

“Give me something to do”

The literary impact and social concerns of American novelist Dave Eggers

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Dave Eggers is among the more interesting contemporary American novelists. Not only has he produced numerous major works of fiction and non-fiction, countless short stories and several screenplays, he has also managed to establish his own publishing agency (McSweeney's), create a small national network of free tutoring centers (826 National), and set up one side project to pressure state governments to raise teacher pay and another to help raise scholarship money for students in financial need. And Eggers is only forty-four years old.

Eggers came to literary prominence with the publication, in 2000, of *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, a largely autobiographical work about how Eggers raised his younger brother following the death of his father in 1991 and mother in 1992 (both from cancer). At the time of his mother's death, Eggers was 21, his brother only eight.

In yet another family tragedy, his sister took her own life in November 2001.

Without wanting to oversimplify, one presumes that the general sympathy with which sufferers are treated in Eggers' novels is owing in no small measure to his own experiences. The premature loss of loved ones, owing to causes personal and social, is a recurring motif.

This is certainly the case in Eggers' latest novel, *Your Fathers, Where Are They? And the Prophets, Do They Live Forever?*, which was published in June.

As the story opens, the protagonist, Thomas, has kidnapped a famous astronaut, Kev, and brought him to an abandoned seaside military base. The kidnapping of the astronaut is only the beginning. Thomas's search for answers, to questions both political and personal, leads him to kidnap, in succession after Kev: a congressman, a former teacher, his own (Thomas's) mother, a police officer, a hospital administrator and, finally, a young woman he has met while walking near the base.

The novel consists of a series of one-on-one dialogues between Thomas and each of these individuals. The entire story is told only through dialogue, as though it were, or is to become, a screenplay. (Parenthetically, we should note that among Eggers' many writing projects, was the story that served as the basis for the screenplay for Gus Van Sant's *Promised Land*.)

Given the August killing of Michael Brown by police in Ferguson, Missouri, it is timely that a central element of the drama consists of Thomas's discovery that the policeman he has kidnapped turns out to be responsible in part for shooting and killing a friend of Thomas's several years ago. The police-as-executioners theme is reinforced as the book closes with police approaching the barracks and Thomas

little inclined to surrender.

Thomas strikes the reader as principled, though deeply confused. This aspect of the novel seems among the most realistic. Furthermore, a generalized sense of dissatisfaction permeates the novel; the title, for example, is a reference to a Biblical injunction on the need for immediate social repentance. The implication is that the US is ripe for a smiting of Biblical proportions in 2014. Moreover, it will certainly jar reactionaries that the hostage-taker (terrorist in modern parlance) is an idealist, more *driven* to an act of desperation than seeking it out.

The other plot devices (the kidnappings themselves, the pronounced sympathy of the congressman for Thomas, etc.) are far less plausible. The Democratic congressman is the picture of reason, sympathetic to Thomas's objections to military spending on the Iraq war while funding for science and social programs is not to be had. Their dialogue is something of a counseling session for Thomas.

The key problem of the novel is that its treatment of the myriad issues raised by Thomas is simply too facile, too influenced by the prevailing ideological climate. There is no reason to avoid the conclusion that resurrecting something of the Kennedy era would suffice to prevent youth like Thomas from going off the proverbial deep end.

The tendency to skim the surface of more profound issues is in keeping with some of Eggers' previous writing, particularly his 2002 novel, *You Shall Know Our Velocity*. In that work, the protagonist and a close friend attempt to travel around the world in a week during which time they intend to give away, in generally ludicrous ways, money that the former has won in a contest. Like Eggers' latest work, the theme of idealism lacking an adequate channel for expression comes to the fore. The would-be recipients of the travelers' generosity are drawn both realistically and sympathetically as minor characters with their own faults, dreams and apprehensions.

Zeitoun

More impressive was Eggers' 2009 *Zeitoun*, a non-fiction novel that tells the story of a Syrian-born immigrant who has lived in New Orleans since the 1990s. The approach of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 finds Abdulrahman Zeitoun tending to his construction and home repair business, while navigating the challenges of living as a Muslim in the American South, raising a family and finding common ground

with his American-born wife Kathy who has converted to Islam some years before meeting Zeitoun.

Ignoring the pleas of immediate and extended family and friends, and in defiance of the involuntary evacuation order issued by the local government, Zeitoun remains in New Orleans during the horrific storm and the flooding that follows. He helps others, particularly the elderly and those physically unable to evacuate their homes after the flooding, find their way to evacuation points.

While inspecting one of his rental properties shortly after the flooding has begun—Zeitoun is also a small landlord—he is arrested. The bulk of the novel deals with his arrest, detainment at “Camp Greyhound” and transfer to Hunt penitentiary in St. Gabriel, Louisiana (about 70 miles from New Orleans). Zeitoun is not officially charged but told that he is suspected of looting.

The novel provides considerable detail on the appalling conditions at “Greyhound” and Hunt. “Greyhound” is little more than a series of cages built from cyclone fencing on the site of the local bus terminal. The construction and the garbing of the detainees in orange jumpsuits brings Guantánamo Bay immediately to Zeitoun’s mind. Still more jarring is his realization, given his background in construction, that this prison was being built, with considerable expenditure and human effort, at the very time when thousands of residents of New Orleans were stuck on overpasses and in the Superdome with no access to safe drinking water or sanitation. The point is unmistakable: considerable resources were found to police the population while next to nothing was done to provide for the most basic human needs.

Zeitoun was only released after a month in captivity and increasingly frantic efforts on the part of his family to confront state and local authorities. At one point, Kathy Zeitoun is told that she cannot attend the bond hearing for her husband because the temporary court location is “private information”! Her refusal to acquiesce to this and other violations of her (and her husband’s) democratic rights constitutes one of the most moving portions of the book.

Zeitoun has been grievously harmed by the actions taken by the state. He has lost weeks of his liberty and the ability to safeguard his property during that time. When Kathy embraces Abdulrahman at their reunion when he is released from Hunt prison, she is stunned by his condition. “She could feel his shoulders, his ribs. His neck seemed so thin and fragile, his arms skeletal. She pulled back, and his eyes were the same—green, long-lashed, touched with honey—but they were tired, defeated. She had never seen this in him. He had been broken.”

A Hologram for the King

Eggers’ 2012 novel, *A Hologram for the King*, shares many of the strengths and limitations of the author’s other works of fiction.

Alan Clay is a former executive at Schwinn, the storied American bicycle maker that declared bankruptcy in 1992. Clay was once in charge of Schwinn’s factory in Hungary, which he sums up as “a colossal failure.” Now approaching middle age, Clay is himself the victim of processes he helped set in motion.

As he writes to his daughter: “We were getting squeezed by the unions in Chicago and we decided to move it all to Mississippi, where we wouldn’t be bothered by any organizing. ... [We expected it to be] more efficient without the unions, cut em out. More efficient without American workers, period, cut em out. Why didn’t I see it coming.

More efficient without me, too. Hell, Kit, we made it so efficient I became unnecessary. I made myself irrelevant.”

A generally pathetic character, Clay is now selling holograms, presumably for teleconferences. Clay’s current pitch is slated for the king of Saudi Arabia for whom he and his team spend much of the novel waiting. Clay fails to impress his younger colleagues and feels more affinity to Yousef (his driver and a Saudi national).

The dialogues between Clay and Yousef are generally astute and engaging (much more than those between the former and his two would-be love interests in the novel). The relationship between Yousef and Clay is suggestive both of a natural human solidarity, as well as its limitations in a world divided by national borders. The two men both sense that the house of cards that is the Saudi monarchy and its official morality—breached far more than observed—is soon to collapse. In this, Clay is reminded of America. The planned metropolis of King Abdullah Economic City is like “LA with burqas.”

In light of Eggers’ later work, one scene is of particular interest. Clay recalls taking his daughter, now grown-up, to watch the launch of a space shuttle. “When the Shuttle disappeared through the canopy of white clouds, Alan cried, and Kit smiled seeing him cry, and afterward he looked frantically for [astronaut Michael] Massimino, to offer himself to anything he needed. I sold bikes, he would say. I sold capitalism to communists. Let me sell the Shuttle. I will help you get to Mars. Give me something to do.”

Like Thomas in *Your Fathers*, Clay finds it all but impossible to locate a personal ideal to which to devote himself under conditions in which there are no public ideals. One has a sense that the author feels himself in a similar predicament and hence his hyperactive attempt, arising out of motivations decent enough in themselves, to find in various charities a resolution to this dilemma. He too seeks “something to do.”

His work, while still painting characters “with warts and all,” never descends to the misanthropy and condescension all too common today in literature and film. We identify with Clay and Thomas much as we may be dismayed by their actions.

Eggers’ writing is engaging, quite often genuinely funny and daring in taking a sympathetic look at those driven to desperation. It also conveys the impression that ideas come to Eggers fast and furiously. The occupational hazard of such a gift, however, is an inclination to quick treatment of subjects that require greater elaboration and patience and to finding somewhat pat answers, as, for example in *Hologram*, the idea that “sending jobs overseas” is the fundamental cause of what has befallen Clay and, by extension, Western societies more generally.

Eggers’ talents are genuine and his instincts healthy. One hopes that he finds a means to channel these into somewhat more contemplative, probing novels in the coming years.



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