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Refighting Old Wars

Race Relations and Masculine Conventions in Fiction

by Larry Brown and
Madison Smartt Bell

Suzanne Jones

Since the Civil War white male writers of the American South have created fond fictions about childhood friendships that crossed the color line. For example, much of the poignancy of Faulkner's *The Unvanquished* (1938) comes from Bayard Sartoris's description of the close relationship he had with a black servant boy Ringo in the Mississippi small town that will separate them as they grow older and that from the beginning marked them as different, based on race. After their boyhood games and real Civil War adventures together, Bayard and Ringo grow up to be, not close friends, but master and faithful servant when Bayard departs for Ole Miss. Representations of true friendships between blacks and whites beyond the period of childhood innocence have only recently begun to emerge. Contemporary Southern novelists like Larry Brown and Madison Smartt Bell begin their interracial buddy novels where earlier fiction about male friendships ended—when innocent boys become racially self-conscious men.

In 1989 both Larry Brown and Madison Smartt Bell published novels that explore the physical and psychological consequences of the Vietnam War. That both novelists also select two protagonists of different races suggests that the representation of interracial Southern male friendships concerns them as well. Their novels examine the possibilities and limits of such friendships formed because of shared experiences in Vietnam, but Bell's novel *Soldier's Joy* disrupts masculine conventions of bonding in ways that Brown's *Dirty Work* does not. In *The Warriors*, J. Glenn Gray argues that while combat settings are "unequaled in forging links among people of unlike desire and temperament,"¹ these links can be fragile. Although such relationships are based on loyalty to a

group, dependence on group members for survival, and even knowledge of individuals in the group, they are not based on reciprocal relationships of mutual intimacy between individuals, and so they may mean little outside the combat setting.² Both Brown and Bell test the significance of the similar experiences their black and white protagonists have in Vietnam against their different histories of segregation and their different experiences of racial prejudice in the American South.

Brown's protagonists, who occupy adjoining beds in a veterans' hospital in Mississippi, are comrades; their male bonding is based on their war experiences, but more immediately on coping with their debilitating injuries and their frustrated desires for more normal lives. Braiden Chaney, who is black, has no arms; Walter James, who is white, has no face. For the first half of the novel each man silently reminisces about parallel subjects, which are designed to show readers that, despite their racial differences, they have significant similarities: growing up poor in rural Mississippi, coming of age with loving mothers and absent fathers, Marine combat in Vietnam, and the devastating consequences of their war wounds. But Brown reveals more to the reader than Braiden and Walter disclose to each other. The alternating first-person narratives are related in distinctively individual voices. Their conversational styles seem to have given some readers the mistaken impression that the two men are talking to each other more than they really are, because several reviewers single out for praise the "conversation" these men of different races have and the "dialogue" they engage in.³

Even when Braiden and Walter begin to share their stories, they have very little dialogue. One, then the other, tells his story, sometimes on different topics altogether—an adult example of what sociologists call parallel play in children,⁴ or to put it in a Southern context, what Allen Tate termed the "traditional Southern mode of discourse," or "rhetorical" mode, which "presupposes somebody at the other end silently listening."⁵ In "A Southern Mode of the Imagination" Tate contrasted this nineteenth-century "rhetorical" mode of discourse with the more modern "dialectical" mode, which involves the give and take of two different minds. Although Walter frequently apologizes to Braiden for going "off like that,"⁶ he does not change his rhetorical mode of communication, and Braiden does more listening than talking.⁷ Brown's narrative technique, alternating first-person monologues in separate chapters, replicates the nature of the emerging comradeship between Braiden Chaney and Walter James, which in all respects except one remains on a superficial level.

The only frank exchanges that occur in the novel concern the morality of suicide and assisted suicide in situations such as the one Braiden finds himself in—twenty-two years of living in a hospital bed with no legs and arms, totally dependent on others. While the heart-wrenching storytelling of both protago-

nists portrays the staggering toll of war on the survivors, Braiden's story-telling convinces Walter that assisted suicide, in Braiden's case, is not only a valid choice but a moral imperative. Before Walter is discharged from the hospital, he fulfills Braiden's wish and helps him die. Braiden's storytelling enables Walter to imagine himself in Braiden's situation, but the relationship that develops only passes for an intimate friendship. Before Walter finally decides to assist in Braiden's suicide, he promises himself, in order to ease his guilt, that he will come back and visit Braiden, "knowing all the time it was a damn lie" (p. 148). Their emerging relationship is not rooted in a concern for the particularity of the individual other, which might create the basis of a friendship, but instead is based on a respect for and loyalty to a person of similar type, a comrade—in this case, a disabled Vietnam veteran living a death in life with no future. Both men respond to each other's stories of woe as problem solvers, the role Deborah Tannen argues men have been socialized to play in conversation.⁸ Although Walter solves Braiden's problem, Braiden decides that he is unable to help Walter and as a result thinks it "surely didn't do me no good to hear all that," i.e., Walter's long involved stories of relationships with his family and his new girlfriend.

The way Larry Brown handles Walter's responses to Braiden, when Walter is initially resisting Braiden's request for suicide assistance, suggests Brown's sensitivity to interracial dynamics, but also his reluctance to directly confront topics of race that might deepen his characters' encounter. It is not clear from the text whether Braiden actually tells Walter how he thinks "all kinds of bad shit about white people" whenever a white person does not act as he expects (p. 102), or simply thinks this for readers to overhear. What is clear is that Walter behaves as if he is aware of this dynamic. The two times that Walter refuses to assist Braiden in committing suicide, Walter immediately tells him stories that he hopes will show Braiden he is not refusing him because he is black. He relates poignant memories of his father's relationship with a black man, his family defending a black family when both families were picking cotton for a corrupt white landowner, and his own comradeship with a black soldier in Vietnam. Walter does not directly respond to any of Braiden's comments about what it means to be black in America or how growing up poor in Mississippi may have been different for a black boy despite the class similarities across racial lines. Because Brown gives Walter a disfigurement that causes people to render him invisible or to avoid him, Brown has created a potential opportunity to allow a white character to better understand the discrimination black people experience, but Brown does not make use of this situation either directly or indirectly.

Although Brown assigns different races to his protagonists, he does not handle this difference as complexly as he might. While Brown has successful-

ly given voice to individuals of both races, a narrative choice not always made in writing about race relations, he shies away from a real dialogue between them about racial issues, which he acknowledges when he has Braiden bring up prejudice and discrimination in his spoken and unspoken monologues and when he has Walter reminisce about his family's good relationships with blacks. But, the contrast between their disagreements and dialogues about the touchy subject of assisted suicide and their anecdotes and monologues about the equally touchy subject of race relations in America is striking. Throughout the novel there are times when each man has questions he does not ask the other, costly hesitations that invariably result in misunderstandings. For example, Braiden becomes emotional when talking about the waste of human lives caused by the war, and when Walter does not respond, Braiden assumes that his silence means he is "thinking about his woman." Indeed Walter is reflecting not only on war's horror but on the injustice in the conscription for the Vietnam War that made its soldiers "young and black and poor" (p. 187). Such reluctance to speak the unspoken not only limits the nature of the understanding between the two men but their self-understanding as well. Walter and Braiden remain comrades; they do not become friends.

In contrast, Madison Smartt Bell's black and white protagonists, Rodney Redmon and Thomas Laidlaw, move beyond comradeship to a friendship of genuine intimacy. They have known each other as boys, but unlike an older generation of white writers, Bell suggests that they have not been close because of their personal history, which is typically and complexly Southern. Redmon's father took care of Laidlaw when he was a boy, and Redmon has always suspected that Laidlaw stole his father's love. While the two never had much of a relationship as boys, the Vietnam War makes them comrades. But the way Laidlaw contrasts his relationship with Redmon in Vietnam with the one back home matches J. Glenn Gray's belief that the strong bonds formed in combat can be fragile when the war is over: "He'd already been over there a good while when we happened to meet up. And we were both just so glad to see somebody from home. . . . So that's when we really got tight. And we made sure to take care of each other ever after that, but I don't know. . . . It don't seem to work out the same back here, quite. I don't see why it shouldn't myself, but it seems like he's got some things eating on him." Although Laidlaw and Redmon have depended on each other for their very lives in Vietnam, when the two men return to the Tennessee hills they both call home, they do nothing to seek each other out, until their paths cross by chance in the middle of the novel. With the representation of their relationship Bell may be questioning the depth of the interracial relationships forged by the institution the United States likes to think of as a model for race relations.

The five books into which Bell divides *Soldier's Joy* mirror the evolution of Laidlaw's and Redmon's friendship. In the first two books the narration is filtered through alternating limited third-person viewpoints. Thus readers get a sense in Book I of Laidlaw's and then in Book II of Redmon's thoughts and feelings as each tries to make a place for himself in the post-Vietnam War South. Laidlaw's task is easier because he is white and because his father has owned property: his father has left him land, a small tenant house, and outbuildings even though fire has destroyed the family home. In contrast Redmon, whose family owned no property, has gotten a job as a real estate agent, and has been betrayed by his white colleagues in a land-development scheme. Redmon ends up taking the rap for all of them and serving time in jail, though not in the jail customarily reserved for white white-collar criminals.

In Books III and IV, where Laidlaw and Redmon become reacquainted, readers experience their tentative friendship first on Laidlaw's territory—at the bar where Laidlaw plays music and at Laidlaw's house—then on Redmon's territory, at his father's house and at a Black Muslim friend's vegetarian restaurant. Their emerging friendship is threatened from the beginning by prejudice on both sides of the racial divide. On Laidlaw's territory Redmon runs afoul of white racism, a mild form when white bigots vacate the bar as soon as he enters to hear Laidlaw's band and a more dangerous form in his job at the warehouse, where a racist coworker not only operates machinery irresponsibly but finally starts a fight. On Redmon's territory Laidlaw encounters Redmon's Black Muslim friend's belief that whites are "blue-eyed devils." While Raschid verbally tries to undermine Laidlaw and Redmon's emerging relationship, the Ku Klux Klan plots to burn Laidlaw out of his home when they discover that he is socializing with a black man.

The relationship between Laidlaw and Redmon is superficial at first. They catch up over a six-pack, exchanging news of housing, work, women, and the aftereffects of the Vietnam War—the kind of conversation that Larry Brown's characters engage in throughout *Dirty Work*. With their first two conversations, Bell suggests that although they know the facts of each other's lives, they do not fully understand one another. On the one hand, Laidlaw, who has no family, naïvely wants to think of Redmon as family because of their acquaintance as boys. He desperately desires intimacy with Redmon without the hard work and time required to produce it. On the other hand Redmon is too quick to suspect Laidlaw of being sympathetic to the racist Giles boys simply because their father has helped Laidlaw plant his garden. Laidlaw's naïveté about white racism, such as why the Ku Klux Klan targeted him, particularly infuriates Redmon who does not have the luxury to be unaware of racial issues. Their second encounter ends acrimoniously with

Redmon declaring that the cost of their relationship is too high. But Laidlaw persists and it pays off for both men.

Their relationship does not become an intimate friendship until Book IV when they begin to speak thoughts and feelings that traditionally have not been expressed across the color line. Laidlaw and Redmon have the conversations Larry Brown's Braiden and Walter never have. Because Laidlaw makes Redmon welcome in his home—sharing drinks, a bed, and a table of food, and thus breaking all the old Southern codes for black/white interaction—Redmon comes to believe in Laidlaw's professed liberal ideology about race relations. Finally Redmon trusts Laidlaw enough to disclose information about his betrayal by his white partners and his resulting incarceration, facts he does not divulge to white acquaintances. Similarly Laidlaw confesses that on one of his insomnia-induced midnight prowls around his property he has impulsively knifed a deer poacher. He trusts Redmon to understand such behavior because of their guerrilla-warfare experiences together in the Vietnam jungle, experiences Redmon is still reliving in his dreams. This self-disclosure of vulnerabilities strengthens and deepens their relationship because it helps them to trust and to better understand each other:¹⁰ Laidlaw to understand Redmon's racial sensitivity and Redmon to understand Laidlaw's tendency to overreact in stressful situations. Bell mirrors their evolving intimacy with his mode of narration, mixing narrative perspectives within Books III and IV so that discreet chapters are filtered from alternating viewpoints,¹¹ first Laidlaw's, then Redmon's, even though most chapters are devoted to Laidlaw. As their lives open up to each other and include each other, so the separate books of Bell's novel include both perspectives.

The narration of the fifth and last book is at first limited to Laidlaw's perspective but becomes omniscient, which suggests the lowering of the psychic boundaries that enclose each individual male self. Western social and cultural patterns that have made comradeship, not intimacy, the predominant model for male friendships, also have made some men reluctant to reveal their vulnerabilities. Susan Pollak and Carol Gilligan contend that the western male social conventions of hiding and denying one's feelings have made it difficult for some men not only to share their feelings with others but even to be aware of them.¹² Philosophers Strikwerda and May argue that "in order to have strongly positive emotional feelings for another person, as well as sustained mutual self-disclosure, it is important to be able both to have such feelings and to express them."¹³ In Book V Laidlaw and Redmon finally confront the particular history of their own relationship and articulate feelings they have been reluctant to voice. In one very painful interchange Bell reminds readers of an important but neglected person in the black servant/white child relationship so prevalent in Southern social and literary history—the black servant's child.¹⁴ Laidlaw is hurt that Redmon has not

told him of his father's death or invited him to his funeral because Laidlaw has finally realized that Redmon's father, Wat, was more of a father and mother to him than his own parents. Laidlaw's mother deserted him when he was a baby, and his father left him in Wat's care because he was frequently away shoeing horses on the race circuit. Readers of Southern literature are familiar with this old story, but for a change they also hear from the adult black child, who desperately needed some of the love and attention that his father showered on the white boy he was paid to care for. Redmon thinks his father loved Thomas Laidlaw not just because he was a smart little boy but mainly because he is white. As the two men talk, Laidlaw almost says the word "father" to explain to Redmon how close he felt to Wat, but Redmon angrily cuts him off, "*Don't you say it. . . . Don't you never. He was my father. Mine*" (p. 377). Finally these two grown men are revealing the truth of both their present and past feelings to each other, but Bell emphasizes that they must work to get at the more complex truth of Wat's feelings for them.

In *The Dialogic Imagination* Mikhail Bakhtin argues that we must know the other's language because understanding occurs "on the boundary between one's own and someone else's consciousness."¹⁵ Laidlaw and Redmon, unlike Brown's Braiden and Walter, behave as Bakhtin says they must in order to improve understanding: they "transmit, recall, weigh, and pass judgment on other people's words, opinions, assertions, information"; they "agree with them, contest them, refer to them."¹⁶ Laidlaw insists that Redmon's belief that Wat preferred him because of his race is "not the truth," and Redmon qualifies his statement saying, "not the whole truth, anyway" (p. 378). Bell uses several long dialogues in Book V between the two men to work through the history of their tangled relationship, not only to better understand what each other is saying and to correct misunderstandings, but to better understand themselves.

Besides Wat Redmon, the other issue that has made a friendship back in the States more difficult than their comradeship in Vietnam is the economic difference in their families' relationship to the same piece of land. Because Laidlaw's father owned this small farm in the Tennessee hills, Laidlaw can fall back on subsistence farming if his music does not earn him a living, unlike Redmon who feels "stuck" "in a corner" in his dead-end warehouse job (p. 390). Redmon reminds Laidlaw that his father Wat lived and worked on this land before Laidlaw's father bought it, "You all didn't do anything but buy it. And then you put him off it in the end" (p. 378)—a perspective on land ownership that is similar to the one Ernest Gaines advances in *A Gathering of Old Men*. For the first time, Laidlaw understands the power and privilege of his whiteness. Laidlaw immediately agrees with Redmon's point and generously, if impulsively, offers him half of the property, saying, "I'd do it for justice" (p. 379).

The nature of coowning this property, however, becomes a bone of contention that the two men chew on intermittently for the rest of the novel. Laidlaw wants a joint ownership that would follow the agrarian philosophy of his father, and of Madison Smartt Bell for that matter, who grew up with the Nashville agrarians as guests in his parents' home.¹⁷ Redmon pronounces such a deal in which Laidlaw calls the shots just as paternalistic as the one his father was engaged in with Laidlaw's father. But Bell is clearly on the side of Laidlaw as far as appropriate use of the land is concerned.¹⁸ The half-built tract homes of the failed development scheme that landed Redmon in jail are depicted as a blight on the landscape. Bell even has Redmon, who admits he was "all for it at the time" (p. 306), wish the land "back the way it was before" (p. 154). Book IV of the novel ends with an unexpected chapter from Wat's perspective, which Bell uses to elevate Wat's kinship with the land. This dreamlike sequence is printed in italics and written in the beautifully lyrical style that Bell takes up throughout the novel whenever he is describing the Southern landscape, but especially when he is describing the reciprocal relationship of a man who is in tune with the earth's rhythms. In an interview with Mary Louise Weaks, Bell indirectly reveals his own approach to writing in a Southern tradition when he distinguishes contemporary writers of "small-town life," like Jill McCorkle, Mary Hood, and Lee Smith, from the earlier agrarian tradition of writers, like Andrew Lytle and Allen Tate, who wrote about "a culture of small farms" and who were concerned "about the destruction of the natural rhythms of life in connection to the land."¹⁹ In *Soldier's Joy* some of Bell's most sympathetic characters have retained a traditional connection to the land: Laidlaw, Wat, Mr. Giles. To use Walker Percy's terms, one of Bell's favorite novelists, these characters feel "at home" on the earth.²⁰ Bell's least sympathetic characters, Vietnam veteran Earl Giles and real estate developer Goodbuddy, are neither in tune with nature nor in harmony with those around them. They are depicted as ill at ease with their lives.

In *Soldier's Joy* Bell harks back to his own Southern agrarian roots, both emotionally and intellectually, but he goes beyond his agrarian predecessors' preoccupation with the machine invading the Southern garden by acknowledging the evil of prejudice and discrimination that made that garden grow. At the same time that Bell would like to get back to agrarian relationships to the land, he knows they can never be the same as they were in his parents' day. Like Laidlaw he "wanted to make up something new" (p. 310) in *Soldier's Joy*, and indeed he almost succeeds, except for the ending. In the middle of the novel when Redmon and Laidlaw spend their first companionable night together in Laidlaw's mountain cabin, the house Redmon has grown up in, readers experience great expectations that the two men will succeed in creat-

ing “something new.” As the sunlight streams down from “a deep untrammelled blue sky” the next morning, Bell writes that Redmon looks “well at home there in the daylight” (p. 304). The day they spend together close to nature and each other is Edenic.

Soldier's Joy is long and slow-moving, an attempt I think to represent the process of becoming aware of one's feelings and the difficulties involved in sharing them with a male friend of a different race, especially in the South. Interestingly a number of reviewers, who are obviously used to the urban eccentrics and fast-paced plots of Bell's New York novels, have faulted *Soldier's Joy* for its “somnolent pace”²¹ and found his rural Southern setting and introspective narrative technique boring, or as Winston Groom put it, “The story's at its best when the action becomes fast paced, not when the writer lapses into his ‘descriptive’ mode: giving us the weather report or gaggles of complicated interior thoughts.”²² Such readers seem to resist Bell's disruption of masculine social conventions, a disruption that depends on “gaggles of complicated interior thoughts.” Other reviewers, such as David Bradley and David Nicholson find fresh and appealing just the characteristics that Johnson and Groom criticize.²³ And while Johnson and Groom find the concluding violent confrontation between the Klan and Redmon and Laidlaw the most engaging part of the novel, it is perhaps not surprising that Bradley and Nicholson judge the ending contrived and cliched or as Bradley says, “degenerating into a gun-and-chase sequence à la ‘Miami Vice.’”²⁴

I think the ending works symbolically as a continuation of both the Vietnam War and the Civil War and an end to neither. For Bell, offended by the tactics of contemporary Southern Klansmen, who he felt were trying to speak for him as a white Southerner, he told an *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* reporter that the novel was a chance to speak for himself and advocate integration.²⁵ Bell suggests through his representation of Vietnam vets that neither the Civil War nor the Vietnam War has made the South safe for cross-racial friendships, despite the strong desires of some individuals of both races. The Klan targets Laidlaw as soon as he initiates a friendship with Redmon, and it tracks the activities of Brother Jacob who, in the style of an evangelical preacher, advocates interracial friendships in open meetings throughout the South. From the subject matter of Bell's other novels,²⁶ it is clear that he is fascinated by the causes of violence. He creates a plot in *Soldier's Joy* that allows him to speculate that the license to kill that was granted soldiers by the Vietnam War has become something close to instinctual in Vietnam veterans and not just those who are racially prejudiced.

Bell prepares readers for his explosive ending because throughout *Soldier's Joy*, violence is not far below the surface. Long before the novel's concluding

bloody confrontation over improved race relations, racist Earl Giles draws his gun instinctively when his brother and some friends play a practical joke on him, Rodney Redmon tortures Goodbuddy in Laidlaw's barn, and Laidlaw in the style of a guerrilla fighter stalks and knifes a deer poacher. All three of these characters are Vietnam veterans. Bell's explanation of the cause of the poaching incident is disturbing, "That taste in [Laidlaw's] mouth was certainly of blood, and vaguely he heard a familiar voice telling him that once acquired it was extremely hard to cure" (p. 106). Bell uses Laidlaw's lover's first experience with a gun to solidify this position. Although Adrienne at first refuses to participate in the race war that ends the novel, she grows afraid she may have to defend Laidlaw's life so she has a change of heart and decides to learn how to shoot. When her first bullet hits the sign she is using for target practice, Bell writes that "she felt her face creasing into a weird smile" (p. 457), a sign that she now is also under the spell of a gun's power. Until this point Adrienne's perspective has called the reader back from the precipice of viewing Laidlaw's and Redmon's violent instincts as somehow normal. In the middle of the novel Bell briefly filters the action through her consciousness, a technique that causes readers to distance themselves from Redmon's and Laidlaw's tendencies to escape into alcohol and violence and to endanger their own lives.

In contrast to the critical reception of the novel's conclusion in 1989, readers in 1997 could view the violent ending of *Soldier's Joy* as prophetic given the proliferation of antigovernment militia groups since the novel was written. Rather than "a contrived, unconvincing climactic explosion of melodrama,"²⁷ the ending could be seen as the inevitable lethal outcome of situations in the United States that combine rage and hatred with readily available guns. Although the western part of the United States takes a slight lead over the South in numbers of paramilitary groups, the South still leads the country in hate groups.²⁸ In *Warrior Dreams: Paramilitary Culture in Post-Vietnam America*, James William Gibson delineates the personality profile of men engaged in such activities:

First, they were deeply affected by the Vietnam War: their participation or their failure to make a personal appearance on the battlefield was a crucial event in their lives. Second, whether they fought in the war or not, these men drew the same conclusion from the defeat of the United States in Vietnam as did a certain part of the mass media: the white man's world was gone; dark forces of chaos had been unleashed and dangerous times made it not only permissible but morally imperative for them to take their personal battles far beyond the law. Paramilitary mythology offered men the fantastic possibility of escaping their present lives, being reborn as warriors, and then remaking the world.²⁹

Certainly the weapons necessary are easily obtained. In a recent study the South still emerges as the region where people are “more likely to own guns” and “more likely to view their guns as instruments of protection.”³⁰ As soon as Laidlaw hears that he has been targeted by the Klan, he thinks first, not of the local sheriff, but of the guns hidden beneath his house. Laidlaw and Redmon succeed in thwarting the attempt on Brother Jacob’s life and in saving each other’s lives, but men are killed on both sides, and the novel ends with the possibility that Laidlaw may die in Redmon’s arms.

But the ending hints at another outcome and reminds readers of an ending that Bell abandoned, an ending that could perhaps have represented “something new” (p. 310) with blacks and whites living integrated lives together in the South. Hit with submachine gun fire in the chest during the shootout with the Ku Klux Klan, Laidlaw is certain he is going to die, but Redmon refuses to give into his pessimism, willing him to live with a reminder of the offer Laidlaw has made to split the land, “Hey, we still got a house to build. Are you taking back all you said?” (p. 465). In a way this remark comes as a bit of a surprise to the reader because the two men have never resolved their differences about joint land ownership; indeed the last time the subject comes up, it does not seem as if Redmon is interested in Laidlaw’s gift unless Laidlaw will give him full rights to half of the property (p. 391). Bell has tantalized the reader with the possibility of a happy ending, Southern agrarian style—but racially integrated as befits the later part of the twentieth century. In many ways Bell’s narrative technique with its lyrical descriptions of the land, its dialogic working through of racial misunderstandings, its several filter characters providing readers with both black and white perspectives, and its psychological realism of the first four books does not seem to prepare us for the shootout with the Klan over Brother Jacob’s promotion of a fully integrated South. Opting for violence Bell chooses the more familiar Southern masculine ending when race relations are involved, only selecting late twentieth-century fire power—submachine guns instead of shotguns. The ending can certainly be seen as a chilling reminder that not all white Southerners are reconstructed. But the ending can also be seen as a capitulation to today’s reading public, which eschews a “somnolent pace” and “gaggles of complicated interior thoughts.” In the article “Literature and Pleasure: Bridging the Gap,” Bell makes the case that the conventions of genre fiction should be “recovered for serious literature,” arguing that “a little dabbling in genre does not necessarily corrupt the serious literary writer” and concluding that “as we take back some of that territory abandoned to genre fiction, we may get back some of the audience too.”³¹

Once Vietnam veteran Ratman enters the novel to aid Laidlaw and Redmon with his military-style bunker and his arsenal of vintage Vietnam weapons, Bell’s style changes from psychological realism to pulp fiction, and his

subject changes from the struggle to forge adult male friendships across racial lines to the comradeship of warriors. Perhaps interracial agrarianism is to be seen as an “escapist fantasy” equal to the “New Age menu of magical solutions” Bell disparages in his 1991 article “An Essay Introducing His Work in Rather a Lunatic Fashion,”³² and yet its presence in the novel can not be dismissed so easily. For in the same article Bell argues that for the novelist “what the unconscious labors to discover is never a fact, but a vision”; he goes on to say, “what maybe all my characters have always been after in all my books, is a visionary solution to the fatal problem which our collective consciousness is virtually unable to acknowledge.”³³ Perhaps then the violence in *Soldier's Joy* is meant to be seductive to late twentieth-century readers, particularly young male readers, brought up on *Lethal Weapon* and *Die Hard* movies. Perhaps Bell hopes with enough violence “to soften the mind and render it receptive to all the more sophisticated pleasures that the finest literature can produce” as he says in “Literature and Pleasure.” As a reader I feel, like David Bradley, that this “little dabbling in genre” in *Soldier's Joy* does “corrupt” the integrity of the novel. With his choice of conclusions, Bell abandons his “visionary solution” to the South’s chronic racial problem—a problem that he, unlike Larry Brown, presents in its complexity. Bell’s violent ending harks back to literary conventions that a previous generation of writers used “to solve” relationships that crossed the color line.

With both *Dirty Work* and *Soldier's Joy* readers dwell momentarily in the tantalizing possibility of friendships between black and white men. Although the relationships they represent are different in degrees of intimacy, they are similar in that they work only in cloistered settings: a veterans’ hospital and a mountain cabin. Larry Brown does not test the relationship he creates in the larger context of Southern society. Madison Smartt Bell does, but he cannot quite imagine how such a friendship will sustain itself in a society where hate still lurks in the shadows.³⁴

Notes

1. J. Glenn Gray, *The Warriors* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1959), p. 27.
2. Recently some philosophers and psychologists have asserted that the western paradigm of friendship between men is comradeship, which is characterized by loyalty, fellow feeling, and a concern for each other’s interests. In “Male Friendship and Intimacy” (*Hypatia* 7, no. 3 [Summer 1992]: 110–25) Robert A. Strikwerda and Larry May summarize these arguments and assert that the characteristics of comradeship “have been stressed much more heavily than intimacy in male friendships” (p. 110).
3. See Chris Goodrich’s review of *Dirty Work* in *Publisher's Weekly*, June 23, 1989, p. 32, and Susan Wood’s review in the *Houston Post*, August 27, 1989, sec. C, p. 6. See also Greg Johnson’s review in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, September 3, 1989, sec. L, p. 10.

4. Strikwerda and May, "Male Friendship and Intimacy," p. 112.
5. Allen Tate, "A Southern Mode of the Imagination," in *Essays of Four Decades* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 583.
6. Larry Brown, *Dirty Work* [1989] (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), p. 120. Subsequent references are cited in the text.
7. Braiden listens to Walter, except when he talks about having sex with his new girlfriend Beth, a topic Braiden does not want to hear because it reminds him of his own unfulfilled desires.
8. Deborah Tannen, *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1991), pp. 49–53.
9. Madison Smartt Bell, *Soldier's Joy* [1989] (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 339. Subsequent references are cited in the text.
10. Strikwerda and May, "Male Friendship and Intimacy," p. 115.
11. There is one exception. In chapter 35 Redmon comes to pick up Laidlaw to visit Wat, Redmon's father. When Redmon is at Laidlaw's house, the narration is filtered through Redmon's perspective; when Laidlaw arrives at Wat's house, the narration is filtered through Laidlaw's perspective.
12. Susan Pollak and Carol Gilligan, "Images of Violence in Thematic Apperception Test Stories," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 42 (1982): 159–67.
13. Strikwerda and May "Male Friendship and Intimacy," p. 118.
14. Toni Morrison first presented this black adult/white child character configuration from a more complex perspective when she focused on the black child whose mother was a servant in a white home in *The Bluest Eye* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970).
15. See Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson (Houston: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 353, and Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 287.
16. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, p. 338.
17. Madison Smartt Bell, "An Essay Introducing His Work in Rather a Lunatic Fashion," *Chattahoochee Review* 12, no. 1 (Fall 1991): 1–3.
18. Mary Louise Weaks, "An Interview with Madison Smartt Bell," *Southern Review* 30, no. 1 (January 1994): 5–10.
19. Weaks, "An Interview with Madison Smartt Bell," pp. 5, 8.
20. Weaks, "An Interview with Madison Smartt Bell," p. 11.
21. Grey Johnson, "Two Numbed Vietnam Vets Turn to the Soil," *Chicago Tribune*, June 4, 1989, pp. 14, 5.
22. Winston Groom, "Fighting the Enemy from Tonkin to Tennessee," *Los Angeles Times*, July 2, 1989, sec. B, p. 2.
23. David Bradley, "The Battles Didn't End with the War," *New York Times Book Review*, July 2, 1989, pp. 3, 23, and David Nicholson, "Tennessee Mountain Nervous Breakdown," *Washington Post Book World*, June 25, 1989, p. 5.
24. Bradley, "The Battles Didn't End with the War," p. 23.

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25. Don O'Briant, "Anger at Klan Fuels New Novel," *Atlanta Constitution*, June 12, 1988, sec. B p. 1.

26. See R. Reed Sanderlin, "Madison Smartt Bell," in *Contemporary Fiction Writers of the South*, ed. Joseph M. Flora and Robert Bain (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1993), pp. 46–53. Bell writes of a revolutionary plot to blow up New York in *Waiting for the End of the World* (1985), of the Haitian slave revolt in *All Souls' Rising* (1995), and of Baltimore's gangs in *Ten Indians* (1996).

27. Bruce Allen, "'Joy' and Pain in the Backwoods," *USA Today*, July 28, 1989, sec. D, p. 5.

28. See "Active Patriot Groups in the U.S. in 1996," *Intelligence Report: Klan Watch and Militia Task Force* 86 (Spring 1997), pp. 18–19, and "Hate Groups in the United States in 1996" *Intelligence Report: Klan Watch and Militia Task Force* 86 (Winter 1997), pp. 20–21, Montgomery, Ala.: Southern Poverty Law Center, Internet.

29. James William Gibson, *Warrior Dreams: Paramilitary Culture in Post-Vietnam America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994), p. 196.

30. Dov Cohen and Richard E. Nisbett, "Self-Protection and the Culture of Honor: Explaining Southern Violence," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 20, no. 5 (October 1994): 562. This study determined that "although southerners were more likely to endorse violence to protect and restore order, they were not more likely to endorse violence to bring about change" (p. 554), which might explain why there has been more paramilitary activity in the West than in the South.

31. Madison Smartt Bell, "Literature and Pleasure: Bridging the Gap," *Antaeus* 59 (Autumn 1987): 134.

32. Bell, "An Essay Introducing His Work in Rather a Lunatic Fashion," p. 8.

33. Bell, "An Essay Introducing His Work in Rather a Lunatic Fashion," p. 13.

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