

Ideology and Violence in “Cloudsplitter” and “Lidie Newton”

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In 1998 two American novelists each published almost simultaneously a heavyweight tome with a great deal of similarity in subject matter to the other's: “Cloudsplitter” by Russell Banks (758 pages), and “The All-True Travels and Adventures of Lidie Newton” by Jane Smiley (452 pages, but of smaller print).

Both authors enjoyed, and still enjoy, considerable reputations as serious writers whose work also sells well. Both novelists are favorites of literary salons and discussion groups, both real and virtual (Internet). Two of Banks's other novels have been made into well-received films, which perhaps had something to do with his subsequent early retirement from Princeton University, where he had been teaching for 16 years. Smiley's Midwestern novelistic adaptation of “King Lear”, called “A Thousand Acres”, won a Pulitzer Prize and was also made into a “major motion picture.” Coincidentally, after giving birth to her first child, a daughter, not much later, she also resigned from her long-term faculty post at a university in the Midwest, and moved to California.

The common theme in both novels is the escalating conflict over issues such as slavery and states rights, in American society in the 1850s, with the “paramilitary” clashes in Kansas around the issue of whether or not the territory would become a state that permitted slavery, and the unsuccessful attempt by the abolitionist John Brown to ignite a slave revolt in 1859 receiving most attention. John Brown is present in both novels, as the main focal point in “Cloudsplitter,” and as a more distant presence in “Lidie Newton”'s Kansas, where he took an active part as an abolitionist fighter in his guerrilla/terrorist struggle with the pro-slavery forces.

“Cloudsplitter”

“Working class” settings, the conflict within families and the often violent and tragic relationships between fathers and sons figure rather prominently in the writings of Russell Banks. His own

alcoholic and abusive father abandoned his family when Banks was 12, and further tragedy struck when his younger brother died in an accident at age 17. Banks believed his brother's death was a defining incident in the life of the family. His mother never got over it. As for his father, Banks has said that it was not until he was himself in his 50s that the negative presence of his father that had been left over since his childhood, finally lost its hold.

It was of course partly through his writings that this change could take place. Perhaps the most overt expression of the long-delayed inevitable effects of an abusive father-son relationship can be seen in "Affliction," a novel Banks wrote a few years before "Cloudsplitter." Interestingly enough, Banks also interrupted the writing of "Cloudsplitter," itself a novel told by the son of the main character many years later when he is an old man, to write another novel, "Rule of the Bone," a contemporary work in which a discontented 14-year old boy, a working-class "mall rat" runaway, close to falling off the edge of society, finds a father figure in a Rastafarian. "Rule of the Bone" is obviously an updated, dystopian "Catcher in the Rye," but it is also related rather closely in characterization and tone to "Huckleberry Finn." This coincidentally brings Banks a bit closer to Jane Smiley's "Lidie Newton," which has a strong, if oblique, link to "Huckleberry Finn," and to Smiley's earlier criticisms in "Harpers" magazine, of the, in her opinion, overpraising of Twain by literary critics and historians.

Although it is Jane Smiley who uses the term "ideology and violence" in relation to her writing of "Lidie Newton," in fact it is Banks's novel which deals with that theme more directly. John Brown began as an idealist and political activist in the 1830s and 1840s, working in the abolitionist movement to abolish slavery in the United States. He was one of the most radical abolitionists, and was closely associated with Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman and others involved in the Underground Railroad in Ohio and upstate New York, as part of the network that helped runaway slaves reach the northern US states or Canada. In the 1850's, his stance against slavery became more active and violent, when he and his family fought on the abolitionist side in the battle over whether Kansas would enter the United States as a slave state or a free one, meaning whether slavery would be allowed or not. He became notorious for leading an attack on a group of pro-slavery settlers in which several were in effect executed by Brown and his men. Due to the general climate of anarchic violence in Kansas at the time, there was no legal pursuit of Brown for this. The final act of his life, which made him world-famous, was a disastrous raid on the federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry, Virginia (now West Virginia), where he and 20 of his family and followers seized weapons intended to be used as arms in a hoped-for general slave uprising. The uprising, which had been a highly

unlikely prospect from the start, did not take place, and most of Brown's men were killed on the spot, while the rest, including John Brown himself, were quickly tried and executed.

Russell Banks, himself a founding member of the Students for a Democratic Society chapter at the University of North Carolina, and an active participant in the civil rights and anti-Vietnam-War movements, believes that Brown was in fact trying to begin a long, drawn-out guerrilla war that would make slavery too costly for the southern states. His own interest in John Brown was derived from Brown's status as a man who fought and died for his beliefs in human freedom, making him a role model for 1960s activists, but he only hit upon the idea of writing a novel about him nearly 30 years later, when he bought a house in the Adirondack mountains of upstate New York, close to the farm at North Elba, NY where Brown had spent the longest period of his life, and the cemetery where John Brown and 11 of the men with him at Harper's Ferry had been buried.

By this time, Banks was much older, and he decided to write a deliberately "historical" novel, narrated by Owen Brown, and written using only the language "available" in the 19th century, and with a view to including the themes and attitudes typical of a 19th century American abolitionist family. The book is an attempt to imitate a kind of secular American prose vernacular of the 19th century, including especially the far greater influence derived then from the Bible. Banks's specialty at UNC was 19th century American literature and he believes the private, non-literary prose of American 19th century letters and diaries is the purest Americans have ever written. Banks has compared his writing process as frequently resembling taking down dictation. He has directly said this happened with most of the composition of "Rule of the Bone," and he also felt that in "Cloudsplitter" he was not so much trying to speak through Owen Brown, as to listen to him. Actually, these two novels may be even closer than they appear. Banks took a 1-1/2-year "break" from writing "Cloudsplitter," after he had been accumulating material and living, as a late 20th century novelist, in the 19th century with John Brown and his sons for 3 years. He had been finding it difficult to get through all the material and create something from it, but after writing "Rule of the Bone" he was able to see his way clearly through to the end of "Cloudsplitter."

Banks sees John Brown as a man finally driven "insane" by his march from idealism to terrorism and martyrdom. He felt such a personal outrage, yet also Biblical in nature, against the essence and the actual workings of slavery, that he would be driven to commit violence in order to destroy what he saw as a greater violence. By having Owen Brown tell his, and his father's story, Banks links the historical background to a depiction of "violence" within the family. Owen Brown also tells the story

of a son who believes in his father's righteousness and in his father's principles, but who for that belief, or perhaps due to it, puts himself in a situation where he must suffer terribly for it.

"*Cloudsplitter*" is a complex narrative that operates on two levels. It is the story of John Brown and his family from the 1830s to his last battle at Harper's Ferry, as told much later by his surviving son Owen. The other level, enabled by the highly reflective and retrospective narration, offers an interwoven consideration of the interrelationships of fathers and sons, and blacks and whites.

Banks creates his fictional study of John Brown by basing it on an ostensible set of narrative notes written by Owen Brown for an actual biography of John Brown, written by Oswald Garrison Villard in 1910. Banks deliberately takes liberties with the facts, sometimes so "carelessly," as when he dated Owen's notes eight years after the real Owen Brown had already died, that we can imagine that Banks is deliberately sacrificing some of his carefully studied historical fiction, in favor of greater focus on the black/white and father/son interaction, beyond literal history.

John Brown can be seen as an Old Testament prophet who happened to be living in the United States during the first half of the 19th century, who still believed in a God of anger and righteousness. One of Brown's most-used Biblical quotes was from Hebrews 9:22: "Without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sins." By this, he believed that God meant for him to free the slaves and punish their owners for the sin of keeping them in bondage. His powerful personality dominated most of his sons, three of whom died with him. Others outside his family either followed him literally to the very end, or provided him with money for his armed struggle against slavery, at a time when pro-slavery sentiment dominated in the government and the military, to such an extent that the election of the anti-slavery Republican Abraham Lincoln as president in 1860 led to the immediate secession of the pro-slavery states and to four years of all-out war.

The question of John Brown's apparent "insanity" must be countered with the question of whether slavery and white racism were "sane." Banks has Owen describe his father as having the rare ability, as a white man, to see the world from the black man's point of view:

Something deep within father's soul, regardless of his own skin color..., went out to the souls of American Negroes, so that he was able to ally himself with them in their struggle against slavery and American racialism, not merely because he believed they were in the right, but because he believed that somehow he himself was one of them... . Father's progression from activist to martyr, his slow march to willed disaster, can be viewed, not as a descent into

madness, but as a reasonable progression -- especially if one consider the political strength of those who in those days meant to keep chattel slavery the law of the land ... due to our obsession, we were, as it were, insane. Which to the Negroes.... made us perfectly comprehensible and trustworthy -- sane.

John Brown associated closely with such forceful and independent black anti-slavery activists as Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman, who saw in him an ally, but who were not prepared to go along with his highly personal and apocalyptic mission. Brown was, however, joined by escaped slaves when he lived in North Elba, New York on a kind of exemplary interracial community farm established with money donated by a wealthy abolitionist. They were active in the Underground Railroad from about 1850 to 1855, helping slaves escape to Canada, after which Brown and his family left to join the struggle in Kansas.

One former slave who lived and worked with John Brown in New York, was Lyman Epps, and the deviation Banks carries out in the novel from Epps actual biography, in order to deepen the interrelationships among the father/son and black/white themes, is highly revealing. John Brown is too historically grounded a character, and too forceful a personality from the start, to experience any credible inner awareness or self-awakening, so Banks moves Owen's self-awakening to the thematic foreground of his work.

Owen realizes he does not have his father's ability to transcend his sense of "whiteness" and his consequent ability to identify with the black present and former slaves in their "blackness." He feels ashamed that he can not forget his color in the presence of blacks. Owen is in an impossible situation here, in that the deficiency he feels in his relationship with his father vis-a-vis black people, ultimately fatally undermines the personal friendship he has with Lyman, something his father is too much the Old Testament warrior-prophet to be able to do.

Owen falls in love with Lyman's wife, Susan, in what he realizes is a displacement of the deep personal friendship and love he feels for Lyman, but which is subverted inside him by the always negative comparison Owen makes between himself and his father. His self-flagellation leads him to feel an irrational hatred for Lyman, yet, ironically it is not the particular hatred, as much as a more generalized racial guilt which Owen feels, that is the cause of tragedy, with the guilt being (thematically) purged by Lyman's accidental shooting death, after Owen fails to warn him that he is unknowingly picking up a loaded and cocked weapon.

Owen believes that his failure to warn Lyman (who in real life survived John Brown and even sang at his funeral service) has made him a murderer, and that he can atone only by becoming a killer of slaveowners and destroyer of slavery, as he thinks his father wants him to be.

I was the man who had never been able to forget that Lyman, while he lived, was black. Thus, until this moment, I had never truly loved him. He was a dead man now -- finally, a man of no race. And as surely as if I had pulled the trigger myself, I was the man, the white man, who, because of Lyman's color and mine, had killed him. It was as if there had been no other way for me to love him.

There was nothing for love, now, but all-out war against the slavers... Father would become my North Star... I had become outwardly a hard man, a grim, silent warrior in my father's army, soon to be a killer more feared by the slavers for his cold, avenging spirit than any Free-Soil man in all of Kansas. More feared even than Father.

Owen oscillates between dependence on his father and independence from him, but his independence can only be felt by Owen when he, ironically, exceeds his father in the area in which he feels most dependent on him. Banks plays down the possibilities of developing the Oedipal potential present in the historical relationship of Owen and his father, derived from Owen's mother's death when he was 8 and his subsequent resentment of his father's marrying again. Instead, Banks remains within the orbit of the 19th century way of thinking, in which the Old Testament stories of Job and of Abraham and Isaac become the models for Owen and John Brown's relationship as son and father. God tested Job's faith, by having him lose everything. But Job did not lose his faith in God, and he was rewarded by God in the end.

The figure of Job was, of course, like no one so much as Father himself. As Job stood to God, Father did also. My terrible understanding was that I, too, was like no one so much as Job. Not, however in my relation to God; but in my relation to Father.

Owen tries to break the force of his father's domination over him, to become his own man, but he cannot. Like Isaac, he must go along with his father's wishes, even if his father believes God has commanded him to kill his son as a sacrifice.

Yet there was so much that I could not understand about this man, my father, and the life we led because of him -- my thoughts, my questions, were blocked, occluded: by the absolute rightness of his cause, which none of us could question, ever; and by the sheer power of Father's personality, the relentlessness of it, how it wore us down, until we seemed to have no

personalities of our own, even to each other.

Believing he has no choice but to dedicate himself to violence, Owen in fact initiates the killing of 5 slave owners in a revenge attack in Pottawatomie, Kansas, even as his father stood aside and watched. Owen leads the way into violence in a cold-blooded, close-up manner; and this time it is his father who follows. But soon enough John Brown becomes "his own man" in the terror and guerrilla warfare in Kansas.

The logic of this escalation leads to the disastrous attempt to raid the federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry. In the novel, Owen is able to escape because he was outside the town, awaiting the slave uprising. Just as God saved Isaac at the last moment in the Bible, Owen was able to make his escape, while his father was playing out his own fatal version of Abraham's terrible, final sacrifice to God.

Despite Owen's later guilt for having, as he felt, "betrayed" his father, at the time of Harper's Ferry he genuinely did feel like the Biblical Isaac when at the last minute God allowed Abraham to sacrifice a ram instead of his son.

[It was] as if, after a lifetime bound to my father's fierce will and companionship by heavy steel manacles and chains, I had watched them come suddenly unlocked, and I had simply, almost casually, pitched them aside.

Jane Smiley's novel had its immediate inspiration in the author's reaction to the 1995 bombing of the Federal Office Building in Oklahoma City, an instance of "the intersection of ideology and violence in America" coming together to kill over a hundred people, including many children. When she mentioned to a friend that she wanted to write about that subject, he said, "Kansas, 1850."

Smiley embarked on an extensive research project for her novel, mostly involving the reading of women's journals from 19th century Kansas, particularly the writings of Sarah Robinson, wife of a governor of Kansas.

There are several other "antecedents" to Smiley's novel, which have a definite effect on the structure and tone of the work. First of all, in the early 1980s, Smiley had set herself the goal of writing an epic, a tragedy and a romance. She had written what she considered to be a modern epic ("The

Greenlanders”) and a tragedy (“A Thousand Acres”), which left her with a romance remaining to complete the task. Extrapolating from Hawthorne’s famous statement about the romance, rather than the novel, being the most suitable prose fiction form for 19th century America, Smiley decided to write her work set in 1850s Kansas as a romance.

The romance she had in mind was something like what she had especially enjoyed reading while in graduate school, 13th century Middle English romance, “The Lay of Havelock the Dane,” conveniently a story in which a character goes on a journey and sees amazing things. But in order to make it a modern “romance,” she decided that *Lidie’s* story would end in resignation rather than in completion of some quest. This process of modernization of a medieval romance passes through the somewhat later development of the picaresque novel, in which amazing things happen, to a non-noble character trying to make his way through life’s vicissitudes by his wits, and along the way both debunking medieval chivalry and satirizing contemporary life.

What is interesting about this is how close it inevitably brings Smiley to the work she had criticized as being overrated only 2 years before she wrote “*Lidie Newton*,” namely “*Huckleberry Finn*.” In this article, for which she received a great deal of often overheated criticism, Smiley said she thought the Twain novel was boring, and that it should not overshadow its contemporary, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s “*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*,” the hugely influential anti-slavery novel of slaves living in and attempting to escape from the south. Smiley also said that the structure of “*Huckleberry Finn*” required his main character to put Jim, the runaway slave who accompanied him in his journey on the Mississippi, unnecessarily in danger, because the story forced Jim to go south with Huck, instead of immediately to escape northward to freedom. Smiley pointed out that Twain had put the novel aside for some time, and upon returning to it changed the emphasis from focusing on Huck and Jim to including more secondary characters, as if he had lost faith in his material.

By the time “*Lidie Newton*” appeared, however, Smiley said she had merely wanted to restore some balance to the consideration of fiction in 19th century America, and described Twain and Stowe as the mother and father of “*Lidie Newton*.” But she also included Stowe’s sister, Catherine E. Beecher, as the maiden aunt. A quote from Beecher’s “*A Treatise on Domestic Economy for the Use of Young Ladies at Home*” prefaces each chapter of “*Lidie Newton*,” as an example of good 19th century writing style, and as a model of what was possible for a woman in those days.

Originally Smiley had wanted to weave the content of Catherine Beecher’s work more thematically

into her novel, but had to settle for "quotations" to avoid making the novel too long.

Smiley's willingness to let so much into her novel, including material to which she is in another aspect antagonistic, leads to a going back and forth between the expectations set up because Lidie is "femininely disadvantaged" as a woman -- she is tall, plain, athletic, a very good horsewoman and a better swimmer and shot than many men, yet when she happens to meet and marry an abolitionist planning to settle in Kansas (and to carry rifles into the territory), her "masculine" heritage as the main character of a picaresque romance mostly serves to help her maintain the same slightly ironic distance, through the trials of settling in a new and violent place where women and children die routinely of disease and men kill each other in an almost absurdist acting out of the great opposing principles of slavery and freedom that would lead to a Civil War in just under a decade, that she had used to avoid giving in to the "normal" state of female domesticity at home in Illinois.

Smiley has said she wanted to convey the sense of the different worlds men and women inhabited in the 19th century, even when living together alone in a hut on the plains. But there is the problem of "domesticity" perhaps being the only way to cut down on the deaths on either side of the gender issue, even in politics, where peace was finally brought to Kansas by a governor who had "seen it all" during the gold rush in California and who dealt in forward-looking actions instead of self-serving or abstract rhetoric.

Lidie learns to love her husband, gradually, although there is more depth and development regarding her relationship to the beautiful and swift horse she buys. She and her husband try to make a go of it on their small claim, through difficulties and in winter weather on the plains far harsher than they had ever experienced. Then her husband, and her horse, are suddenly killed before her eyes in a random pro-slaver attack.

Lidie decides to go on a search for her husband's killers, and disguises herself as a young man. This succeeds, and we get the world of working men and life on the river, until she has a miscarriage and is rescued by a slave-owning family. Lidie is taken care of by one of the slaves, Lorna, to whom the daughter of the family is deeply attached. This family is composed of kind and generous people, who do not mistreat their slaves, and it is at this point in the novel that Smiley introduces the issue of the highly tempting benefits of slavery for women who owned them. The realities of non-slave owning domesticity required the "production" of a large number of children, which was often fatal to both the mother and the child or children, with neither getting much comfort from the highly

patriarchal moral tone of "duty" with which all this was described. This dilemma was only really solved with the invention of electrical appliances, and the point Smiley makes is that women were chattel unless they owned other women.

Lorna in a sense "captures" Lidie to help her escape to freedom, and they set out, with Lidie happy to go in order to escape a marriage proposal from Lorna's owner. Lidie tries her best, and they are successful in their flight north for a while. But when they reach the last river which they must cross, Lidie inadvertently causes their capture. Lorna is "sold down the river," to the great sadness of the daughter of the family, and Lidie barely escapes hanging only because she is a woman and because the family that owned Lorna would not prosecute her. Lidie returns home, unsure of what benefit anything she did or could do would bring to the slaves, sees the slave vs. free conflict erupt into the Civil War, and decides that as someone who had been in Kansas, she would never be surprised by anything again.

In "Lidie Newton," John Brown is present only as an agent of violence in the background, an anti-slavery terrorist who distinguishes himself by having at least some connection between his principles, his actions and the results they have. For the most part, the world of men in "Lidie Newton" is portrayed as a lot of empty, vulgar rhetoric, for the most part serving merely as a cover for money-grubbing activity.

Smiley's work can seem like a novel fatally drawn toward replicating what she had earlier criticized in "Huckleberry Finn." And "Lidie Newton" does sometimes seem conflicted and contradictory about its relationships to its fictional and historical background. Yet although "Lidie Newton" is in its texture less a "historical novel" than "Cloudsplitter" is, because of its attachment to traditional forms such as the romance and the picaresque, and its "family" of 19th century writers, it incorporates more "history" than would seem evident on the surface, "Lidie Newton" in a sense looks back more, in order to allow women to participate more fully in the fictional and historic narration of Kansas, and America, in the 1850s. "Cloudsplitter" is on the other hand a fiction seeking to use myth, religion and psychology to see the American mid-19th century as a standard of comparison, to see what we have done since then, as blacks and whites, and as fathers and sons.