

James and the television: Shooting the fairy tale

by Jim East
October Light

by John Gardner
Ballantine Books, 497 pp.

James Page shot his widowed sister's television. Yes, he shot it dead, and chased her up to her room, brandishing a cudgel of firewood all the while.

Sally Abbott picked up a 'trash' novel and, provisioned with a crate of apples and a bed pan, settled in for the fight — a proud prisoner.

Sally's friends and niece Virginia (James' daughter) gathered downstairs — each of them going up in turn to entreat her capitulation, without success, while James went to Merton's Hideaway, got drunk, lamented his son Richard's unexplainable suicide, wrecked his truck, and returned to chase the remaining guests from the house with a shotgun.

James Page is the embodiment of the old 'piss and vinegar' patriot, "born in the age of spirits" now bemoaning the deliquescent culture of a new era — possibly responsible for Richard's suicide.

James believed all life was a "hopeless struggle against the pull of the earth, and that everything decent supported the struggle upward, gave strength to the battle against gravity." And so, he was violently repelled by all that senselessly prettified life — television, 'trash' novels.

But this is not the explanation for his rage. He was angry because he had a "smashed" world. His two sons and wife, Ariah, were dead, locked in the past.

His drunkenness at Merton's Hideaway temporarily unlocked that past:

His chest gave a jerk as the memory ambushed him, his boy — or rather man, by then — hanging from the gray attic rafter...For days he'd been unable to believe it. It seems the boy had been up to something, only God and his wife Ariah knew what.

But Ariah took the secret to the grave with her, saying only: "Oh James, James." And though he had survived it, he "had walked on the mountain at night, prowling like a lost bear hunting for the door to the underworld" that obscured the significance of those words.

And so when James fired his shotgun at the t.v., he was killing all that ignored his real-world — killing the fairy-tale, the state of California, and Coca-Cola — all the things that pretended truth.

He shot the world that Sally Abbott drew all of her information from. She believed in "changing with the times, believed in atomic bomb power plants,

since the Government claimed they was perfectly safe. Who knows about such things if not the Government?"

She sought and utilized these mediums — t.v. and literature — for their referential qualities. Not only did they conjure up images of a real life, they made decisions for her. Each new program or 'trash' novel was not in itself the art, the enjoyment. It was the identification Sally Abbott drew from them, making their internal symbols identify with symbols in her real world.

Indeed, as the real-world novel's conflict progressed (*October Light*), Sally searched for the answers, the sense of it, in her world of fiction — 'The Smugglers of Lost Soul's Rock.'

"For in the beginning, "quite imperceptibly the real world lost weight and the print on the page gave way to images, an alternative reality more charged than mere life, more ghostly yet nearer, suffused with curious importance and manageability."

Then the process of association settled in... "Captain Fist (the head of the smugglers) was exactly like her brother James"...and, "at some point in her reading...she had begun to give Peter Wagner her nephew Richard's features."

And so, Sally Abbott hung on the current of the 'trash' novel's progress, feeling that its ending would bear the solution of her conflict — tell her what to do — with James in the real-world novel.

But the ending of 'The Smugglers of Lost Soul's Rock' was a bitter disappointment to her. The smugglers, under fire from the U.S. Air Force, rushed up the precipice to beseech a hovering flying saucer to save them, shouting: "We're innocent! Beam us up!"

And in the following exchange, James discovered that the night her husband Horace had been found dead — Halloween — the front door was still open. "I keep thinking, what if he'd just seen something or someone, and it gave him a heart attack...A child, I suppose. But how could a child," Sally drifted off.

It was as if suddenly he had fallen back into the world — the magic door. The past began to rush over him. It was that Richard, gruesomely costumed as an ax-murderer, had scared his uncle Horace to death twenty-years ago, and that he had carried the vision of Horace's throbbing body and bulging eyes for five more years.

And then, unable to summon the courage to tell his father, he told Ariah and went into the garage and hanged himself.

Through his tears, James saw his wife's face clearly, "as he hadn't remembered it



for years." It was the unlocking of his heart, the *October Light*, an incredible release.

In the final passage of the novel James came face to face with an old black bear out by his hives. "The two ancient creatures stared at one another." When the bear gathered a couple of hives, James grabbed his gun and pointed directly at its chest. On second impulse he pointed it in the air and pulled the trigger.

When asked why he didn't shoot the thing, he could only answer that he forgot. But he thought for an instant "that the bear had said something, had said to him distinctly, reproachfully, 'Oh James, James.'"

old book

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purchasing library that it had a stolen book on its hands. The librarian, whom Barnes described as a "very proper lady," responded, "What! You mean I've finally got a hot book on my hands?"

The bookworld has its share of celebrities, Barnes said. A notable example is Thomas J. Wise, who forged first editions of early 19th century English authors. Wise was finally exposed in 1934, three years before his death, by two English bibliographers, but today his works are collector's items.

In terms of present trends in book collecting, Barnes felt that Americana, especially regional Americana, is very popular.

"I think right now the South is quite a fertile ground for book collecting," said Barnes. "More and more good books are coming this way and more and more people who are interested in good books are coming this way."

Rossini opera at Duke

Rossini's comic masterpiece, "The Barber of Seville," will be presented by Duke University 1978 Opera Festival Workshop on Sunday, July 9, at 3 p.m. in Durham's Carolina Theatre. Admission is \$4.00.

One of Rossini's most irresistible works and a perennial favorite among opera lovers, "The Barber of Seville" concerns the efforts of young Count Almaviva to win the hand of Rosina, ward of old Dr. Bartolo. To do so, he enlists the aid of the barber Figaro and dons a series of hilarious disguises, while the opera frolics to a joyous finale.

The opera will be presented in English with full costume and set. The North Carolina Chamber Players will assist as the orchestra under the direction of Don Wilder, Festival Music Director.

The performance is jointly sponsored by the National Opera Company and the Duke Department of Music in coordination with the Loblolly Performing Arts Festival.



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