A Permanent Member of the Family: Responses to trying and frustrating times—short stories by Russell Banks

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A Permanent Member of the Family by Russell Banks, New York: Harper Collins, 2013, 228 pp.

For the last four decades, Russell Banks has written novels and short stories concerned with—and unsettled about—the lives of American working people. Inevitably, Banks has been affected by the historical and social forces that have molded artists of his generation, especially when they attempt to address social problems in a critical manner. There is a historical texture and complexity missing from his work, and from these recent stories in particular.

Nevertheless, Banks, is critical of American society and takes the side of people who are under the gun. He has depicted them surviving the difficult life situations that arise and confronting those without getting rich, or climbing out of the working class, in the way most people really do (or do not) overcome obstacles. In his earlier works, these trials often took place in New England towns, in the novel *Hamilton Stark* (1978), for example, and the interrelated stories in *Trailer Park* (1981).

Banks has set also his works in Florida and the Caribbean (*Continental Drift* [1985]) and West Africa (*The Darling* [2004]). He has sought a number of times, with mixed results, to relate his characters to broader historical currents. In recent years, the writer has shifted his focus to upstate New York, where he lives (in the small town of Keene, some 65 miles south of the Canadian border) and the locale of many of the stories in this volume.

One passage in *Continental Drift*, for example, takes in the struggles of the poor across the world in the early 1980s. There is something moving about the global sweep of the imagery, and it is hard to recall anything as widely empathetic as this in contemporary fiction. But Banks concludes that in the present, "The metabolic rate of history is too fast for us to observe it." (But hasn't that been one of the tasks of the significant novelist over the past two hundred years or so?) Treating life as people *immediately* live it now (in the manner of numerous contemporary American fiction writers) largely excludes history, and although Banks has set his fiction in the past a number of times, history itself does not seem observable there either.

A case in point is *Cloudsplitter* (1998), Banks's work about the great abolitionist martyr, John Brown, whose efforts prefigured the decisiveness of the Civil War in his refusal to compromise with slavery. The story is told intimately and at times quite passionately, by one of Brown's surviving sons. The reader, however, doesn't obtain a strong, evocative feeling of what it was like to live in the America of the mid-19th century. Brown tends to come across, ahistorically, as an eccentric religious extremist not so different from our contemporary ones.

The novelist's *The Reserve* (2008), set in 1936, also failed to convince as a historical work. The novel features a left-wing illustrator, Jordan Groves, apparently modeled on painter and illustrator Rockwell Kent (1882-1971). Groves falls in love with a wealthy woman. Her family owns a private reserve in the Adirondacks where much of the action takes place.

The book has honest and fresh pictures of the impoverished people who live near the reserve, but, by and large, Banks's characters fail to venture an opinion about what is going on in the world, or to be moved by much beyond their personal lives. In Groves's case, this seems unlikely for a supporter of the Communist Party in this period. As with a number of the author's other works, violence intrudes in *The Reserve* in a lopsided, exaggerated way.

Banks's *Lost Memory of Skin* (2011) is a somewhat better effort. It concerns a young, convicted sex offender, who like many others in his legal situation is forced to live in poverty and homelessness. The novel is an implicit rebuke to the media and politicians who dehumanize emotionally troubled and socially dysfunctional individuals, while ignoring the horrific social and psychological conditions that helped produce them.

In spite of his admirable empathy for the most despised felons, however, Banks introduces other figures who are less credible: an enormously obese genius, for example, who engulfs the novel in a spy drama, the function of which seems only to be to show us that there is no way of knowing objective truth, that all knowledge is opinion.

The stories in *A Permanent Member of the Family* are more artistically successful than the recent novels. These characters and plots rise out of the genuine circumstances of life and, as a rule, the conflicts in the stories speak to the way many people live now. As with his other work, there are limitations as to how deeply Banks is willing to go into the historical circumstances that form contemporary psychology, but, overall, the collection says something valuable and necessary about the last decade in the US.

In "Former Marine," Connie, a retiree in upstate New York, has

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taken to crime because of the disastrous social conditions that affect a large swath of the American population. “It’s not his fault he’s unemployed, using food stamps, on Medicaid, scraping by on social security and unemployment benefits that are about to run out. It’s the economy’s fault. And whoever the hell’s in charge of it.”

Connie’s sons are police officers, and when his law-breaking surfaces, the story ends tragically. “Former Marine” projects a sense of confusion and desperation about the economic disaster that has changed the social landscape in the United States, particularly in upstate New York, a part of the US that has lost more of its population than almost any other in the last twenty years. The story captures the individualistic way that many Americans feel that they can deal with social dislocation. Banks sets the scene well; the diners in small towns and the long car rides on country highways feel authentic.

“Christmas Party” also provides a sense of the psychological damage that inequality has on the have-nots. Sheila and Harold, again in upstate New York, go through a divorce. Sheila then marries Harold’s wealthier friend and neighbor, Bud, whom he now works for. Banks presents Harold as a man whose life is largely empty, who is lost in a small city and whose ex-wife remains present in his thoughts.

Harold is invited to the new couple’s Christmas party. Sheila and Bud’s circumstances seem alien to him. Around them are an affluent group of friends, and Sheila’s newfound happiness is hard for him to accept. “She wasn’t looking at him and was about to step away in the direction of a red-faced couple in matching ski jackets who had just come through the door—summer people, he noticed, up for the holidays to ski at Whiteface and go to parties.”

There is something of Sinclair Lewis’s *Main Street* in this story, but the emotions that unfold have more in common with those in Theodore Dreiser’s work: a sharp hunger, almost a desperation, for acceptance, although without the ambition or drive of Dreiser’s characters. Harold finds himself in the same room with Sheila and Bud’s newly adopted Ethiopian baby. A tense and disturbing moment arrives, but Harold is able to escape.

“Snowbirds” is about Isabel, a woman in her sixties, also from Keene, who purchases a condo in Miami Beach with her husband shortly before he dies. Banks conveys Isabel’s feeling of liberation in the warmer Florida climate where she remakes herself. Her friend Jane has to leave Miami and the possibility of a more carefree life to return home where, “in the absence of full-time jobs, people, more often than not, had to rely on two part-time jobs.”

“Big Dog” reveals the bitter envy that comes out at a dinner party of successful artists and academics when one of them announces winning a prestigious MacArthur Fellowship. No one behaves well. One senses the author’s antipathy to fame and fortune.

An unnecessarily menacing plot turn emerges in “Blue,” about a woman in Miami who has saved up enough money to buy a used car. Banks, however, can make readers feel the hopes and the troubles of those in the bottom 30 percent of income earners in Florida. The used car salespeople are somewhat calculating, but not treated without sympathy. The real objects of scorn are the police and the media.

In “The Green Door,” set at a Native American-owned casino in New York State, a bartender describes his customers: coaches with their high school sports teams; graceful backup performers for Cher; a young, angry Dominican car-wash owner. Here at least a more exotic (or grotesque) character seems an organic part of the landscape: the salesman of prefabricated religious meditation rooms who is looking for a brothel that caters to unconventional tastes. One has a sense of the range of social types in America. The story’s ultimate violence seems less contrived than it does in some of Banks’s writings.

“The Invisible Parrot” describes a decently motivated encounter between a poor man and a poorer woman that then lacks sensitivity. There is harshness in the encounter, but without cynicism on the part of the protagonist or the author.

In many of the stories in *A Permanent Member of the Family*, Banks investigates the responses of ordinary Americans to trying and frustrating times. Often they exhibit passivity or turn their anger inward at themselves. Banks also portrays resilience, generosity and patience in a world that gives back less and less for the effort people put into it.

The nature of the characters’ responses also raises questions. People in these stories, for example, strike back at oppressive and limiting conditions almost always as individuals. They tend to conceive of their problems only in an immediate, unconsidered and often myopic way. There is no doubt that millions of Americans think and act this way. The task of the important artist, however, is to find an artistic means of suggesting something *beyond the limits* of his or her characters’ thinking and acting.

The author’s own understanding is somewhat immediate, limited and myopic. People have not always reacted, even in America, to impending poverty, social dislocation and economic hardship simply as individuals. Broadly conceived and collective solutions have also gripped Americans at other difficult times in history.

The problems depicted are bound up with some of the difficulties of the last half-century or more, including the virtual criminalization of left-wing thought. Insofar as Banks accepts the limitations of his fictional figures, the weight of various social trends, including residual anticommunism, makes its presence felt.

Unfortunately, we get little sense that Banks, like most contemporary artists, although an honest writer, has begun to digest the historical issues that beset his characters and his own writing.

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