Fort Wayne is Seventh on Hitler's List: Indiana Stories Michael Marton, Indiana University Press, $20.00 ISBN 0-25-333-6791

Michael Marlone's third book of short fiction, *Fort Wayne is Seventh on Hitler's List: Indiana Stones*, is a credit both to the authors talent and to the willingness of university presses to take chances commercial houses can't or won't. This collection's queer publishing history is sketched in an authorial preface/manifesto that would be ostentatious were the book's fiction Itself not so good. *Fort Wayne is Seventh on Hitler's List* apparently comprises an earlier Knopf collection, *Alive and Dead In Indiana*, which latter Itself represented a gutted version of Martone's original project, *Biograph*, a tapestry of thematically connected "... stories playing with the notions of story and history, questioning the border between fact and fiction when in the presence of fame." Martone's preface explains how the pieces were conceived: "I started with a story of an actual person. Manipulating the facts and the widely held beliefs about these people, I hoped to create a kind of pedestrian mythology of Indiana." Well, terms like "manipulating facts" and "actual person" are like dogwhistles to the infringement-attorneys major houses have elevated to near-editorial status. By the time *Alive and Dead in Indiana* came out in May 1994, Knopf's "... lawyers had thrown out two stories," others had had to be substituted, and the resultant book, according to Martone, "never hit on all cylinders." *Fort Wayne is Seventh on Hitler's List* represents Indiana University Press's attempt to let the book Martone originally wrote see light, even though "One of the stories, first questioned by Knopf lawyers, remains in legal limbo."

In a sound-bitten age when more Americans watch "Wheel of Fortune" than all three network newscasts combined, when celebrity is royalty and fame grace, there is a weirdly apposite movement in realistic prose that might be called the Fiction of Image. Max Apple's *The Oranging of America* and *The Propheteers*, Jay Cantor's *Krazy Kat*, and Don DeLillo's *Libra* are good examples of a realism that traces the collapse of distinctions between objective reality and perceived image into a gorgeous chaos of cultural self-reference and electric myth. Realist fiction's big job used of be to afford easements across unseen and unknown places and ways to be -- to make the strange familiar. Today, when we can eat Tex-Mex with chopsticks while listening to rap music and watching a CBC-cable newscast of the Berlin Wall's dismantling, i.e. when just about everything offers itself as familiar, a lot of the best realist fiction seems to be trying to make the familiar strange, and, in so doing, to restore what is "real" to three dimensions, to reconstruct an environment/world out of an object/spectacle.

Martone's new collection is a genuine achievement in this Fiction of Image, in the new mythology that's starting to pulse at the edges of 2-D fame. In the story "Pieces," a never-named Colonel Sanders delivers a monologue on his rise to franchised greatness alongside the federal highways of a Midwest designed to be traversed at high speeds. In "Everybody Watching and the Time Passing Like That," James Dean's high-school speech coach meditates on Dean's life and apotheosis and on what it means to live in a place

famous people are only "from." In "Whistler's Father," a marvelously earnest teenage scientist who has trouble finding feeling In anything he can't see, discovers and lives history as a part-time actor in a frontier fort turned tourist trap.

What makes this book way better than good is that it's simultaneously effective on three different realistic levels. The first is the prenominate level of Image, public truth, here movingly slanted as a study of the Midwest in all its self-conscious averageness, a place that understands itself as always origin and never end. The second level is the collection's full and accurate evocation of Indiana as place. Some of the stories' deadly accuracy is a function of good old glass-clear prose:

> I saw the Wayne Knitting Mill's tail smokestack, Wayne built right into the bricks. I flew by the elevators, followed Main Street downtown and circled the courthouse. Then over the Old Fort, looking defenseless, and the filtration plant with the ponds. I followed the Maumee from the three rivers downstream, sweeping by the old Studebaker plant. Zollner Piston, all the wire-and-die works, Magnavox. Then banking up the bypass, north, over the shopping centers and malls and their parking lots, over Eckrich and the campus, to my house.

But the uncanniness of the landscapes' capture seems in this book to be more a spiritual than a technical achievement. Michael Marlene (unlike the transplanted William Gass, who "immortalized" Indiana while awaiting tenure at Purdue) is first and last a native, and he has made Indiana his own In a manner reminiscent of Breece Pancake with West Virginia or Walker Percy with New Orleans. Here is an Indiana limned in marvelously offhand detail as environment and not setting: wind and soybeans, flat black land, schizoid temperatures, elms blighted by Dutch rot, tornadoes as religion, basketball as mantra, diners and single-car crashes and endless road construction and agribusiness and casket factories and normality under the watchful eyes of sociologists studying normality and municipal monuments with blank plaques awaiting a fame sufficient to cause some emigre's (e.g. Deans's, Pound's, Letterman's) reclamation.

Here the reader is warned that the reviewer, who's from rural Illinois, might be prejudiced by sentiment. It may be that some of Martone's Midwestern portaiture will not have the same emotional resonance for an East-Coaster. If, for example, you don't know that Eckrich is a conglomerate of evil-smelling meat plants, or that Speech Team is to the Midwest's nerds what computer science is to Cambridge's, that elevators are for grain and not for peole, or that the Maumee River has catfish to die for and flows into Fort Wayne and the St. Joseph's and St. Mary's from Defiance, Ohio ... some of Martone's impeccable detailing might be just data to you.

A similar but bigger problem with the stories is that the same "use-popularly-endemic-facts-about-the-famous" strategy that works so well for Martone in the cases of Colonel Sanders or Ezra Pound or James Dean works less well with "public" figures who just aren't all that famous. If you don't know (as I didn't) that Heinrich Schliemann is the guy who supposedly discovered Troy at Hissarlik, or that Robert Welch founded the John Birch Society, or much at all about the specifics of John Dillinger's career, then stories like "Schliemann in Indianapolis" and "Dear John" and the impressionistic "Biograph" are going to be confusing. The question of how much erudition a fiction writer gets to require of his reader is, of course, eternally vexed. And none of these stories are really inaccessible. The special knowledge they presuppose is a problem only because of Fort Wayne's professed project: in order to "question the border between fact and fiction when in the presence of fame," the fame needs to be sufficient to comprise a body of fact to transfigure, a familiarity to estrange. The kind of allusive detail that, in "Pieces," rings true because of what we know about the Colonel--"In the restroom, I wash my face and shave quickly. I have very little beard"--fails to ring many bells in "Schliemann In Indianapolis"--"I have created this elaborate life of lies. I do this in order to one day scratch in the dirt. My languages have only helped me lie in every tongue"--for here the story must work to create the very "facts" Martone professes to "manipulate." In pieces like "Schliemann...," when 90% of the facts have to be built up, as it were, around the character by the narrative itself, one wonders what the big deal is about basing the character on someone "real" in the first place.

That occasional obscurity of referent in *Fort Wayne is Seventh on Hitler's List* is finally only a minor problem is attributable to the collection's third level of realistic triumph: a truly superior rendering of voice and sensibility. All of these stories are monologues, exposition. There's hardly any dialogue, no scenes that are not mediated through one central character's psyche and voice. And Martone's voices are superb, from the prim stoicism of Dean's teacher to the tired stoicism of Pound's ex-lover the frat-mother, to the modest honesty of the kid who plays "Whistler's Father," to the near-stilted educated German's English of Schllemann's diaries. It is its fidelity to character and expression, its integrity as an act of witness, that makes Martone's collection the great book I'm pretty sure it is. Its medium is, finally, less the projected image of an era or the emotional cartography of a region than it is the timeless theme of people in circumstances. Martone's people are unique and 3-D and worthwhile not only because of their studied normalcy or their brushes with fame, but because they're drawn with the animating care which sheer talent can confer. They have life breathed into them; their author has given them and us a good gift.

■ □

David Foster Wallace