Russel Banks, *Lost Memory of Skin* (Clerkenwell Press, 2011)

Russel Banks’s new novel *Lost Memory of Skin* has enough potential to be charted in the best-sellers. The novel engages the reader from the very first scene, as soon as the protagonist walks into a Florida library to access Internet to confirm whether his name appears on the database of national sex-offenders.

At a young age of twenty-two, he is a paroled sex-offender, fettered to a GPS monitoring device. As a young man he must create a life for himself in the wake of captivity. Known only as the Kid, and on probation after having been convicted of soliciting sex with a minor, he spends three months in jail and is released on good behaviour into a world where he is forbidden for the next ten years both to leave the jurisdiction and to reside within 2,500 feet of anywhere children might gather. The novel’s epigraph is from Ovid’s *Metamporphoses* – ‘Now I am ready to tell how bodies changed into different bodies’; it possibly indicates the changes brought to the human body by the dictates of technology. With nowhere else to go, the Kid, with his pet iguana Iggy in tow, has found refuge under a south Florida causeway. There he becomes part of a makeshift tent peopled by other sex offenders. It is a repugnant, murky place occupied by hollow, ruined people that surely multiplies his agony and augments his miseries in an already troubled life. Repeatedly ignored by his self-indulgent mother, he grew up with his pet iguana for close family and an excessive early-teenage porn habit. His mother did not know the Kid’s father for long. She had a lot of boyfriends who found the Kid troublesome. And she tossed him away once he committed the crime; it is not surprising that as a preteen without friends – except for his giant pet iguana, Iggy – the Kid fell into the dark domain of online porn to appease his isolation and boredom.

After jumping onto a chat line on Craigslist, the Kid arranged to meet an underage girl ‘brandi18’ at her home while her parents were away. Recently discharged from the Army for planning to distribute pornography to his fellow soldiers in an effort to win favour, and now unemployed, the Kid arrived for the rendezvous via city bus with a backpack full of beer, condoms, X-rated movies, lubricant and high hopes ‘to bump up against and break through an invisible membrane between the perfectly controlled world locked inside his head and the endlessly overflowing unpredictable, dangerous world outside’ (220). Instead, he was greeted by Brandi’s father and five cops. Banks scores points in painting a character ‘more sinn’d against than sinning’, as he is innocent; the only skin he has encountered is his own while masturbating. This revelation surely succeeds in garnering sympathy for the Kid.

The plot takes an exciting turn when a local professor, an academic of colossal size and intellect, who has cautiously erected a realm, based on his secrets and lies, barges in to find in the Kid, the perfect subject, apparently to further his research into sex offenders and homelessness. The Professor extends his voluntary help to the Kid who is slightly sceptical but yielding. When the camp beneath the causeway is scattered by the police, and later, when a hurricane destroys the shelter, the Professor tries to help the Kid in routine matters while trying to teach his young charge new ways of looking at, and understanding, what he has done. But when the Professor’s past reemerges and threatens to destroy his carefully constructed world, the steadiness of the two men’s relationship is shaken. In the interests of so-called research, he gradually entices the Kid to describe why he was forced to leave the Army and exactly how damaging the Kid’s addiction to online pornography has been. ‘Unlike the kid, the Professor makes a sharp distinction between plans and fantasies’ (157). The Professor expounds convincing ideas, and his ideas ‘are rapidly evolving’.
When a society commodifies its children by making them into a consumer group, dehumanizing them by converting them into a crucial, locked-in segment of the economy, and then proceeds to eroticize its products in order to sell them, the children gradually come to be perceived by the rest of the community and by the children themselves as sexual objects. (159)

His assertion about pedophilia: ‘If it is a mental illness, then the entire society is to one degree or another sick with it. Which makes it normal’ (163) inflates his position as a thinker of a standing.

The novel is not without weaknesses. The weakness is exposed with the emergence of a new figure, the Writer, who appears all of a sudden to preach to the Kid. His sudden appearance on the stage is meant to resolve mysteries but he ends up giving birth to many more unsolved questions. And the revelation that the library assistant who helps the Kid in the first scene is actually the Professor’s wife is an unpersuasive coincidence.

Banks greatest prowess lies in delineating characters with much precision. He has specialised in painting characters with hamartia which guarantees a disproportionate punishment. He is undoubtedly one of the most accomplished fiction writers of America, but he loses the grip of the plot when a magazine writer who, as Banks describes him, looks a little like both Ernest Hemingway and Banks himself, jumps in and starts professing profound ideas. The excessive preaching makes a dent in the credibility of the character. It seems as if Banks could not hold himself back from intervening in the matter. The writer fails to flesh out credibility to his characters when he tightens a rope around their neck enslaving them as his mouthpiece.

The book articulates the view that we live in a spooky world where the ‘time is out of joint’. The novel lays bare a comprehensive view of American moral vision and its hypocrisy. By peeping into their unexplored life, the novel uncovers the maltreatment of sex offenders by society. The novel proffers many questions to solve, the reader automatically relates to characters and tries to decipher unsolved mysteries.

In some respects, in Lost Memory of Skin two different plots compete for attention, both interesting but somehow not fully moulded. The Professor’s incomprehensible interest in the Kid excites the reader to know ‘what happens next’ but fails to address ‘why’. The revelation of stratified selves of the Professors past life does not suit the movement of the plot. Nevertheless, Lost Memory of Skin is a compelling read.

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