

Literary Excretions: “Soap Savior”

Although Charleen correctly noted that I didn’t know how to write novels, creating my four unpublished books was surprisingly easy. The trick was getting started and staying regular.

It was like going to the bathroom.

The Soap Savior was my first book-length literary excretion. The idea came from conversations with Frank about Amway. He had gotten involved with a group in Shelby and liked to tell me how the distributors had gotten rich - about their big houses and fancy cars. He especially liked to talk about the rally at the Charlotte Coliseum when Rich DeVos brought the attendees to their feet in a frenzy of material devotion. (In my novel the people drove purple and white Cadillacs and the rally culminated in several crucifixions.)

Thinking about this one day while driving from Shelby to UNC-Charlotte where I had returned at age 30 to get an English degree, the phrase “Soap Savior” popped into my head. That’s what Amway was selling – salvation through soap. Repeating the phrase, liking the sound of it, I determined to write a novel about religion and Amway.

Unlike my later unpublished novels, over which I labored and strained, the Soap Savior was loose. I did not spend the first several months devising a plot. I just started writing.

The project went on for several years. During this period, I finished college, joined Cardinal Associates as a producer of programmed audio visual training materials, and tried to market the Tetra Triangular Building System.

While in school, I occasionally read chapters to Bertha Harris’ writing class. Being exposed to this liberal environment and to earnest children who seemed to actually like what I was doing might explain some of the novel’s excesses.

Following are two excerpts. One introduces David Hume, the 18th century British philosopher who appears throughout the novel. The other introduces Winton Hotchkiss, a U.S. Treasury agent and former caseworker with the Phenix City Alabama Welfare Department. Hotchkiss, a minor Christ Figure, gets crucified by Dick Whisnant when he fails to convict T.J. DuBois, the founder of the Love Self-Franchising Sales Corporation.

DAVID HUME

David Hume spat out the amber liquid and threw his goblet into the fireplace. The crystal exploded into a thousand shreds of burning light.

The woman watched him from across the shadowed room. Her eyes were glittering, flame reflecting pools.

Beyond the walls of the old house, the wind moaned. The mastiff dog lying on the warm hearthstone trembled in his sleep.

Hume leaned his head against the back of his chair. He sighed and said barely aloud, "My dear, I detect in you this evening a sense of whimsy."

The woman breathed deeply, her milky bosom tinted fire red, and replied, "Ah yes, whimsy."

Hume continued, "Please, don't ever pish in my brandy again."

Hume sat at his desk. It was dark oak, worn smooth from years of use. A small lamp flickered on a corner. Piles of foolscap lay in the shadows. There were no other lights in the room and beyond the small circle of illumination everything was black.

Putting down his quill, Hume propped his elbows on the desk and cupped his face in his hands. Speaking in a muffled voice, he said, "I will key the piece to the presence of evil. That will be the turning point, slowly approached, subtly apprehended but finally irrefutable.

He picked up his quill, dipped it into the ink and began to write...

So anxious or so tedious are even the best scenes of life, that futurity is still the object of all our hopes and fears. We incessantly look forward, and endeavour, by prayers, adoration, and sacrifice, to appease those unknown powers, whom we find, by experience, so able to afflict and oppress us. Wretched creatures that we are! What resource for us amidst the innumerable ills of life, did not religion suggest some methods of atonement, and appease those terrors, which we are incessantly agitated and tormented?

WINTON HOTCHKISS

Before going to work for the U.S. Treasury Department, Winton Hotchkiss had been a caseworker for the Phenix City Alabama Welfare Department.

On his last day as a caseworker, he attended a regular staff meeting in the basement conference room. Winton (who did not know it was his last day) arrived early and sat toward the rear as was his custom. He leaned back in his molded, blue plastic chair and rested his greasy head against the concrete-block wall. He liked to do that because his hair would stick to the pebbles in the block and when he pulled forward the sensation was like bursting a pimple.

It took ten minutes for the other caseworkers to come straggling in, still puffy faced and sleepy, carrying paper coffee cups from the vending machine in the hall. The cups were decorated with gaily colored safety mottos.

Winton nodded to a few but for the most part remained unseen and unnoticed.

When the department head, Orin Thewston, came in, the background noise died away and a hollow, concrete-block quiet fell over the room. The only sounds were labored breathing and occasional coffee-cup slurps.

Thewston walked directly to the blackboard which hung on the front wall and stood with his back to the assembly. He weighed over three hundred pounds. His head was naked and shaped like a bullet, growing neckless from great sloping shoulders. He seemed to have no buttocks. After a long, uncomfortable moment, Thewston turned to face the caseworkers and said in a falsetto voice, "Hi there, co-workers."

They murmured their replies and greetings.

Speaking for a moment in a normal manner, he went on, "This morning's meeting is going to be a little different than usual. I am going to talk about YOUR welfare for a change."

Then changing his voice to a bull-like baritone, he roared, "What I want to know is - are you people making all the money you want to make?"

Most of the people looked at him blankly; however, a few did mutter,

"No."

"Hell, no."

"Shit, man."

"Crazy fucker, of course not."

One person, a short, fat woman with gray hair and gray skin and black fuzz on her upper lip whispered, "Oh, for God's sake, tell me how." She was sitting near Winton who looked at her uncomprehendingly.

After a moment when there were no more whispers and no more coffee-cup slurps and the quiet was absolute and perfect, Thewston spoke again.

"Well, I'll tell you how."

The people stirred expectantly.

He picked up a piece of pale yellow chalk and began drawing circles on the blackboard. They were arranged in a pyramid with a single circle at the top expanding down into a dozen or more circles.

After drawing the circles, Thewston moved back to admire his handiwork. Muted oohs and aahs could be heard from the group, several of whom got up from their chairs for a closer look.

Suddenly, Thewston jumped into the air, landing with a crash. He cried, "Do you know what it is?"

Winton Hotchkiss shuddered at the noise, and the people who had moved in closer to the board jerked back and flung up their hands protectively.

Thewston screamed again, "Do you know what it is?"

The little woman with the moustache and gray hair and gray skin whispered again 'For the love of the love I never had and for the children who never suckled these withered dugs, oh tell us. Yes, tell us.'

Then standing up, she cried in a keening voice, "For God's sake, tell us."

Thewston fed on her anguish and calmly replied, "It's the pyramid of life." Then turning again to the board, pointing with the chalk, he went on, "See, the top circle is you. And from you extends all these other circles. The circles are mankind. It is all of a one and one of an all... a diversity of unity... a multfluidity of changing sameness... a sonorous rapture of blind seeing... a deal variety of hearing.

"And," he screamed, "It's LOVE."

Winton Hotchkiss felt physically abused and mentally raped. He muttered, "What's all this horse shit?"

But the other people were completely enraptured now. They breathed in great moaning sighs. Thewston's presence ranged among them.

They began to chant:

"Tell us more."

"Tell us more."

"Tell us more."

And the little gray woman moaned, "Oh guru, please for God's sake, do."

He said, "O.K., I'll tell you. Here is the deal. You come in at the top, see."

He tapped the top circle with his chalk.

"Then you sponsor all these other people under you."

He tapped several of the other circles.

"When they make it you get a cut. And when they build their own pyramids you get a cut of that too."

There was a moment of reflection which was broken by Winton Hotchkiss, raging from the back of the room, "Cut of what? What do we get a cut of?"

Thewston threw his chalk which exploded in a cloud of yellow dust against the concrete block wall inches from Winton's head and screamed, "Money, that's what I have been talking about all along. Money."

Winton yelled back across the bowed, brooding heads of his fellow workers, "How is this money made?"

Thewston answered, calmly now, "By selling soap."

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