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The endangered species list: the mercurial writing of Charles Willeford and the strange case of *The Shark-Infested Custard*

Abstract:

In the late 1960s and the early 1970s the crime writer Charles Willeford moved into various other genres. Willeford explored how the solitary, selfish, and obsessive male protagonists of his crime writing responded to the genre in which they featured. The outgrowth of these experiments were the key texts of his career: *The Burnt Orange Heresy* (1971) and *The Shark-Infested Custard* (the latter was not published until after Willeford's death in 1993). These texts were masterworks of the crime fiction genre, pushing its boundaries beyond the realm of the creative work and producing creative-critical texts. *Burnt Orange* is a hybrid novel that is at once the story of a sociopathic first person narrator and, perhaps more importantly, a commentary on Surrealist and Dadaist art. *The Shark-Infested Custard*, on the other hand, comprises a quartet of stories less concerned with the hardboiled world of crime and more with how condominium complexes, specifically those for bachelors, were creating lifestyles built on selfishness and possessions. This article will closely examine these texts and Willeford's genre writing of the 1960s and 1970s (from science fiction to westerns to sports narratives); it will contextualise his work in relation to crime fiction; and finally, it will place Willeford's work in a broader context than that of the marginalised pulp writer or the writer of the Hoke Mosely novels, on which the majority of scholarly writing on his work has concentrated.

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Introduction

The back of the hardcover edition of Charles Willeford's novel *The Shark-Infested Custard* (1993) states that it is both Willeford's longest novel and 'the book that he considered his master work' (1993: rear cover). This self-described masterwork, written in the mid-1970s, was rejected by publishers at the time, and was not published until 1993, five years after Willeford's death. Interestingly, *The Endangered Species List* was the original working title of *The Shark-Infested Custard* with another title considered by Willeford being *The Man in the Yellow Jumpsuit* (Herron 1997: 418). Prior to publication of the complete novel two sections of *Shark* were published separately by Dennis McMillan Publications (in 1987 and 1988). The first, *Kiss Your Ass Goodbye*, took the lengthiest section in *Shark*, and re-framed it as a novella, with Willeford writing a slightly different ending to the story, while a second section was published in the short story collection *Everybody's Metamorphosis*, which was also published by Dennis McMillan, under the title 'Strange'.[1] In addition to Geoffrey O'Brien (1997) and David Cochrane (2010), Willeford appears in two other studies: Woody Haut (1996) performs a close reading of *Pickup* (1955) and *The Woman Chaser* (1960) while Kirby Olsen (2001) examines the *The Burnt Orange Heresy*.

In a letter to his literary agent in 1974 reproduced in Don Herron's biography *Willeford* (1974), Willeford anticipates difficulties for *Shark*:

> Says a good deal about the brutalization of urban life – at least in Miami. It's written in the hard-boiled tradition of James M. Cain, Horace McCoy, and, I suppose, it is a fairly nasty picture of so-called ordinary young men who are making it and out down here. But such is my intention, and there is a lot of humor in it as well …
>
> As far as I'm concerned, the MS. is ready to send to the printer. I don't foresee any changes, or anticipate any. It is a very contemporary novel, and it will be either accepted for that reason or not (198–199).

Shark was, it is suggested here, too contemporary for 1970s publishers; indeed, it was rejected by all those who received the manuscript for consideration. As one of Willeford's regular publishers, Crown, said on rejecting the novel, it was also too 'depressing' (Herron 1997: 200). But this 'depressing' novel is actually an example of Willeford's complexities as a writer – he uses the crime fiction genre to parody American Television sitcoms of the 1970s; at the same time, he also uses *Shark* to further the figure of the immobilised hero, which he had been exploring in all his previous work. Dennis McMillan, publisher of several of Willeford's books, said of the author's creative intentions that:

> Charles did many things in his writing, but maybe one of the most "important" was to rub people's faces in their own shit and do it in a way that most didn't/don't even realize. This is the "dickhead" hero character that he was fond of presenting. Somebody asked him once why he had so many of that type (totally self-centred borderline or actual sociopaths or psychopaths), and he replied that, "The majority of guys I've known in my life were/are that way, and nobody writes about them, so I thought I'd do it, or something to that effect" (McMillan, personal communications).

In this way, Willeford takes on difficult to write, and often difficult to read, concepts and incorporates these into his creative practice. Such characters, so unlikable and so often ignored by many writers, add a great sense of realism to the type of crime fiction for which

he was so well known.

The Shark-Infested Custard

The four protagonists in *Shark* are another set in Willeford's long line of these 'dickhead' hero characters brimming with misogyny, selfishness, and heartlessness, financially successful, and most likely, insane. Clearly publishers were wary of publishing work that made readers feel as if their faces were being rubbed 'in their own shit', as the advertising and selling of this type of experience can understandably be problematic for the general public. But as McMillan rightly points out this was the subject matter Willeford was fondest of, and it is this attachment to difficult protagonists that explains why Willeford's creative work has always been consistently framed in relation to other crime writers of the 1950s and early 1960s. To see Willeford in relation to pulp writers meant a discussion of his critique of masculinity, and his critique of American culture could easily see him compared to writers like Jim Thompson and David Goodis as well as to the writers Willeford identifies in his letter to his agent, who include James M. Cain and Horace McCoy.

There has been little critical response to Willeford. Geoffrey O'Brien's book, *Hardboiled America*, is a good example of Willeford's critical obscurity. O'Brien examines writers like Thompson and Goodis and their literary context amongst hardboiled writers like Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. The writing on Willeford is distinctly non-critical – mentioned once in a list of writers who set their books in Florida, and four times in an appendix where the only details listed are his pulp titles and their years of publication.

David Cochran's (2010) study provides the most astute analysis of those texts in which Willeford went beyond genre conventions. He argues that:

> Willeford created a world in which the predatory cannibalism of American capitalism provides the model for all human relations, in which American success ethic mercilessly cast aside all who are unable or unwilling to compete, and in which the innate human appreciation of artistic beauty is cruelly distorted by the exigencies of mass culture. If his characters are not … psychotic … they are in some ways even more disturbing because of their appearance of normality (2010: 40).

It is this appearance of normality, coupled with fragility and vulnerability, that drives the narratives.

As much as Cochran's insight is crucial to identifying Willeford's writerly preoccupation with mentally unstable characters, he stops short of situating Willeford's penchant for these character types within his wider creative aims. Willeford's *Shark*, as the most pivotal example, is both a crime novel (though a problematic one) and his successful re-visioning of his own creative project, particularly his investment in the immobilised hero figure that his work obsessively explores. Since his first novella in 1953, *The High-Priest of California*, Willeford had been writing about this literary character type, which he identified as central to modernist literature. He mapped it extensively, for example, in his critical essay 'New Forms of Ugly' (1987). In this work Willeford traced the immobilised hero from Fyodor Dostoevsky's Underground Man in *Notes from Underground* (1864) to Kafka's Joseph K. in *The Trial* (1925), and from Camus' narrator in *The Fall* (1956) to Chester Himes' *Lonely Crusade* (1947). He re-mixed and repurposed the figure of the immovable hero, and with the

completion of *Shark*, Willeford transformed it from what, in all his previous books, he had portrayed as a solitary loner, into a pack of men whose identities cannot function in isolation. Willeford's obsession in his work with the immobilised hero can be seen as an attempt to align himself with modernist writers, whom he considered to be receiving serious critical attention. As Willeford stated, the immobilised hero was part of a 'new type of inactive fiction [with a] need for highly literate readers' (2000: 224). By re-visioning the figure as four protagonists rather than one, Willeford was moving beyond the critical boundaries that he himself had set out.

The roots of Willeford's project are outlined in a thesis that he wrote in the 1950s, but which, in what is now a typical refrain in his oeuvre, was not published until 1987 in a small print run of 350 copies as *New Forms of Ugly*, and then republished in the collection *Writing and Other Blood Sports* (2000) in a larger, though still modest, print run of 1,000 copies.

In the essay, Willeford defines the immobilised hero:

> When the modern hero is immobilized, his inactivity is caused by his mental state, his environment, his personality, or the overwhelming crush of modern civilization; he is never Grail-hungry and he rarely, if ever, blames either a personal God or the gods at large for his inactive state. If he is unsound of mind, he is usually sound of wind and limb … and if his thinking is often distorted when compared with the thinking of the so-called adjusted, or average, man, he himself considers his mental state far superior to the run-of-the-mill average male who lacks his perception and pretension of the real nature of the world and universe (Willeford 2000: 228).

In *Shark*, there are four immobilised male heroes: Eddie Miller, Don Luchessi, Hank Norton, and Larry Dolman. They epitomise Willeford's definition; they do so, however, not as individuals but as a pack, none of whose members can function outside the group. As Larry Dolman, the narrator of the first section explains of their friendship:

> Under different circumstances, I don't think Don, Hank, Eddie and I would have become such good friends. But the four of us were all charter members, so to speak, the first four tenants to move into Dade Towers when it opened. And now, after a solid year together, we were tight. We swam in the pool, went to movies together, asked each other for advice on the broads we took out, played poker one or two nights a month, and had a good time, in general, without any major fights or arguments. In other words, we truly lived the good life in Miami (Willeford 1993: 12).

The paragraph's construction, with its list of examples of the men's 'tight' bond with each other leads to the punchline: 'we truly lived the good life in Miami.' This *we* provides the primary tension of the novel. Their 'good life' is eroded when the men are separated and isolated from one another; their identities are reduced, until near the end of the narrative when, one by one, the four men relocate to Chicago together where they can re-create the perfect living arrangements for themselves. As Larry Dolman explains in Part Four in Chicago:

> I [lived] above Hank, and Eddie and Don were across the hall from me. There was an inside stairwell, and Hank's apartment was directly below mine … When the fireman moved out, we had already made arrangements with the real estate agent for Don to get his apartment, and the four of us would then have the quadriplex to ourselves (Willeford 1993: 238).

The 'stormy … night[s]' (237) and new quadriplex apartment in Chicago are a far remove from the 120-apartment Dade Complex and 'hot and muggy air' of Miami (11). By eliminating all distance between themselves and, further, by isolating themselves from any other human contact, the quartet restore order to their world and their identity as *we*: 'everything was working out well' (238).

Willeford structures *Shark* to emulate the fractioning of the men – there's no unity of identity within the text, no consistent first person or third person voice to represent or speak for them. Instead, Willeford fragments the narrative voice, splitting it over several characters: Part One and Part Four are narrated by Larry Dolman; Part Two is narrated by Hank Norton; and Part Three is written in third person and tells Eddie Miller and Don Luchessi's stories (with an eleven-page letter from Hank opening their section). They are further splintered when, in each section, they are faced with a tension that challenges their identities. In Part One this threat is to the group, while Parts Two and Three threaten to break them individually.

In Part One, the men are involved with the murder and concealment of the bodies of a drug dealer and his partner, Hildy, and while the pack's security is threatened by this event, by the end of the section they are laughing and 'still ahead of the game: four lucky young guys in Miami' (48).

By Part Two, they are no longer four close-knit, lucky guys. Eddie and Don have moved away from Dade Towers and are living with women, Eddie 'shaking up with a well-to-do widow' while Don has gone back to his wife (55). In Part Two, Willeford mirrors the collective bonding paragraph of Part One, but this time, with the group reduced to two, the men's bond is more tenuous:

> [Larry] is a friend of mine, and he became my friend – if not what you would call a close buddy – simply because we both happened to live in the same apartment house. We became friends through the accidental sharing of the apartment facilities. We used the swimming pool, and we played poker in the recreation room … we shared enough common experiences, together with Don Luchessi and Eddie Miller, to be more than just acquaintances (55).

Hank and Larry are friends by convenience, and the former is already yearning for Don and Eddie, of his relationship with whom he says, '[he] and I were *close* friends' (55). In Part Three, Eddie and Don scheme to leave their partners (a girlfriend and a wife respectively). They are far away from the unifying *we* of Dade Towers: Eddie communicates with Hank by letter, while Don spends the majority of this section in his own thoughts. Part Three is told in the third person, adding to the alienation of the men one from another.

In Part Four, the men are back together with Larry again taking up the role of the narrator. By having Larry as the narrator, Willeford has returned the novel to the voice that the men had when they 'truly lived the good life' (12). The men spend this section trying to figure out how they can change Don's identity so that he can live in Chicago without his ex-wife ever finding him, and they can all live happily ever after together. This is the journey of the novel. There is one final, and destructive, moment for the pack at the end.

Willeford isolates the men in *Shark* in various ways – having them move out of Dade Towers and away from one another, switching between first person narrators in Parts One and Two, and third person in Part Three. But during Part Two, Willeford's writing and structure of the novel reflects Willeford's view that male isolation leads to the loss of self.

The original title of *Shark* was *The Endangered Species List* (Herron 1997: 199) a title that explicitly defines Larry, Hank, Eddie and Don as examples of a dying species. These 'dickhead' males are in danger of extinction through domesticity. As a title, however, *The Endangered Species List* does not go far enough in explaining the meaning of their pack relationship. That domesticity and employment constitute threats to the pack suggests that Willeford is critical of anything that would endanger the men. But by changing the title to *The Shark-Infested Custard*, Willeford shifts the threat to also include the men's relationship with each other. The epigraph at the start of the novel states 'What is very sweet, bright yellow, and extremely dangerous? – old Miami riddle (Willeford 1993: 6). The answer to the riddle is the shark-infested custard whose meaning is that everyone and everything is an 'extremely dangerous' shark but what the men fail to see is that the shark-infested custard also includes their pack. Their 'tight' bond is so constrictive that they cannot function without it and it cannot but lead to their implosion.

By the time the men have formed their 'tight' bond their individuality is already compromised. Several chapters into Part Two, by which point the pack is splintered, Hank (who is also the narrator of this part) gets involved with a woman named Jannaire. Hank, ever the poet, tells her the following:

> "My overall plan, after I convince you how sweet and charming I am, is to get you into the sack. Eventually, anyway; I'm not going to rush it."
>
> "A woman admires frankness, Hank, but you're awfully crude."
>
> "Not crude," I laughed. "Basic" (87).

Hank's reduction of himself to one word – basic – draws attention to a pattern of sentence construction (or, again, reduction) that Willeford uses throughout Part Two. It is also a misrepresentation, for he dates numerous women, spends pages describing the nuances of the pharmacy business (111–113, 135–146), and understands the monetary and ethnic systems of Miami (129). Calling himself basic is a means of undervaluing himself in order to appear less threatening for Jannaire. But when his relationship with Jannaire blows up (literally), Hank starts to fall apart: 'Why in the hell was I crying? Perhaps I cried because it was three in the morning, but most of all, I felt that I had lost something, something valuable and irreplaceable, even though I didn't know what it could be' (110). By the end of Part Two he is completely isolated from his pack and moves to Chicago alone. And the crying returns: 'I broke off with a short laugh that was a half-sob. But I didn't cry. Not yet. There would be plenty of time to cry during the long, cold, winter nights in Chicago' (176). He's dislocated from the city he understands so intimately – Miami, his friends – and reduced, 'basic, left without the intellectual capacity to 'know what it could be' to return to his former self.

While Willeford locates *Shark* in the hardboiled tradition, he remarks that 'there is a lot of humor in it as well' (Herron 1997: 198-199). Although humour and the hardboiled are not mutually exclusive, Willeford takes humour to a new level by infusing elements of the American television sitcom genre into the hardboiled. The murders, violence, and betrayal are incidental, better read as accidental, to the novel. Comedy is what actually drives the writing of *Shark*; the hardboiled framework is a means for Willeford to write a parodic novel of 1970s television sitcoms – albeit a deeply cynical parody of a television sitcom that would never make it to air. Willeford had already used the film and television industry as a backdrop in two previous works, *The Woman Chaser* (1960) and *The Machine in Ward*

Eleven (1963), and was planning another after *Shark.* However, after the manuscript for *Shark* was rejected in the 1970s, Willeford gave up trying to complete *The First Five in Line: A Documentary Novel*. The premise of *The First Five* is 'that Willeford would portray the workings of a TV game show, following each of the contestants as they vied to be the ones to have their arms cut off on live television' (Herron 1997: 201).

The parody in *Shark* is not as explicit as it is in his earlier novels *The Woman Chaser*, *Machine*, and the unfinished novel *The First Five*. From the premises within the four parts of the novel, to Willeford's comedic-style of writing, to the last scene of the novel, *Shark* uses the TV sitcom without ever explicitly acknowledging this. Reduced to their plots, the four parts of *Shark* read like North American *TV Guide* sitcom descriptions:

> Part 1: The guys bet Hank that he can't pick up a woman at a drive-in movie. But when he does their troubles really start.
>
> Part 2: Hank gets involved with Larry's ex-girlfriend, Jannaire, who runs a dating service but Hank's in for a surprise when she turns out to be more than he expected.
>
> Part 3: Eddie finds out his girlfriend, Gladys, is a lot older than she's been saying. Don wants to leave his wife for good.
>
> Part 4: The guys decide to help Don change his identity so he can live with them forever.

Meanwhile, at the start of the novel we're told, 'It started out as a kind of a joke, and then it wasn't funny anymore because money became involved' (11). The tension of the novel, then, is that it's 'a kind of a joke' but 'then it wasn't funny.' This conflict undermines the punchlines throughout the novel.

But if the absurdity of the plots weren't enough, what sets most of the conflicts[2] in *Shark* rolling are either accidents or misunderstandings (a common feature of many American sitcoms of the time). In Part One, when Don kills the drug dealer he says, 'I didn't touch the trigger! It went off by itself!' (42). While there's no direct proof of this in the novel, even with Hank's reassurance that 'We know it was an accident, Don' (42), the truth is that this was Willeford's intention. As Dennis McMillan recounts, 'Charles told me: "He didn't *mean* to shoot him, the gun just went off"' (McMillan, email to author). In the second section, the entire revenge plot against Hank stems from the misinformation that he was the one who impregnated Jannaire's sister (the sister who then committed suicide over the pregnancy). And in Part 4, Don accidentally shoots someone again – this time himself – over a misunderstanding about sexual proclivities.

These absurdist sitcom plots are reinforced by Willeford's construction of paragraphs and sentences, which are often built on the rhythms of comedy. The scene when Hank and Jannaire joke about Hank's base instinct is worth returning to, as it highlights key examples of these rhythms. Janniare's line, 'A woman admires frankness, Hank, but you're awfully crude', is the set-up, while Hank's response, 'Not crude … Basic', is the punchline (87). All that is missing after Hank's line is CUE LAUGHTRACK.

Later on in Part Two, Hank tries to purchase a gun and discovers this will take three days. This joke's set-up takes several lines for the payoff. The way to solve the three-day delay is simple for the owner, Mr. Dugan. Dugan sets up the joke by asking, 'Who did you vote for in the last election? … Do you mind showing me your voter's registration card?' Hank,

continuing the joke's set-up, says, 'Of course not.' Then comes the punchline: 'The moment [Dugan] saw my registration card his stiff attitude changed. He smiled, shook my hand, winked, and returned the card. "For a fellow Republican … we're willing to bend a little …"' (131).

When Hank meets his boss, Tom, there is a long description about how they are going to be using the Dale Carnegie business techniques on each other. This paragraph block acts as the set-up for the first joke of the chapter, in which Hank builds up Tom's abilities with the Carnegie technique before making the following revelation at the end of the punchline:

> It was quite simple to maintain my role with Tom because he made it easy for me, and I admired his skill.
>
> Besides, you can't shit an old shitter (136–137).

The conclusion, 'Besides, you can't shit an old shitter,' undermines the previous description of the Dale Carnegie techniques and sets up the comedy of the rest of the chapter as both men try to out-Carnegie each other.

Finally, when Jannaire confronts Hank with her revenge plot, Hank realises that the conflict between them has been a misunderstanding. Rather than tell her, though, Hank sets up a joke: 'but I couldn't tell Jannaire the truth about our brief encounter. To do so would be too cruel.' He completes it with the following line: 'Besides, Jannaire wouldn't believe me anyway' (172–173). Like the previous example, Willeford spends several paragraphs setting up the thought before dropping the punchline.

Willeford's punchlines are given their own paragraphs – they are the last, disruptive thought on the situation. They are 'kind of jokes' (to paraphrase Larry's opening line from *Shark*), which give the novel a dark comedic style and pave the way for the final joke of the book. In 1970s American sitcoms a common beat was to have the cast together at the end laughing at a final joke suggesting that order has been restored and that any transgressions or traumas that occurred during the episode have been resolved.[3] There are two examples of these laugh endings in *Shark*. At the end of Part One, after burying two bodies Hank realises he has won his bet: 'I picked up the girl in the drive-in, and bets were made! You guys owe me money!' (48) As Larry reports, 'We all laughed then, and the tension dissolved.' In other words, the bodies have been disposed of, the bet is paid, the status quo is restored. This laugh ending is repeated in Part Four, but the final laugh is the most insidious. The men have relocated to Chicago and live in the same complex together. The status quo has, seemingly, been restored. But in the last few pages Don, who has previously accidentally shot another character, this time kills himself, again accidentally, and the three remaining men realise that they are back where they started when they had to bury the dead drug dealers: 'Oh, shit!' Hank laughed. 'Here we go again!' They all burst into laughter in front of Hank's maid, Merita:

> All three of us were laughing, and we couldn't stop.
>
> Poor Merita.
>
> She probably thought we were crazy (263).

Again, Willeford has constructed his lines in a set-up/punchline style with the third and second last lines being the set-up for the brutal punchline, 'She probably thought we were crazy.' Eddie, Hank and Larry, standing over their dead friend, already planning on how to

dispose of his body, are not 'probably' crazy; they are full-blown. Worse, earlier in Part Four Larry had stated that now that the four of them were back together 'everything was working out well' (238). These men needed their pack to remain intact. With one down, they are back to instability, and with their maniacal laughter (which '[they] couldn't stop') there can be no return to psychological order. Willeford's final joke, then, is the reaffirmation that the loss of one of the immobilised heroes means the loss of them all.

Conclusion

The Shark-Infested Custard is a rejected manuscript by a writer primarily known for pulp-fiction crime writing, who wrote a novel that did not fit easily into the pulp-fiction crime genre. *Shark* is filled with dark humour, with punchline beats; it is a parody of TV sitcoms without ever explicitly stating that this is what it is. This unstated aspect of the novel's framework, the way that Willeford's male protagonists try and fail, coupled with the fact that they are psychotics, serve to explain why publishers initially rejected the novel: this is not how they wanted crime fiction to read or crime fiction protagonists to behave. But Willeford was writing about something beyond crime fiction; with *Shark*, Willeford was expanding the definition of the immobilised hero to include multiple men, to show how the figure could move as a pack and how this pack was vital to its psychological survival. *Shark* marked the start of a new phase of Willeford's writing; and it is a shame that its posthumous publication meant that its significance went unnoticed in the 1980s when he created his most famous character, Hoke Mosely.

Endnotes

1. Willeford's *Cockfighter* (1962) has its own, tragic, publishing history. 'Not long after its release, the publisher was hit by a car and killed, and the business was shuttered. Over 20,000 copies of *Cockfighter* went straight into remaindersville' (Willeford 2011). In 1972, *Cockfighter* was republished, this time in hardcover by Crown Publishers, with substantial rewrites by Willeford.
2. I say most, the third part reads like a slight aberration to the other three parts. It is written in third person (unlike the first person accounts of the other parts) and is split between Don and Eddie's conflicts. Also, it doesn't have the same misunderstandings as the other parts, unless we think Don's foiled plan to kidnap his young daughter, Marie, is really her naive misunderstanding of how happy she would be with her outlaw father? Part Three merely reinforces how much of a sad sack Don is and his inability to fully comprehend the people or situations in his life.
3. Examples of American sitcoms where this happens includes *Three's Company* (1977–1984), *Welcome Back Kotter* (1975–1979) and *Happy Days* (1974–1984).

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