

## The Real Thing: Authenticity in Frank Bergon's Fiction

First, full disclosure: I have been a close friend of Frank Bergon since we were colleagues at Vassar College in the 1970s. I have read each of his novels in manuscript and offered constructive criticism, mostly suggestions about how to tighten sentences and sharpen drama. He has done the same for my manuscripts. That we hold each other's work in high regard is a part of our friendship. Thus it is true that I have a bias in his favor, but as a fellow novelist and a literary critic, I trust that the following will shed some light on the merits of his works.

Frank and I share assumptions about the craft and purpose of fiction. My first novel, *The Children Bob Moses Led*, has a line from a Robert Penn Warren poem as its epigraph: "The world is real. It is there."<sup>1</sup> In our discussions of the contemporary literary scene, Frank and I often lament that popular fiction, and too many acclaimed novels, are formulaic fantasies whose purpose is to escape from, not engage with, the real world. What is often lacking is an author who actually knows what he or she is talking about, who speaks with authority about real people living in a specific time and place—characters whose thoughts, words, and actions tell us something important about being human. Nowadays, I realize, it is out of critical fashion to suggest that some authors know more than others and speak with the kind of authority that convinces us of the authenticity of their fictive worlds. Granting that the interpretations of this essay are suspect in some critical circles, let me cite John Dewey's comment that often philosophy does not solve problems, it gets over them. Thus I plan to proceed as if Frank Bergon the author really exists, knows what he's talking about, and his novels engage us in worlds, set in the past or present, that matter.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Penn Warren, "Court-Martial," *Selected Poems: New and Old 1923-1966* (N.Y.: Random House, 1966), 164.

## *Shoshone Mike*

The origins of the novel trace back to Frank's Basque grandmother's house in Battle Mountain, Nevada, where as a child he heard tales of "the last Indian battle in America," the 1911 massacre of Shoshone Mike's small renegade band by a posse. Years later he read an account, "more fantasy than fact," that he found offensive and set out to correct the historical record.<sup>2</sup> His research—which extended beyond archives to interviews with the last two survivors, one white, one Shoshone, of the massacre—convinced him that he should write a novel. "I had the facts but not the truth," he realized, and only a work of fiction could dramatize the emotions at the heart of a "larger, over-arching Nevada story."<sup>3</sup> He invented a few figures, most notably Jean Erramouspe, yet the greatest challenge was to create credible voices, feelings, motivations, and actions for all of the characters. As Frank has noted, verification is the task of the historian, the novelist must master verisimilitude, a "semblance of life" that we can believe in and take seriously.<sup>4</sup>

*Shoshone Mike* is a moving ironic coda to the epic "winning" of the West. This first novel is a work of reflective maturity, marked by an inclusive moral vision, a firm grasp of the material, and an artistic control as unobtrusive as it is sure. The secret of the book is the years of preparation behind it. Yet all the research and reflection might have produced a factually correct but flat work were the author not a genuine novelist who carries his learning lightly, knows how to tell a tragic story, and makes us care about his characters.

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<sup>2</sup> David Rio, "Basques in the International West: An Interview with Frank Bergon," *Western American Literature*, 36 (Spring 2001), 64-65. Battle Mountain is 53 miles from Winnemucca, where Sherriff Lamb lived. The novel includes maps of key Nevada locales on the inside front and back covers.

<sup>3</sup> Frank Bergon, "The Search for Shoshone Mike," *Nevada Magazine* (Nov.-Dec., 1987): 57-59.

<sup>4</sup> Frank Bergon, "How to Know What to Write," talk at Center of the American West, Boulder, Co., 29 April 2016.

At first glance the central character Graham Lamb, sheriff of Winnemucca, fits the conventions of the western. Stoic, laconic, tough, he has killed a man and knows how to apply the third degree to get a confession. A closer look reveals a multifaceted person—shrewd, contemplative, tolerant, sensitive. Lamb’s relationship with his wife Nellie is striking. Several chapters show how acutely observant he is of her, how their give-and-take talks capture both the strains in and strengths of their love. Nellie is also complex. She admires the civilization of San Francisco, terms the Indians “savages,” yet welcomes the chance to come home and kill her own chickens. Known for his unflappable calm and “wait and see” attitude, Lamb serves as a mediator between contending groups; he sees his job as enabling “different people to live in different ways without killing each other.”<sup>5</sup> A student of fallible human nature, he wants the law to be firm but flexible, making allowances for various codes, cultures, and prejudices. Thus he keeps the solid daytime citizens separate from their less respectable nocturnal counterparts.

*Shoshone Mike* is both a western and a murder mystery. When the novel opens in 1911, four men, three of them Basque shepherders, have been found dead in Little High Rock Canyon and a posse is searching for the killers. Sheriff Lamb is known for always getting his man; he “solves” crimes not scouring the countryside but waiting for reliable facts and valid reasons to emerge before making his move. Yet in this case, he is at first mistaken. He thinks the perpetrators were “some riffraff and thieves” like Frank Tranmer and Nimrod Urie. It takes time before he puts the pieces together and understands what led up to the four murders and who was responsible. In the novel’s second section, set in the previous year, we learn that a

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<sup>5</sup> Frank Bergon, *Shoshone Mike* (N.Y.: Viking, 1987), 11. Subsequent quotes cited parenthetically.

man named Frankie Dopp had been killed, supposedly by some Indians he caught changing brands on stolen horses, but Lamb suspects Tranmer and Urie. What he doesn't know yet is that the person those two desperados *had* killed was Shoshone Mike's son Jack, and that Mike's band killed Dopp to avenge that previous murder. Under questioning, Urie insists that Shoshones killed Dopp, but Lamb thinks he's lying. Only after the four men are found dead in the canyon, and more information is discovered, does Lamb admit that he had been wrong, that the posse was now in hot pursuit of "a Shoshone family" (212).

The novel's thirty-five chapters juxtapose the points of view of key characters; among the most impressive are those devoted to Shoshone Mike and his daughter Henie. Bergon's short, declarative sentences marked by telling details that evoke a sense of place and the spirit of a people, capture the essentials of a besieged culture. Since the Shoshone have been confined to reservations for forty years, Mike is a walking anachronism; he fashions ropes, arrows, spears, and headdresses in traditional ways, knows how to move with the seasons, live off the land, and attend to the power of dreams. The author's clear, crisp style shows us the world as the Shoshone experienced it, painting the Nevada landscape so vividly as the seasons change that it, too, becomes a major character: "The winds grew warmer. The ice broke up in the creek. Trout swam in the creek and squirrels pushed themselves out of the ground. Their noses quivered as they looked at the world with quick dark eyes. Green clover appeared along the stream. Shoots of wild onions and the light green leaves of young lettuce thickened on the canyon floor. After the winter, they tasted like sunlight and spring water. Birds were flying around everywhere" (77). Mike's Wolf and Coyote tales teach his children about the animistic forces of nature and how the Shoshone, known to themselves as "the People," fit into the

grand scheme of things. Henie keenly notes that the abandoned nests of sparrows are lined with the same shredded sagebrush bark as the floor of her wickiup. She appreciates that her world, before the disruption of whites, was “a satisfactory place to live” (77). After one of his sons kills Dopp, however, Mike and his family must “live like the blue summer haze and the winter fog” (75), struggling to survive in the seams between the encroaching whites and the degradations of reservation life. Like his contemporary Ishi, the last “wild” Indian in California, Mike faces extinction. He and his family strive to maintain an ancient way of life that is perishing from a thousand cuts. “We’re vanishing,” he tells Henie. “I don’t know why this is happening. I don’t think we are useless” (224).

The second section of the novel ends with Henie’s brief account of how four men, who weren’t tracking Mike’s band, see a few butchered cattle in the snow and walk into a lethal ambush. The third section, “Battle at Rabbit Creek,” relates the tragic consequence of these murders. The point of view now shifts for a time to Mort West, a young member of the posse determined “to prove he was as game” (160) as the other men. For him the expedition, in spite of the posse’s petty feuds and one-upmanship struggles, is a rite of passage into manhood. On the other hand, Jean Erramouspe, a “black Basco,” is not allowed to join them and avenge his father, one of the four murdered men. This highly prejudiced posse is only seeking to inflict justice for the single “white man” killed.

The leader of the posse, Captain J. P. Donnelley, deliberately misleads Lamb about how close they are to Mike’s band. As a result, Lamb is not present for the battle at Rabbit Creek. Instead, the fighting is vividly rendered through the point of view of Mort West. First he sees a

young girl running, screaming a warning, then four armed warriors coming forward from the camp. Amid the ensuing gunfire someone shouts, "Shoot the horses," and Mort sees:

the girl up and running again toward the camp as the last of the horses threw its head toward the sky and slumped to the ground.... There was a volley of shots and the black head dropped behind sagebrush. "I got him this time," someone shouted. The head popped up again and a rifle cracked. A running form collapsed into the brush. The men fired at the spot where the form disappeared, only to be answered by a shot several yards to the left of where they were shooting. (236-37)

Here the impressionistic prose captures the frantic you-are-there immediacy of battle, how it feels to be in the midst of a life-and-death fight where confusion reigns and what is seen one second is refuted by what happens next. Isolated images jump out for a second, creating a somewhat surreal effect: "the toe of Skinny's boot showing over the cantle as he hung from the side of his horse" (237), a teenage girl charging with a spear; "a black spot" suddenly appearing on the forehead of an Indian woman, killing her instantly. Mort experiences the daze, the bafflement of the bloody engagement that leaves four Indian men, two women, and two young boys, as well as one of the posse, dead. All he can think at the end is, "He had expected something different" (250); while Lamb, upon his belated arrival at a battle he had hoped to prevent, can only cry out, "What in hell has been going on here?" (249).

By having Lamb arrive too late to stop the killing, if that were possible, Bergon keeps faith with the historical record. Although back in Winnemucca the members of the posse are celebrated as heroes, in truth there were none. For his part Lamb is filled with despair that the tragedy wasn't averted. He engages in three important conversations in the final chapters about the meaning of what happened and whether the massacre was inevitable. One is with

Father Enright, the voice of Christian witness, who had previously delivered a sermon about treating people, especially enemies, like the good Samaritan and leaving vengeance to the Lord:

“We talk about bringing the kingdom of heaven into this world,” the priest said, “but it’s not possible. The violent bear it away.”

“Bear what away?” Lamb asked.... “You have to remember that those Indians murdered innocent people. They had wives, families, friends....

“We did to them exactly what we said they were going to do to us. What does that make us?” (269)

Lamb understands why the posse didn’t spare most of Mike’s family, but that doesn’t mean he condones the killing. His wife Nellie, on the other hand, has no remorse. For her the Indians “were out of the dark ages. Those boys had a job to do and they did it,” while Lamb wanted them treated no differently than those white killers, Tranmer and Urie: “Why couldn’t they be caught and tried just like anybody else?” (278). As sheriff, he thinks the laws should apply equally to all, but it is an open question whether for Mike it was more “just” to die in battle or at the end of a rope, a form of death all Indians loathed.

The crucial question was whether the tragedy was inevitable. It has been a standard and self-serving interpretation of the Indian wars since their inception that the beliefs and customs of Native Americans were doomed, that they were backward peoples who must of necessity yield to civilization and progress. Lamb doesn’t see it that way. In a last discussion with Donnelley, he admits that the boys in the posse “were brave.... They really didn’t know what they were up against, and they stuck it out” (281), but he doesn’t approve of the wanton killing that took place. Even if Mike’s band insisted on fighting, some deaths might have been prevented. “If we hadn’t wiped them out,” Donnelley states, “somebody else would’ve. It was inevitable.” To which Lamb replies, “Nothing’s inevitable...especially that” (282). Indeed, as the

novel makes clear, there were contingencies throughout the story. Had the four men, for example, not happened upon slaughtered steers in the snow, they would not have been killed, there would have been no posse, Shoshone Mike's family might have hidden in the wilderness areas of Nevada and Idaho and survived for years.

And yet, as the Afterword reminds us, we are all born to die. Ishi lived out his last days at the University of California Museum of Anthropology; within eighteen months of the battle, Henie and two more of Mike's children, like many confined to reservations, died of disease. Only the baby "recovered and grew up as Mary Josephine Estep" (288). Many years later she was interviewed by the author of this memorable novel, already an acknowledged classic.

### ***The Temptations of St. Ed & Brother S***

Frank was educated in Jesuit schools, and a sabbatical year trip to Spain in 1984 rekindled his interest in monks and mysticism. He visited monasteries and read *The Cloud of Unknowing* and other essential works about devotional practices that date to the desert fathers.<sup>6</sup> It is this age-old tradition that the novel's protagonists, St. Ed and Brother S, hope to revive. Known to be a little "wacky," St. Ed is an erudite student of monasticism and, following in the footsteps of his fellow Basque Ignatius of Loyola, he wants to found a transformative religious order. His star recruit, Brother S, aspires "to be a saint."<sup>7</sup> Back in high school, "as he listened to pop songs on the radio, he yearned for that transcendent experience the mystics described as ecstasy" (5). The question is whether Brother S has a true vocation, or is just a

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<sup>6</sup> Rio, Bergon Interview, 66. My wife Roser and I accompanied Frank and Holly St. John Bergon on excursions in Catalonia to see the splendid monasteries of Santas Creus and Poblet, the latter still vibrantly active.

<sup>7</sup> Frank Bergon, *The Temptations of St. Ed & Brother S* (Reno: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 9. Subsequent quotes cited parenthetically.

California guy auditioning a unique lifestyle. Their crucial concern is a nuclear waste site at Shoshone Mountain<sup>8</sup> that threatens their makeshift monastery as well as the future of the planet. St. Ed wants to harness spiritual energy so that “the Cloud of Unknowing [will]... overwhelm faith in the mushroom cloud” (24). But temptation promptly arrives in the form of Amy Chávez, rescued from the desert by Brother S. During her recovery he sees her sunbathing naked on a log; afterwards she cuts her finger, which he “thrust...into his mouth” (121) to stop the bleeding. From then on, two plot lines compete: can the nuclear waste site be stopped? And will Amy’s presence break the vows of St. Ed and Brother S?

Thomas Merton, who knew whereof he spoke, provides a key to why the mission of St. Ed and Brother S will be marked by folly and probably doomed to failure: “The most dangerous person in the world is an unfulfilled mystic” (77). Striving to rise above the quotidian and achieve perfection can result in unforeseen and sometimes disastrous consequences. One of the novel’s strengths is St. Ed’s ability to find analogies for their monastic efforts in anecdotes about the desert fathers and the founders of religious orders; these serve as reminders, even as a typology, highlighting the recurrent patterns inherent in the contemplative life. The fundamental irony, however, which provides a wealth of comic insights as well as a few tragic outcomes, is that knowing the accomplishments as well as the mistakes of the past does not mean that one can achieve the former and prevent the latter in the present.

Historically, sexual temptations have presented an crucial challenge to monastic life as well as priestly chastity. Often the temptations faced by the desert fathers were erotic. Fasting

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<sup>8</sup> The actual site was Yucca Mountain. While remaining true to the basic historical situation regarding nuclear waste disposal, the novel changes other names and places and creates the principal characters and plot.

and abstinence may induce visions, but they can also stimulate desire. If sex is not accepted as a natural part of life, it becomes, to the tormented mind, unnatural, demonic. Thus there is an unfortunate connection between mysticism and misogyny. While St. Francis and St. Dominic “made room for women in their reform of monasticism” (124), others in the Church denounced the carnality of females as evil. Amy exudes “a good-natured innocence,” but Brother S notes she has “bedroom eyes” (73). Before long, her role in the monks’ desert retreat becomes that of Eve in the garden. When Amy’s brutal boyfriend Jerry badly beats Brother S, to soothe him she “took off her clothes and spread her body over his like a comforting angel” (130). Although they then live “separately and chastely” (148), Brother S is smitten and tells St. Ed, “I feel we’ve lost our way” (155). St. Ed also falls for Amy’s allure, even after, or perhaps especially because, she announces, “I want to be a monk” (161). Simultaneously we have the on-going saga of her stolen pink panties, fetishized by both men, who reify her into a temptress, “a demon of fornication” (207). Thus we see how these two would-be holy men put the blame on Amy’s wiles for their own twisted lust.

St. Ed makes a convincing case for the lethal dangers posed by nuclear waste. He knows the site was chosen because Nevada is a thinly populated state whose vast spaces lend themselves to exploitation. Furthermore, the feds have selected a mountain sacred to the Shoshone. St. Ed provides authentic information about the monastic tradition and eloquently argues for the concepts of sacramental time and eternal life as well. Yet his ambitions to start a monastic renaissance and stop construction at the nuclear waste site are all too easily sidetracked by his propensity to outsmart himself. He takes a pair of Amy’s panties supposedly to get her to confess a previous pair had been stolen, but we suspect ulterior motives. He

diagnoses her as a “gymnomanic,”<sup>9</sup> a person who shuns clothes, only to “convert” her into keeping them on. Then he proclaims her “Mother Amy,” abbess of the monastery, and primes his postulants for “spiritual delight in eternal time” (224). Shortly after, Amy, who seems quite sincere in her new vocation, is shot by a paranoid hermit named Straightgut, and the resulting chaos shatters St. Ed’s schemes.

No one is more unhinged by Amy’s near-fatal injury than Brother S, who even before that bizarre event suffered a sudden paralysis of one arm that he saw as just punishment for ever touching her. This psychosomatic illness seems to free him, for a time, from “all his sharp longing for Amy” (174). In his quest for a cure, he even attends a precisely observed peyote ceremony. When finally he regains use of his arm, he feels he has been redeemed, but the truth is he was never in love with Amy but rather self-absorbed in his own desires.<sup>10</sup> He accuses St. Ed of being “evil.... I know the devil has your heart” (225-26) for favoring Amy, and during her hospitalization he slips into a downward spiral where he attends a burlesque show and then does a brief stint as a disc jockey, playing pop love songs from his adolescence and feeling sorry for himself. Because he no longer visits Amy, he is unaware of her miraculous recovery, and, in a vain attempt to protect Straightgut, granted refuge by St. Ed, from the murderous intentions of Jerry, Brother S destroys himself, driving off in a tractor on a Quixotic suicidal strike against the nuclear waste facility at Shoshone Mountain. In his final delusion, rendered in heightened

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<sup>9</sup> A gymnosophist was “a member of an ancient Hindu sect of ascetics who wore little or no clothing.” *Webster’s New World Dictionary* (N.Y.: Simon & Schuster, 1980), 625.

<sup>10</sup> Brother S is disturbed by his “taunt, engorged, aching” penis (152). “Even St. Augustine found erections so beyond human control that he was convinced they were proof of man’s lack of free will” (152). This is true: when he was sixteen Augustine was shamed by unwanted erections at the public baths, which made him wonder why he couldn’t prevent them by sheer will power. He eventually concluded that we are born innately evil. Thus his theology contains the dogmas of original sin and infant damnation, two notions that did more harm than good and which tie into the novel’s exploration of what is natural and unnatural in human sexuality.

poetic prose, he believes he has pierced the encroaching darkness and attained the ecstasy he has always sought—“Eternal light” (294).

Not surprisingly, St. Ed has earned the ire of his bishop, who warns him “we’re not some disembodied spirits who can put off our bodies and take hot baths with girls and remain sexually pure.... Christianity keeps us in the real world, in the flesh as we are, not in some crazy never-never land where people can somehow float out of their bodies into some spiritual cloud” (266-67). Wise words, but St. Ed isn’t about to give up his grand design. He sees himself as a martyr who had “been calumniated, abused, jailed, and suppressed for his efforts to bring spiritual reforms to the slack soul of the nuclear age” (300), and Amy is determined not to permit Brother S’s “life and death [to] be meaningless” (303). In the end a motley crew of seven believers set out to “choose the Cloud of Unknowing—in this world” (305). Will they succeed? Not likely, given the novel’s tragi-comic vision of human nature. But that’s not to say their spiritual venture isn’t worth another try.

### ***Wild Game***

*Wild Game* dramatizes a clash of values between Old West ideals and New West realities. The novel draws upon the true story of Claude Dallas, who killed two game wardens seeking to arrest him for poaching in his remote Idaho camp. Since he lived as a self-reliant Mountain Man, eluded a posse, convinced a jury he acted in his own defense, then escaped from prison and avoided recapture for a time, the media made him a mythic hero while vilifying his victims. Featured in the news, he was the subject of a TV film and two non-fiction books.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Jeff Long, *Outlaw: The True Story of Claude Dallas* (N.Y.: William Morrow, 1985); Jack Olson, *Give a Boy a Gun: A True Story of Law and Disorder in the American West* (N.Y.: Delacorte Press, 1985). While both books contain

He seemed to be a reincarnation of the admired “outlaw” figures of the frontier who shoot to kill and abide by their own rules. Like Shoshone Mike, Claude Dallas was an anachronism, a person who consciously modeled himself after the fantasy cowboys in Louis L’Amour novels and Marlboro Man ads. His fame in the 1980s coincided with the Sagebrush Rebellion in the West, a populist movement supported by President Reagan. At issue was “an intensifying conflict between an environmentalist, recreational West and a diminishing mining, grazing, and logging West.”<sup>12</sup> Thus Claude Dallas, in spite of the innocent blood on his hands, was celebrated as an ultimate individualist who stood up to federal authority.

For Bergon, Claude Dallas was an “ersatz survivalist,” while the real heroes were the two murdered men who had devoted their lives to protecting “wild game.”<sup>13</sup> The challenge was to create a novel where Billy Crockett (roughly based on Dallas) and the issues he embodies can be seen in a more complex way and historical facts are combined with emotional and moral truths. The main character Jack Irigaray, a Basque wildlife biologist, accompanies his friend Bob Pritchard and another Nevada warden Larry Hughes when they try to arrest Crockett in Little High Rock Canyon for “trash trapping” and killing game out of season. The setting is early January, 1982, and the men find ample evidence of Crockett’s illegal activities, to which he boldly admits: “I’m a hundred miles from civilization. If I obeyed city people’s laws, I’d starve to death.... It’s a matter of survival.”<sup>14</sup> What happens next is sudden and brutal. As Jack is looking

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factual material of interest about the murders and the trial, each author lacks a moral compass when it comes to Dallas, accepting his highly suspect version of events, indulging in pure apologetics for his lethal actions, and drawing inadequate conclusions about the meaning of his “true story”.

<sup>12</sup> Frank Bergon, “Rebellion in Marlboro Country,” *Two-Buck Chuck & The Marlboro Man: The New Old West*. Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2019), 200. Dallas once worked for the brother of Frank’s uncle and godfather. “The true story of the West,” Bergon notes, “is not independence but interdependence.”

<sup>13</sup> Rio, Bergon Interview, 65.

<sup>14</sup> Frank Bergon, *Wild Game* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1995), 21. Subsequent quotes cited parenthetically.

inside Crockett's tent, he hears Pritchard cry out, "Oh, no!" and then shots. Whirling around, Jack sees Crockett in a crouching position fire a handgun at Bob and Larry, retrieve a .22 rifle from the tent, and shoot both men in the head. In terror for his own life, Jack helps Crockett cover up the crime. A half-naked Hughes is dumped in an ice-laden creek and Pritchard's body is last seen in the back of a pickup. At the conclusion of this harrowing first chapter, vividly presented from Jack's point of view, Crockett smirks, says "Sorry, Jack," and shoots him too.

Found the next morning, Jack survives; he wonders if Crockett, a crack shot, meant to kill him. He is tormented by regrets that he didn't do more to prevent the deaths and by an obsessive notion that he and Crockett were in a deadly "wild game" of their own. To "redeem himself" (53), Jack wants to capture the killer and find Bob's body, while his wife Beth pleads with him to save their rocky marriage and "Put this thing behind you" (63). For Jack, figuring out how Crockett thinks is the key to capturing him. In a memorable chapter, Jack interviews his Uncle Pete, who once employed Billy on his ranch. A sharply drawn character, Pete epitomizes the best values of the Old West. He taught Crockett the skills to be a true cowboy, a buckaroo. "Nothing came easy to Billy," Pete says, "but he worked hard at learning" (87), and for Pete hard work ranks with "good judgment and physical competence as signs of virtue" (90). While he doesn't approve of Billy's law-breaking, Pete admires how "he just wanted to do things the way the old timers did" (95). In effect, Billy writes his own script, plays the part, and becomes the character he pretends to be.

Jack as a boy also worked for Pete and has always admired him. Beth suggests that he may admire Billy as well: "He acted out what you dreamed about" (104). Perhaps because Billy is his "secret sharer," Jack decides that "the desire to kill Crockett and the demon inside him

were one and the same" (122). Yet in the final pursuit that leads to his surrender, it is Billy who shoots at Jack twice: "I could've killed you, Basco. That makes three times. Don't forget" (142). Jack replies that it's time to "end this game" (151) and for Crockett to tell where Bob's body is, but he is keeping his own counsel in anticipation of his trial.

"It's going to come down to his word against yours" (154), Jack is warned by his friend Jim Sandoval about what to expect in court. The four chapters on the trial are a *Rashomon*-like tour de force, pitting Jack's honest attempt to relate what he witnessed against Billy's ability to twist the truth in his favor. A lawyer once told me that the secret to winning a case was to present the jury with a convincing "cartoon," an over-simplified version of events slanted to favor a client. Jack conscientiously tries to tell what happened, but because he was in the tent during the exchange that led up to the shooting and was repeatedly asked to recall exactly what he saw and heard, the defense exploits slight inconsistencies in his account.<sup>15</sup> As a result, a local paper states that Jack's "whole testimony was perceived as convoluted and contradictory" (167). Billy, on the other hand, has his story down pat. "Composed, confident, idealistic, he blossomed into a man from another era" (174). He looks so much like the authentic cowboys he imitates that an AP reporter proclaims him, "The Real Thing" (174).

Billy's self-serving version was that an overbearing Pritchard was "flying hot" at him from the start, frequently reaching for his gun and threatening, "You can go easy or you can go hard, Crockett" (177), which is to say dead or alive. Billy argued that this was his home and he

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<sup>15</sup> While the murders themselves and the proceedings of the trial are similar to the Claude Dallas case, Jack is a completely different character than Jim Stevens, the potato farmer who witnessed the shooting. The creation of Jack enables Bergon to provide richer dramatic texture and deeper moral meanings to the story.

needed to kill wild game to survive, and Bob replied, “‘I can carry you out....’ Then he went for his gun.... He fired one round at me. Then I fired” (178-79), hitting both Pritchard and Hughes. As to why he proceeded to shoot them in the head, Billy said “I was a little crazy at that stage.... I was afraid for my life” (179). He didn’t kill Jack because he was unarmed, and he denied, as Jack had testified, that he fired from a combat crouch and later confessed, “This is murder one for me” (181). When he did shoot Jack it was because he “came at me with a shovel” (180). The defense is permitted to slander Bob as a bully and reveal that Jack is an alcoholic, yet the judge doesn’t allow testimony that Billy possessed an arsenal of assault weapons and read books on combat firefights. Although the prosecution noted that “by his own admission” (195) Crockett had broken the law, resisted arrest, and killed two men who were doing their duty, the Nevada jury, swayed by myths of the Old West, believed Billy’s improbable story and only found him guilty of voluntary manslaughter. “We just figured Pritchard drew his gun and Crockett was a better marksman,” the foreman said—but for those “excessive” shots to the head, Billy would have gotten off scot free (205).

On a nicely ironic note, at the sentencing hearing the apparently lenient judge cuts through the fog of obfuscation and bluntly states, “I don’t believe the issue of self-defense ever arose at Little High Rock Canyon” (211). To decide otherwise, as the jury has, “is an insult to common sense” (212). He then proceeds to outline the most likely scenario and sentences Billy to the maximum penalty of thirty years. After months of torment, Jack feels vindicated: “the judge had believed him, not Crockett” (217). Yet his troubles are not over, since the entire experience has left him disoriented and in despair. His deteriorating marriage to Beth ends in an uncontested divorce. Even before Billy reveals where Bob is buried, Jack gets involved with

his grieving widow Cindy. Then, to make matters worse, he has an affair with Billy's former girlfriend Georgette and even visits a prostitute. He believes that "women control the game of love" (199), proceeds to look for love in all the wrong places, and succumbs to a self-inflicted moral and mental collapse. Instead of seeing Georgette as highly suspect for having been with Billy in the first place, Jack harbors macho fears that Billy is better with women and more of a man than he is. At the end of his untenable relationship with Georgette, she shouts, "You're not like Billy at all. You're a fucking animal" (258). In sum, Jack makes a series of bad decisions without understanding why he is losing his self-respect and dignity. He remains trapped in some "wild game" with Billy Crockett.

When Billy escapes four years later, Jack is on "the rebound from booze," having lost "his wife, his girlfriend, his car, his license, his job" (272). At a final confrontation, Jack tracks Billy down in Mexico, where Billy boasts about outwitting the jury and being his own man: "Nobody lived out in the country the way I did... It was people like you who ruined it" (294). Jack, at last, sees through Billy's bravado: "You're not tough, Billy. You're mean, but you're not tough" (295). After Billy is recaptured, he once again bamboozles a jury by pleading, in effect, paranoia: he only fled for fear of his life. Nonetheless, he will still have to serve many years before the prospect of parole. For his part, Jack finally develops the good judgment to come to terms with who he is. And he understands that the most common pattern of the natural world is not survival of the fittest but peaceful coexistence. At the novel's end, he is a warden protecting the wild game he loves.

## *Jesse's Ghost*

The novel's opening tells us that this is "The story of how I came to kill my best friend," and its Bob Dylan epigraph concludes "Go get my pistol, babe, / I can't tell right from wrong."<sup>16</sup> As in García Márquez's masterpiece *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, a murder is announced at the start and the narrative explores what led up to it. *Jesse's Ghost* was inspired by a crime that involved several of Bergon's boyhood friends from his hometown of Madera, California. In Fresno on 4 September 1968, Gary Bolding shot Orville Lee Carter, known as Billy, for sleeping with his estranged wife Coann Swift Garvey.<sup>17</sup> Unlike the sensationalized Claude Dallas case, this was the kind of killing that never draws national attention, precisely because it was ordinary. The challenge for the author, then, is to bring the characters alive so that we understand who they are and care about this particular domestic tragedy. Since Frank knew the participants and was involved in key events, much of his research consisted of interviews. Jesse Floyd is based on Billy Carter, while Sonny Childers, the narrator, is a composite drawn from multiple sources. This is also true of his wife Sonia and other characters. Likewise Mitch and Ana Etcheverry and their parents share similarities with the Bergon family, but in the novel they are created figures with their own motivations.

An essential essay, "The Toughest Kid We Knew," recounts the recollections of Frank and his friends. They all agreed that Billy Carter was the toughest fighter in the San Joaquin Valley and possessed immense personal charm. "Billy was an all-American Boy," one said. "He

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<sup>16</sup> Frank Bergon, *Jesse's Ghost* (Berkeley, Ca.: Heyday, 2011), 1. Subsequent quotes cited parenthetically.

<sup>17</sup> Bill Coate, "Pieces of the Past," *Madera Tribune* (1 June 2011), 2. This article includes the original account of the crime in *The Fresno Bee* (4 September 1968).

had crystal-clear blue eyes, a great smile, he was a hard worker, and a loyal friend.”<sup>18</sup> Others praised his smarts, wit, and gift for gab. They were all in awe of his prowess as a no-holds-barred brawler and envied his success with the opposite sex. At a time when Frank felt “tongue-tied and fearful of being trapped by wily women,” Billy was a smooth talker, “a magnet for girls” in part because he possessed “the power of the outlaw.” Even though as a “pure Okie”<sup>19</sup> he lacked status, Billy dated the daughters of a dentist, a doctor, and a businessman. This would suggest that Madera was free of snobbery, yet social undercurrents prevented him from marrying the girl of his choice and the resultant mismatches, leaving several women in love with him, led to his violent death.

When the novel begins Sonny has served his time in prison and, thanks to Father Dan’s teachings, thinks he’s reformed and happy with his new wife: “People say there are two kinds of women: those you love and those you marry. But that’s not true for me. I love Lynette and I loved Sonia” (3). But it’s an open question whether Sonny really has changed his life or knows what love is. The arrival of his old friend Mitch, who is haunted by Jesse’s murder and wants to understand it, probes old wounds and leads Sonny to confess, “I don’t know what got into me” (32). At the time, he was at the mercy of unconscious forces, and as he relates his life we realize that he still hasn’t come to terms with who he is and how the values of the valley have shaped him. Both Jessie and Sonny were “Okie riffraff” (4), products of an ages old Scots-Irish clan culture that stressed fierce individualism, fundamental equality, defiance of authority, and a man’s pride in defending his honor with his fists or other weapons. It was these feisty and

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<sup>18</sup> Frank Bergon, “The Toughest Kid We Knew” (unpublished), 6. Mitch says these words in the novel, p. 24.

<sup>19</sup> Bergon, “Toughest Kid,” 10-11, 7, 8, 9.

relentless frontiersmen who were the bane of American Indians from the Appalachians to the Far West, and who fought with great valor in our foreign wars.<sup>20</sup> “Jesse just loved to fight,” and Sonny shares his enthusiasm: “There’s no better feeling than kicking the shit out of somebody” (35), an assumption that often ruled their young lives. While he rarely seeks out his battles, Jesse never backs down from a challenge, and his reputation for toughness, just like the man known to be the fastest gun, draws many an upstart to test his mettle against him.

While *Jesse’s Ghost* is packed with blow-by-blow accounts of the fights Jesse and Sonny were in—mostly victories but a few bloody defeats—their relationships with women are what proves to be lethal. Near the end of Part I, Lynette suddenly announces, “I’m leaving you, Sonny” and adds that she considers their seventeen years together “a mistake” (37). That he didn’t see trouble brewing is a sign of Sonny’s ineptitude with women, yet it leads him to speculate about previous romantic entanglements at the core of the plot: “No one forgets their first love. Ana loved me, and I loved her. Sonia loved Jessie but married me. Ana loved Jesse, but he loved Sonia. We were all hooked up in a crisscrossed love that never got straight.” He then admits that he probably hated Jesse, and may have shot him, “because I loved him” (39).

Part II goes back in time to recreate the summer it all began: Jesse and Sonny were best friends, fresh out of high school, tending tomatoes for Mitch’s father Sam. After a day of hard work, “at night we tomcatted around until morning” (43). Sonny’s first love is Ana, Mitch’s fourteen-year-old sister. When he informs Sam he wants to marry his daughter, he shrewdly keeps cool and tells Sonny he’s a good worker but simply “can’t afford it” (52). Later he advises

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<sup>20</sup> See Arthur Herman, *How the Scots Invented the Modern World* (N.Y.: Crown Publishing, 2001), and James Webb, *Born Fighting: How the Scots-Irish Shaped America* (N. Y.: Broadway Books, 2004).

Sonny to stop partying and settle down before someone gets hurt. One reason they want to run-off is that their mothers are alcoholics: Ana's, in particular, made her home "a screaming hell" (45). In truth, life in the valley is very hard on all the women, many of whom "are going crazy with booze" (52) and grow old before their time. It's a macho culture, and Sonny's idea of courtship is shooting rabbits or rats or gigging for frogs. Jesse is more sophisticated with women; he asks, "Why don't you take Ana out on a proper date?" (50). Jesse, for his part, plays the field. Sonny knows that he "was never going to attract girls the way he did" (121). Jesse chooses Sonia for the summer, detailing their sexual exploits to Sonny, but when they break up, she targets Sonny, telling him "You're my sweetheart" and assuring him "I am not pregnant" (138). Shortly afterwards, Sonny sees Jesse "putting the wood to Ana" (140). Sonny learns that Sonia's father had forbidden her to "marry that Okie kid" (155); as a result Jesse has turned to Ana. In spite of this tangled web, with Sonny wondering whether Sonia was using him to make Jesse jealous, the pair marries: "We were happy, Sonia and me, for a while, in our way" (159). Jesse then marries Ana, and the couples go their separate ways—for a time.

Sonny's narrative voice is compelling; like Huck Finn, another Scots-Irish boy who tells his own story, Sonny is acculturated to his valley. As it never occurs to Huck that slavery is wrong (he's going to hell for being a rotten kid and helping his friend Jim), so Sonny rarely questions a life centered on working, drinking fighting, and fucking. He takes these things for granted just as Buck Grangerford accepts feuding.<sup>21</sup> Like Huck's "Pap," Sonny's father was "a

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<sup>21</sup> "Well," says Buck, "a feud is this way. A man has a quarrel with another men, and kills him, and then that other man's brother kills *him*; then the other brothers, on both sides, goes for one another, then the *cousins* chip in—and by and by everybody's killed off, and there ain't no more feud. But it's kind of slow, and takes a long time." Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1985), 146.

real mean person” (70), while his stepfather Dewey, a brawler and heavy drinker, “whopped” (82) him to teach him manners. To his credit, Dewey “learned” (65) Sonny the right way to work. Indeed, some of the strongest passages in the novel are on farm work in the valley. As a boy Sonny cut grapes, dug potatoes, rolled trays, chopped and picked cotton, but Sam’s “Tomato Piece” is described the most memorably. Sonny and Jesse were responsible for irrigating the fields, and in those days, when planes dropped cardiogenic bug spray on workers, no one cared. Like Huck on the Mississippi, Sonny’s descriptions of the natural world can be poetic: “Outside, when I looked across the sparkling alfalfa at the sun coming up above the Sierras I felt in a new country.... A breeze smelled of eucalyptus leaves and Mrs. Etcheverry’s flowers. Even the blazing sun bounced as it popped up fresh from the Nevada desert behind the mountains. The whole ranch shined full of light, something familiar but strange” (105); “Moonlight brightened the ditch water creeping over the ground like slow-moving mercury as it twisted around the alfalfa stalks, giving the air a sweet, musty smell. You could almost hear the water crackle through the hay stubble” (125). Sonny’s narrative, at its best, is simple, sensuous, direct, lyrical, with the right admixture of slang and common, and sometimes uncommon, usage. To select one example: “If he wanted to plug Ana, I thought, and she was abiding, well, then, more power to him” (146). The surprise choice is “abiding,” but it is spot on to Sonny’s particular world. Finally, like Huck asking Jim if the stars were made or just happened, occasionally Sonny ponders ultimate questions: “I wondered which would be better, being a ghost and knowing yourself dead or just being dead without knowing it” (130).

A few years pass. Mitch comes home from college to find his mother dead in her bedroom from alcoholism; Sam moves to town and starts drinking too. After multiple

amputations, Dewey dies of diabetes. Jesse and Sonny join the National Guard: “We started having good times again...but always without our wives” (169). Jesse now heads his family septic business; he is “a honey pumper” who lives with Ana in “a rundown white-board house” (172) with their young son. Sonny and Sonia have a girl, but “things slid south between us. She was bound to look down on me when she saw the situation she found herself in” (174-75). Clearly, both Ana and Sonia are dissatisfied that their husbands have not risen on the social ladder, and, as happens in many failing marriages, red lines are crossed and unsayable words spoken. Sonia calls Sonny “a fucking wino loser” (174), a coward, and challenges him to “Go fuck Jesse. That’s what you wanted with me anyway” (177). Sonny resists an urge to hit her and goes off on another drunk. Soon afterwards, the couple separates, Jesse resumes sleeping with Sonia, a pregnant Ana is in despair, and Sonny is at the end of his tether. Since their divorce is not finalized, Sonny thinks he can get Sonia back. “You two aren’t stomping on me no more,” he declares. “He’s not going to have you,” to which Sonia replies, “Have me?... He can have me whenever he wants” (184).

Criminal psychologists have long pointed out that uttering certain unsayable things that touch upon repressed feelings can trigger an uncontrollable violent response. Some variation of this is what happens in Sonny’s case. After he traces the couple to a motel, he buys a .38 pistol and begins to stalk his estranged wife. Fuel is added to the fire when Jesse says in a phone conversation, “She’s left you.... Forget it, Sonny. You know you were always second choice” (184-85). The next time Sonny sees Jesse he kills him, firing two shots at Sonia as well. At the trial, because his lawyer portrays Jesse as “violent, aggressive, and dangerous,” Sonny is

merely convicted of voluntary manslaughter, yet he knows in his heart that he “had murdered Jesse” (189), and like Mitch he is still haunted by Jesse’s ghost.

Mitch is researching an article prior to writing a book on the murder; he is the one who gets Sonny to relate what led up to the killing and thus it falls on his shoulders to make sense of events. Since he’s been to college and lived away from the valley for years, we expect him to have a larger perspective. During the summer when the three friends worked at irrigating Sam’s tomatoes, Mitch told Sonny, “Someday we’re probably going to look back on this as the best time of our life” (76). Sonny doesn’t know how to respond: “Here we were without pussy, busted up from hangovers, smeared with mud and goose shit, threatened by three thugs,” if that was the best of times, “I hated to think what would be the worst” (76-77). In this instance, Sonny is wiser than Mitch, who wants to celebrate those glory days, regardless of the cost in life and limb. Indeed, when worse times come, Mitch’s interpretation of the tragedy is muted. He tells Sonny, in relation to Jesse’s death, “Live by the sword, die by the sword” (195), since Jesse “brought it on himself” (196), and that he had forgiven Sonny and had no hard feelings. He brings unwelcome news that “Sonia still carries a torch for Jesse” and that “Ana’s bitter about everything...except Jesse” (194). On a more positive note, Mitch tells Sonny he has talked to Lynette and a reconciliation is possible. Father Dan, for his part, is trying to teach Sonny “the difference between loving and fucking” (191-91). That Sonny finds comfort in religion fits another aspect of valley culture. Although he hopes to make a new start, at the end he is a figure of pathos: “I always knew I was second pickings” (199), an all-too apt metaphor for a man who worked the tomato fields of the San Joaquin Valley.

One final irony eludes Mitch and Sonny. While both admired Jesse as the Alpha Male of their world, what was he actually thinking? What did he aspire to be? Obviously he used his fists to rise to the top of his immediate physical world. But what about his social world? He was a poor Okie boy who married an attractive girl from a land-owning family, sported a fancy car, and hoped to make enough money to buy a big house, yet as a “honey pumper” he was trapped in a lower status. Thus he burned “the candle at both ends” (180) to compensate. In a sense, Mitch is right, Jesse *did* bring destruction down on his own head. Yet if Mitch wanted to be Jesse, in his heart of hearts Jesse’s dream was to be Mitch.

Frank Bergon’s four novels deserve attention largely due to description, dialogue, and drama. Each presents a vividly evoked shared landscape that encompasses Nevada and the San Joaquin Valley. A sense of place shapes the participants in the stories. Where you are is a part of who you are. The central characters, sharply individualized and fully realized, not only talk to each other, they talk *back*, giving voice to various points of view. The resulting clash of values creates the essential conflict. Each novel features an anachronistic and controversial way of life—Shoshone Mike’s roving band of renegades. St. Ed’s efforts to revive an ancient monastic tradition, Billy Crockett’s determination to survive as a mountain man beyond the law, and Jesse Floyd’s sustained prowess as a fighter and womanizer. Each of these challenges meets strong opposition and ends in defeat or death. Yet each dramatizes a spectrum of valid perspectives. Both Billy and Jesse are outlaws, for example, but the way we view them is radically different. The former we condemn as a cold-blooded killer, the latter wins our sympathy in spite of his flaws. These things matter thanks to Bergon’s artistry, his ability to tell compelling tales about authentic people and places we believe in and care about.

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