wales," and Truman Capote, in "A Christmas Memory," shape narratives out of recollections. The stuff of these stories comes from memory hooked to time rather than a more freewheeling invention, plots and characters reach toward the Real.

MacKiernan's novel is different and announces its difference from the very first sentence: "It was in the Month of Bramble that things began to happen." The Month of Bramble is not the calendar year of predictable holidays; it is something different, something a little strange, tree time, not central, eastern or daylight savings.

For a few moments, however, let's treat *Ancestors Maybe* like a holiday fable or story with characters and a plot that raises a number of problems during a few months, October to December, or Bramble to Holly and Ivy.

Three sisters live in a house together in Middletown, CT: Marie Madeleine "takes an interest in the sciences. The science she takes the most interest in is, of course, magic"; "Marie Celeste is devoted to the languages of Europe"; "Marie Angelique is an artist." They have acquired an orphan of modest height, through unspecified channels, indeterminate of age: Hugo de Fremery, "a genius." Of the three sisters, only Marie Madeleine has children, two of

Ancestors Maybe. Burning Deck, Providence; 160 pages; \$8 (Signed \$15).

them, Isabelle and Bonaventure, whose father, Professor Davenport, Marie Madeleine's sometime husband, lives next door. About these unconventional living arrangements the narrator remarks, "Marie Madeleine married the professor many years ago. Obviously they could not live together. It was not that kind of marriage."

The father of the three sisters, whom everyone thought was dead, comes for a long visit; he has decided to be an Octogenarian and arrives with the name of Captain Stuart. Their mother, now using the name Princess Yzumruda, sends postcards as she heads eastward across the country towing a blue mobile home painted with stars. A parrot rides with her. Although his proper name is Quetzalcoatl, the Princess always calls him something different, Calligraphy, or Tobacco, or Massachusetts.

These sisters, then, the children of one of them, that one's husband, their parents, the orphan Hugo: these make up the three generations of the family living in Middletown, CT, although Marie Madeleine's two babies that were never born, whom she remembers sadly, whom Isabelle and Bonaventure know about, whose names they are unsure of, should be included in the family, as well.

Plotwise, problems raised and resolved include: providing a lineage, and even an inheritance, for Hugo de Fremery the orphan; releasing Marie Madeleine from her seven years' labor as a systems designer in the Hartford insurance industry; securing the means of getting Professor Davenport to Ireland so he can finish his book on the Irish Saint Brendan; getting for Marie Celeste the opportunity to revisit places where they speak the languages of Europe (the place in question is, of course, Europe, naturally); belying at least for the reader if not for the three sisters the apparent indifference bordering on hostility between their mother and father; discovering how to keep the seasons if you're not a gardener; finding horsepower for Captain Stuart after he dreams of cavalry in World War I; deciphering, or failing to decipher, items in various languages, Anglo-Saxon, Latin, Swedish, Russian.

This partial list orders problems in terms of their macro-cosmic effect on the development of the story, i.e., the one listed first is the major problem, and the one last really a very minor problem: An item in Latin "*Hic Jacet Arturus Quondam Rex et Rex Futurus*" seems important in context because immediately following its appearance in the pie, Isabelle and Bonaventure talk about the names of their mother's lost babies—as though Arthur's epitaph raises the question of theirs, if there had been one, or two.

Predictably, given the observance of Samhain or Hallowe'en, which inaugurates the Pagano-Christian traditional observances, Thanksgiving follows, although it is preceded by Armistice Day, then Christmas Season begins, although it is really the year travelling toward the Winter Solstice; New Year's happens, too, since time works that way. Ghostly presences make themselves gently apparent, a crime is committed, sort of, then comes the happy ending.

Like good Realism, we have characters, plot, setting in time and place.

It looks relatively straightforward. Let us return, however, to the Latin item carved with a knife into the Thanksgiving pie: "Hic Jacet Arturus Quondam Rex et Rex Futurus," or, Here Lies Arthur the Once and Future King. To read these words as Realist fiction would have them be read would be to come to understand that Arthur the once and future king is buried in the pie. Since this is absurd, since the Hic or Here carved into the pie cannot meaningfully refer to the pie, since no one can be buried in a pie (though four and twenty blackbirds can be baked in one), how Hic/Here "means" in this moment becomes a problem. Experienced readers all, we understand the epitaph to be a quotation of Arthur's epitaph rather than an epitaph proper. If a quotation, then, these words don't refer to the things they appear to refer to: Hic/Here does not mean "here" at all as in the pie but it means precisely elsewhere. By legend and literature, the elsewhere of Arthur's burial has never been located. Was he once buried at Glastonbury? Or did the ladies of Avalon take him away in their boat to heal him, and England ever and still awaits the future of the Future of his kingship? Where is the elsewhere of Marie Madeleine's two miscarried babies? Where might they be buried? Are miscarried babies buried at all in some place mysterious as Arthur's grave, or merely disposed of under the euphemism of some medical procedure? Not properly questions broached in the novel, these are questions a reader might pose depending on how s/he understands Hic/Here to refer or "mean" when here means elsewhere and when the elsewhere is actually nowhere, or at least a where undetermined.

Robert Coover's cover blurb says "Elizabeth MacKiernan, author of this marvelous little Christmas tale, is a kind of Connecticut-Yankee version of a magic realist, stylishly anarchical in the James Thurber manner, with wonderful pace and a gift for wry oblique humor. A great read."

A good blurb; I agree, almost completely. I pull back at the diminutive. This marvelous *little* Christmas tale, this holiday fable (a word recovered from Robert Scholes's work on fabulation), is a very serious novel. It works through and with ideas like reference, then moves into the whole problem of how meaning is constructed, how Signification works. Or, how Signification plays, and makes serious fun.

Some precociously astute readers may have gathered even from the character list that *Ancestors Maybe* cares about how words refer to things: three sisters with the same name? a father with a pseudonym, and a mother, too? the problem of the names of the lost babies? And why does Captain Stuart sometimes call Professor Davenport by the name Zind? Who gave Hugo a last name from a park in San Francisco? Hugo lists the sisters' aunts and uncles: three aunts Marion, five aunts in versions of Nina and Marguerite, two uncles Bertram, Sr., and Jr., and more. When the same word points to many things or in this case persons, the word calls attention to itself and to how it goes about its work of making meaning.

But multiple names alone don't make Signification a big enough problem. More complex things do that work. A direct shall-we-say meta-statement contributes to the work of Signification, as do comments the narrator makes now and again in the middle of the story (comments made prominent by virtue of erratic typography, but that's another story). Professor Davenport's *Life of the Irish Saint Brendan* works very hard to complicate the whole idea in a way similar to how Arthur's epitaph works.

First, the meta-statement. From the disclaimer on the copyright page: "*All persons (except the saints) and all places (including the State of Connecticut) and all events (especially the crimes) mentioned in this book are entirely imaginary and, in fact, impossible.*"

Indeed? Connecticut is imaginary?

Second, the narrator's comments now and again, a third of the way through: "DISCLAIMER: THIS IS A STORY. THE NAMES HAVE BEEN CHANGED. THERE IS NO SUCH TOWN AS MIDDLETOWN, CONNECTICUT. OF COURSE NOT!" In other words, in *Ancestors Maybe*, which takes place in Middletown, Connecticut, there is no there there. Further on:

If Marie Madeleine were writing this story she would call it "A Tale of Two Cities," meaning the real city of Hartford, Connecticut and the imaginary city of Middletown, Connecticut.

Hartford is real? Connecticut is imaginary and so is Middletown? *Caveat Lector*: According to Webster's Ninth: **Middletown** \ . . . \ 1 city *cen* Conn. S of Hartford *pop* 39,040.

By asserting that Middletown does not exist, MacKiernan severs the relation between Middletown, the signifier, or word, and the referent Middletown whose statistics Webster's gives you in its gazetteer. Severing this relationship makes her Middletown fictional, but not merely fictional; it is a more fictional fiction than you get in Realist fiction because the words in *Ancestors Maybe* do not pretend to refer to Real things, but rather to things readers compose in their heads, like a Middletown, Connecticut, imaginary, the signified.

Concerned on behalf of less experienced readers, I posed a question to a select group of teen-somethings of my acquaintance: "Suppose," I said, "I said to you that Iowa City is imaginary. In what way could that be true?" Some pausing, coughing, deep breathings of sighs ensued, then one young woman offered: "Well, like, your Iowa City probably's not my Iowa City, you know?" A young man: "If I think about Iowa City, there's like the streets in my head, as a sort of map, but it's in my head, right? so isn't that imaginary?"

Of course, naturally.

MacKiernan doesn't leave it at that, however, for her meta-statement on the flyleaf excepts the saints from the realm of the imaginary, which would seem to imply they are real, or something else. Professor Davenport's St. Brendan is a real Irish Saint, dead as of the year 576 and "pretended" to be buried in Galway in Ireland (again, the where of the burial is uncertain). If Middletown is imaginary and Saint Brendan is not for MacKiernan, the particulars of the Life of Saint Brendan, versions of which circulated all over Europe in the Middle Ages, may reveal just how this could be so. Out of curiosity I looked at the Middle English Prose Life of Saint Brandan, since I passed it one day right there leaning out of the library shelf as if not by accident.

MacKiernan's character Professor Davenport works on his St. Brendan book every day, but not for very long ("Professor Davenport has stopped writing for the day. He is a Professor of Letters, but not too many at once"). Presumably and fictionally, Professor Davenport's research focuses on the Latin rather than the Middle English version of Brendan's life, a choice of source text evident by the spelling of the whale's name Jasconius (in Middle English, Jasconye). In any case, an abbot Brendan or Brandan lived once in Ireland

who, on hearing how another Abbot Beryne found the island called Earthly Paradise, took twelve monks and set out in search of the same island. He and his companions spent seven years on the ocean, with stops at the Island of Sheep, on the back of the whale Jasconius (Sinbad had a similar adventure), at the Paradise of Birds, at a corner of hell, on Judas's sometime rock, at St. Paul's Island, and finally, at the Earthly Paradise, or, in Middle English, the Londe of Byheest.

Geographically speaking, the medieval Life of Saint Brandan had consequences: the Island of Saint Brandon appears west of the Canaries on geographical charts as late as 1755 (according to *The Reader's Encyclopedia*). However. According to legend (according to the Percy Society Publications, vol 14, 1844), no sailors setting out on purpose to find this island ever found it, though some came upon it by accident. Once, a king of Portugal apparently gave the island to someone else on the condition "when it should be found"; later, when Portugal passed the Canary Islands to the Castilians, it included the Island of Saint Brandon as "the island which had not yet been found." In other words, the Island of Saint Brandan is imaginary only, purely a construct of legend. The mind of the reader finds no difficulty here, for the mind of the reader can easily make up an image of the Island of Saint Brandon, or Brendan, or Brandan, and if you're a reader in Iowa, the Island of Saint Brandon is every bit as real as Middletown, CT.

Or more Real since you made it up yourself.

Realistic fiction often pretends that all words refer to things, that words in fiction refer to things outside of fiction. MacKiernan's novel pretends otherwise, and raises the problem of reference again and again until it accomplishes the neat conjunction of culminating plot and idea at the same time as it resolves the problem of Hugo's orphanhood. How? By computer.

To say more would be to give up the secret of the resolution of the problem, and the pleasure of this discovery belongs to the reader him/herself.

Now, when a novel dares not to be Realistic, it takes risks as far as finding an audience goes. Realism dominates fiction these days, so it looks to me, which is a problem since I prefer other than Realism. My preference comes out of a discovery: when you forego Realism, you not only get compensations for it in narrative terms, but you get particular and special delights, good fun.

Some of the fun from MacKiernan's novel comes from the narrator's addressing characters directly: "MARIE CELESTE, DON'T BE DISTRESSED. A SINGLE

BAD DREAM DOES NOT MAKE THE WORLD”); or from the narrator’s addressing you, the reader, directly: (“There is a completely beautiful carrousel in Bushnell Park. Go and talk to the horses. Don’t be shy”); or from the narrator’s uncertainty about the characters: (“Does Captain Stuart have a beard? Odd, how hard it is to remember when he is out of the room. His face is rather pale”); or from, especially, discovering how MacKiernan creates texture, which has a great deal to do with how Marie Angelique creates art:

“A collage artist collects everything!” says Marie Angelique as she carefully threads wires through the little birchbark canoe that somebody brought back from somewhere.

MacKiernan collects too, and distributes. Take Marie Celeste’s feet, for instance, which are the longest and narrowest of all the sisters, and the cause of Marie Celeste’s lack of sympathy for Cinderella (clue: this might be a sort of rags to riches story). Marie Angelique finds that Cinderella’s slipper of verre (glass) was really a slipper of vair (squirrel fur). Squirrels enter the story, troubling Professor Davenport’s bird feeder and conversing with Marie Celeste after her visit to an employment agency. They discourage the Professor and encourage Marie Celeste. After her chat with the squirrel,

She walks back home with long strides and whistling. She is feeling much better.

WHAT BIG FEET YOU HAVE, AUNT CELESTE, she whistles. THE BETTER TO WALK AWAY WITH.

Finding these small connections, these matters of design and shape rather than reference or signification, makes for pleasure. There are other pleasures waiting, and something like the riddle of a plot not Real nor hoping to be but rather a fiction aware of itself as fiction and revelling in it.

Ancestors Maybe, published by Burning Deck in 1993, is still in print, according to the latest *Books In Print*. The endpaper of *Ancestors Maybe* says 1500 copies were printed. You can still buy one of the fifty signed copies. As for Burning Deck Press, it published three books of poetry in 1998 and one collection of stories, took a sabbatical in 1999, and will resume in 2000. Keith and Rosmarie Waldrop own Burning Deck Press, at 71 Elm Grove Ave., Providence, Rhode Island, 02906. Apparently the Press holds onto inventory.

Everybody's always looking for holiday stories. Here's a fine one. How lovely it would be if some Knopf or Vintage picked it up. The more time I spend with this novel, the more I admire it.