

Turn On, Tune Out, Drop In: Review Essay of Ben Fountain's Beautiful Country Burn Again

D.H. Lawrence once claimed that the “essential American soul is hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer.” This sounds nice, something to be proud of in a masochistic sort of way; unfortunately (or fortunately), it’s not true. Americans might be hard, isolate, stoic killers at times, but what people aren’t? Here is the D.H. Lawrence quote on America that matters: “The most unfree souls go west, and shout of freedom. Men are freest when they are most unconscious of freedom. The shout is the rattling of chains, always.” This is a long Lawrence way of saying something rather simple: Americans are ridiculous.

Ben Fountain, the author of the 2006 short story collection *Brief Encounters with Che Guevara*, the 2012 novel *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*, and the 2018 essay collection *Beautiful Country Burn Again*, has always been particularly good on this fundamental aspect of the American character. Here is the U.S. aid worker protagonist from Fountain's short story “Lion's Mouth.”

“So here was the joke: she'd come to Salone determined to lead an authentic life and had instead discovered all the clichés in herself. She wanted to be stupid. She wanted to be rich. She wanted to be lazy, kept, indulged—this is where her fantasies took her lately, mental explosions of the guiltless life.”

Here, in “Asian Tiger,” a former pro-golfer Texan half-wittingly enables a conspiracy between billionaire venture

capitalists and Malaysia's military junta:

"Maybe you felt the urge to scream and rage around, maybe you felt like that would be the moral thing to do, but you sucked it up and stayed cool. Because out here the critical thing was to play it straight. To go along with the joke. To concentrate, he realized with something like revulsion, on golf."

And here are two U.S. Army grunts in *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*, Fountain's novel about an infantry squad invited to the Super Bowl Halftime Show at Cowboy Stadium while on leave from Iraq:

"At staged rallies, for instance, or appearances at malls, or whenever TV or radio is present, you are apt at some point to be lovingly mobbed by everyday Americans eager to show their gratitude, then other times it's like you're invisible, people see right through you, nothing registers. Billy and Mango stand there eating scalding hot pizza and their fame is not their own. Mainly it's just another thing to laugh about, the floating hologram of context and cue that leads everyone around by their nose, Bravo included, but Bravo can laugh and feel somewhat superior because they know are being used."

Fountain's characters consistently confront this American "joke"—that wild disproportion between "the floating hologram of context and cue" and the fact that they are, theoretically, choice-making dignified and sovereign individual human beings. This disproportion has little to do with the individuals themselves, who are, almost without exception, nice guys and girls, but with the fact that they were born in a country with more wealth than God. Add in the comically lopsided distribution of that wealth, a military budget larger than the next 7 countries combined, and a 24/7 entertainment industry that makes money off every hour of our waking lives, and it is difficult to be proportional. And to act without proportion—as Lawrence well understood—is to act ridiculous.

Of course, just as one can't "indulge the mental explosions of a guiltless life" unless one periodically aspires to authenticity, one can't truly be ridiculous unless one occasionally takes oneself Very Seriously. Hence Democracy. Hence Elections. Hence the hope that despite the various horrors of our past—the slavery, the segregation, illegal wars, and ill-gotten wealth—there might be hope of renewal, straight talk, progress, and redemption. And hence the genius of the *Guardian* in commissioning Fountain to report on the 2016 U.S. elections. Who better than Fountain to document our 6-billion dollar circus of platitudes, sanctimony, cynicism, and apocalypticism? Who else could trace whatever it is in the American character that made Donald Trump not only a possibility—horrifying in itself—but president of an entire country with living people in it?



Unsurprisingly the author of *Billy Lynn* rises to the ridiculous occasion. The introduction to *Beautiful Country Burn Again*—the Robinson Jeffers-inspired title of Fountain's collected Guardian reportage—even has a relatively straightforward historian “thesis” to explain both the last election and much of American history:

Our founding fathers, Fountain argues, promised us “meaningful autonomy,” but we got “profit proportionate to freedom” and “plunder correlative to subjugation” instead. In other words, the more money an American takes in this country, the more freedom an American has. Which seems pleasant enough, except for the opposite also holds true, in that the more wealth an American has taken from them, the less freedom they have. Thus, despite “all the sound and fury of the most bizarre election in the country's history,” this unhappy equation persists and belies all the talk of “meaningful autonomy,” and until this equation changes, argues Fountain, “it's still a chump's game.”

But Americans today, some might protest, are educated, media-savvy, aware. We have internet. Color TV. Ironic cat memes. How can we be chumps? Fountain's fictional characters often struggle in similar ways, agonizing over how they, who went into life so clear-sighted and full of good will, became like everyone else, actively aiding whatever it was they didn't want to be. How could they, they ask, who so despise chumps, become chumps? Yet the reason for their failure is blindingly obvious, and all the more painful for being so obvious.

Money.

Here is Fountain in “Iowa 2016: Riding the Roadkill Express” on Hillary Clinton receiving \$675,000 in speaking fees from Goldman Sachs for three hours worth of speaking:

“The human mind wasn't built to comprehend moneys of this magnitude; we need time to behold and ponder, time for the

vastness to seep into our brains like a cognitive vapor, and there remains an awesome abstraction to it all...And so the realm of political money is beyond the understanding of most of us. This many millions here, shit-tons more millions there...we numb out."

As money wears down the moral sense of characters in much of Fountain's fiction, so too Hillary Clinton. So too the Democratic Party. So too the American Middle Class. So too the American Working Class. So to you. So to me. Couple this impossible wealth with a trillion dollar entertainment industry—which Fountain christens the "Fantasy Industrial Complex"—and you and me not only numb out to morality but cease to believe in the possibility of reality.

"The old distinctions start to break down, the boundary between reality and fantasy," Fountain says in "Two American Dreams," an essay on the 1980s, Trump's New York, and advertisement. "It becomes increasingly difficult to know what's real anymore, especially there, inside those screens where so much of our daily existence takes place."

Because how can you be moral or good if you don't see a difference between the real and the unreal? How do the words we use to weigh democratic participation and civic responsibility compete with a fantastical simulacrum that consists of color blotches and furry-Star-Wars-Guardians-of-the-Galaxy-crossover fan-fic Reddit threads? Trump, in this American Dream, becomes our Shakespeare, the playwright of a peculiarly American art form, one that does not so much privilege fantasy over reality but turns fantasy into reality, and all of us sprint drunkenly into the arms of infinite disproportion for fear of the stubbornly proportional chump game—"profit proportionate to freedom; plunder correlative to subjugation"—staring us in the face.

"Easy to despise the political phony," says Fountain of Trump's success in "The Phony in American Politics," "at least

in retrospect. The harder work is plumbing the truth of an electorate that allows the phony to succeed. He didn't create the situation of fear; he merely exploited it. What is it about the American character that allows the long con of our politics to go on and on, electing crooks, racists, bullies, hate-mongering preachers, corporate bagmen, and bald-faced liars? Not always, but often. The history is damning. We must, on some level, want what they're offering."

And that right there is the really hard question. What if we, we of the oh-so-innocent and proletariat-like 99%, *want* what they are offering? What if we vote for the hate-mongers and corporate bagmen and bald-faced liars because we ourselves are hate-mongers and corporate bagmen and bald-faced liars? And, if so, do we gain a sort-of freedom by voting in the hate-mongers and corporate bagmen and bald-faced liars that reflect our hateful, corporate, and prevaricatory values? Did we, despite all our handwringing over illegal invasions, foreclosures, and student debt, find meaningful autonomy in Wal-Mart hypermarkets, Dallas Cowboy halftime shows, and Netflix binges?

No. If you are wondering. The answer is a no. Fountain trots out an impressive array of historical evidence to prove the extent which Roosevelt's New Deal and post-WW II prosperity have been sabotaged, how the middle and working classes have been robbed, humiliated, and manipulated by Reaganomic Republicans and Third Way Democrats, and how what happened in 2016, insane as it was, makes logical sense, given the historical record. In this view Clinton and Trump are less enemies, and more two sides of the same \$100 dollar Monopoly bill, one selling the soul, dollar for dollar, piece by piece, the other telling us to just be you because there's no such thing as a soul anyway.

Yet –joke of jokes—we buy what they sell. This is our

“floating hologram of context and cue.” These are our “mental explosions of the guiltless life.” They leave us feeling like all insane pornographic fantasies do. Empty. Like chumps. Seen but not seen. Half existing. Manipulated (but ironically so!). Eating hot pizza in a giant football stadium.

So it's our fault. We are the chumps. We sold our neighbors and ourselves time and time again. We bought into the fantasy of the corporate bagmen and crooks, of the fantasy industrial complex, of the military industrial complex, of the neurotic self-doubting complex. We said there was no other way. We watch cowboy movies. Game of Thrones. Toy Story 4. Trump hugging the flag. Hard. Isolate. Killers.

But this is part of the fantasy, isn't it? The lack of choice. A Trumpian vision of callow sentimentality, ironic bombast, and murderous power politics thrives on the idea of necessity—“sometimes you get what you need,” the Rolling Stones sing at all his rallies—and the delusion succeeds because it allows us to imagine there is nothing but necessity. This is the force of his fantasy. It has all the appeal of reality. We need (or want?) to believe it is real so we don't have to be real.

It makes sense. Being real means making difficult choices. And Fountain's uncanny understanding of the American character extends not from his belief that we have no choices, and that we are doomed to make the wrong choice, but that choices matter, and that we have made the right choice before (during The Civil War and New Deal), and, therefore, that we can make the right choice again. He believes the conscience is a thing. A real thing. God forbid. And that this thing should not be given up for profit. The artfulness of his fiction attests to this. So too the eloquence of these collected essays. His prose bristles with confidence, in the belief that there was once an America that believed in the possibility of dignity for all men and women, an America where sovereignty might not depend on one's bank account, and that there can be one once

again.

In the collection's final essay, "A Familiar Spirit," Fountain recounts the long depressing history of racial violence in the U.S. He shows how the codification of "whiteness" promoted and excused the murder and plunder of our fellow Americans. He shows how it's back with a vengeance in 2016, and how this shouldn't surprise us, as it never really went away. It is a tragic note to end on, and would seem to confirm Trump's "American Carnage" horror show and Lawrence's "hard, isolate, killer" bit, to prove that behind all the sanctimony, sentimentality, and sententiousness is nothing other than a moral void of blind hopeless hate and greedy violence.

But Fountain does not actually end there:

"Fantasy offers certainty, affirmation, instant gratification, a way to evade—for a while, at least—the reality right in front of our face. It's so much easier that way, but perhaps we're fast approaching the point where the fantasy can no longer be sustained. The evidence won't shut up; it insists and persists...Consciousness—historical consciousness, political consciousness—has been raised to critical mass, and to suppress it, to try to stuff it back in the box along with all its necessary disruptions and agitations, will destroy the best part of America. The promise of it, the ongoing project."

The evidence insists and persists. And the fact that it insists, that people like Fountain are still writing, thinking, and voting based on this evidence proves that the idea of meaningful choice-making autonomy, while not exactly thriving, is not exactly dead either. The joke is there, yes. But the joke is not everything. It is a testament to the genius of Fountain and the power of this collection that he is able to point out the disgusting and disturbing schizophrenia so fundamental to the American character without giving up on whatever is good and true about the American experiment.