

Woman as animal: Bonnie Jo Campbell's *Once Upon a River*

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21 October 2011

Bonnie Jo Campbell came to national attention in 2009 with her short story collection, *American Salvage*, which became a finalist for the National Book Award. She has been compared to John Steinbeck, Flannery O'Connor and William Faulkner for her depictions of rural and working class life. Her most recent novel, *Once Upon a River*, was released in July.

Although *Once Upon a River* is Campbell's second novel, it is written as prequel to her first, *Q Road*, which followed young Rachel after her mother Margo shoots a local womanizer and disappears. While *Q Road* was Rachel's story, *Once Upon a River* is Margo's, in which the source of her eccentricities and fears is revealed.

The Margo of *Once Upon a River* is sixteen and the time is the late 1970s. The story follows Margo Crane as she travels the Stark River, a fictional waterway in southwest Michigan. It begins with a series of traumatic events, any one of which might derail the life of any teen. While Margo is mourning the loss of her beloved grandfather, she is abandoned by her self-absorbed mother, raped by a close uncle in a garage on Thanksgiving Day, and then witnesses the shooting of her father. It is the last event that is the final impetus for Margo's escape to the river. She is a resourceful and potentially compelling character—an excellent shot and talented cook of wild game and fish, who understands her environment and how to survive in it.

Margo's interactions with the river, almost a character in itself, are among the strongest and most deeply-felt portions of the book. This is a verdant place of subtle beauty that has been ravaged by some of the highest rates of industrial pollution in the US. The Kalamazoo River, which runs through the area depicted by Campbell, is a Superfund site and last year was the location of a massive oil spill that poured more than

80,000 barrels into the river. (See, "Michigan oil spill forces evacuations"; "EPA holds public meeting on Michigan oil spill")

When Campbell writes about this setting, the social and environmental contradiction is well established and not overdone. After a lengthy passage on Margo's childhood spent swimming, fishing, and catching turtles, Campbell reminds us, "They all fished the snags at the edges of the river for bluegills, sunfish, and rock bass, though they avoided the area just downstream of the Murray Metal Fabricating plant, where a drainpipe released a mixture of wastewater, machine oil, and solvents in to the river—some of the fish there had strange tumors, bubbled flesh around their lips, a fraying at the gills."

All of this seems appropriate to an exploration of the complexities of late twentieth-century life, in the general tradition of *Huckleberry Finn*. However, when Margo flees to the river in search of her mother this is not what we find. Instead, Margo stumbles from one unhappy sexual encounter to the next. All the people she meets along the river are men, and except for one ailing, old man named Smoke, her interaction with each one of them is largely sexual. No doubt there is some reality to this. Female teenage runaways face much higher rates of physical and sexual abuse than their peers.

However, because of the way in which Campbell places these encounters in her narrative, the reader feels set up to interpret them as something more than a sociological fact, rather as pivotal moments of self-discovery. But are they? This is difficult to gauge, since Margo does not seem to change much from one liaison to the next. This incongruity leaves the reader with a distinct sense of unreality, further deepened when Margo commits a violent act.

Jaimy Gordon, National Book Award winner and the author's mentor, has said of Campbell's female characters, "They're very in touch with their human natures, I think because Bonnie believes that that's the better part of our human nature in some ways. They're like lionesses, with powerful survival skills, strong bodies, and strong sexual impulses. Trouble is, they can't find teachers for this part of themselves—nothing in society is ready to receive them."

This observation is largely true and points to Campbell's strengths as well as her greatest weakness. Margo is indeed portrayed as a kind of feral animal, but at the same time, we must insist, objectively speaking, she is also a human and therefore capable of evolving. In Campbell's hands, Margo's personality has no plasticity; her body simply moves through differing settings and she reacts only as an animal might ... by instinct. She seems, in many ways, an almost mythic abstraction of self-containment and isolated eccentricity. The novelist keeps Margo so busy having sex and shooting or gutting animals that she loses track of the need to change and deepen her central character. In this sense, Margo is not a real girl, but only the idea of a girl.

Despite the rigidity of Margo's character, and the social absurdity of the story, it is difficult not to feel sad by the end. We are left with a very pregnant Margo Crane, swimming naked in the river off the houseboat on which she now lives. Nothing has materially changed for her—she is still uneducated, with little source or hope of income, and still trapped in her Annie Oakley-inspired fantasy of self-reliance. She remains isolated and unable to relate to other human beings. She floats, like Ophelia, incapable of leaving the river, and completely arrested in time. "As Margo floated, the baby floated with her. The black dog left his food bowl and jumped off the side of the gangplank, came splashing down in to the river. He walked up to his knees and lapped at the water. Smoke would turn in his grave to see his dog drinking from the river. Margo laughed and held on so as not to be swept away."

Anyone with any sense at all knows, however, that Margo will not hold on, at least not forever. Women like Margo are the first swept away. If Campbell is outraged by the conditions under which her characters are forced to live, it does not come through in *Once Upon a River*. No doubt Campbell feels a deep

empathy with her creations and their plight, and she has an evident love of environmental detail, ably expressed in her short stories. Unfortunately, these things are often obscured by Campbell's equal fondness for the quirky and individualistic to the hazard of any larger social perspective, which may add some fleeting interest, but does not help, in the long run, put flesh on her characters' bones.

Writers such as Campbell, who struggle to depict the reality of everyday life, should be nurtured and encouraged—we need them now more than ever—but neither should their shortcomings be overlooked. It would be to their detriment if we were to do so.



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