Bad Actors

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D.B.C. Pierre
VERNON GOD LITTLE
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‘THE FUCKEN OOZING nakedness, the despair of being such a vulnerable egg-sac of a critter, like, a so-called human being, just sickens me sometimes, especially right now. The Human Condition Mom calls it. Watch out for that fucker.’

The speaker of these lines, fifteen-year-old Vernon Little, is a literary descendant of Huckleberry Finn. Like Huck, Vernon narrates his story in his own idiosyncratic vernacular, complete with dodgy grammar and malapropisms. As a comic monologue, Vernon God Little is not quite in the same league as Twain’s masterpiece, but much of its appeal springs from the quality of Vernon’s voice, his flashes of insightful cynicism, his erratic flair for metaphor, his crude puns and the energetic discontent with which he interprets the world.

Vernon has a foul mouth and one of the most flagrant cases of anal-fixation in all of literature, but he remains likeable, primarily because he manages to reveal — to the reader, if no one else — that beneath his prickly exterior he is insecure and vulnerable.

Vernon God Little is a black comedy and a vicious satire on the cruelty and narcissism of American society. Most of the action takes place in the town of Martirio, Texas, a small pocket of affluence ringed by decaying suburbs and populated by a collection of grotesques of varying degrees of unpleasantness.

As Vernon depicts it, the whole town reeks of junk food, low-budget consumerism and disappointment. A disproportionate number of residents are obese, and a similarly high percentage are spiteful, vain and stupid. In places, the grimy, distasteful atmosphere resembles another wonderful comic novel of the American South, John Kennedy Toole’s exuberant A Confederacy of Dunces, but, in comparison, Vernon God Little is a much darker work.

As the novel begins, Martirio has just become the focus of national attention by enduring a high school shooting. A tormented Mexican boy named Jesus has killed sixteen fellow students before turning the gun on himself. Jesus also happened to be Vernon’s best friend, and the book gradually reveals the extent to which Vernon is entangled in the complicated web of events that led to the shootings. The satire, however, flows from the reaction to the murders. Martirio, a town that is normally ignored by the media (and uncelebrated in song, Vernon notes), is intoxicated by the sudden flurry of attention, and a disturbing number of people come to regard the massacre as an opportunity rather than a tragedy.

The source of much of Vernon’s contempt for his society is its phoniness. He senses something fundamentally wrong with the way adults interact. Everyone around him seems to behave unnaturally; every action is a kind of performance whose purpose seems to be to conceal an emotional void. Again and again, Vernon notices that the gestures that are made to signify anguish or sympathy or love, all ‘their fucken pre-programmed coos and sighs and bullshit’, are copied from television and films. When adults want to demonstrate their seriousness, they start ‘talking like bad actors’. They are apparently so inured that not even the massacre is enough to provoke a genuine response. As the funeral procession passes, Vernon observes that ‘the folk up and down the street are standing by their screen doors being devastated. Mom’s so-called friend Leona was already devastated last week, when Penney’s delivered the wrong color kitchen drapes.’

Even Vernon’s mother is culpable. When Vernon appears in court, she turns up each morning so she can be photographed arriving, but does not stay for the proceedings. She assumes that Vernon is as heartless as everyone else: she advises him to gain sympathy by rubbing toothpaste under his eyes to make himself cry — the way television actors do.

Vernon has an instinctive loathing for what he sees as hollow and manipulative behaviour. His problem is that his ideas and impressions are similarly influenced. Like everyone else in town, he has film and television as his only cultural reference points. The novel’s recurring question — ‘what kind of fucken life is this?’ — is partly a question of genre. Vernon is constantly trying to give his narrative a cinematic gloss, trying to decide what type of film it resembles, and
wondering why it does not measure up. He realises that, like
the rest of the residents of Martirio, he gives his life meaning
through the assumptions supplied to him by the media, which
is kind of pathetic, but he doesn’t really have a choice.

There is also defensiveness and a significant degree of
self-loathing fuelling Vernon’s adolescent scorn. As he ma-
tures, he slowly realises that he is mistaken about many of the
people around him. What he assumed to be shallowness is in
fact a symptom of a pervasive sense of despair. People fall
back on the outward signs of emotion, not because they can
no longer feel but because they are incapable of expressing
their sadness. Their ability to communicate and empathise
has been warped by constant exposure to the media. They
have simply adapted to an environment where the most im-
portant thing is appearances.

Vernon is not immune simply because he becomes con-
scious of the fact; awareness is part of the problem. The end
point of self-consciousness is a crisis of authenticity and a
fracturing of identity. And self-consciousness is not revers-
able. Once you know something, you can’t un-know it; inno-
cence is not a state that can be reclaimed. As Vernon puts it:
‘[Y]ou’re cursed when you realize true things, because then
you can’t act with the full confidence of dumbness anymore.’

Vernon’s struggle to prove his innocence as incriminat-
ing evidence linking him with the murders piles up (evidence
that is not just being disseminated but uncovered and inter-
preted by the national media) is an attempt to wrest back
control of his identity. It is an attempt to establish some form
of basic human connection; to reassert the truth in defiance of
the dehumanising situation in which he finds himself. But the
choice presented by Vernon God Little is stark: people are
either exploitative and manipulative, or they are victims. Early
in the novel, the television reporter/con man Lally offers
Vernon some advice that is self-serving, but sound nonev-
less: decide the form your narrative will take, or someone else
will step in and do it for you.

D.B.C. Pierre is hardly the first writer to diagnose the
unhappiness at the heart of America’s materialistic, image-
obsessed culture. Nor is he the first to explore the implications
of a media-saturated environment for questions of truth and
justice. The ideas underpinning the novel — that truth is
contingent and facts are shaped by narrative pressure rather
than by any objective criteria — are no more than garden
variety postmodernism. But if the ideas do not impress with
their originality, the energy with which they are appropriated
does. There is a sense that they are being worked through,
not simply laid out as a fait accompli. Pierre has a solid grasp
of the mechanics of plot and has written a well-paced novel,
with his unreliable narrator supplying plenty of satisfying
twists and teases. Not coincidentally, its intricate but tidy
five-act structure would probably make a good film.

Vernon God Little is, in the end, morally ambiguous.
When the novel concludes, the question of whether Vernon
has succeeded or capitulated is left unresolved. Most likely, it
is unresolvable. But that’s the Human Condition for you.
Watch out for that fucker.