

BOXING THE MONSTER

David Winn

*MEMORIES OF MY FATHER
WATCHING TV*

Curtis White

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That television is the hearth for most American households is a cliché, but nonetheless true. Still one wonders why, in a season when *The New York Times* can refer to the end of *Seinfeld* as a “significant cultural event,” and academic pundits are drawn to exegeses of *Buffy*, *The Vampire Slayer*, Curtis White chooses to focus on the shows of the fifties and sixties. These are programs that summon up the faint, convex, black-and-white screens of the last stages of vacuum tube technology: *Combat*, *Sea Hunt*, *Highway Patrol*, *Bonanza*, *Have Gun Will Travel*, *Maverick*, the scandal ridden quiz shows, and the family sitcoms. Television screens then had the bulbous, vaguely prognathous countenance of girls who read poetry, wore leotards, and hung around coffee houses. There was something powerful inside them but you really couldn’t tell what it was, and any serious attempt to find out risked electrocution of one kind or another. The TVs were all American made and the girls were mostly Jewish, but I suppose none of that matters now.

Well, it does, actually. It matters to White and in *Memories of My Father Watching TV*; it matters to the reader because of the way in which White is tempted again and again to redraw the map of American experience free hand through that maze of transposed electrons smashed every evening against the inside of a nineteen-inch glass screen. The father in White’s novel is the author’s one nod to the notion of a formal generation-to-generation continuity, but it’s not much of an acknowledgment. The son’s gaze is fixed on the father, but the father’s eyes are locked on the blue-gray screen.

It was, for the boy, the gray, repeatable night...shocking...that little prefab mousehole they lived in...and Mommy and Poppy, such dirty little stinkers...measly is the word for it....

Well, measly yes, but somehow grand as well. White is a tricky customer and readers would do well to think of him as a kind of Witness Protection Program novelist, running his rackets from the safety and anonymity of a split-level ranch in Nowheresville, after having solemnly promised the feds he would go and sin no more. The caves at Lescaux and Alta Mira were probably no less disgusting, confining, or mundane than the crackerboxes of White’s own experience, real and fictive. But the son, driven to decorate the wall with his mud and dung dyes and pigments, was hounded there by the same boredom, the same nasty, brutish, and short-tempered exasperation with the old man’s routine, that drives the novelist to his (or her) word processor. *Maverick* in this novel becomes Blue *Maverick*. And in White’s perspective this becomes more than just the spectral distortion common to pre-solid state black-and-white TVs, although he doesn’t hesitate to use that effect anymore than the Neolithic tagger hesitates to give the buffalo eight legs to show it running.

Blue *Maverick* comes riding up over the hill on the horse demon Keshi...Keshi is gigantic, powerful, and swift as the mind...he furrows the earth with his hooves, crowds the sky with clouds, disperses the heavens with his mane, and terrifies all who behold him....

Here the Western Knight-Errant becomes the Eastern God Cyclist, but is this anything new? It might be in the context of the American living room of the fifties. Like Richard Boone of *Have Gun Will Travel* quoting Keats before he shoots the bad guy, it’s the thought that counts.

The last program the protagonist/narrator watches with his father is a Million Dollar Movie showing of Carol Reed's *The Third Man*. Television in its first thirty years, especially before the advent and quick hegemony of cable and VCRs, was filled with re-showings of the films of the thirties, forties, and fifties. Like wrestling, it was a cheap and easy way to fill time. But these movies summoned up a

world—or memories of a world—that children born in the aftermath of World War II might have otherwise only imagined through the reconstructions of novelists. They were, like novels, vivid and powerfully incomplete glimpses into versions of the past. And it is, interestingly enough, the old, fierce pull of the celluloid that alone has the power to bring a writer like White back to anything resembling

conventional narrative. He tells us the story of *The Third Man*, re-runs it for us if you like, but with the added and characteristically intrusive participation of the viewer imagining himself into the film, first as one character and then, simultaneously, as all the characters.

Part of what White is after is a sense not only of how we watch television, but of how television watches us. The same characters in each of the shows that transfix the narrator's

father and draw the family into the glow of the tube, also stumble or stride out of the screen to interfere in the relationship between father and son. Brett Maverick, Sergeant Saunders, Paladin, Dan Matthews of the Highway Patrol, and the rest all have their role to play beyond the script. As Dad explains at *The Third Man*'s dark conclusion:



Curtis White

Those fingers are my fingers! Orson Welles filmed the scene in the sewer weeks before and had to return to Italy where he was working on *Othello*. [Carol] Reed needed fingers and I had some.

Son, I played Harry Lime's fingers in *The Third Man*. There's something to tell your punk friends.

Television then drew a formal, rectangular frame around the accepted and established myths of American culture. This was profoundly different

from the influence that radio had had between the two World Wars, because with TV there was nothing outside the frame. There was certainly no place in the network mentality or programming schedule for a show that was self-consciously and intentionally "about nothing." Instead, there was *Kukla, Fran & Ollie* or Ernie Kovacs's *Take a Good Look*, which were joyously about not very much at all. What did exist in shows like *Father Knows Best*, *My Three Sons*, or *The Donna Reed*

Show were the small, trite, weird occurrences of American domestic routines that began to creep into larger forms in shows like *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis*, or NBC's attempt to recreate the sophistication of *The Thin Man* as Greenwich Village bohemian kookiness.

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What all these shows had in common, along with the cop shows, westerns, and cheap rotoscope cartoons, was the sense that lives of the main characters began afresh each week. There was no cumulative experience and no sense of culmination in the major joys, disappointments, griefs or tragedy that affect real people in real life. There was never any sense of permanent, inevitable loss. Rather, there was this endless renewability that was quintessentially American in both its hopefulness and stultifying boredom. If the Greeks journeyed to Delphi for clues as to how best to live their lives, Americans, in the two decades immediately after the war, watched television in order to have some idea of who they were. And in White's book, this instructive quality has the intermediative property of metaphor. In an episode of *Combat*, for instance, the narrator's father plays and becomes all the roles: US infantry man, Nazi *soldat*, French *maquisard*, pontoon bridge to be destroyed.

These intimations came to my father, half asleep in his dirty green recliner, as strangely as if creatures from outer space had come through his TV to deliver the news. A true oracle, the truth of the world visited him, virtually sat on his face, while he dreamed.

White is one of the few American writers who realizes the era he has resurrected was the last time Americans had a dialectical relationship with their machines—particularly domestic appliances. All that ended with the early sixties when the national news went from fifteen minutes to half-an-hour and the networks focused the nation's public attention first on the Civil Rights movement, then on the Kennedy assassination(s), and finally on the

Vietnam War, where history became history-confirmed-as-television-coverage. In a way, *Memories of My Father Watching TV* is a kind of anti-nostalgia, with memory and imagination standing in for the selective and cyclic capacities of a universal remote. There's no false fondness here, no sad longing for the good old days of a single set in its cheap wood veneer cabinet: a vacuum tube pre-solid state eye that sat completely apart, casting longing glances at the hi-fi and rotary dial phone.

And this brings us back to White's ever-recurring theme: the mythic discontinuity and imagined traditions of a culture where everything and everyone is made new everyday. The two most popular shows now on cable television are (surprise!) professional wrestling exhibitions that appear every week, Barnum-like, in a different city. They are the traveling circuses of American delight and displeasure with our own old dark forces and forms.

Working class, rebel-red-neck wrestlers defy their Armani-clad bosses and bop them around the ring in staged confrontations, only to succumb to the front-office machinations of those same bosses the following week. Bikers swear vengeance against headbangers, Gen-X gym rats gesture obscenely at their post-punk metalhead counterpart. A good number of wrestlers are women, although steroids and cross-dressing have made gender identity problematic in this world. One wrestler is legendarily recognizable in at least four different ring personalities: as the Southern-gothic chainsaw psycho (Cactus Jack, the dead-head hippie Dude Love, the gone-postal office nerd Man Kind (my personal favorite), and, finally, plain old Michael Foley from—of all places—Huntington, Long Island. Blue Maverick and Harry Lime have nothing on guys like these, but one suspects that Curtis White knows that.

Since I began working on this review, Stephen Spielberg, God and America's last Mouseketeer, has released *Saving Private Ryan*, Spielberg's rendition of D-Day and the reality of combat. Yet veterans of the actual fighting, interviewed in *Newsday*, complain they have a hard time recognizing their own past in Spielberg's

movie despite (or perhaps because of) the high production values, technical expertise, and painstaking attention to detail. It's all more real than real. One vet plaintively confessed that the vividness of the film's colors threw him off completely. His voyage across France and Germany with Patton's Third Armored unfolded in blacks, whites, and grays and remains that way in his memory. White's novel seems to me to be one of the few artistically legitimate responses to the vet who remembers the waiting, the boredom, the bad food, and the military's infinite daily round of small humiliations and indignities, as well as the moments punctuated by terror, blood, and death. Like the narrator's father, half asleep in front of the television, White attempts to apprehend for the reader the incomprehensible through what language, memory, and imagination can suggest. The sources of myth rely as much on these as they do on what we call reality; just as myth itself, far more than reality, becomes the source of a culture's idea of wisdom, courage, and truth. White returns to this source over and over again in his fiction. He knows it is the one story worth telling and that the ways of telling it are infinite.

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