

The Bully of Order

Brian Hart's novel of a booming timber town enters the canon the Northwest literature

Exceptional novelists have written about the Pacific Northwest, and Brian Hart bids to enter this lofty, if under-appreciated (by the eastern literary establishment) pantheon of writers with his second novel, "The Bully of Order." The book may secure his position as A Writer To Be Watched, but how does it stack up next to those who have gone before?

A work of historical fiction, the title apparently refers to both legal and illegal restraints upon individual action in a frontier setting: Aberdeen, Washington, in the 1880s, thinly disguised as "Harbor." In the voices of several characters, the story follows the early life of Duncan Ellstrom, his father (who posed as a doctor until a botched delivery revealed the deception), his uncle (a psychopath), his cousin (the least twisted of the family), and an assortment of odd characters in the powerful lumber mills, violent unions, warehouses, and outlying forest of the booming timber town. In the course of the book, Duncan's love of the mill owner's daughter is won and lost, he kills her father because it seems the thing to do, and escapes to be hunted by every man in the territory. By the end of the book you care little if Duncan is caught or not. He is a victim who becomes a perpetrator, and if not a psychopath, he is at least a young man in search of a conscience.

There are parallels with "The Living," the 1992 novel by Annie Dillard set in Bellingham, Washington, thinly disguised as "Whatcom." Both novels describe the terrible difficulties of life at the time: hardship

and death in a land of beauty and bounty; a time of repression, destruction and growth. In short, the contradictions of frontier life.

Over both these novels hangs a dark cloud, an evil that is repellent yet never discussed because it differs not so much from everyday life. "The Living" has its psychopath, too: Beal Obenchain, who lives in a cedar stump. One wonders if frontier America was really like this or if there have been anachronistic intrusions.

Be that as it may, there is an interesting comparison to be made here that reveals both strengths and weaknesses in the post-modern novel. Consider description. Dillard's is matter-of-fact observation:

Eustace died in the common way; he slipped when a tree shifted. He fell, and the current pinned him underwater, against the jam...they could not see or find where he fetched up.

It is easier to imagine the scene if you live here. By contrast Hart, writing two decades later, is more evocative:

A bent spoon in a jar of bacon grease. Smoke seeps from the cracks in the stove. Turn the screws. Breakfast is a battle won and the darkness relents, a degree, from black to shy of...Whisper against the dawn.

More poetic, but perhaps overwrought; he's only waking up.

Another writer finds the sweet spot that Dillard and Hart just miss. The most lyrically descriptive passage in the literature of the American West may be the first chapter of Ken Kesey's "Sometimes

a Great Notion." A sample:

Metallic at first, seen from the highway down through the trees, like an aluminum rainbow, like a slice of alloy moon. Closer, becoming organic, a vast smile of water with broken and rotting pilings jagged along both gums, foam clinging to the lips.

Not too hot, not too cold; just right.

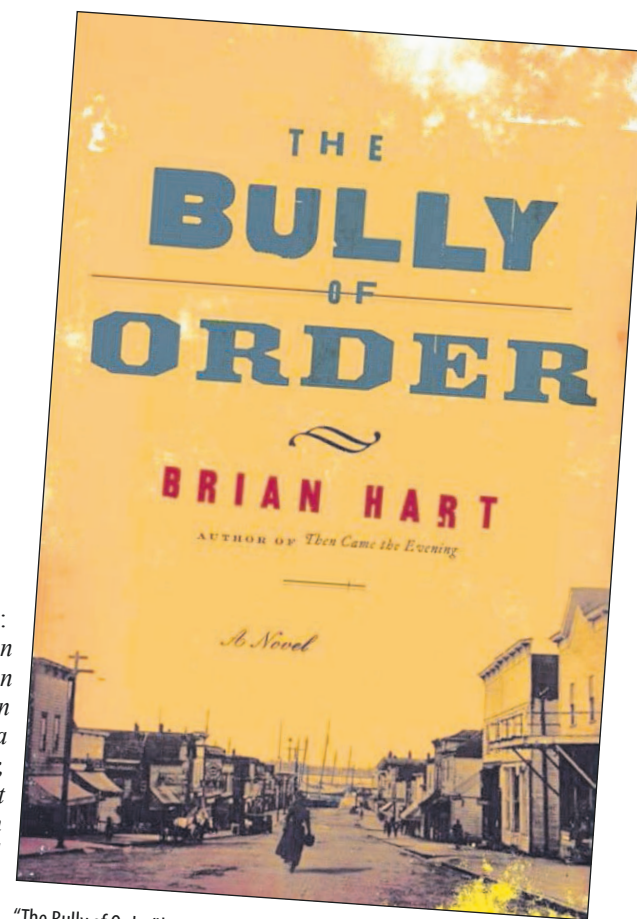
Sometimes there is too much of poetry about the prose of "Bully of Order." It is most apparent in the inner thoughts of almost every character, however inconsequential, the revelation of which is de rigeur for the 21st century novel: "Beneath the sky, the only one I'd ever known, I was open to the possibility that I was a dream of dirt and everything else was vapor."

Dillard's work is largely free of internal musings; she relies on dialogue to reveal feeling, as does Kesey. But Kesey can rip our hearts out with a few sentences of pure prose:

A short, plump, plush-looking pastry of a

woman leaves the Snag and stalks up the street with short, angry steps...Her round breadloaf shoulders are stiff with indignation. Her mouth is a grim dab of raspberry jam...She sinks against the dew-glazed fender with a dejected sigh like a cake falling...

These are differences in style, which is fashion, after all, and "Bully of Order" is a worthy addition to the canon of Northwest literature. It is as well told as "The Living," and neither book can be faulted for not being as well written as "Sometimes a Great Notion." Nothing else is, either.



"The Bully of Order" by Brian Hart.

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Review by DWIGHT CASWELL