



WHOLE BEAST RAG

FERTILIZE YOUR BRAIN

WHO WE ARE
CONTRIBUTORS
SUBMIT
NEWSLETTER
STORE

ANTHEMS
COLUMNS
INTERVIEWS
SEAN ANONYMOUS
JAMES CORDAS
LIGHTSEY DARST
VENUS DE MARS

INTERVIEW: DOUGLAS GLOVER

SPECIAL REPORTING: ADAM SEGAL

*I was introduced to the work of Douglas Glover earlier this summer when I was given the unique opportunity to read an early manuscript for Douglas Glover's forthcoming collection of stories, *Savage Love*. It's a gorgeously vivid, inventive, and occasionally brutal collection, steeped in blood, familial affection, and North American history. If you're a fan of short fiction, it's not one to ignore.*

*Glover, who holds a Master of Letters in philosophy from the University of Edinburgh and an MFA from the Iowa Writers' Workshop, has been writing stories, novels, and essays for over thirty years. He is also the founder of the online literary magazine *Numéro Cinq*. Douglas Glover is, as *Macleans*' Magazine suggested in a review of his 2003 novel *Elle*, "the most eminent unknown Canadian writer alive." Indeed, *Elle* won the Governor General's award for Fiction, Canada's most prestigious literary award. But let's not listen to the awards for a moment, and instead listen to the man himself.*

I recently spoke with Glover about the flickering quality of ironic language, about the proper ways of approaching historical fiction, about talking corpses and strangled cats, and finally about the massive importance of human self-delusion. Read on, read on:

WHOLE BEAST RAG: Some time ago I listened to a **particular episode** of the *New Yorker's* Fiction Podcast, in which Nicole Krauss reads and discusses a story by Bruno Schulz, "Father's Last Escape." Krauss says the author deserves admiration because, "there really is nothing like entering into the world of Bruno Schulz. It is a complete world. It is so fully realized, and so completely unlike any other world that another writer has created." With apologies to Krauss, I initially found the statement rather humorous, because it seems like a thing that could easily be said about any author one admires.

But then I'm not so sure. Your novel *Elle*, for example, bears a blurb proclaiming "Only Douglas Glover could write such a bawdy, outrageously modern historical novel." Having gained some familiarity with your work, I must agree that this is a specialty of yours. So I ask: when we say of an author "only they are capable of constructing such a work," are we dealing in biased, uncritical hyperbole, or are we merely making the reasonable suggestion that every author, as an individual human being, has a unique set of abilities that inherently set them apart from the crowd?

DOUGLAS GLOVER: Your question reminds me of Borges' Pierre Menard whose ambition is to rewrite *Don Quixote*. His *Don Quixote* will be better than the original (though exactly the same) because all Cervantes had to do was write the book whereas Menard will have to reinvent himself as Cervantes first before recomposing the novel. The uniqueness of the author precedes the uniqueness of the book, but they are inseparable.

I agree with your initial reaction to that Nicole Krauss passage. It sounds like literary logrolling to me. You could substitute any great writer's name for "Bruno Schulz" and the sentences would carry the same intellectual heft (as in, not much). What she says is not biased hyperbole but tautology. Creating a particular world of the book is bullet point one on the writer's job description. If you don't do it, you haven't produced a work of art. And it goes without saying that the closer you hew to your own internal motions and rhythms, the less likely your work will look like anyone else's. A lot of commercial fiction does read continuously, one author to another, but that's not a compliment.

WBR: Certainly not. *Elle* contains a number of clever asides that fit within the context of the narrative but seem to be more pointedly directed at the contemporary reader. One of my favorites follows an anecdote about the illiterate nurse Bastienne becoming a modest literary success: "thus two people who could neither read nor write contrived to author a bestseller, a pattern that I suspect will prove the rule rather than the exception as the history of literature unfolds." Are you often wary of popular, celebrated fiction? And are there other aspects of contemporary literature, whether as an industry or an art form, of which you are sometimes cynical?

DG: On the surface, *Elle* is about a young woman marooned on an island in the Gulf of St. Lawrence in the 16th century, but on another level it is about first contact between the Old World of Europe and the New World of America (in this case, Canada). But those phrases Old World and New World are already metaphors; at the same moment *Elle* discovers Canada, the Old World of Europe encounters a New World of book printing and Protestantism, the incipient Enlightenment. *Elle* is a reader, we're in the first decades of the book publishing industry, it's like the Internet in our day, I was fascinated by the idea that all the basic economic structures of modern publishing were in place by the 1540s and that, yes, the bestsellers were memoirs by retired generals, books of devotion, recipe books and pornography. Rabelais had to pitch travel books to his publisher to make money. Cynicism isn't the right word to describe my reaction; I am delighted with the way humans view themselves, how they compulsively self-represent as more original, rational, romantic, mysterious, and noble than they are. There is always a joke in the common pose.

The jokes about publishing are a motif in the book; they come to a nice climax when *Elle* meets Rabelais, becomes his lover and helps write the proto-novel *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, a book in which the heroes set sail from the west coast of France and are swept up in a series of adventures on unknown islands (sound vaguely familiar?). This is not an entirely implausible conjecture: whether or not Rabelais wrote the last volume of *Gargantua and Pantagruel* himself is a matter of scholarly debate; he was curious about Jacques Cartier's Canadian explorations; and there was a rumor that someone at court invited him to help Cartier write his memoirs. Around the date *Elle* returns to France, Rabelais really did disappear for a couple of years, hiding out from the vengeful Dominicans after his spiritual protector inconveniently died. So the last joke on the string is the idea that a promiscuous girl from Canada invented the modern novel.

WBR: The notion of Rabelais as a character within your novel brings me to another question: what do you suppose ought to be the proper relationship between an author and the celebrated writers who came before him? How do we admire while still remaining critical, engage a work closely without imitating it? Should there be a set pantheon of canonized authors requiring our attention, or are we better off seeking out whatever pleases us?

DG: Unanswerable question. I am the last person you should ask about propriety. Especially when the question strikes off from my use of Rabelais as a character in *Elle*. Rabelais's bread and butter M.O. was the inappropriate and ironic misuse of the ancient greats. My use of Rabelais is Rabelaisian. Everything I write attests to my pleasure in inappropriate relations and the subversion of propriety.

Derrida uses that word "tremble" to describe the way some texts work; I use the word "flicker" (in *The Enamoured Knight* and in *Attack of the Copula Spiders*). Both words describe the intensely strobe-like character of ironic language, the way it asserts and subverts, the two aspects of meaning oscillating like a candle flickering or a body trembling. This trembling, flickering, shimmering aspect of language is what interests me. Propriety is the antithesis of irony; propriety invites irony; propriety maroons Elle on a deserted island in the Gulf of St. Lawrence and leaves her to die.

WBR: Is this desire to subvert propriety what keeps you coming back to historical settings for your narratives? The colonization of the New World, the American Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, the Civil War, and so on. I suspect there is a sacredness—or rather a stiff and stilted feeling of the academy—popularly associated with the past, which probably makes it so fun to play around with.

I find it wonderful that, in the Author's Note for *Elle*, you conclude a dizzying list of references and source materials with the statement, "otherwise, I have tried to mangle and distort the facts as best I can." Are these distortions perhaps what make your characters and settings feel so current, so relatable, so alive?

DG: There are at least a couple of different kinds of historical fiction. The most common and recognizable is your garden-variety costume melodrama in which the author pretends to be recreating a period and event. This more or less defines the genre in the popular imagination. I am much more interested in writing fiction about history itself, various theories, how it's constructed, how versions of a history compete for authoritative priority, and how that defines the present discourse. So my novels juxtapose competing historical narratives (as in Bakhtin's definition of the novel as a text containing competing discourses). Of course, I do the research and try hard to impress upon the reader the down-and-dirty reality of life in Revolutionary America or 16th century Canada. That's part of the canvas. But then I flood the research with the flickering light of irony by the deliberate use of anachronism in order to demonstrate that verisimilitude is technique, not the meaning of the book.

My later novels and stories are systems of plot and subplot, image pattern, and hierarchized themes that work together to create a complex dramatic structure. I try not to make them reducible to a single theme or impulse (such as subverting propriety). If there is a totalizing theme in operation, it has something to do with the idea that things are always more complicated than we think they are. (In the same vein, one critic said he couldn't find a central thesis in my book *The Enamoured Knight*, he was absolutely right; that's not the way I work; I'm not a topic sentence-body-conclusion kind of writer.) The novels work as self-referential semantic systems: all the plots in *Elle* and *The Life and Times of Captain N* are graduated versions of one another and reflect one another; the motifs of dualism, cultural contact, colonization, New World/Old World, translation, love, redemption, hybridity, etc. are all explained within the works by reference to each other.

DG: I'm glad you enjoy being called the enemy. It shows a flexibility of vision. And I am only being half ironic when I say that. This goes back to the question of history, authority and propriety: I sense a drift in the American mental self-construct; people are getting a tad bored with the authorized version (forget whether it's right or wrong; most ideas die of tedium). So it is refreshing to find another point of view presenting itself. But you're also right to say that I cast a "sympathetic yet critical" eye on all sides. People live, love and die inside systems of ideas that to them seem reasonable and moral. The paradox and the joke of existence is that other people live, love and die inside quite different systems of ideas that also seem reasonable and moral. So who is right? Probably no one. Too many vibrant belief systems have come and gone for us to put much stake in whatever is currently available. So I concentrate on a poignant nexus of existence within colliding systems of ideas; what is it like to be an Inuit hunter as his myths deteriorate before his eyes? What is it like to be a loyal colonist watching that American idea march up through the forest toward you with a completely new idea of history?

As to the brutal and unsettling passages, there is a bit in *Captain N* where someone says there is nothing so violent as the thing that changes your mind. So to begin with violence is relative and the mental violence of clashing myth and ideology (not to mention the clashing ideas of love between men and women) is far more brutal than an amputation. All the physical violence on the page is a simulacrum of the psychic violence; just as the sex on the page is a physical image of love (love is one intimate strangeness meeting another intimate strangeness—how can you show that with character in the missionary position?).

That said I don't want to be reductive; things are always more complicated than they seem. I am steeped in Rabelais (and Bakhtin), and besides the misuse of the ancient greats, Rabelais makes a joke of juxtaposing the body (bawdy) and the spiritual. The mystery of human existence is the infinite extensibility of the mind (image of the soul) trapped inside a gross shell. Pain and discomfort are spiritual markers; they ground us in the body and the earth, in our own paradoxical nature. We're talking corpses; that's the essence of the situation; we yap away while the body rots. It's awful and funny. A lot of contemporary writing ignores the body or tarts it up by moralizing it—think of our contemporary health, exercise and eating fads. Most North American writers have stopped writing characters who smoke cigarettes (unless the characters feel guilty about it or also do drugs and murder people).

WBR: Do you feel, then, that humor is one of the better ways to struggle with these awful, paradoxical truths of human existence? (We've already established that irony is your preferred mode, do irony and humor necessarily go hand in hand?)

I ask because on your recommendation I read Witold Gombrowicz's *Cosmos*, an enigma of a novel that I believe could stand to be interpreted some 10,000 ways and still have secrets left to keep. To me, *Cosmos* is a sort of anti-novel, sharply criticizing the human (and literary) need to create symbols and find meaning in every little sign and phenomenon. Slowly Gombrowicz builds the case that this need to put meaning to random events manifests itself as a sort of existential masturbation; an observation that is as dark as it is hilarious. Did you get a similar sense from *Cosmos*? What is it about Gombrowicz's work that draws your admiration?

DG: Gombrowicz leans toward Surrealism, but then he is also aware of the history of philosophy. He knows about the Enlightenment and Husserl's *Crisis in Philosophy* and the loss of Being and the turn to Phenomenology. So there is a loony side to what he is doing and at the same time it's very serious. He has that flickering quality I described earlier. In *Cosmos*—the title makes it obvious—he is investigating the phenomenology of world creation, the mental process by which we construct a frame of meaning for ourselves. The process is comically rational (Husserl demonstrated that reason was never going to get where it said it was going). You begin to notice repetition and pattern; you look for other instances of the pattern; eventually you decide the pattern is real. This is the process of reason and science. But, of course, in the novel what seems real to the narrator is utterly ridiculous. As Gombrowicz makes clear there are two other forces working on the human mind besides reason. One is the dark and unknowable current of desire; the narrator can't sleep with the girl he's attracted to so he suddenly and incomprehensibly kills her cat (it's a sick joke, right? he orgasmically strangles her pussy). The other force is the desire or gaze of the other. Gombrowicz learned from Hegel the social construction of the self. As soon as you enter a relationship (however trivial), you begin to bend yourself to fulfill, oppose or circumvent the desire of the other. Even if you resist, the purity of selfhood has been corrupted. So you construct another self in secret, the masturbatory self, the self who doesn't have to relate or unmask himself before the eyes of the other. Out of this triangle of forces, Gombrowicz creates a truly awe-ful, hilarious novel. The narrator discovers patterns and deduces meaning; his own sexual violence betrays reason; he discovers that the secret life of the adult male patriarch is one of chronic secret masturbation (the creation of trivial, private, obsessive cosmos).

WBR: Your essay "Mappa Mundi: The Structure of Western Thought" contains, or so it seems to me, an underlying anxiety about the remarkable human capacity for perceiving the world selfishly and self-importantly. I noticed it first with the aside in which you note "how easily and thoroughly we acquiesce to our own narratives," but it comes to a head with your subsequent dismissal of Existentialism:

"Though appealing to poseurs, young people and feverish romantics who like to see themselves as heroes, the idea that heroic choice, commitment and passion can somehow make one person's life more authentic than another's is poppycock. This is a recipe for good novels, bad marriages and terrible social cruelty."

I'm particularly intrigued because of what you said earlier about the way we compulsively self-represent ourselves as greater than we really are. This inflated sense of self-worth, is it avoidable? Does consuming fiction enhance or abate its effects? And if we are speaking of idols, is the exaggerated self the real idol we should worry about smashing?

DG: I am pretty sure I am not anxious about the human tendency to self-delude or self-dramatize. I think it's kind of cute, one of our more endearing traits (as opposed, say, to genital mutilation, mass murder, and the rape of the planet). Our capacity for deluded self-presentation is the basis of a lot of great novels—*Don Quixote* is the model. Existentialism is just a dead-end branchline of the mighty network of western philosophy. I talk about it in the context of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche and their rather similar responses to the loss of immanence, what is called their aesthetic argument. The sentences you quote are the ironic climax of that 2-3 paragraph discussion. They don't represent the argument itself. My essay is really about the mysterious thing we sometime call the experience of God and what philosophy has made of that idea over the centuries.

The question of "consuming" fiction and whether or not that has a good effect is lovely. You remember that in *Elle*, the heroine eats her books to stay alive. Obviously, I do think that when in need, you should consume your library. During the siege of Leningrad, Viktor Shklovsky burned his books and manuscripts to keep warm. There are many good uses for books besides reading.

But to be serious for a moment, in *The Enamoured Knight* I spend a lot of time thinking about the way our culture has responded to books. From the outset one thread of western discourse has described books with deep suspicion (Plato thought we should ban poets from the Republic, for example). *Don Quixote* is a great comic novel about a man who goes mad (becomes deluded) by reading fiction. Of course, Cervantes didn't believe people go mad from reading books; he was extrapolating a philosophical argument, a thread of discourse. He has tremendous fun with book burnings and walling up libraries. At the end of *The Enamoured Knight* I develop a theory about what I call a basket of themes that more or less define the concerns of the modern novel, and one of those themes is a suspicion of the book. So then you start counting how many books of you've read that have book burnings (even Jane Austen has a book burning; it's in *Mansfield Park*). One of those curious human delusions, it turns out, is that books cause people to have self-delusions; both Cervantes and Austen knew this and wrote wonderful books about it. There really isn't space to enlarge upon the topic, especially as I did write a whole book about it already (which, probably, you should not try to eat).

WBR: In "Mappa Mundi"—an essay commenting in part on the way in which Western philosophy has slowly turned on and weakened itself, "as if philosophy, having set out to prove and establish reality, self, God and soul, has only managed to cast doubt on everything it touches,"—you end with a rather poetic image I find incredibly appealing:

"After all is said and done, out of the whirlwind of imagination and language, there is yet "a still, small voice" that has nothing to do with God (yet) but is my voice, the voice of the self, which may be nothing but the self who talks and protests and expresses a desire that does not stop at the surface of things but leaps, however quixotically, into the dark."

Perhaps this question will suggest that I missed the broader argument of the essay, but this voice leaping into the darkness, is this how you perceive the project of literature? Or am I projecting too heavily? You mention in one of the essay's side notes that "novels are the modern form, debased epics tied to subjectivity and verisimilitude." And yet you write novels. Which I suspect requires no small amount of hope on your part.

DG: I am pretty sure I didn't mean to arouse any hope in the reader. We all go to our long home, and no amount of novels, self-help books, and philosophy can change that.

The last lines of the essay are actually meant to be a twist in the argument that I had traced through the previous thirty or so pages. The history of western philosophy is an unsteady march away from the delusion that you can describe (know) the world as it is. We have gradually shed ourselves of sanguine hypotheses such as God, soul, self and the possibility of any dependable information about same. The vehicle for this shedding is logic—the law of non-contradiction.

Descartes was a precursor of the Modern; he applied the law of non-contradiction ruthlessly until there was nothing left but the indisputable fact that he was thinking, i.e. applying the law of non-contradiction. I think, therefore I am. (One can make jokes about this now since it's pretty clear that most of us don't have thoughts we can call our own; the mind is more like a media player and as such one mind is pretty much like every other mind.) My argument at the tail-end of "Mappa Mundi" is a version of the *Cogito*, or a parody. Put it this way: if humans are a self-deluding species, their self-delusions are signs of life. The fact that I am deluded about myself proves that I exist. I may only exist in order to be self-deluded. I may never know anything else about this mysterious deluded being other than the fact of its self-delusion. But that's something, isn't it?

So far from being "anxious" about self-delusion, I find it to be the one true thing you can say about human beings. (Zizek makes a similar sort of argument after Lacan in *The Desert of the Real*: the symptom is not a real thing, but it is a sign of the absence of the Real.) The fact that humans keep yapping so ardently about themselves is comic and ever so slightly heroic. At the end of *Don Quixote*, the old man drops his delusions, returns to sanity and prepares to die. His friends, Sancho, the curate and the student Carrasco, who have been trying throughout the novel to cure his mania, suddenly realize how stupid that is and, too late, begin to rekindle Quixote's fantasies. It is a strange and beautiful ending, utterly poignant and true.