

Robert Drake: The Writer as Listener

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Survivors and Others, by Robert Drake, Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1987. xiv + 188 pp. \$24.95 (paper \$14.95).

IN A LONG, chatty critique of *Tender Is the Night*, Ernest Hemingway told F. Scott Fitzgerald that his failure resulted from closed ears: "A long time ago you stopped listening except to the answers to your own questions." The justice of these strictures on Fitzgerald's most ambitious work is still an open matter, but the generalization that Hemingway drew from them is surely as valid today as it was in 1934. "That's what dries a writer up," he concluded, "not listening. That is where it all comes from. Seeing, listening." As we can happily judge from *Survivors and Others*, Robert Drake is a contemporary fiction writer who has never stopped listening.

Drake confirms the importance of the sound of the human voice to his own fiction. He works hard at making the voice "sound *right*," catching the intonations in crucial scenes—little dramatic encounters, even performances. In a Drake story the reader hears more than he sees. That the way a person looks is less revealing than the way he sounds may or may not be a critical distinction in real life, but in fiction the art of characterization often is best communicated aurally. If we are rarely able to imagine what one of Drake's characters looks like—the hair and eye color, the skin tone, the sheer heft in the long and short of it—we are never unaware of how he sounds. In Drake's scheme of things, hearing is believing.

Drake once paid tribute to the two Southern writers whose work was a shaping joy to his own career: Eudora Welty and Flannery O'Connor. The first, he said, taught him to listen; the second taught him to see. But he himself suggests that writers have less conscious choice in the matter of form and emphasis than they may like to pretend; themes have a way of choosing their own means, and the person with the pen, though perhaps not with willy-nilly obedience, leaps at the opportunity offered.

Drake is not, for example, a weaver of plots; nuance rather than narrative is his priority. He has several times announced, with no little exasperation, that he must be the only writer around who has no novels making their rounds of publishers. "Maybe," he admits, "it's an expanded anecdote I'm after." In his favored form, the short story, the emphasis is on *short*, and its links are to the oral tale. "I don't think anything can be more interesting than listening to people talking about themselves and their concerns, if it's not unduly protracted"—and, he adds, even "first-class bores" can teach us all a thing or two.

While many of his figures are creatures of self-interest who unthinkingly expect others to be interested in them and their concerns, *Survivors and Others* has no first-class bores. The first of two parts in Drake's newest collection, "Wanderers, Warriors, Oracles," depicts a series of characters memorialized as personified educative milestones in the growing-up years of a first-person narrator. The second part, "Ann Louise: The Making of a

Survivor," focuses on a single character in a clutch of third-person stories in which the center of consciousness is a vibrant, mildly rebellious girl whose own educative milestones begin when she is nine, at the outbreak of World War II, with the sudden awareness of time and her place in the continuum of history, and ends when she is married, a mother ("old enough to start having grandchildren") enjoying a Kenny Rogers concert with her husband. (It should be pointed out here for all Ann Louise Parker buffs that Drake unfortunately allows his perky little heroine to grow up much too fast. This ebullient child is caught in characteristic situations at 9, 10, and early teens—and at 15 she's the sophomore candidate for football queen. But, suddenly, she's standing at the back of the Methodist church waiting for the first strains of Wagner to march up the aisle; we learn, moreover, that she has been out of college for "a couple of years and taught school in Nashville"! Remembering that Hemingway continued his Nick Adams stories for more than a decade after *In Our Time*, we can only hope that Drake will discover other moments in Ann Louise's maturing that will pace her survivorhood in more measured stages in a future book.)

Drake's work, from *Amazing Grace* (1965) to *The Home Place* (1980), has been one sustained counter to what he has called the moderns' "great rage against context," which to his mind importantly includes the "particularities and peculiarities of time and place—history and geography." In *The Home Place*, his memoir of the Drake family, he observes that many people now "do not seem to be from anywhere"; indeed, he ventures, we are perhaps "afraid of both history and geography." Those readers familiar with that moving account of his father's family—itsself a genreless amalgam of genealogical lore, portraits, and profiles from both memory and family legend, and an evocation of time and place generated by fictional making as well as by the compulsions of piety—will welcome again the place that grounded the Drakes. Wood-

ville, a county seat in West Tennessee, is some fifty miles from Memphis; its geographical interests also include Barfield, Fisher's Crossing, and Jimson, the latter a community boasting the only other high school in the county. All the denizens whose stories are recounted in *Survivors* may not be actually from this place, but it has a powerful pull, a staying power, even for those who find it pokey—for example, June, the Arkansas cousin of a Woodville family, or newcomers, those who have lived there for "only ten years" and who may have "gotten no further than selling insurance (accented, of course, on the first syllable)."

But while Drake is not among those "afraid of both history and geography," it would be a mistake, I think, to locate the uniqueness of *Survivors* on its sense of place. If the elder Drakes dominate the setting of *The Home Place*, other village types, older friends, neighbors, and town acquaintances are the subject of *Survivors*. What they share is not a small town as sacred place but their affective lives and relationships as a community: lovers of life, gossips, long-sufferers, wisdom figures, rebels, wanderers, and stay-at-homes. A reader would be hard put to retrieve any significant descriptive detail that would fix Woodville in the mind's eye. It has, like many towns in the South and Midwest, a square; the Illinois Central pounds grandly through the town even if it rarely stops; the doctors' offices are above a drugstore; and there are a few references to other shops in town. But the real public spaces are the high school auditorium and the Methodist church. Even the private homes are as unmemorable as their architecture. Woodville is, in short, less like Faulkner's Jefferson and more like Anderson's Winesburg. We are not invited to visualize square, streets, businesses, and I much doubt that the author himself would be much interested in drawing a map of his chosen spot. Drake's distinctive construct is Woodville's inhabitants, an aesthetic choice that says *here* is what Woodville is. As we listen (overhear—readers are also eaves-

droppers) to their stories, we become gradually aware that the rhythms of their voices carry more substance than what they say, since what they say emerges from a physical Woodville that is mutually assumed by teller and listener *prior* to the telling itself.

Listening, as Drake makes clear in the structure and texture of these stories, should not be explained away as a passive virtue. More than in some texts in which the presented figure dominates, even dictates his given space because of the vitality of his judgment or convictions or deviation from the norm, *Survivors* disallows any hoggish monopolizing for very long, not from the unconscious response to the old parental admonition that every child absorbs—*We all take turns!*—but from the plain fact that one-on-one situations require human, not just social, accommodation. The “I” of *Survivors* is not recessive.

While Drake allots space for his figures to express themselves, to impress their personalities upon the total flow of event and gesture, he never gives them free rein as unbuttoned characters (in both senses of that word), perhaps because he knows them too well. Our brief glimpses of them here suggest a great deal more to them than has been tapped, but those glimpses are enough to suggest something else: a voracious appetite for public ratification of their views, their angles, their words to the would-be wise. Such individuals as Auntee, Miss Eva Pierce, or Cousin Rosa Moss have too many impulses and too much vital eagerness to manifest them to set their own boundaries. Where would it all end were it not for the “I” who establishes boundaries for his people? We have some notion in two stories. “On the Side Porch” shows how the need of a perceptive but garrulous widow to dominate her occasions would clearly overflow the niceties of conversational etiquette (seldom observed, anyway) were it not for the “I” who insists upon his own apportioned contribution. And “I Never Have Been a Well Woman,” the dramatic monologue of an alert former schoolteacher on her hundredth birthday in which the burden of her

talk—her announced assorted ailments—is contradicted by all the rhetorical signs of the alive-and-kicking—such signs as the compulsive need to comment on the world in all its variousness, the acerbic judgments, the tonic candor.

Though he may not define himself as a character, the narrating voice sets the terms of those who are characters by his control, his paced intrusions, his own dramatized insistence that he also participate in these colloquies. The “I” is quite as functional as the separate individuals whose profiles actually generate these pieces. In every case the story exists first as a negotiation between the central figure and the narrator before the enactment of that relationship, the text, emerges as a negotiation between itself and the reader. As I read *Survivors*, the give-and-take relations (they are hardly confrontations) between the “I” and his characters function as sporadic spots of time, points in the humane education of the narrator. In a formal sense, the sensibility and character of the narrator are sketchier than his colorful subjects because the “I” is (sometimes) unformed and (more often) forming, while the Evelyns and Mrs. Garretts and the Mrs. Greens are fully formed, at least from the narrator’s perspective, as coherent, settled attitudes toward life. From the body of accrued experiences, what I have called these negotiations, from family, kin, neighbors, and acquaintances, come the survival values of the narrator himself.

The narrator’s participation in the rhetorical lives of his characters shows up in another way as well. One measure of the continuity of values from generation to generation is the language that names what those values are and lends them their relevance through metaphor, image, and pertinent analogy. It might be argued that we never learn values, even our modest down-home sort, apart from the words that nail down the free-floating abstractions—which is why the demotic, the popular dialect of the tribe, has always been a necessary language even before such poets as Dante and Chaucer decided

it was good enough for literature. I remember having trouble when I was a child with the phrase *trained ear*, partly because it conjured up grotesque bodily tricks that only a few superior souls could possibly be capable of performing. But one of the glories of modern Southern literature (while not exclusive to it) is the sheer profusion of trained ears, taught to pick up and transcribe for the joy of both insiders and outsiders the rich vernacular of native speech.

The voluble inhabitants of Drake's Woodville punctuate their storytelling with revealing idioms that define their speakers not as abstract eccentrics but as eccentrics from somewhere specific. Time, place, class, culture all meet in "brought-on" evangelists; "it changed hands and went down" (as applied to a restaurant, department store, or hotel); "they even told it on him"; "off-brand Baptists" (distinctions usually observed by brand-name Methodists); "he just ran through everything he had in no time at all"; and "she had always been used to nice things and all." The narrator, whose ear has assuredly been trained by listening to parents, relatives, and friends, as well as the occasional eccentric, is not the inert blotter that he at one time suggests he is. Because of his presence comes the idiomatic phrase that resonates with moral as well as linguistic meaning. In the singing of praise to survivors—and others—his is not just a contributing voice but one that pitches and leads.

One of the motifs that threads its way through *Survivors* is the recurrent need to acknowledge that truth of domestic Calvinism that Southerners have always been particularly comfortable with: that the Old Adam, like the poor, will be forever with us—indeed *is* us. And if the felt need to acknowledge that truth in some cases produces sourpusses, cranks, and backbiters, in others such bracing realism actually reinforces the outlook of the natural celebrators of life. None of those celebrators whom Drake celebrates does so with sappy optimism. Even those who tread the fine line between the articu-

lation of firm beliefs honestly held and the egoistic trumpeting of views because those views are *theirs* contribute to the joyous sense of having "come through," of having joined their own precursors who once also bore witness on the side of life.

Readers will necessarily have their own nominations for Best Survivor. For my own taste the nod would go to Auntee, the plain-spoken, ample-bosomed widow who represents not only realism but "*life—and lots of it*"; to Evelyn, always at home on her side porch, who likes people to be "*professional*" in their behavior but who dispenses opinion and grace to even those who are not; to Miss Clara, the long-retired schoolteacher and unretired disciplinarian who still emphasizes geography when called on as an occasional substitute because "it was important to know about other folks in other places"; to June, the unconventional Arkansas cousin who teases the conventional with her songs, jokes, and dancing and who, though finally choosing to be buried in Tennessee among her staid and sober kin, leaves her money as fellowships for students "to travel and widen their horizons"; and to Mrs. Garrett (a more poignant case), the Englishwoman displaced to West Tennessee because of World War II, who retains her British perspective, manners, and clothes into tattered old age, brusquely rejecting village condescension. Some of these are fine portraits of eccentrics, but none of them is a grotesque. Their survival, to use one of Robert Penn Warren's favorite words, is *earned*. Within the limits of their own mortality they survive through their testimony. As both they and their participating narrator would agree, if pressed, being a survivor after all is at best a holding operation: with all the benefits of luck and pluck and what my own aunt calls a sweet disposition, survivorhood is a state that can go just so far and no farther. Those who walk in the blessed company of all faithful people do so with full awareness that they are hostages to Time and its depredations, and they are blessed in part because they are counting with us all the way.