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DOROTHY ARNETT

REVIEW OF *BIG WHEEL AT THE CRACKER FACTORY*

by Mickey Hess  
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I loafe and invite my soul,  
I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.  
My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this soil, this air,  
Born here of parents born here from parents the same, and their parents  
the same,  
I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin,  
Hoping to cease not till death. —Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself* (1881)

Mickey Hess's story of a year in the life of an English instructor brings to mind Whitman's celebration of himself as an observer and mirror image of life's parade in *Song of Myself*. Beginning with Spring 2001 and moving through Summer 2002, we get a personal history of how Hess's life outside of academe comes to wrap itself around the teaching and its various commitments (grading papers, daily writing, presenting at conferences), obligations (appearing ever-grateful for the job one is ever-grateful for, but perhaps uneasy for being quite so grateful), and minefields (living in the community of one's students when one is a cohort of that group). He takes on varied odd jobs—ice cream man; Action World Family Fun Center guide; dead man in a haunted house; improv comedian; volunteer at a Billy Graham crusade revival—for both the money and what he finds to be a requirement of teaching: experience.

2. Hess may not be Everyman, but part of being Every instructor is understanding the pageant of humankind one comes to revere from the love of knowing and making literature. And then there are those student loans that piled up as he worked toward the degree that got him the *real* job that doesn't provide enough salary to pay back the loans. Students know we work for pay they wouldn't even consider; that we often live on less income than they do as students. The irony of his situation results in his making those extra jobs the whipping boys to his *real* one, the one in which he is perhaps most disrespected—by the low pay and ever non-renewable contract, the lack of an office or phone or computer, the suspension in Limbo with regard to next semester's schedule, and finally—unfortunately so—the papers to grade and the classes to meet. "I'm a displaced worker," he confides.

I carry everything—books, lesson plans, student papers in my trendy backpack, which I soon discover was designed to be more fashionable than sturdy. I'm a mobile unit. I read *Ulysses* at Comedy Caravan, respond to papers at Tyler Park. After class Adam asks if I want to go

work on jokes or play miniature golf, and I say fuck yeah I want to play miniature golf, then that night I'm up til [sic] 3 AM planning classes, reading chapters for the next day. (103)

3. But as cruel as the instructorship might be, he loves and ultimately celebrates it. Running through the almost daily chronology of his life is a sense of Whitman's loafing and observing: a deep, quiet reflection of the beauty of the work, in spite of the book's occasional irreverence (the most obvious being its unfortunate cover). We may safely conclude that what we hold in our hands is an accumulation of daily writings that Hess at first self-publishes and gives away by the hundreds out of love for his life.

4. The book's title comes from the *Simpsons* episode in which Milhouse explains to Bart the special authority of his bigwig father that allows him to get Krusty the Clown at his birthday party. Hess enjoys some of that big wheel status himself (he teaches at a university after all), and he *is* Krusty by virtue of his placement in the academic food chain. The kids love him, but the *adults*—i.e. the tenured—know he's a fool.

5. Hess's friends provide a supportive network throughout the account. Like Hess and his wife, they get jobs within the womb of campus, where they have been formed again within a larger world of knowledge after leaving home. For a while, no one seems to want to leave. In one section, Hess examines his friends' jobs by way of his own while adopting the style of Studs Terkel in *Working*. Elsewhere, the book's focus on the indignities of minimum wage labor recalls that of Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed*. As Hess explains,

Sometimes I'd teach at three different universities in the same day. Any routine I settled into would be broken within fifteen weeks, when the semester ended. Part-time jobs in the summer was [sic] an extension of that. I ended my classes in April and two weeks later I was waiting tables at Mexicana Bar and Grill. . . . [I was] learn[ing] how to pour tea from the side of the pitcher and convince people to try our Mexican Eggrolls. (7)

6. The most tragic moment of the book comes in the description of Shane, a colleague and former roommate, who dies at age thirty-three from a mysterious illness of which he had been aware for some time, but regarding which he had not consulted a doctor. Hess collects the facts:

Dead at thirty-three. Same age as the Human Beatbox. People ask me what killed him and I don't know. I don't want know [sic]. All I can say is he was sick and he didn't have health insurance. He had teaching awards but no medical benefits. (138)

7. The teaching job is the ultimate minimum wager, with the work itself being its own greatest reward. Hess loves the stacks of student papers, the semesters with their own rhythm, and keeping current with the field. By the end, his friends "grow up" and move on, and he remains in place, the proud recipient of a teaching award for excellence with a purse of \$5,000 and a private office in a distant corner of the library.

8. Hess has sounded his own "barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world." He "bequeath[s] [him]self to the dirt to grow from the grass [he] love[s]." Those of us in the profession know to look for him under our "boot-soles." He is the dirt, the ground, and the foundation of English departments across this vast land. And like Whitman's, his book is a coming-out-of-the-closet of sorts—and it's about time. Hess might as well have invoked the bard himself, from another poem:

Whoever you are holding me now in hand,  
Without one thing all will be useless,  
I give you fair warning before you attempt me further,  
I am not what you supposed, but far different.