

# Novelist Russell Banks (1940-2023): “Go, my book, and help destroy the world as it is.”

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American novelist Russell Banks’s death on January 3 is a loss to contemporary literature. He was one of the few artists of his generation who chose to depict the daily lives, struggles and tragedies of working people. Banks did so in a genuine and relatively spontaneous manner, although within the artistic and ideological limits imposed by the culture and politics of the last half century.

Most of his 21 fiction works concern working class people, often in upstate New York and northern New Hampshire. The strongest and most intriguing works remain the interrelated short stories in *Trailerpark* (1981), the novels *Continental Drift* (1985), *Affliction* (1989) and *The Sweet Hereafter* (1991), and the stories in *A Permanent Member of the Family* (2013).

Other less artistically successful but more ambitious works include *Cloudsplitter* (1998), about the abolitionist John Brown, and his final work, *The Magic Kingdom* (2022).

A film version of *The Sweet Hereafter* (1997), written and directed by Canadian director Atom Egoyan, received two Oscar nominations. *Affliction* was also adapted as a film, directed by Paul Schrader (of Blue Collar fame). It was released in 1997 as well, starring Sissy Spacek, Nick Nolte, Willem Dafoe and James Coburn. It was nominated for two Oscars, with Coburn winning for best supporting actor.

As a writer of fiction, Banks regarded himself as a product and adherent of classical American realism. He told the *Guardian* in a 2000 interview that he identified with “an important tradition in American writing, going back to Mark Twain and forward to Raymond Carver and Grace Paley, whose work is generated by love of people who are scorned and derided.” He was particularly influenced by the Chicago realist Nelson Algren, whom he regarded as his mentor.

Banks followed an urge that was common in an earlier period of American literature: to show how ordinary people really lived.

Banks was born in 1940 in Newton, Massachusetts, the son of a plumber and a homemaker, but soon moved to Barnstead, New Hampshire, where he was raised. He was bright and artistically talented, but received no encouragement to be a writer. His father, an abusive alcoholic, deserted the family when his son was 12. Banks received a full-tuition scholarship to attend Colgate University in upstate New York, but left after

six weeks and traveled to Florida, where he hoped to find passage to Cuba to join Fidel Castro’s guerrilla movement.

Later, he attended the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill where he was inspired by the civil rights movement and became a member of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). Banks began to compose poetry in the 1970s, a volume of which was published in 1974. His long prose poem, *Family Life*, was published in 1975 followed by *Hamilton Stark* in 1978, a novel about a conservative plumber in New Hampshire, narrated by a Christian socialist.

For much of the rest of his life, Banks taught writing at various universities, in particular Princeton University, where he was close with his colleagues novelists Joyce Carol Oates and Toni Morrison. He lived in upstate New York and Florida.

Banks came to prominence with his third novel, *Continental Drift*, which tells the alternating stories of an oil burner repairman, Bob DuBois, who moves with his family from New Hampshire to Florida, and Vanise Dorsinville, a Haitian refugee fleeing from poverty and trying to reach the United States. In many ways, it is Banks’s most accomplished work. He looks at the difficult, even tragic circumstances of two sets of working people from different parts of the Western Hemisphere. Both characters seek a better life. Both experience frustrations, indignities, abuse and ultimately tragedy, but one which emerges seamlessly out of social conditions they confront in common.

In *Continental Drift*, Banks raises the possibility of larger forces acting behind individuals’ lives but dismisses it. “The metabolic rate of history is too fast for us to observe it. ... At the same time, the metabolic rate of geology is too slow for us to perceive it, so that, from birth to death, it seems to us ... that everything happening on this planet is what happens to us, personally, privately, secretly.”

The skepticism about knowing the world is also applied to relations between people. When Bob has an affair with a young black woman in Florida, Banks informs us, “but like most white men, he’s not imaginative enough to believe that being a woman is extremely different from being a man and being black extremely different from being white.”

Of course, common sense tells us that women are different from men (and so is being black different from being white).

But how different, and what weight do those differences have under varying conditions? In a maternity ward, being a woman is very importantly different from being a man. In other situations, a strike struggle, for example, there is no difference of *any* significance. But Banks is clearly hinting at what we today would term identity politics.

Because there is not a past in *Continental Drift* that we can understand, there is really no future, no end to the present agonies that people, especially the poor, suffer. Hope is in short supply. This is roughly the outlook Banks conveys in his fiction.

His next novels focused on working class life in the chilly Northeast. *Affliction* is a humane portrait of Wade Whitehouse, a part-time cop and snow-plow driver in New Hampshire. Wade is forced off the emotional and moral rails by his painful family history, by his employer and by his encounters with the wealthy “summer people” in his town. The novel ends in murder.

Banks’s portrayal of Wade and the other characters, however, is circumscribed, and the broader world of the 1980s does not enter the novel, at least not consciously or systematically. Everything in *Affliction* happens, as it were, “personally, privately, secretly.” The story is narrated by Wade’s educated brother, who has escaped from the town, but Banks does not use him, as he might have, to give a wider-angle view of Wade and the other figures.

The case is similar with *The Sweet Hereafter*, a novel about the deaths of 14 children in a school bus accident in a small town in upstate New York. The unendurable tragedy for the families, the bus driver and the one high school girl who survives is explored with great sensitivity, but still with a sharp, almost exclusive focus on a handful of families.

In this instance, once again, a character more removed from the immediate community—this time a city lawyer arranging a lawsuit for the families—might have added some perspective on the event and on the town’s residents, but instead we are drawn (disturbingly) into the sufferings of his own family. Here too hope is dashed everywhere.

Although Banks left his working class characters largely outside of history, he earnestly tried to deal with historical topics, for the most part unsuccessfully, in other novels. In *Cloudsplitter*, the abolitionist John Brown is a man of tremendous courage and energy impelled to act for justice and equality. Brown’s raid on the federal armory in Harpers Ferry, Virginia in October 1859, as heroic as it was, was only a prelude to the greatest war against slavery in history, less than two years in the future.

Yet in Banks’s work, Brown and his life are for the most part events in themselves, disconnected from the coming bloody conflict. Here the problem is not the *absence* of history, but a *faulty view* of history. Brown’s son, Owen, who narrates the book, says at one point: “The three-hundred-year-long War Between the Races, from before the Revolution up to and

including Harpers Ferry, was being fought mainly as the War Against Slavery [meaning Brown’s activities]. ... The truth is, for us, the so-called Civil War was merely an aftermath.”

One reads this and recognizes Owen as a middle-class inhabitant of the late 20th and early 21st century, not the 19th. These are Banks’s views. As he told the *Paris Review* in an interview in 1998 (the year *Cloudsplitter* was published): “I’m a white man in a white-dominated, racialized society.” In Owen’s mouth, these sentiments take us out of the realm of artistic and historic plausibility.

Banks’s last novels were also set in the past, but were largely missed opportunities. *Foregone* (2021) treats a muckraking documentary filmmaker dying of cancer, but focuses on the regrets of his past personal life, not the content of his life’s work. Banks described it as a memoir of sorts.

*The Magic Kingdom* (2022) purports to be the narration—recorded in 1971 on reel-to-reel tapes—of a Florida realtor who was raised in a utopian socialist commune in the 1890s, worked on a plantation at the turn of the century and then lived among the egalitarian religious group, the Shakers. In the end, the themes of the novel, love, collectivism and murder, do not add up.

Banks had profound aims as an artist—to write about how people lived now and to depict characters set against the backdrop of significant events. But he wrote in a period that was extraordinarily difficult for artists. As the WSWS noted earlier about Banks:

“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.”

Banks, nevertheless, distinguished himself from the literature of his times because not only did he write about the working class, but he also took its side. He believed, moreover, that fiction could help people understand the world and, in that way, change it.

The last, worthy word belongs to Banks, from the end of *Continental Drift*:

“Good cheer and mournfulness over lives other than our own, even wholly invented lives—no, especially wholly invented lives—deprive the world as it is of some of the greed it needs to continue to be itself. Sabotage and subversion, then, are this book’s objectives. Go, my book, and help destroy the world as it is.”



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