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Essays When I am Dead

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“Knockemstiff” Does

Evil has become a great concern of mine in these modern times. Not just as a convention for moralists and ethicists, but because the current civic landscape seems populated with men and women intent on conducting the most evil of villainy - in our politics, our national discourse, and even our daily civic lives. The kind of nefarious disturbance one usually reserves for the odd Shakespearean tragedy or theological plot by Moliere. Which got me to thinking. Just exactly what makes an evil character evil? Their choices? Did they choose evil for personal gain? Or was it in their birthright? Born into affluent sycophant-ism replacing understanding and empathy with amorality? Or were they simply evil fully formed from the start?

In literature, I know evil to be a necessity to the stories we read. Otherwise how would we know who the heroes are if not the villains to oppose them? But what happens when your world is filled with all evil characters? No good to be found? What then?

“Evil is just a point of view,” wrote Anne Rice, Interview with a Vampire novelist and Queen of the Damned who made a career out of writing literal demons and devils as her main protagonists. “Evil is always possible. And goodness eternally difficult.”

What a depressing view.

The English novelist Mary Ann Evans, under the pseudonym George Eliot, viewed the subject with a bit more nuance when she penned, “No evil dooms us so hopelessly as the evil we love, and desire to continue in, and make no effort to escape from.”

Elliot at least suggests we have goodness in us from the start and only acquire evil through the choices we make along the way. Even if that way is apathy. A point many classic authors make when generating dislikable characters as barometers for evil in the stories they author. Think Fagin from *Olivier Twist* or Iago in *Othello* or Nurse Ratchet from *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

Most classic stories, in fact, center around the theme of good versus evil in some form or context. Who is good. Which character is evil. Why they are good. Why they are evil. Walt Disney practically lived on the distinction. As did J.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, and Frank Herbert. Even modern novels with their grey areas of moral rationalization at least address the concept of good and evil if only to shade the difference between the two. J.K. Rowling does a job of exceptional job of this with her wonderful Harry Potter series.

But what happens when there is only evil? If there is no hero in our stories? What does it mean to populate an entire book full of loathsome, lowdown, rotten, evil characters without a single good person anywhere to be seen? Such was the predicament I found myself in reading Donald Ray Pollock's *Knockemstiff* – a collection of short stories populated by the vilest, most despicable people you're ever likely to encounter. Without a good person to be found within a hundred miles, fictionally speaking.

Knockemstiff, for those yet to read Pollock's collection, contain eighteen loosely connected tales set primarily in the fictional town of Knockemstiff, Ohio between the 1950's to the 1980's. A place populated by rednecks, rapists, and addicts living a select kind of desperation in our modern times. There are no virtuous characters or redeeming stories. There are no bright and hopeful moments of wonder. And there are no sweeping tales of romance. Despair is what you get. And plenty of country folk whose poverty of environment imprisons them into the banality of immorality before they even have a choice which way to direct their lives.

Why, I wondered, would Donald Ray Pollock intentionally inhabit every tale with downright hateful, reprehensible, immoral characters without offering any single "good" person for counterbalance? Not a one. All evil. No good. Just despicable, irredeemable, bastard, son of a

bitch, redneck shitheel people treating other despicable, redneck shitheel people terribly. The only reason I could figure was because it made for damn interesting reading. Sort of *redneck dark noir* without the burden of Voltaire's Mephistophelian morality.

Now the sympathetic reader - those of us who prefer the glass as half full - might look upon the residents of Knockemstiff as simply damaged souls who need the redeeming value of love to light their difficult circumstances and misguided paths. I don't think that kind of love really exists outside of our Lord's eternal patience. But if it did, I think it would prove hard to acquire a foothold in Knockemstiff where citizens regularly inflict harm on each other for no other reason than to inflict harm. Including their own children.

In Knockemstiff, "bad," "despicable," and "evil" are as synonymous to the culture as much as any one particular character in the tribe.

Reading each story, I kept questioning whether being raised in such a place excused bad people for their ignorant ways if they never knew the kindness of civility or the enlightenment of a higher power. Or should they be condemned like the Troglodyte for their deliberate ignorance and thrown away as stagnant ancestors of a lesser tribe?

I'm not sure what the answer is. Or which I would choose. But I certainly recognized my own southern ancestral connection to the people of Knockemstiff and questioned if I would have the resolve and determination to break away. Close enough that I prayed a blessing to my father who moved my mother, siblings, and I away from a similar "holler" of our youth to a more prosperous life on the west coast. My father being one of the few troglodytes I knew who recognized "belonging" to a place as being different to being stuck inside the apathy of a place. And in that realization, he did something about it. Most of Donald Ray Pollock's characters often suspect, if not downright recognize the difference, but few do anything successful about it.

Would you like to meet a few? Yes?

Let's introduce Sammy's father from "Discipline." A purposely muscular man – a bodybuilder whose life revolves around pumping iron - and a veritable "douchebag" the kind of which only the 80's could produce. All walking, talking cliché of proverbial compensation where the bigger the physique, the smaller the actual phallus, as they used to say. In "Discipline," Sammy's father uses his retirement to coach his son Sammy in the ways of competitive bodybuilding. Which includes pumping Sammy so full of steroids, Sammy himself blows up into a very large, muscle bound lunkhead just like his dad. Albeit a less angry and more idiotic, sniveling, hirsute copy. Don't think for an instant Sammy's father is being altruistic with his son or trying to bond with him. He only mentors Sammy in order to vicariously re-live his own glory days as the perpetual runner-up to many a bodybuilder competition circa the 1980's. And to exact revenge on his more successful nemesis. Sammy's father doesn't care a bit for Sammy. And it shows. He manipulates Sammy's desire for fatherly acceptance into an abusive relationship. Which is only one of the reasons Sammy's father is a giant douchebag and the "evil" character of Discipline.

In "Hair's Fate," we meet a 14-year-old redneck boy without name, experiencing the birth pains of puberty, who is caught by his redneck father using his sister's favorite doll as a sex partner. Disgusted, his father summarily throws him out of the house threatening him never to return. And so the boy, left to his own devices, takes to the road. Soon enough, while hitchhiking, the boy accepts a ride from a foul, raunchy, immoral trucker named Cowboy Roy who ends up teaching him firsthand, in the most personal of ways, where such perverse sexual impulses can lead when pedophiles with specific sexual tastes have a girl's blond wig on hand. Don't worry, Cowboy Roy takes "good" care of the boy.

With "Dynamite Hole," a rural recluse with mental health issues stumbles across two siblings committing incest in the woods and feels compelled to act in the most biblical of distorted ways. Believe me, no one gets saved.

There are more tales lurking in Knockemstiff, but reading all of Pollock's stories one after the other can cause you to despair wondering whether such inhabitants of humanity still exist.

That Pollock also writes fast paced stories full of intrigue makes putting the book down more difficult no matter how lurid the tales get.

Pollock's greatest writing strength is his attention-grabbing opening lines. For example, read this from the short story, "Real Life," and see if you don't agree.

"My father showed me how to hit a man one August night at the Torch Drive-in when I was seven years old."

Or this introduction from "Gigantomancy."

"We looked down to see if my feet were legal." Think about that for a second.

How about my favorite opening line from "Rainy Sunday."

"It was one o'clock on a rainy Sunday, and Sharon was sitting at the kitchen table debating whether or not to stuff another slice of American cheese into her mouth."

Compellingly crass! As shocking as reality tv. But just about everything in Knockemstiff is. That Pollock manages to find relevance to each person's story and never lets you dismiss them solely as troglodytes from a lesser tribe makes their stories that much more personal. Not that you would envy their situation. They are a family stripped of their chivalrous ways.

A warning though. You cannot save anyone in Knockemstiff. Every character is poor, willfully ignorant, pathetic, and mean. Every one of them. To the point, I kept wondering how difficult could it be just to pull themselves out of poverty, even if poverty of thought, for just one moment? It felt frustrating knowing none, not a one, would ever do so. A sad commentary, by extension, of our society maybe? Of the evil we hopelessly doom ourselves to love?

It is to Pollock's credit he writes sympathetically about the people of Knockemstiff which, in a strange way, nearly redeems most of his tales if not the members of his tribe. So be sure to visit Donald Ray Pollock's Knockemstiff for lessons concerning the ugly ignorance of tribal

humanity. But plan to stay no longer than you must lest you get caught too deep and cannot get out.

Evil is waiting for you in the power of literature.

Postscript: *Eric is a recreational reader who first learned of Donald Ray Pollock after watching a Netflix movie titled, "The Devil We Know." The movie itself, a feature adaption of Pollock's short story, Real Life, intrigued him with the redneck noir aspect in Pollock's film adaption. A quick search revealed the recent popularity of "redneck noir lit." Along with Pollock, there was Winter's Bone by Daniel Woodrell, Hillbilly Elegy by J.D. Vance, and Big Bad Love by Larry Brown. But after reading their and Pollock's short story collections, Eric decided he had had his fill of "redneck" literature and wouldn't be staying any longer. Oh, he might pop in for a brief visit here or there, mainly with Woodrell, but he planned never to return again for very long. Most of redneck lit being way too crass for his taste and too depressing for his state of mind. So there is that.*