

A TICKET TO ALBANY

Nigel Krauth

A Ticket to Albany, New York

To get to Albany, the capital of the State of New York, I took an Amtrak train from the Penn Station in New York City. As I purchased my ticket, I was getting used to the definitions - those that said that New York was not the capital of the state it belonged to. I was rejigging my poor geography. 'New York, New York...it's a hell of a town', was beginning to have a more correct meaning for me. Having heard the song, I thought the repetition was simply an intensifier. Say the name of the city twice and you get an idea of its significance? Not so. The second 'New York' in the song refers to the state - the one the first-mentioned 'New York' is set in. Damn! Dumbed-down Aussie sucked in yet again!

In Australia, we have a queer sense of overseas geographies. We build our version of the world according to barely-specific fictions, films, songs, and news reports. We take much for granted. The sources don't spend time in precisely locating themselves. I had no idea that in going to upstate New York - away from New York - I might be approaching the state capital.

A Passenger Car Called 'James Fenimore Cooper'

The Hudson Valley is exactly as you may have read about in Cooper's Leatherstocking novels. It was twenty years since I'd read of Natty Bumpo and Co., but I recognised the setting straightaway. For me, the feel of the forest, its particular angularity of thin, dispersed, endlessly-replicated tree-trunks - not tall, strangely regular, easily moved amongst by fur-trappers - was nothing like the Australian bush. For Australians, bush is something you push through before you discover it's a maze; for Americans, the woods are clearly a maze before you enter.

I don't recall the name on the Amtrak carriage I was travelling in, but as the journey continued, as the Rockefeller-style castles passed on the west side of the Hudson River, I became aware of the carriages parked in sidings, quickly passed, along the east bank of the river. The names printed in capitals on those cars' aluminium sides were such as: the 'Thomas Jefferson' carriage; the 'Benjamin Franklin' carriage, the 'Richard Nixon' carriage, and so on... And then I saw it: the 'James Fenimore Cooper' carriage, at rest in a nondescript siding in the magnificent Hudson Valley. I had my throw-away camera ready, and took a blurred picture of it.

At the Conference

At the conference in Albany I walked in the door of the huge central display room where more than a hundred publishers were showing their wares. I immediately got into discussion with a gentleman whose desk was covered with Creative Nonfiction Magazines. I picked up a couple of his publications and flicked through them.

'We do this stuff in Australia,' I said. 'We don't call it Creative Nonfiction. We call it writing.'

He looked at me archly.

In the Streets of Albany, N.Y. (1)

If you're trying to return to your motel late from an after-conference drinking session in Albany, New York, don't respond to the first offer of assistance you receive. The girl who promises to help you may in fact have her eye on the good and expensive 'how-to-write' books you are toting in your conference-provided carry-bag. She may invite you back to a dodgy apartment under the freeway where a group of ex-New York city drug freaks will do you over and confiscate your bag of new purchases. From this point, carry your bruises with equanimity. Just think: it's good to distribute published learning.

And because the situation is possibly life-threatening, race away.

In the Streets of Albany, N.Y. (2)

On the other hand, make friends with local, long-established coffee-drinkers, academics and taxi-drivers. They'll set your mind racing as you contemplate global possibilities. They'll tell you what America means, what writing means, and what sitting in the back seat of a taxi with a group of heavy 'hood' dudes means. None of this is life-threatening.

Australia and America

I wonder why I am attracted to America as a cultural source and essence? Is it because I feel small as an Australian and want to look up to a big, successful global brother? Is it because I have both hated and loved what America has done in physical terms in the world in my lifetime, and have thus developed a political dependency? Is it because America has produced so many sexy images of living in the western culture context that I can't see any other way to the future? Or is it because I envy American writers?

For thirty years, I didn't like America...until I visited her. Is that like finding that the hooker has a heart of gold?

Cedric of Albany

Cedric is a one-armed black American living in Albany. How could I have had any idea that our paths would cross? Perhaps that's a mistake of our culture. Why shouldn't I meet Cedric? How impossibly big must 'global' be?

Cedric and I were on a bus in Albany. Believe it or not, the driver of the bus lost her way. She was trying to get a bus-load of conference delegates to the central venue, from their outlying suburban motels. She finally had to admit to her passengers that she didn't know the way back to the central city venue. 'This is my first time,' she said. Albany, N.Y., is a kind of big city.

Then Cedric stepped in. One-armed Cedric, short of a left arm - he went to the front of the bus. 'I was a taxi-driver,' he said. 'I'll show you the way.'

Cedric directed the bus along roads that avoided street-lights, up ramps that motorways barely recognised, through minor backstreets that short-cutted freeways, and into one-way streets the wrong way, until we arrived, miraculously on time, at the conference venue.

I turned my mind around and figured the consequences. The arm Cedric had lost was the one that might have been sticking out of a US taxi window in some horrendous accident. Unable now to drive a taxi, he must have studied to become an academic in the creative

writing field. As a lecturer in creative writing, he could guide a bus-load of academics to their proper destination.

I fell in love with the guy.

Flying Back

The conference finished. I got out of Albany, N.Y. by plane. On that flight I stopped thinking of 'Albany' as a small ex-whaling town in the south of Western Australia. I stopped thinking in Tim Winton terms, in terms of a visit I had made to the south-western tip of Australia when I was a teenager. 'Albany' had been for me a windswept, out-of-the-way, somewhat ignored, Western Australian minor port. Now it was a considerable place - the capital of New York - a hell of a town.

Nigel Krauth's novels include Matilda, My Darling, The Bathing-Machine Called The Twentieth Century, JF Was Here, and Freedom Highway. His work is published internationally and has won several Australian literary awards. He is Associate Professor and Head of the School of Arts, Griffith University, Gold Coast, Queensland where he conducts the Writing Program.

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