

Play Here

It's Summer. Officially on June 21, the Solstice. After that, surprisingly enough, the days begin to shorten. Unencumbered by layers of grayness, people tend to bound around. Early morning joggers doff sweatsuits in favor of shorts, and occasionally, even smile. Pools fill. Eyes disappear behind dark glasses. Skins glisten. Graduation! Tops of cars fold down. Where buds were, where flowers were, fruit is. Also now is the hour of the great children exchange. A child who lived with one parent during the school year is now transported to the habitat of the other parent. And vice-versa. Families that have continued to live together under one roof will by necessity satisfy themselves with other signs of Summer.

Thus my tiny apartment began to overflow with the wherewithal of my three children. My once-wife and I had agreed on a girl's name prior to the birth of each of our three sons. Too bad. We still love all three boys; even though they have unusual names for their gender. Where I once had small yet well-organized living quarters, there are now suitcases, boxes, backpacks and clothing enough for an army. A small army.

A unique sprawl of dirty clothes drape and droop on, under, near to, around and far from the chairs, table and bed. I ask perplexed, "What is wrong with the hamper?" I get a chorus of, "Oh, sorry Dad; we forgot." Somehow, in their own inimitable system, they manage to maintain in entirety games of Stratego, Monopoly, Yahtzee, Clue, Connect 4, Othello, Pente, Risk, Backgammon, Masterpiece, Chess, Scrabble, decks of cards, paints, pastels, crayons, balls of every sort, several dozen books, and seven frisbees.

Both the vastness and detail of food consumption will not be discussed; it is too depressing.

Two weeks have gone by and we have re-adjusted, more or less, to each other's daily rhythms, personal needs, preferred ice cream flavors hygienic rituals, eating and sleeping habits. We share one room. They claim I snore raucously; I shoot back that they three carry on conversations in their sleep and use words repeatedly that I have strictly forbidden.

And then there's the Oregon State Lottery. Living in a less enlightened state than Oregon, the children have just become aware of the excitement one can experience by projecting a windfall of wealth. By pushing \$1 into the pointed end of this cornucopia, millions will flow out into their outstretched arms. Of course they're only children. Fortunately the authorities have seen fit to restrict the purchase of these tickets to the adult populace who have sufficient will power not to be seduced by fantasy riches.

The eldest boy says: "No one wants to change their life but everyone wants to gamble."

The second says: "Not much chance of winning \$5,000 with the odds 60,000 to 1 against you."

The youngest says: "With \$5 million I could buy some neat stuff."

To fulfill parental obligation only, I agree to purchase four Pot of Gold tickets. The woman selling them eyes me and the trio of youngsters. Not wanting to participate in any breach of the legal system, she enquires suspiciously whether all four tickets are for me. Although I falter in response, she sees it in her heart to overlook my lying nod. Nonchalantly I buy a pack of gum to indicate that I'm mostly indifferent to the Lottery and all its signifiers.

As soon as we're comfortably out of the 7-Eleven, we race the three blocks home, lock the door and pull the curtains. For the first time since they've arrived, the children spontaneously clean up, put away dishes, wipe off the table and search out renegade green houses and red hotels from Monopoly. The middle son gets out a plate of chocolate chip cookies, the small one glasses, the eldest a jug of milk. The scene is set.

#1 son says, "What'll we use to scrape off the tickets that will bring us good luck?"

#2 says, "How about Chinese brass I Ching coins?"

#3 says, "My thumbnail works great! I already got one 5000!"

In ritual rotation we uncover the six possibilities. By the fourth round all the cookies are gone and the three of them are squatting on their chairs, cheering each other on. I, an adult, sit there composed, smiling. It's the last round and no one has three of anything. Then, like Uncle Scrooge, with S-signs in our eyes, we simultaneously uncover the last numbers.

BOOKS

This Novel's Core: Life's Most Urgent Problems

Continental Drift

By Russell Banks, Harper & Row, New York, 1985.

Russell Banks' novel *Continental Drift* gets you on the hook and you don't get off the hook with easy answers. The life of Bob Dubois and the lives of 16 Haitians intersect with the American Dream in a horrific Bermuda Triangle that sucks them all up like a gigantic and invisible vacuum cleaner.

The story of Bob Dubois, "an ordinary man, a decent man, a common man," begins in a New Hampshire blue-collar milltown and moves to that part of the American map that hangs down like a sexual appendage, the state of Florida, where you can make a killing and become a millionaire overnight on drugs or real estate and where you can lose it all just as fast.

Hundreds of miles to the south of the Florida coast is Haiti, where the American Dream hums powerfully in people who don't hesitate to leave everything they have "for soon, they know, they will own all the things that Americans own—houses, cars, motorcycles, TV sets, Polaroid cameras, stereos, blue jeans, electric stoves. . . . These people are not trying merely to improve their lot; they're trying to obtain one."

December 1979, Bob is 30 years old and "there's nothing dramatically or even apparently wrong with his life (many men would envy it)" but he can see that if for the next 35 years he works as hard as he has so far, he will be able to stay exactly where he is now, materially, personally. Bob turns a skeptical eye on the American Dream that tells him, "Don't be stupid, Bob, look above you—a new car, a summer house down on the Maine coast where you can fish to your heart's content, early retirement, Bob, college-educated children, and someday you'll own your own business too, and your wife will look like Lauren Bacall in mink, and you can pick up your girlfriend in your Lancia, improve your memory, Bob, eliminate baldness, amaze your friends and family." Bob doesn't buy it and yet it has seeped into him, it has him in its grasp even while he rejects it, he wants more, needs more than he's got and what he's got is—locked into a mediocre life as an oil burner repairman.

It begins to implode in on him. It's payday after work. He's promised wife Elaine he will buy the

figure skates, size four, for Ruthie's Christmas present. He's out of focus with inner fury in the sporting goods department of Sears, Roebuck. It's closing time. The salesman wants to get rid of him so he can close up and go home. Bob stares at the bald spot on the back of the salesman's head as he walks away. "There's tissue, thin, pink skin, then eggshell bone, then fleshy brain, he thinks. And that's all. That's all there is between everything and nothing." A few minutes later Bob is out in the wintry New Hampshire night, his fist methodically smashing window after window of his station wagon as if "trying to free a child trapped inside." That night he admits it to himself and his wife: his life has become unbearable.

Brother Eddie in Florida has been trying to get Bob to move, offers him a job and the possibility of a partnership. With his pregnant wife and two kids, Bob goes to Florida where he lives in a trailer court, works in a liquor store, kills a black man who holds him up, learns that Eddie is in deep with the Mafia who are going to repossess not only all of Eddie's possessions but they're going to repossess Eddie himself.

"Repossessed," Eddie says, "just like the house and the boat and the store and everything. You didn't know that, probably. There's people can repossess people."

Continental Drift gets the affluence of America, how fragile that affluence is and how it is connected to violence. This novel shows us the relentless inevitability of the way people of the Third World countries will continue to rub up against us abrasively, how they will continue to be propelled across our borders, how poverty and hunger become forces of nature like hurricanes which do not respect national borders.

As author Russell Banks lets us know, it isn't the facts and it isn't knowing more facts that will change anything, including knowing the facts of Bob Dubois' life. What we need according to Banks is red-hot anger or pity, a motion, an action of the heart not the mind; we need, he says, to grieve or to celebrate the life of this decent ordinary man who causes the death of men and women and children who have, in no way, harmed him. He is appalled by what he has done and his wife is repelled by what he has done and he seeks redemption.

This book reaches out into the core of the most urgent problems of our time. As Buckminster Fuller said, we have, at this very moment, the resources and the technology, here on this planet of ours to provide everyone of us living on it with a decent standard of living. We could, he said, change everything in one hour. "What we lack is the motivation to do so."

The tough resilient surface of *Continental Drift* is a soft mirror, like the mirror of water that reflects our own lives back. Pulling in our reflections and giving them back, making me, when I've closed the book, remember a childhood taste when I was very small and would put pennies in my mouth, that metallic taste of copper, of money in my mouth. "Don't," my mother startled me so that I almost swallowed them, "don't put money in your mouth!"

—M. Penfold

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