Spring 1975

on Max Crawford

M. Miles

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank

Part of the Creative Writing Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss4/35
imagination step outside and meet on the middle-ground of the poem.

I must mention that there is no price listed on this collection. It is a very limited edition, (I had to borrow a review copy), just 230 copies, numbered and beautifully printed on handmade rice paper. I can only suggest that we hope and watch for a collection of Tess Gallagher’s poems from a major press. I’m sure one will be forthcoming. That way we can all get letters from home.

Robert Wrigley

THE GOOD OLE NOVEL

WALTZ ACROSS TEXAS
Max Crawford
Farrar Straus & Giroux, $8.95

Why did you want to kill somebody the last time you got the urge to flick the switchblade? Sex? Money? Revenge? None of the above? Some of the above are central to the plot of Max Crawford’s *Waltz Across Texas*, in some combination.

Flash to “Sugar” Campbell, your basic good Joe, returning home to Flavannah, Texas from his collapsed business in California. His father is dead, the estate worthless, and this old pal “Son” Cunningham has offered Sugar a mysterious job. Bored, at loose ends, Sugar takes the job and finds loco weed growing right thick on the El Toro Ranch where Cunningham works. Old man Kitchens passed this faltering spread to his son “Tee” Kitchens (or “Tee” Texas or “Little Tee”) hoping to run the place by proxy. But Tee seizes power spurred on by his city-bred wife, Adrienne (“A.”). Tee’s gigantic life insurance policy may play a sinister role in these
maneuvers. When Sugar gets to El Toro, two cowpokes have died suspiciously, Tee has employed Son Cunningham to get El Toro functional at any cost, oil barons like Dolph Gunther and his son “Gunner” keep cropping up, and Sugar has no idea what his four hundred a week job is. Weird vibes abound; somebody wants Tee Kitchens dead, Sugar was hired to kill Kitchens, or to be killed and look like Kitchens, or to protect Kitchens. Tee himself proves to be a wildman, unstable, drunken, crazed with the burden of responsibilities. El Toro itself seems chaotic with pointless parties, gunfights, revolts to Tee’s faction or to Old Man Kitchen’s.

Sugar begins to piece together his planned role, but the plans keep shifting. He falls hesitantly into a romance with Adrienne, suspecting this to be part of some plot. P. M. Eastep (“Pork Man” or “P. M.”), a squat West Coast Mafioso also hired by Son for a vague job, goes with Sugar down to Mexico, supposedly to retrieve Tee from a potent booze spree. In Mexico, Sugar loses Pork Man, stumbles into a hotel room with a corpse and gets grazed with a .45, then escapes in a fever back to El Toro. Right after this debacle, Tee returns and seems to clear his finances at a business conference. But after the slightly hysterical celebration that follows, Sugar finds Tee Kitchens with his face bashed in lying on the floor of the smaller ranch house. The focus of Waltz Across Texas shifts from What’s Up? to Who Dunnit? with Sugar conducting a personal investigation up one lie and down another. Eventually the persistant Sugar Campbell reaches some hard conclusions and wraps-things-up in general.

Seems clean. But I finished Waltz Across Texas sensing unanswered deserts, canyons, and prairies inside the book. Technical skill is not the problem—the writing is uniformly excellent. Take Tee Kitchens describing himself when he met Son Cunningham:

“Yessir, the kid was in bad shape, his hands was shaky, his eyes was not clear, his dreams was freakin’ out the help, there wasn’t no lead in his pencil. He had only one pal, old Jack Daniel’s, and he was out to git him. Still is, mebbe, but he’s been sent to the foot of the line. Then one night there I was chasin after some piss-aint loan like it was a soggy-drawered cheerleader, lickin that Sunday-school teacher’s boots, when I happened acrost your ole buddy here and he begun to tell me about the real world, laying on all them twenty-five-cent words; inflation, depression, consolidation, and all that other crap that I pay him to wade through. Ah fuck, you tell the rest of it, Cunningham, my tongue needs a nap.”

Passages with this spark are not uncommon and Crawford expertly

78
paces the tone of the prose to match the plot tempo. The novel is not hard to read, just unsatisfying, both in characterization and overall intent.

Son Cunningham functions as the mainspring of *Waltz Across Texas*. By the end of the book Son has become more important than El Toro, the murder, even Texas itself, since he has encompassed them all. Sugar describes Son’s powerful presence:

Even in high school Son had been a big man, tall and raw-boned. The last time I had seen him, several years after graduation, he had been six two or three, a hundred and ninety pounds. True I wasn’t looking for a man two inches taller, sixty pounds heavier, but it was his face I didn’t know... that strange destroyed face. A face that was still handsome—the nose, the lips had once had delicate lines—but it was too big. There was too much flesh on the skull. It had the look of a body that had been ruined—bruised and swollen. The man’s eyes were hidden.

Son progresses in the novel from puzzling to sinister to demonic. A failed sensitive, Cunningham has turned to lust for power, money and high-class pussy. A revealing exchange occurs near the end of the novel when Sugar confronts Son with the web of deceit and murder Sugar feels certain his old friend masterminded. Cunningham declares himself one of the “golden men” described in Plato’s *Republic* and mentions *Crime and Punishment*; how the murder did not torture Raskolnikov enough. Sugar replies:

“That’s bullshit, Son. You win and everybody knows it. You beat Tee, Adrienne, me, Dolly, everybody. You losing is bullshit, just like your cornball philosophy and your stories about our youth and your crime-and-punishment bullshit—it’s all bullshit to cover up the fact that you know exactly what you’re doing, you’ve known all along, every step.”

Son Cunningham is the most fully realized character in *Waltz Across Texas*—he exposes more fantasies and feelings than anyone and yet they don’t seem enough. Exactly how Son schemes or the nature of his madness or the fine tuning of his lust for Adrienne never quite reach the surface. What remains is that “one cold s.o.b.” can get away with anything if he uses style and drive, especially in Texas. “‘Crime and reward—ole Feodor would have shit a brick,’ ” says Son. He might have at that.

Son would come off better if his characterization didn’t have to pull so much weight. Pork Man and Foose the detective are well developed, but Pork Man’s role, particularly in relation to Sugar,
stays too hazy until the conclusion and Foose provides little more than comic relief and some slight sleuthing work. The women in *Waltz Across Texas* are pretty much trapped in the Western Romance-Adventure slots and wield no real power. June, possessed with prophetic insanity, stands out but appears only briefly and irregularly. Adrienne is both *femme fatale* and *Macbeth*-style bitch, but she rarely rises above the level of chief sex object.

Adrienne didn't remove her sunglasses, so that I was acutely aware of the planned warmth of her smile, her easy sardonic attitude toward me. Each part of her I found soft, easy, yet somewhere she was cold and hard.

Much energy focuses on Adrienne and when Sugar announces near the end of the novel that she *is* the treasure, it goes over—but the rich princess never reveals enough interior to make her preciousness seem real or important.

A similar lack of definition surrounds Sugar. The incident with his father and the wasted farm drops out of sight—Sugar never evolves any resolution. Why does Sugar stick with Son so persistently, especially when he finds himself likely to be shamed, imprisoned, or killed? Sugar is labeled bored, homesick, a voyeur, but nothing develops enough to have any impact. The romance with Adrienne peters out. The revenge on Son for the murder ends frustrated. Sugar wanders out the door at the end of *Waltz Across Texas* and the meaning of his dance goes too.

If *Waltz Across Texas* is intended to be a heavily commercial book, a raw potboiler, then it's not crass enough. You can't make up glittery bunk about it ("Waltzing means never having to say you're guilty . . .?") There's not enough sex and the murder isn't Evel Knieveled. Besides, the strokes aren't broad and simplistic—Son, Sugar, Pork Man keep bursting from their boxes and puzzling the reader. Max Crawford doesn't want to be the new Earl Stanley Gardner anyway; *Waltz Across Texas* begs to be richer, more concentrated, not a bucks-and-murder-covered candy. Crawford's book hovers around the territory of the Good Ole Novel. The Good Ole Novel is a tale of brotherly guffaws and stock womenfolk intertwined with violence, lust, and lots of hooch—guys divergent as Ernest Hemingway and Zane Grey write Good Ole Novels. A distilled, pointed *Waltz Across Texas* would be a fine current example of this sensibility, but Crawford shies away from the path too often.

*Waltz Across Texas* stands now as a potentially probing novel
harnessed by fake schmaltz appeal. What drives men to kill for power in a world slithering with lies and faithless women? What part of evil do we share with one eye open? Monster questions, but the book never hogties one head-on. The plot rambles and seems to pointlessly repeat loops, such as the endless conflicting stories after Tee’s murder—I mean, how much suspense can you cram into compulsive fibbers? Crawford seems to want to haul Dostoevski to Dallas and the result could be a bitchin’ yarn. But Waltz Across Texas, written by a native, reads like a tourist.

M. Miles