

is offered a view into the witty, intelligence, sardonic, and playful mind of a man whose life was far too short for him to give the world all of the genius that resided within.

Snow White is not a perfect work. In fact, the argument could be made that, as a novel, the book is quite flawed. Often, the exquisiteness of many of the novel's small moments make a more powerful impression than the book as a whole. The fluidity of Barthelme's technique renders the plot not only ambiguous as it seems was intended, but, at times, almost clunky and awkward. These are issues that Barthelme's next novel, *The Dead Father*, also encounters, but this is no indication that the author was ill-suited for these longer works. Instead, one must approach the reading of *Snow White* as one would approach one of Barthelme's short stories, with the same expectations and frame of mind. When this is done, *Snow White* can blossom more fully, and the radiance with which Barthelme created the novel can be better appreciated. For, just as with his shorter stories, Barthelme's take on the American novel is one that thumbs its nose at the rules and ideas of what's proper. Donald Barthelme may have found his niche in short stories, and these are the works that may always be linked to his name, but there's more than enough magic in *Snow White* for a reader to understand why Barthelme truly was one of twentieth-century America's most inventive and entertaining writers.

-Adam Strohm

Robert Coover. *The Public Burning*.
Grove Press, 1977. 534 pp.

Joseph McElroy. *Lookout Cartridge*.
Overlook Press, 1974. 531 pp.

Joseph McElroy. *Actress in the House*.
Overlook Press, 2003. 432 pp.

One of the ways my interest in literature has expanded over the past few years is through the use of the Internet. When I was in college, I would scour websites to find writers who fit my literary interests. Much of that time was spent educating myself about authors like Pynchon, DeLillo and Gaddis and of the reoccurring cultural themes in their works. I was immediately drawn to the paranoia that laced the writings of these authors - and after immersing myself in films like *The Manchurian Candidate* and *The Parallax View*, I began to realize how paranoia saturated much art of the 1970's. With Watergate as the defining political event - or catastrophe, perhaps - of the decade, Americans seemed to be struck with the realization that there are (or could easily be) forces aligning against them, watching their every move and forever altering the concept of privacy. (Oddly enough, these concerns seem largely irrelevant to many of my generation even though we came of age during the Internet boom and the accompanying information explosion, where information can be accessed in ways that could only have been dreamed of before. While there are libertarian concerns about private information being made public online, there is a deeper anxiety about global networking - that our every communication could be potentially intercepted. Since 9/11, there have been increasing concerns about free speech and political expression, though feelings of massive, malevolent conspiracy have yet to really sink in with 20-somethings.)

Robert Coover's *The Public Burning* was written in the wake of Watergate, and daringly featured Richard Milhous Nixon as it's main character and narrator, but instead of dealing with the scandal, the book takes us back to the three days leading up to the executions of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg in 1953. With a hideously familiar Uncle Sam as the other strong narrative voice, Coover's book is non-stop hilarity, full of bawdy American slapstick that while raucous, doesn't soften the book's quiet cry against the death

penalty. Surreal and over-the-top, it's a fantasy of American life that makes the slide towards fascism seem like great fun. Yet as overbearing as Uncle Sam is, it's really the more subdued Nixon who steals the show. We find the vice-president obsessing over his ambition, getting caught masturbating, and saying unkind things about President Eisenhower, and as much as I hate to admit it, he's pretty damn likeable. Immersed in 1950's Communist-conspiracy paranoia, Coover presents the real conspiracy as the Eisenhower administration's prosecution of the Rosenbergs, who in all likelihood were innocent, their only crime being that they were socialist-sympathizing Jews during the McCarthy years. Despite having predominantly anti-Rosenberg narrators, Coover makes his point and has a hell of a time in doing so. While this was written long before the Watergate tapes were released to the public, one can't help but contrast Coover's young, energetic Nixon with the paranoid, insane Nixon that we now know. As William Gass puts it in the introduction to the reissue of *The Public Burning*, "Coover's Richard Nixon is a rich and beautifully rendered fictional character. The real Richard Nixon is a caricature." After reading this book, one can't help but feel that the "real" Richard Nixon does not, and can not, exist. He is a specter of a human life, a shell – real enough to still inflict his own power-mad agenda, yet slowly hollowed out by his enemies. In 1977, the world wasn't quite ready for a novel casting a living public figure in such an irreverent fictional voice, and Coover had great difficulty finding a publisher for this book. As Gass' introduction describes, it's only after Nixon has left us that the book has gotten the distribution it deserves, though I'd like to think that R.M.N himself stumbled across a copy when it was originally published and ignored 25 years ago.

Like Pynchon, Coover is not afraid to use humor in his conspiracies (for similar ideas also check out the brilliant *Illuminatus Trilogy* by Robert

Shea and Robert Anton Wilson, which ranks up there with Samuel Delaney's *Dhalgren* as a masterpiece that is usually ignored by literary academia because of genre bias). But the novels of Joseph McElroy are far different. Dry, serious and perhaps a bit too somber, McElroy's style is almost the polar opposite from Pynchon's and Coover's (though his prose is no less dazzling). Back in college, when I searched for other 1970's writers who dealt with paranoia, the name "Joseph McElroy" kept popping up, most notably his work *Lookout Cartridge*. But it was out of print, so I never bothered with it until I found a used copy online for \$5 . I started *Lookout Cartridge* two or three times, but never got more than 80 pages in. There wasn't any resemblance to the absurdity of Pynchon, nor the readability of DeLillo - it was a book that was more difficult, and I felt like there wouldn't be a payoff. Finally on the fourth try, I made it past the first hundred pages, and found myself engrossed in the novel. McElroy is a fascinating writer - and it's hard not to resort to superlatives - but with effort, his novels are some of the most rewarding works I have ever read. Besides *Lookout Cartridge*, his novels are unconventionally plotless - rather than being rambling, directionless narratives they function as narratives without a story (or better said, without a conventionally interesting story). For example, *Ancient History: A Paraphase* (1969) is over 300 pages of a narrator hiding in the apartment of a famous writer/political figure moments after the celebrity has committed suicide; throughout the book the present barely moves beyond this, and the action takes place in the internal thoughts and memories of the narrator. Likewise, *Plus* (1977) is about a disembodied brain floating in space, slowly attaining a form of consciousness as the book progresses. McElroy subverts traditional concepts of plot and conflict, and structures his books around disjointed networks of mental associations and memories. Of all of his novels (which I have quickly devoured in the past year except for the daunting *Women and Men* and

the difficult to find *Hind's Kidnap*), *Lookout Cartridge* stands out, combining McElroy's unique style with a conspiracy-themed mystery; for this reason it is perhaps his most successful book. The narrator, Cartwright, has made an experimental film with his friend Dagger Digennaro, but the film was stolen and destroyed by persons unknown. Cartwright is sucked into a network of shady characters, seeking out explanations and resolution. Along the way he becomes caught up in the relationships between the people in his life - friends, family, enemies - all are potential characters in the conspiracy. The reader, likewise, is drawn into the web. The plot works well to move the book along, though it takes some time to get used to McElroy's style; his typical narrator (who becomes more familiar with each book) shifts his thoughts into recollections, fantasies and associations without warning. This approach is remarkable in the way it attempts to mirror consciousness, and once one gets used to it, it becomes the central appeal of his work (thus making his other novels' hijacking of plot rather irrelevant). Furthermore, by being so close to the workings of the narrator's mind, the sensation of paranoia becomes even more powerful. Working somewhat like a successful version of DeLillo's disappointing *Running Dog*, *Lookout Cartridge* exposes the fears and doubts we experience every day, in all of our thoughts but with a juicy mystery overtop. And though the guns and deception are gripping, after reading some of his other works, one can see that they aren't even necessary to create a paranoid environment.

McElroy's most recent novel, *Actress in the House*, again features a middle-aged male narrator and deals with sinister themes. Daley, a lawyer who is the focus of this novel, is attending a play in New York where an actor slaps one of the actresses on stage as part of the script. There is a jarring violence to the slap - it is too *real* - and this slap transfixes Daley, drawing him towards the actress. Their entanglement is the primary story here, though it

again works mostly through mental associations, disrupting linear temporality. Unlike Cartwright, Daley is a more difficult character to get a grip on; after 400 pages, I still didn't feel like I fully understood who he was. Also, the fact that this novel is written mostly in third-person may further contribute to this distance. Though it is obtuse, and removed from the violence of Cartwright's film, *Actress in the House* still creates an aura of paranoia around the characters. McElroy's style suggests that there exists a general, everyday paranoia that we are all caught in - that we cannot avoid when wrapped up in our own lives, working towards our own desires. It's a difficult book, and not one I would recommend as a starting point for McElroy, but since the publication of *Actress*, *Lookout Cartridge* has been reprinted in paperback by Overlook Press, so interested parties should start there.

When compared to other examples of 70's postmodern paranoia, *Lookout Cartridge* and McElroy in general stands apart, both because of the nature of his paranoia (internal and personal rather than the global creeping Invisible Hand) and because of his style. I wouldn't say that paranoia is the predominant theme in his work, by any means, but merely one way to approach his books. Perhaps "paranoia" isn't even the correct word; maybe it is better to say that his prose is "tense". He doesn't obfuscate his voice with surreal interludes or hallucinations like the more well-known writers mentioned above; he relies merely on connections that are already there. Though his style is experimental, he is not unreadable or cryptic; yet his work has never found the large popular audience it deserves. Toiling in relative obscurity, most of his books remain out of print, and probably will for some time. But with a little bit of effort in both finding his books and understanding them, reading Joseph McElroy can be one of those experiences that makes us continue to cherish the novel as art.

-John W. Fail