

INTRODUCTION

On a map, Brooklyn looks like nothing so much as a crumpled napkin. Its thousand gridded streets are set at odd angles, like so many fractal variations or carnival-mirror reflections of its slim-waisted sister city to the west. Of all great towns, Brooklyn (in the words of James Agee) is the nearest to Manhattan's "mad magnetic energy," and yet it is provincial nonetheless—a patchwork of neighborhoods, as Agee puts it, "where people merely live." Perhaps this is no longer the case, at least in the northwestern quadrant of the borough, where people now flock to live, and write. No reader of contemporary American fiction can fail to notice that the recent Brooklyn real-estate boom has coincided with a surge of interest in Brooklyn-based fiction. The last fifteen years have given us too many "Brooklyn novels" and "Brooklyn writers" to count. Most of these writers aren't natives of the city. A few of them aren't even locals. And why should they be? In fiction, what matters is the quality of the words on the page, not the quality of the experience behind them.

Sometimes, though, a native writer's mingled love and hatred for his homeplace allows him to make something special of his experience, something to which non-natives may only aspire. So it is with William Boyle's

first novel, which sets its sights on a Brooklyn neighborhood down toward the bottom of the city's crumpled map, not quite far enough north to count as Bensonhurst, not quite far enough south to borrow the faded glow of Coney Island: a gray stretch of avenues and chain-link streets called Gravesend.

If you search for *Gravesend* online, you'll probably find it called a crime novel or hardboiled fiction, "Brooklyn noir" or "neo-noir." And it's true that Boyle's characters tend to live outside the law, or at the very edge of it, and that his style owes something to the venerable tradition of hardboiled American writing that runs from James M. Cain to James Ellroy, from Daniel Fuchs to Daniel Woodrell. But Boyle's participation in this tradition doesn't begin to account for just how good, just how singular, just how stunning *Gravesend* turns out to be—not that I claim to take a dispassionate view of the matter. We're friends, Boyle and I. But even if I had never met him, I would admire his novel no end.

The first thing to admire about *Gravesend* is its style. Boyle has an eye for precise pictorial detail and an ear for language that cleaves close to his characters' ways of looking at the world. So, through the eyes of Conway D'Innocenzio, we see a big moon "shaded rusty"; we see pigeons congregating on the sidewalk and boots flung up on telephone wires near Augie's Deli; we see seagulls pecking at dirty sand where condom wrappers rim a "seaweed-skirted shoreline." At a dive called The Wrong Number, we see bartenders with "bad histories, greasy, balloon-chested fucks in Nautica gear with Yankee tats on their necks and white date rape caps." Through the eyes of Alessandra Biagini, we see a "bearded dude eating mangled fries" at a trendy bar in Manhattan, "washing them down with a wet-labeled Coors Light." Through the eyes of Eugene, we see a kid named Tommy Valentino—a tall, B-team basketball player—who is always "hunched over his locker . . . spooning candy from an envelope into his mouth with a wooden stick and washing it down with Gatorade."

Such images play a large part in making *Gravesend* as memorable as it is. But I wouldn't want to suggest the book is only a stylistic tour de force,

because it's more than that. The style is striking, but the story is a knockout. Like Thomas Hardy and Bernard Malamud before him, Boyle shows himself to be many things at once. He is a novelist who, as Auden said a novelist must, knows how to be just among the just and filthy among the filthy. He is a wordsmith with all the devices of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century novel at his disposal. He is, in short, a damn good storyteller.



In the first pages of *Gravesend*, we learn that Ray Boy Calabrese is about to be sprung from prison sixteen years after he and a group of friends murdered a young gay man named Duncan. Duncan's brother, Conway, has never really left the old neighborhood and has no intention of letting bygones be bygones. He hates Ray Boy for what he's done, and the reader hates Ray Boy too. At the end of the first chapter, the story seems made to run along ancient lines. We're expecting a kind of *Revenger's Tragedy* for the twenty-first century, and we think we know what kinds of questions to ask. How long is it going to take Conway to track Ray Boy down? How long until Ray Boy, or Conway, or both of them, wind up dead?

As it turns out, though, blood vengeance isn't what drives *Gravesend*. What drives it are the characters and their experience of the neighborhood, more cluttered with junk and the molding stuff of life than any Old World rag-and-bone shop. This is clear to us from the second chapter, when we are introduced to Alessandra, a failing actress who has returned from a stint in Los Angeles back to her Brooklyn home, where everything smells "like dirty sponges":

a puzzle she'd done with her mother when she was ten or eleven was on a TV tray next to the cabinet. Dust bunnies poked from between the wilting pieces like weeds. Her father came over and sat next to her. He smelled like a dirty sponge, too.



There are a number of characters in *Gravesend* you are bound to remember long after you've finished the novel. There are the high school boys Eugene and Sweat, who worship Ray Boy for the crime he's committed. There's Ray Boy himself, the murderer who thinks of nothing so much as his own death. There's Cesar, who might be straight out of Dickens, except he's a gun-dealing, rap-writing purveyor of exotic birds, working out of a thrift shop backroom on Mermaid Avenue. And there are all the mothers and fathers of Gravesend, for whom the neighborhood has become the meridian of their lives, the jigsaw puzzle they're never going to finish. But the story of Alessandra—the story of a young woman who has left the neighborhood only to find herself drawn back into it again—is the beating heart of the book.

The way Alessandra's story is told, and the way it gets tangled up with the stories of Ray Boy and Conway and Eugene, may remind some readers of the best of George Pelecanos and Dennis Lehane. It also brought to my mind Malamud's masterpiece, *The Assistant*. Both *The Assistant* and *Gravesend* are full of the poetry of Brooklyn speech (without ever condescending to or parodying that speech), and both blur the line between the urban crime novel and literary realism writ large. Alessandra, like Malamud's Helen Bober, lets us readers see into the life of the neighborhood because she herself is so painfully conscious of the world beyond the neighborhood. "I want a larger and better life," Helen Bober tells a young man hoping to court her (and keep her in Brooklyn): "I want the return of my possibilities." Alessandra would sympathize. She, too, wants the return of her possibilities. And I hope she finds them, as I hope maybe someday she'll come across a copy of *The Assistant* among the paperbacks at the Strand or East Village Books.



Throughout *Gravesend*, Boyle's great gift is to make the reader care about his characters—to make them come alive in the reader's mind. The novel is not only a display of talent; it's a rare demonstration of talent going beyond the flash of isolate phrases and sentences to enliven every page. This is a Brooklyn novel, yes, but it cuts the new ballyhoo Brooklyn back down to sorrowful human scale. This is a crime novel, without a doubt, but it has the realism of Malamud and Yates in its blood. The writer John Brandon has said of *Gravesend* that he "can't remember being more convinced by the people in a novel." I couldn't agree more. Fiction, even of the relatively realist variety, is a mystical business. It requires a summoner of souls. And Boyle has what's required.

—Alex Andriesse,

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