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## Place-Based Fiction: Tourist Town Stories

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PLACE-BASED FICTION: TOURIST TOWN STORIES

by

Keegan Waller

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

English

Approved:

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UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY  
Logan, Utah

2024

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## INTRODUCTION

I first conceived of the idea for this short story collection in my early 20's while working as a ski lift operator, bartender, construction worker, and window cleaner in Park City, Utah. At the same time, I was becoming interested in short fiction through the works of authors like Raymond Carver, Chuck Palahniuk, and Charles Bukowski, whose dirty realism has played a large role in the formulation of my thesis. I intend to write a story collection that moves their genre into a more modern setting. While this collection will not fit perfectly into the dirty realist box, the themes and characters are inspired by the dirty realists' mold, as well as depictions of the interaction of character and place across multiple literary genres.

I began to think about this collection more concretely while taking an undergraduate fiction workshop with Dr. Charles Waugh where I wrote an initial draft of the first story of the collection. It was also in this class, as well as an introductory fiction workshop taught by A.J. Ortega, that I began to understand short fiction as a genre. The short story form has been interesting to me ever since. I enjoy the challenge of creating plots and crafting characters that develop and hopefully change over the course of a few thousand words.

The collection that follows this introduction attempts to tell an interconnected story about a specific place—a tourist town in Utah whose economy, while changing, is

centered around ski tourism. As a six-year veteran of the ski industry, with even more years in the food service industry, I took Stephen King's advice in his craft book *On Writing* to, "Write about what you like, then imbue it with life and make it unique by blending in your own personal knowledge of life, friendship, relationships, sex, and work. Especially work" (King 161). These stories all involve fictional characters living and working (or not working) in a very real place. By writing these stories, I wanted to take a closer look at the issues faced by working people in a place that I lived and worked for most of my young adulthood and a time in my life that I look back on with both nostalgia and cynicism.

I felt that the short story form would serve me best in my attempt to find these answers, and to tell the story of a place rather than a specific character. At various times I have considered writing my own story of Park City, or a thinly veiled alter ego like Bukowski uses in many of his novels and stories. But while the story of my time in the town is not unique, it is not complete. By telling the stories of multiple imagined characters, I could more effectively paint a picture of the place they inhabit, and look more thoroughly at the interaction between people and place.

This interaction was particularly important to writing these stories. While the rock, sagebrush, and concrete that make up the landscape of Park City are important parts of the town's character, I would argue that a town's residents can paint just as vivid a picture of setting for the reader. Describe a character wearing a custom tailored suit driving a luxury car, or a character wearing coveralls and smoking a hand rolled cigarette, and readers will naturally make assumptions about the spaces those character occupy.

The inverse is also true, and while writing these stories, I was conscious of how this relationship could work toward building my narrative.

To prepare for this thesis, I researched depictions of class, environment, and setting in short fiction, as well as work by dirty realist authors who wrote about the American working-class. I studied short fiction that: 1) attempts to tell the story of a place, 2) tells a similar story from different points of view, 3) looks realistically at the lives and experiences of working-class people, or 4) any combination of the three. I also studied short fiction where each story works as a part of a larger, semi-connected narrative, without sacrificing each story's ability to stand on its own as a complete work. Finally, I examined a few non-fiction and poetry collections that do similar work.

I began by reading short story collections by authors within the dirty realist literary tradition, specifically, Bukowski and Carver. In Bukowski's *South of No North: Stories of the Buried Life*, the author tells the stories of people who feel as though society has made them outcasts: drunks, lonely old men, professional fighters, college Nazis, and the working poor. The prose in the stories is sparse, and many are heavily driven by dialogue. However, the characters are vivid and well developed. This is exemplified in the opening paragraph of "A Couple of Winos" where Bukowski writes, "My mind was in riot against my lot and life, and the only way I could calm it was to drink and drink and drink. I was walking up the road, it was dusty and dirty and hot, and I believe the state was California, but I'm no longer sure. It was desert land" (24). Though these short sentences contain little flourish, the reader learns much. They learn that the narrator is mentally unwell and using alcohol to self-medicate. They learn that he has no fixed

home, and that he travels enough to forget where he is. They learn about the setting, and more importantly, what the narrator considers important about the space that he occupies.

This briefness in prose is typical of Bukowski and is an extreme example of common advice found in many creative writing craft books. This includes *Elements of Style* by William Strunk Jr., a book that Stephen King claims in *On Writing* contains, “little or no detectable bullshit” and that “every aspiring writer should read” (King ix). Strunk lays out rules for writing fiction, including, “Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words... This requires not that the writer make all sentences short, or avoid all detail and treat subjects only in outline, but that every word tell” (28). While Bukowski’s writing is certainly concise, it does not lack detail.

As mentioned above, dialogue also plays an outsized role in many of Bukowski’s stories. In “You and Your Beer and How Great You Are,” a story about an up-and-coming professional boxer struggling in his romantic life, the majority of the story plays out over a conversation between the man and his girlfriend. There is little action, setting description, or narration, with few dialogue tags even. There is likewise no interiority or internal monologue for any character until the third to last paragraph, when Bukowski writes, “For a moment he felt like telling her who she was riding with but he changed his mind and reached over and squeezed one of her knees” (12). However, the dialogue is enough for the reader to get to know these characters, who they are and what they care about, and to get a sense of the place that they inhabit.

Raymond Carver’s short stories fall within a similar literary tradition to Bukowski, which is exemplified by “Where I’m Calling From,” a story found within his collection of the same name. Like Bukowski, Carver’s sparse prose still manages to be

illuminating and his characters well-developed. The opening lines of the story beautifully set the stage for setting and character: “J.P. and I are on the front porch at Frank Martin’s drying-out facility. Like the rest of us at Frank Martin’s, J.P. is first and foremost a drunk. But he’s also a chimney sweep” (Carver 278). Similar to “A Couple of Winos,” these lines are doing multiple things at once, allowing the prose to be spare while still providing detail and background.

Since the stories in this thesis all focus on characters occupying the same space, I devoted significant time to reading authors doing similar work. *Winesburg, Ohio*, a short story collection by Sherwood Anderson, focuses on characters in a fictional town of the same name. The book, while not exactly a novel, does seem to be connected by more than just geography. In the initial chapter, the omniscient narrator introduces himself while discussing a writer who had written an unpublished book toward the end of his life. The book has a profound impact on the narrator, who seems to be translating or summarizing its contents for the reader throughout the rest of the collection, saying that, “The old man had listed hundreds of the truths in his book. I will not try to tell you all of them” (Anderson 6). The narrator, however, is not the only cohesive force throughout the book. One character, a newspaper reporter named George Willard, is arguably the main character throughout and appears in most of the 24 stories. Yet, he is only the main focus of one story, “Departure,” where he leaves Winesburg for a life in the big city. Instead of functioning as a protagonist, Anderson uses George to connect the other characters and show the loneliness that dominates the town.

Anderson’s narrator creates an interesting dynamic throughout the collection. At multiple points, the narrator reminds the reader of their existence, saying things like,



“The story of Wing Biddlebaum’s hands is worth a book in itself...It is a job for a poet” (Anderson 10). The narrative voice remains mysterious, despite being present in multiple stories. However, the narrator’s omniscience is likewise present in each chapter, giving the reader a glimpse into the minds of all the major characters.

Stephanie Soileau’s short story collection, *Last One Out Shut Off the Lights* uses a different narration strategy, employing first, second, and third person in various stories. In these stories, set in a small oil town on the coast of Louisiana, the characters work together to tell the story of a community in a similar way to the four stories that follow this introduction. The landscape of southern Louisiana is an important part of Soileau’s world building, her characters and their southern mannerisms give the reader greater insight into the space they occupy. For example, in “Poke Salad,” a story narrated by a natural southern storyteller to his daughter, the way that characters interact with their landscape is explored. The story is told in a stream of consciousness narration, where the protagonist relates the story of how eating handpicked, uncooked poke leaves made him violently ill. A character picking poke leaves out of a weed filled garden shows the reader a lot about the environment, but the asides made by the narrator are perhaps even more illuminating. Through digressions like, “Did I tell you I got the internet? The next time you come down, it’ll be there for you... You don’t always have to stay at your grandad’s” (Soileau 85), the reader learns about the narrator’s relationship with his daughter, what is important to him, and potentially creates a larger cultural picture of the town.

A book doing similar work is *Knockemstiff* by Donald Ray Pollock, a collection of short stories that takes place over multiple decades and follows multiple protagonists.

All of the collection's stories are either set in or connected to the small town of Knockemstiff, Ohio. Unlike Anderson, Pollock's narrator shifts in each of the stories within the collection. However, most of these stories employ a first-person or third-person limited narrator, with the author only using a third-person omniscient narrator twice over the course of 18 stories. The limited, though detailed interiority in each story build a cohesion similar to both Anderson and Soileau's collections.

While the protagonists change and characters only occasionally show up over multiple stories, Pollock begins building a cohesive world in the first line of the first story in the collection, "Real World," where Pollock's first narrator claims, "My father showed me how to hurt a man one August night at the Torch Drive-in when I was seven years old. It was the only thing he was ever any good at" (1). A similar tone is present in "Pills" where the new narrator says, "my old man was telling everyone around Knockemstiff that he hoped I was dead" (Pollock 52). These themes of violence and dysfunctional family dynamics show up in multiple stories and work together to create a vivid image of the small town Pollock's characters inhabit.

Through these stories, Pollock creates a setting that is inextricably interconnected with his characters. As Janet Burroway et al. write in *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft*, "Just as character and plot are interlinked, so character itself is a product of place and culture. We need not only know a character's gender, race, and age, but also in what atmosphere she or he operates to understand the significance of the action" (157). While Pollock's descriptions of rolling hills, rural restaurants and bars, and rusty decaying infrastructure help contextualize his characters, his characters likewise work to build the setting. In "Discipline," a story of an overbearing father who pushes his son into

competitive bodybuilding, leading to the young man's early death from steroid abuse, the narrator says, "For breakfast, he got a spoon of oatmeal, for dinner, a sliver of baked fish. At night, I gave him wooden clothes hangers to chew on... 'South Ohio!' I screamed every time he puked" (Pollock 121). With lines like this, the reader learns about the town of Knockemstiff through the people who inhabit it.

The short story is not the only literary genre where writers build setting through individual loosely connected characters. In *Spoon River Anthology*, a poetry collection by Edgar Lee Masters, the stories of people who lived and died in Spoon River are explored and narrated by the dead. The poems are all presented as epitaphs, all named for the deceased character they concern, and often present conflicting or clarifying information from one to the next. As in the collections by Soileau and Pollock, Masters uses the shifting narrative voice to give a more complete picture of a place. For example, in "Benjamin Pantier," Masters tells the story of a man who feels victimized by his wife, who he claims forced him to into a life of solitude with only his dog for company, saying that she, "snared my soul / With a snare which bled me to death / Till I, once strong of will, lay broken, indifferent" (15). The next poem, "Mrs. Benjamin Pantier" tells his wife's side of the story:

And the only man with whom the law and morality  
Permit you to have the marital relation  
Is the very man that fills you with disgust  
Every time you think of it - while you think of it  
Every time you see him?

That's why I drove him away from home  
To live with his dog in a dingy room (16).

Whether or not the reader sides with Mr. or Mrs. Pantier, the shifting perspective in these and in others throughout the collection paint a vivid picture of the town of Spoon River.

While these collections helped point me in the right direction for world building, character development, story construction, I still felt compelled to supplement my lived experiences in Park City with research into ski towns. While short fiction collections specifically focusing on life in these places is somewhat rare, much has been written in literary non-fiction about the evolution of western tourist towns, including Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire*, the book that no review of western outdoor recreation literature could be complete without. Despite its many flaws, I would be lying if I said his portrayal of southeastern Utah did not inspire me to both explore and write about the mountains and the deserts and the rivers of the state. While Abbey's ideas about wilderness and the west have fallen out of fashion, his attitude of reverence for his idea of nature, combined with disdain for urban areas and those who live and feel comfortable there, exemplified by lines like, "As for those others, the wretched inhabitants of city and plain, can we even think of them, to be perfectly candid, as members of the same race?" (305) is still prevalent in outdoor recreation communities.

But while the Abbey attitude about wilderness, the west, and outdoor adventure are still common in ski towns, both in this collection and in real life, these ideas have been reconsidered in academia. In "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," William Cronon discusses the history of American ideas about

wilderness, and the consequences of those ideas. While wilderness had a negative connotation for much of human history, Cronon notes that, after the American Civil War, “Wilderness suddenly emerged as the landscape of choice for elite tourists, who brought with them strikingly urban ideas of the countryside through which they traveled. For them, wild land was not a site for productive labor and not a permanent home; rather, it was a place of recreation” (77). The relevance to Park City, a place where the rich and famous have built second homes and rental properties as wilderness adjacent getaways, is impossible to miss. Cronon concludes, “The very men who most benefited from urban-industrial capitalism were among those who believed they must escape its debilitating effects” (77).

For many of the characters in the following stories, Park City is a version of wilderness, an illusory getaway from grinding out a living in hyper-capitalist urban America. The inclination to escape those conditions is, of course, not necessarily indicative of insanity, but these characters all discover in different ways that, “wilderness is not quite what it seems. Far from being the one place on earth that stands apart from humanity, it is quite profoundly a human creation” (Cronon 69).

In stark contrast to traditional conceptions of wilderness and Abbey’s portrayal of life in rural Utah is Heather Hansman’s recent book *Powder Days: Ski Bums, Ski Towns, and the Future of Chasing Snow*. In the tradition of the new journalists, the collection of connected non-fiction essays follows the author’s travels around the United States interviewing people who live and work in various resort towns. While Abbey revels in his perceived masculinity as a western man conquering the natural world, Hansman identifies the sexism that can spring from this attitude. While Abbey views the west as a

place where he can get away from people and find a kind of inner animal, Hansman recognizes the gatekeeping that naturally evolves from this conception of wilderness, questions who gets to decide who deserves to occupy these spaces, and the people who get pushed out as a result. A former ski industry worker herself, Hansman is sentimental about the culture and people that she finds in various places, but also realistic about environmental challenges the ski industry faces, as well as the toxicity and bleak economic conditions faced by people on the margins. This realistic portrayal debunks the popular perception of the ski bum as a carefree and easy lifestyle lived by bohemian free spirits, which felt true to my own experiences in the industry.

After years of thinking I might become a career ski bum, I left, but have felt drawn back to that part of my life, both creatively and physically. Toward the end of her book, Hansman discusses why she eventually left her Colorado ski town and her ski bum lifestyle: “I wonder if other people’s nerve endings work differently than mine. Maybe I didn’t cut it as a skid because I wasn’t addicted enough. Being comfortable with risk, and having a high tolerance for instability is another ski bum commonality, as is the ability to throw yourself into a questionable situation while negating or ignoring the consequences” (217). Like Hansman, I couldn’t hack it as a ski bum forever. Like Hansman, I still feel connected to that world. And like Hansman, I sought to find a truth about ski culture. Instead of interviewing real characters who live and work in these places, however, I invented my own and tried to learn something about what keeps them in a place that does everything it can to force them out.