The plausible and the implausible in Carolyn Chute's Snow Man

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3 December 1999

Snow Man, by Carolyn Chute, Harcourt, Brace & Co., New York, 1999, 242 pp. $23.00

Carolyn Chute published her first novel, *The Beans of Egypt, Maine* in 1985, and its sequel, *Letourneau's Used Auto Parts*, in 1988. These were important novels: it seemed that without any sentimentality whatsoever, Chute was able to depict the concerns for love and happiness of the working poor at a particular time (the Reagan/Bush years) and place (rural Maine). The novels told about families of all sorts, stable and decaying ones, families made up of two people and families that stretched the biological definition of the term. The pinch of poverty and denial could be felt everywhere in these books, and the strain on the emotions under it.

Chute played with the wicked variety of life among a group of people that readers hardly ever read about. These first novels of Chute's flowed unabashedly and honestly from her own life. There was unquestionably a spontaneous relation of the author to the material. As she said at the time of publication of *The Beans of Egypt, Maine*, "This book was involuntarily researched. I have lived poverty. I didn't choose it. No one would choose humiliation, pain, and rage."

In her latest novel, *Snow Man*, an alienated building contractor from Maine, Robert Drummond, has driven down to Boston where, with a group of friends and relatives who have organized themselves as a "militia," he has shot to death a conservative senator named Kip Davies. All of Drummond's companions have been killed by the police and Drummond has been wounded. A manhunt is going on and a media outcry over "Nazi militiamen" swamps the airwaves.

Drummond, bleeding and semiconscious, is found by the household staff of another senator, Jerry Creighton, a liberal apparently in the Kennedy mode. Two staff members, Art and Mark, bring him inside, find a veterinarian to treat his wounds and inform the senator's visiting daughter, Kristy, a professor in a women's studies department, of Drummond's presence. Later, the senator's artiste wife, Connie, is let in on the secret. The family and staff, without the senator's knowledge (he is in Washington until the very end of the novel), harbor Drummond for several months. The senator's wife and daughter care for him, argue with him, have sex with him, while Drummond prepares to continue his mission of striking at the political establishment.

Overall, *Snow Man* does not stand as a work of art, but I wouldn't completely dismiss it either. Robert Drummond is the sort of character who eventually had to—and ought to—break through into fiction. Too many people in the United States are feeling too intensely the things that he feels: helplessness at their material situations, an overriding disgust with the establishment and self-destructive despair. Chute notices the presence of this sensibility in the American population, and she has decided to write about it. This is an accomplishment. In *Snow Man* the cops beat you up in places that don't show; senators, the liberals included, make up a corporate-sponsored mafia; and members of the media come across as more or less hysterical liars. This is the actual social environment in which violent and misguided acts of rage take place, and it is no small matter to say, as Chute certainly does, that there is a very bad smell in the air, emanating from above.

Important as his sort of character is, Robert Drummond is not much more than a literary doodle. The reader is not able to learn much about either Drummond or the people that help him, and the reasons they do so. The house staffers, Art and Mark, appear to be reluctant to turn Drummond over to the police because of their opposition to the death penalty. Art says that they all need to give the situation some "deep thought," but that is precisely what never happens. One might think that these are exactly the sort of people that Chute would develop, but they are pretty much upholstery after the first few scenes. We never really understand what chord Drummond is striking with them. The veterinarian, more trustworthy than an MD in Boston, so it seems, whom they call on to treat Drummond expresses no reluctance to help, but no reason, either. He steals medicines for Drummond, acts like a stand-up guy, but we can hardly sense any connection between him and Drummond's beliefs or actions.

Most mysterious of all are the reactions of the senator's daughter Kristy and wife Connie. They secrete Drummond for months in the face of a protective FBI cordon around their house. They are deeply concerned for the man from the outset and take every sort of risk for him. What has developed in their lives up until this moment that might lead to this? We receive some hints, but nothing that would really tell us why these women would help an anti-government fugitive. Kristy drives a Porsche, an overt display of privilege. Her role as a women's studies professor plays a superficial role in her consciousness: she occasionally bristles at sexist remarks that Drummond and the other men make, but a sense of the politics of this sort of a person is completely missing in a deeply political situation.

At one point Kristy gets mad at Drummond because he calls the

police and government "socialist." She says to him: "'Socialism means government, by the working people, by the proletariat! Socialism is you!'" Where does this come from? I doubt that an American senator's daughter and an academic in her early thirties, much less a professor of women's studies, would say such thing in 1999. I suspect that she'd be more prone to modeling herself after Hillary Clinton, whom she might have met over a dinner with her father and his colleagues. Such a woman would not harbor the killer of a senator without the greatest possible internal dissent.

Connie, Senator Creighton's wife, is a similar case. While she has lived through more liberal times and tries to maintain herself with painting, she is immersed in an upper-class world of play-readings and Women's Club meetings, which she conspicuously stops attending at Drummond's appearance. Her own internal—contradictory and conflicted—logic is missing. At one point she muses on the right-wing voting record of her liberal husband and recalls that in "all the union-busting schemes and government property giveaways and investor rights acts, Jerry had not seemed ashamed. He told her, 'It is the climate.'"

Wouldn't "the climate" also have had a deep effect on the wife of such a man? Aren't the friends and acquaintances of this family politicians, judges, corporate lawyers? There are tremors of guilty consciences in the senator's wife and daughter, and that is to be expected, but the subversion of supporting an enemy of their own kind so easily, with such good intentions, is a stretch.

This novel also makes much about groundswell of support by ordinary people for the assassination of Kip Davies by Drummond. In the first scene in the book, a group of workers in a bar in Boston watching news footage of the assassination cheer on the militiamen. I was not convinced. There is widespread distrust of the US government today by its citizens, in Boston as elsewhere, but this scene does this ring true? Acts of individual terror, political and otherwise, do not generally elicit the kind of unanimous sympathy Chute depicts. It isn't implausible at all that in certain historical situations groups of people might support or shelter the assassin of a political figure. But this novel purports to take place today or in the near future. If the job of a novel is to conceal its art and to create a plausible fictional dream, then *Snow Man* fails because it does not reflect the actual possibility of feelings (and actions) in groups of people, any more than in individuals.

Finally, Chute stumbles even with Robert Drummond, the best-drawn character of the book. Drummond is too smoothed out. There is too much that is acceptable about him, and indeed the liberal senator's family can accept him. In the novel the media label him as a fascist, but as it turns out, the small swastika tattooed on his arm is only a youthful indiscretion. "'Then, Robert ... you aren't full right-wing.'" Kristy says, and Robert smiles and says, "'Guess not.'" Kristy and her mother are relieved, and the reader is supposed to be as well. Drummond does not always behave well, but in the end, he is well-intentioned. Aside from being a gun-owner, it isn't really clear what makes him a right-winger. In fact he looks up to Zapatistas and other Latin American oppositionists.

If there is some message about not attaching easy labels here, fine—but even if Drummond doesn't know what sort of political creature he is, then that sort of confusion, its history in Drummond's life, needs to be shown. Where did he get the idea that the police are socialistic, and why does he have sympathy for the Zapatistas? As it is, Drummond fits altogether too easily into the senator's family. Again, I am not arguing that such accommodations are impossible in life or in literature, but there has to be a consistency amidst contradiction, a necessity to the development of a human personality.

And this is the biggest problem: we do not really learn what makes Drummond do what he does. Chute tells us that his wife has had to take two jobs, that he has lost the family farm to the state in payment for his mother's nursing-home bills. Yet the feelings that stand in-between this kind of personal disaster and holding a gun to a politician's head are missing. We are supposed to hear the frustration when Drummond, talking about money problems, tells Connie, "'Let's see ... teeth or female exam? Hernia or the leakin' roof? Manifold valve in the truck ... orrrrrr property taxes? Which? Which? Which?'" To me this reads like a list of causes from which I should deduce the proper effects. But what is it that leads him to organize his friends and plan and carry out an assassination? What ideas and what feelings? What has made Drummond see and hear these awful choices in a new way, different from his life before, when he could pay the bills and his wife could stay with the kids?

As with the other characters in the novel, Chute makes Drummond's development depend on coincidence and a simple one-thing-follows-another chain of events. Complex feelings, internal strife are left out. Everything is very mechanical. More than this, there is not much of a sense of how things develop in the world. No one, least of all the author, seems interested in asking why the good life has slipped away in America for people like Drummond, once upon a time known as the middle-class.

It is something to make a novel about people who confront the problems Robert Drummond confronts, though. Not many writers are doing that today. It is good and important that someone has tried. And if Chute has made the behavior of her characters implausible, then at the very least she has presented us with a problem to solve: what will it take to really depict the feelings and actions of ordinary people who are being stretched to their limits?