

TIM GAUTREAUX      THE    CLEARING    2003

In Tim Gautreaux's first novel, *The Next Step in the Dance*, the author staked a literary claim to Louisiana bayou country. In his second novel, *The Clearing*, he colonizes that claim. The atmosphere of the novel is humid and snake-infested, a swamp alive with mosquitoes and hungry alligators, stink bugs and stench, flooding and freezing alternately. The setting provides a fitting backdrop for the bare subsistence lives of the people who live there.

The time is 1923, the place a family-owned mill, and the people a motley collection made up of a manager from Pennsylvania, his brother the constable, poor white and black loggers, three women, Sicilians, and polyglot Cajuns. Byron, the constable, a golden boy before the war, eldest son and heir apparent to a timber fortune, returned from France a damaged man, no longer interested in family or future. He drifted away from home and lost contact. When the novel begins, he has been found in this Louisiana backwater and his brother, Randolph, is dispatched to manage the family mill until the cypress forest is cleared and to bring Byron home. What happens to them in this hermetically sealed redoubt is a story of intense and forgiving brotherly love, as Randolph struggles to reclaim Byron and to maintain decency against formidable odds. They must deal with the Sicilians who own the gambling, liquor and women and will do anything to hang onto this franchise; the loggers who work and fight in equal part; and each other, not as the boys they were, but as the men they are

A godforsaken mill town in the cypress swamps of Louisiana is the setting for a bitter power struggle in this darkly lyrical, densely packed second novel by Gautreaux. In 1923, Raymond Aldridge set out for the mill town-called Nimbus-in search of his brother, Byron. The two men are the heirs to a Pennsylvania timber empire, but ever since Byron came back from World War I, he has shunned his family. Before the war, he was a charming young man with a charmed life; now he works as a constable at the Nimbus mill and listens obsessively to sentimental popular tunes on his Victrola. When Raymond arrives, he assumes charge of the mill, which his father has purchased, and tries to understand how and why his much-admired older brother has come to this pass. Their reacquaintance is complicated by Byron's feud with a gang of Sicilians who control the liquor, girls and card games that make up the only viable entertainment in town. In battling them, Byron has turned as ruthless as they, and killings are as common as alligator sightings in Nimbus. The violence turns even deadlier when three women are mixed up in the fray: Raymond's feisty wife, Lillian; Byron's sturdy wife, Ella; and May, Raymond's almost-white housekeeper, who gives birth to a son who looks remarkably like an Aldridge. Gautreaux's prose is gorgeous, though his virtuosic images

("a nearly blind horse... its eyes the color of a sun-clouded beer bottle") sometimes pile up precariously, threatening to teeter into overkill. The novel adroitly evokes the murky miasma and shadowy half-light of the treacherous Louisiana swamps, their gloom and murderous undercurrents echoing the grisly wartime slaughter Byron is unable to forget. Gautreaux is perhaps the most talented writer to come out of the South in recent years, and this all-enveloping novel further confirms his skill and powers.

Tim Gautreaux has produced a finely crafted novel set in the 1920's in one of America's most unique states, Louisiana. Most of the novel's action takes place in a lumber camp in a bayou, not all that far from New Orleans as the crow flies, but decades, if not centuries removed in terms of the so-called civilizing influences. Gautreaux handles a number of themes well: capital and labor; the American North and South; race relations; the violence that lurks at the edges of society, as well as its heart; men without women; ecology, and even "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder" long before it received such a label. The numerous characters are realistically portrayed, and the author provides sufficient twists and turns in the plot to ensure the reader readily turns to the next page.

The story commences in 1923, when Jules Blake, acting as a timber scout for Northern interests, finds not only a suitable tract of cypress forest ready to be "harvested" but also the scion of the wealthy Pittsburgh family, who is the acting security guard at the lumber mill. The scion, Byron Aldridge, had been in the First World War, in France, and has had difficulties adjusting to routine civilian life once he returned to America. After the purchase of the tract of land, Byron's younger brother, Randolph, is sent down from Pittsburgh not only to manage the lumber mill, but also to save his brother, and bring him back into the family fold. The cypress trees are used for a variety of purposes, from wainscoting to railroad ties.

Gautreaux vividly describes the very basic life of the camp, primarily of men of a rough-hewed cast. A plethora of mosquitoes, water moccasins and alligators are the fauna. The mill itself is steam powered, and along with the supply boats that are similarly powered, will soon be replaced by diesel, but before their demise, manage to clank along. A central dynamic of the novel is the saloon, run by the Sicilian mafia, where the men "blow off steam," as it were, and often blow their entire weekly wages. The denouement of many a Saturday evening is the razor fight, which Byron tries to break up, sometimes successfully. Thirty have died in the camp as a result. Randolph is primarily

concerned about the "board feet" that the mill will produce, and considers "labor" to be an abstract concept that is damaged by the saloon being open on Sunday. His efforts to enhance the "board feet" which are produced places him against the Sicilian's own efforts at profit maximization.

Via Merville, a sheriff in his '70's, there are flashbacks to the American Civil War, when marauding bands of soldiers, from both sides, devastated his family's farm. There are also flashbacks to World War I, via both Byron, as well as the Sicilians. Gautreaux is sometimes compared to Cormac McCarthy, and certainly in terms of violence, a particular passage involving World War I could rival anything from McCarthy's [Blood Meridian: Or the Evening Redness in the West](#). Fortunately though, that is often offset with the author's beautiful southern descriptive prose, for example: "He got up and dressed, walking blindly out into the street stumbling around a broad puddle lying like a filthy mirror, the moon imbedded in it like a vandal's rock." And: "...four shotgun houses of raw wood were arranged with the logic of an armload of tossed kindling."

In France, this novel carries the title: "Le Dernier Arbre," (the last tree), and I found that a bit more suitable. After four years, the principals look back on their work, and remark that it will be fully recovered in 1500 years. The author scatters very selective French words sparsely throughout the novel, not very effectively in my opinion. And Bryon's depicted World War I experience was "a bit of a stretch," and seemed to reflect the author's desire to combine and distill the French and American experience during that four year war into one character.

