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From Redskin to Redneck: Atrocity and Revenge in American Writing

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Terence Martin,
"From Redskin to Redneck: Atrocity and Revenge in American Writing"
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Abstract: In his article, "From Redskin to Redneck: Atrocity and Revenge in American Writing," Terence Martin argues that one of the basic narrative patterns in American writing is that of revenge for the violation of innocence. Martin explores in his study Robert Montgomery Bird's *Nick of the Woods*, Brian Garfield's *Death Wish*, and John Grisham's *A Time to Kill*, texts in which ambiguities of the pattern are expressed in a dramatic and disquieting fashion. After brutality to innocent victims precipitates the action, each of these novels identifies predators and revenge figures and thus sets in motion an escalating spectacle of retribution. Typically, predators are drawn from groups society views with disdainful hostility -- Indians in the frontier setting of Nick, nameless and vicious "bad guys" in the New York of *Death Wish*, or rednecks in the Mississippi locale of *A Time to Kill*. Set against such antagonists are the avengers, frequently fathers who become obsessed with the need to destroy the destroyer. As the selection of predators reveals social biases and frustrations, so the actions of the avenger manifest a need to get even for something no longer possessed. Additionally, as part of a fascinating sub-drama in these novels, the avenger tends to become the creature of his obsession; he is thus prone to resemble the predator in unsettling ways.

Terence MARTIN

From Redskin to Redneck: Atrocity and Revenge in American Writing

In an "Author's Note" to his first novel, *A Time to Kill*, John Grisham recalls attending a trial in which a young girl testified against the man who had brutally raped her. Impressed by her courage, dismayed at her anguish, he envisioned himself ("for one brief yet interminable moment") as the girl's father -- and realized that he "wanted personally to shoot the rapist." "I wanted justice" (ix-x). Out of the intensity of that moment came *A Time to Kill*, a racially-charged version of a fundamental story of atrocity and revenge that has long captured the imagination of American writers. The essential ingredients of such narratives are standard and significant. All have victims (conventionally innocent) who are sacrificed at an early point to precipitate the action; all include predators or bad guys (typically stereotyped) who are drawn from groups society views with disdainful hostility; and all feature relatives (frequently fathers) who are driven by the need to avenge the loss of innocence. To note who is assigned to these roles in specific instances and to observe further the evolving consequences of revenge is to encounter matters of enduring social import. For as such narratives unfold and move toward resolution they enact impulses and biases that tell us something about ourselves as we were in an earlier day and as we are today. Along with the circumstances of many novels and films, the radically different worlds of Robert Montgomery Bird's *Nick of the Woods* (1837), Brian Garfield's *Death Wish* (1972), and Grisham's *A Time to Kill* (1989) provide scenarios that explore the resources of this recurring story in dramatic and disquieting fashion.

In a central episode of *Nick of the Woods; or, the Jibbenainosay. A Tale of Kentucky*, a distraught Nathan Slaughter tells Roland Forrester how (ten years before) a band of Shawnees headed by Wenonga came to his farm and massacred his wife, his mother, and his five children. As he recalls gory details of the incident -- a son and two daughters knifed before his eyes, his wife's blood spouting onto his chest -- Nathan trembles with rage; his face takes on the "wild" and "hideous" look of "a raging maniac." Suddenly he falls twistingly to the earth, "mouth foaming," "body convulsed" in the throes of "an epileptic fit brought on by overpowering agitation of mind." At that point his cap rolls off revealing "a horrible scar," evidence that "the savage scalping-knife had done its work on the mangled head" (Bird 235). Having been "scorched by experience," as R.W.B. Lewis puts it, Nathan Slaughter becomes single-minded in his quest for revenge (109). In a novel replete with Indian fighters -- all of whom are part of frontier society -- he is, as Bird tells us, an Indian-hater whose motives and mysterious identity are private. As a personification of Old Nick he haunts the forest with lethal intent, savagely killing and scalping Indians, then leaving his mark -- a mutilating cross -- on the chests of his victims. In public, however, he remains a man of amity and goodwill: Bird builds a powerful doubleness into his character by making him a Quaker. To the Indians he is feared as the Jibbenainosay, the spirit that walks; to the rough-hewn men of Bruce's Station in Kentucky he is ridiculed as a humble man who exhibits a steadfast reverence for his faith. Beyond the conventional bells and whistles of plot in *Nick of the Woods*, the primary narrative movement is the revelation of Nathan as the pacifist avenger, as (to use Bird's oxymorons) "the warlike man of peace, the man- slaying hater of blood" (Bird 341).

The process of collapsing the two aspects of Nathan's character into one begins in the episode to which I have referred. Shortly before he relates his appalling story to Roland Forrester, Nathan has rescued Roland from painful confinement by killing his three Indian captors -- two of them while they sleep. Embarrassed by Roland's praise for his actions, Nathan temporizes, makes excuses, and finally mutters, "Truly, friend, it is quite amazing, the ill things thee has brought me to." Preoccupied by concern for his cousin, the fair Edith, Roland fails to note "the strange medley of self-accusing and exculpating expressions, the shame-faced, conscience-stricken looks, alternating with gleams of military fire ... with which the man of peace recounted his bloody" rescue. At this point the reader alone is privy to the "extraordinary metamorphosis" of Nathan from "a man of amity and good will" to "a slayer of Indians, double-dyed in gore" (Bird 225-26). As a gentleman from Virginia, Roland Forrester represents the acme of civilization in *Nick of the Woods*, much more so than the Kentuckians or the bombastic Ralph Stackpole. It is thus revealing

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that when Nathan asks what Roland would have done if Indians had massacred *his* family, Roland replies that he would have "'declared eternal war upon them and their accursed race! I would have sought undying vengeance, and I would have sought it ... without ceasing. Day and night, summer and winter, on the frontier and in their own lands and villages, I would have pursued the wretches, and pursued them to the death'" (qtd. in Bird 236). Which is, of course, exactly what Nathan Slaughter is doing. What Grisham felt in a Mississippi courtroom -- an impulse to shoot the predator, to avenge the violation of innocence -- is what Roland Forrester feels on the Kentucky frontier. When Roland and Nathan clasp hands over his impassioned response, the Virginia gentleman and the Quaker Indian-hater are one in spirit.

But Roland is more a hypothetical than an incipient Indian-hater. He and Nathan bring different codes of conduct to the situations at hand. Roland, for example, recoils at Nathan's suggestion that they might wish to scalp the Indians killed during his rescue. And Nathan defers momentarily to Roland's sense of what is proper. Soon after the two stride away into the woods, however, Nathan stops nervously, tells Roland to rest for a moment, and goes back, as he says, to hide the enemy guns he has carelessly left in the open. Upon his return he looks like "a new man": "His gait was fierce and confident, his countenance bold and expressive of satisfaction." And just as Bird issues a heavy-handed hint that blood drips from his knife, Nathan mumbles to himself, "'Things should never be done by halves'" (Bird 239). Roland soon becomes aware of Nathan's vengeful self: after a later skirmish, he begs his friend to spare the life of a young warrior he has wounded and finally subdued: "'I have disarmed him'" Roland explains, "'he resists no more -- Don't kill him.'" "'To the last man of his tribe!'" cries Nathan with "unexampled ferocity; and, without another word, drove the hatchet into the wretch's brain" (Bird 254). The difference between an impulse and a literal act, between a gentleman in search of his captured cousin and an Indian-hater obsessed with the death of his family, between -- finally -- civilization and bloodthirsty vengeance, could not be more vividly displayed.

An atmosphere of border warfare, free-wheeling and turbulent, pervades *Nick of the Woods*, complementing the actions of Nathan Slaughter. Accompanying the fighting is an attitude toward Indians that is patronizing, disdainful, feral in its own way. Not only are Indians "savages" and "barbarians," terms one might expect in a frontier novel of this vintage. The bombastic Ralph Stackpole calls them "'red niggurs,'" the "'rale children of Satan'" (Bird 181, 265). Abel Doe, the renegade who has (as he says) "'turned Injun'," vows that he will never marry his daughter "'to a cussed niggur of a savage'" (Bird 310). To Roland Forrester, Indians are "'the most heartless, merciless, and brutal of all the races of men'" (Bird 189). To Nathan Slaughter, whose actions speak more savagely than his Biblical words, they are "Philistine rascals" whom the Kentuckians should "smite hip and thigh" (Bird 251). And to Bird, who comments editorially after describing a group of warriors mutilating a dead body, the "red-man of America" is a lover of blood whom "the dreams of poets and sentimentalists have invested with a character wholly incompatible with his condition. Individual virtues may be, and indeed frequently are, found among men in a natural state; but honor, justice, and generosity, as characteristics of the mass, are refinements belonging only to an advanced stage of civilization" (Bird 201-02).

In the Preface to the second edition of *Nick* (1853), Bird acknowledges that the Indian is capable of being civilized -- with assistance and "friendly instruction" (32). But his fundamental stance is unaltered: In a natural state the Indian cannot be anything but a "barbarian." In *Nick* he sought to present what he calls "real" Indians, present them as, "in his judgment, they existed" and continue to "exist wherever not softened by cultivation -- ignorant, violent, debased, brutal" (Bird 32). The Preface to the first edition makes the same point: the "single fact" that "the North American savage" conducts war on "women and children" strikes Bird as unconscionable. (By way of contrast, Nathan affirms that his hands "'have never been stained with the blood of woman'" [Bird 285]). Are Indians "heroical?" Bird asks finally, before answering his own question in Latin: "*Hoc verbum quid valeat, non vident*" -- they do not see (or know) what the word means (Bird 29).

Nathan exacts a heavy price for the massacre of his family: systematically, he has killed Wenonga's sons and grandsons. During their climactic meeting, he speaks to an astonished

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Wenonga in "the Shawnee tongue" with a look of "gratified malice" on his face (Bird 321). When he sees, prominently displayed, the "shriveled scalps that had once crowned the heads of childhood and innocence," he leaps on the Chief with "the rancorous ferocity of a wolf," tears a tomahawk from his hand, and before the two hit the earth buries "it in the Indian's brain. Another stroke, and another, he gave with the same murderous activity and force" (Bird 323). Thus Wenonga dies, victim of "the unrelenting and successful vengeance of the white-man" (Bird 323). But Nathan has not completed his work: "leaving the shattered skull, [he] dashed the tomahawk into the Indian's chest, snatched the scalping-knife from the belt, and with one grinding sweep of the blade, and one fierce jerk of his arm, the gray scalp-lock of the warrior was torn from the dishonored head. The last proof of the slayer's ferocity was not given until he had twice, with his utmost strength, drawn the knife over the dead man's breast, dividing skin, cartilage, and even bone, before it" (Bird 323). With the "locks and ringlets of his own murdered family" in one hand and Wenonga's "reeking scalp-lock" in the other, Nathan rushes from the village filled with "insane fury" and uttering "a wild, ear-piercing yell, that spoke the triumph, the exulting transport, of long-baffled but never-dying revenge" (Bird 324).

Seen through the lens of Nathan's obsession, his vengeance is successful. Seen in the total context of the novel, it marks a completion, a terminus. Bird has had his protagonist "out-savage the savage," to appropriate words from Roy Harvey Pearce's analysis of Indian haters in fiction (238). In killing Wenonga, Nathan has destroyed his obsession, which (as he is sadly aware) has compromised his Quaker faith beyond repair. It would be misleading to say that he remains on the frontier, having found action a better *modus vivendi* than peaceful faith. The dramatic logic of Bird's narrative indicates that with no family to love and no Wenonga to hate, Nathan is left without purpose or place. Not only does he refuse Roland Forrester's invitation to live in Virginia; he also finds the praise of the Kentuckians at Bruce's Station (who would claim him, finally, as one of their own) embarrassing, even humiliating. Nathan disappears, "no man knew whither," and there is no narrative voice, as in Cooper's *The Pioneers* (1823), to tell us that he went westward to prepare the way for the march of civilization across the continent (Bird 349). The novel is over, its energies played out, and with them those of the "man-slaying hater of blood." Nathan cannot survive the violence he has done to himself, which is to say that he falls victim to the contrary impulses by means of which he was conceived. The relation of the self to the self, so important to the destiny of any double, generates in his case a character complex, fascinating, and powerful, even as it contains the seeds of its dissolution.

As different as it is in time and locale, Brian Garfield's *Death Wish* bears fundamental similarities to *Nick of the Woods*. At an early point in the narrative Paul Benjamin, accountant and native New Yorker, learns that his wife has been murdered and his daughter raped in their apartment by three youths posing as delivery boys -- who also stole four dollars and a portable TV set. Before she subsides into a vegetable-like condition, Paul's daughter says that two of the three may have been Puerto Rican and the third a black -- provocative details, to be sure, though they have no bearing on the ensuing narrative (56). Contributing to her emerging trauma is the daughter's memory of the three assailants giggling and laughing throughout the violent assault. During a similar scene in *Nick of the Woods*, Indians greet Roland Forrester's discomfiture with jokes and laughter, giving Bird the opportunity to editorialize (once again) in a manner at once patronizing and homiletic: "It is only among children (we mean, of course, bad ones) and savages, who are but grown children, after all, that we find malice and mirth go hand in hand -- the will to create misery and the power to see it invested in ludicrous colors" (Garfield 209). A combination of malice and mirth, of the wanton and the antic, heightens the sense of atrocity in each novel. A sympathetic policeman in *Death Wish* speculates that the intruders might have been "'junkies, they usually are'" (18). The generalizing pronoun *they* in this comment is significant; for it indicates a group indistinguishable one from another -- hence easily stereotyped. Repeatedly in the novel Paul refers to the three predators as *animals* and *savages*, making revenge all the easier to justify. When he accepts the fact that in all probability "'these animals will never be brought to justice'," New York becomes for him "a wilderness" in which vengeance "lay curled in the back of his mind like a poison snake" (Garfield 39, 149, 106).

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Paul Benjamin's transition from an embracer of good causes, a "nominally Jewish" liberal, to an avenging killer, is roughly analogous to Nathan's metamorphosis from Quaker to Indian-hater. It begins with startling changes in attitude. Paul comes to think that liberals act as they do to make themselves "feel less guilty"; he defines a liberal as "a guy who walks out of the room when the fight starts" (Garfield 68). More surprisingly, as he surveys passengers on a subway train he determines that only seven out of fifty-eight "had a right to survive." The remainder are "human cattle," fit for extermination. "'I should have been a Nazi,'" he once thinks with grim albeit shocking satisfaction (Garfield 86-87). A more deliberate consideration of the vigilante-type crusade he will undertake brings Paul to adjust such an extravagant notion to the exigencies of his life. He visualizes himself, for example, as a defender of society, a soldier, the first of an underground resistance. His actions, he believes, will be pre-emptive, a help to would-be victims of crime. Paul's six encounters with people he views as bad guys (to choose the most general term) differ in kind and in consequence. As a fledgling avenger, he uses a sock full of quarters to chase away a youth who tries to rob him, giving "a high call of joy" when the youth runs (Garfield 93). Once he obtains a gun, however, his confrontations become lethal. Accosted by an "almost emaciated white junkie" in Riverside Park, he shoots the man three times, then vomits when he reaches his apartment. Next, in Central Park, he stops a black man from robbing a drunk, steps deliberately into the light -- thinking "so you can watch me shoot you" -- and fires four shots, two into the man's abdomen, then two more "into the back of the man's head" (Garfield 144-45). Following that chilling episode he feels nothing; it was "as if his emotional center had been anesthetized" (Garfield 148). With precision and purpose, the language of the novel becomes sparer, more laconic, as Paul Benjamin's program of retribution becomes increasingly impersonal, unprovoked, scattershot. Paul rents a car, parks it in a lonely spot as a kind of bait, then kills "two thin boys" who decide to strip it (Garfield 152). One evening he has dinner with his son-in-law and talks "pointlessly" with him about their loss: "Later that night in the East Village he shot a man coming down a fire escape with a portable TV set," a bizarre act of violence that recalls the bizarre details of the original crime: One murder, one rape, and one stolen TV set -- portable (Garfield 154).

Whereas the primary movement of *Nick of the Woods* brings the pre-existing doubleness of the protagonist into public view, that of *Death Wish* traces an evolving schism in Paul Benjamin's life. While newspapers editorialize about the dangers of vigilante-ism and popular sympathy surfaces for one who strikes at predators as ruthlessly as predators strike at their victims, Paul remains divorced from, unidentified as the author of, his covert actions. His feelings are understandably scrambled: even as his work at his accounting firm earns praise and a promotion to full partner, he feels cut off, isolated, with "no one to confide in, no one at all" (Garfield 158). Not that he wishes to be apprehended. Surprised at the accuracy of a conjectural profile of the vigilante in the *New York* magazine (which he reads while sitting on the toilet), he wonders if he should discontinue his clandestine activity, hang up his gun as gunslingers yearn to do "in countless westerns" (Garfield 178). But the fact that *they* are still "out there" dissuades him. If he can achieve no ultimate victory, he can at least continue to fight the battle.

The denouement of *Death Wish* is mischievous and open-ended. Armed with renewed self-justification, Paul brings a fresh desire to eradicate evil to the concluding encounter of the narrative. On the roof of a building he sees three teenage boys and a girl throwing large rocks down on a subway train -- "a vicious and dangerous game" (Garfield 180). As the four clamber gleefully down a fire escape he shoots one boy, then shoots a second twice (while the girl runs away unharmed). When the third comes at him with a knife, Paul shoots him in the face; wounded slightly by the knife, he shoots the "groaning boy" again in the face. A moment later, he shoots the boy one last time with his final bullet (Garfield 180-83). We are informed at this point that a policeman stands under a streetlight looking at Paul, who has gun still in hand. Garfield's words tell the story: "The cop reached up in the light and took off his cap and held it in his right hand. Then slowly the cop turned his back and stood there without moving." When Paul "absorbs" the meaning of the policeman's gesture, he walks away, finds a taxi, and goes home (Garfield 184).

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The decisive difference between the agendas of Nathan Slaughter and Paul Benjamin is that one has a specific and recognizable target and the other does not. Nathan kills Indians, identifiable as such, after the massacre of his family. With stealth and accelerating purpose he manages to leave his deadly mark on Wenonga's male descendants. His ultimate objective, however, is to move from group to individual, to exact revenge on Wenonga. Only that will give him (and the novel) a sense of closure. From an early point in *Death Wish*, however, we surmise that Paul Benjamin will have no specific target on which to wreak his vengeance. Once he understands that the three persons who invaded his apartment are not likely to be apprehended, that many like them walk the streets of New York, and that their common bond is predation (not skin color), his program of vengeance must be broadly inclusive. Accordingly, his list of victims is haphazard; it extends finally to anyone he sees committing a crime. Since there will always be "savages" committing crimes, there can be no stoppage, no sense of closure for Paul Benjamin. The final scene of Michael Winner's film *Death Wish* offers a variation on the novel's open-ending. It takes the protagonist, now an architect named Paul Kersey, to Chicago where in his first moments he sees a ragtag group of adolescents bump packages out of a woman's arms and make obscene gestures as they run (laughingly) away. Stooping to help the woman, Paul looks up at the group, gives a half-smile, and cocks his finger like a gun barrel at them. It is a revealing gesture, signaling archly that Paul sees fresh opportunity for his career as vigilante -- even as it invites the sequels that Garfield had no part in writing and has disparaged.

"Billy Ray Cobb was the younger and smaller of the two rednecks." With that opening sentence, *A Time to Kill* introduces a member of a group that is readily stereotyped in the present-day United States. In accord with the accepted profile, Billy Ray drives a pickup truck with a Confederate flag displayed in the rear window. He is individuated, to be sure, by his temperament -- bright, quick, meaner than most -- and by "his small-time narcotics business" which makes him "one of the more affluent rednecks in Ford County" (Grisham 1). But even his name fits the mold, as we learn from a later conversation about names on a jury list. "'Joe Kitt Shepherd'," one character reads from the list: "'Sounds like a redneck'," says another. "'Why do you say that?'" asks the first; "'The double first name. .... Most rednecks have double first names'." Then follows a catalog of such names -- Billy Ray, Bobby Lee, and Jesse Earl, among them. "'Even their women have double first names'" -- Bobbie Sue, Betty Pearl, Thelma Lou (Grisham 331). Such stereotyping is rolled into the early action of *A Time to Kill*, as Grisham adds potent details of setting and character to the basic story of innocence defiled by predators and avenged by a father. Thus, in the small Mississippi town of Clanton (not quite Klantown but close enough to notice) the rednecks Billy Ray Cobb and his buddy Willard rape, beat, kick, and -- according to one report -- urinate on a young black girl, "screaming and laughing" like "two crazy men" as they revel in their brutality (Grisham 2). Identified partly by a description of Billy Ray's pickup truck, they are arrested by the only black sheriff in Mississippi, a former professional football player; shortly afterwards, they are shot repeatedly with an M-16 rifle by the victim's father (who has signaled his lethal intent) as they are brought to court for arraignment.

Like Nathan Slaughter, Carl Lee Hailey has a specific target for his vengeance. Despite the obvious differences between the particulars of each narrative, the two fathers are one in fury when they confront their antagonists, pitiless as they attack -- Nathan with a tomahawk, Carl Lee with an automatic rifle. As Billy Ray and Willard are being brought down a stairway to the courtroom, Carl Lee begins firing "at point-blank range": "The rapists froze, then screamed as they were hit -- Cobb first, in the stomach and chest, then Willard in the face, neck and throat. They twisted vainly up the stairs, handcuffed and helpless, stumbling over each other as their skin and blood splashed together" (Grisham 72). Throughout the mayhem, as bursts from the rifle kick "blood and flesh" onto the walls of the stairway and echo through the courthouse, "the high-pitched, shrill, laughing voice of Carl Lee could be plainly heard" (Grisham 72). When the protagonist, Jake Brigance, arrives just after the shooting, he is nauseated: the front of Willard's head "was missing, and his brains rolled out like jelly covering his face." As for Cobb, the discarded rifle was "between [his] legs on the fifth step, and it too was covered with blood" -- fit emblem of a rapist undone (Grisham 73). Such violence, unrelenting and impassioned, is commensurate with the avenger's

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sense of outrage, be he Nathan Slaughter, Paul Benjamin, or Carl Lee Hailey -- wrathful Quaker, avowed liberal, or family-man known to be considerate of others. Carl Lee, of course, has no ongoing agenda of retribution; nor does he have an unrevealed self at odds with his social identity. After careful planning -- to obtain an automatic weapon and to select the most favorable time and place for the attack -- he strikes once, in public and with no concern about witnesses. When he is finished shooting, his moment of savagery over, he throws his rifle at "the two corpses," runs to a restroom, and crawls out a window (Grisham 72). Walking "nonchalantly" to "his pickup," this man who also bears a double first name then drives home. Quietly, almost collegially, apprehended by the sheriff, he remains comfortably incarcerated until the conclusion of his trial -- many chapters later. He explains his actions straightforwardly: "'I just did what I had to do'" (Grisham 208).

In the "Author's Note" to which I referred earlier, John Grisham mentions his autobiographical affinities with Jake Brigance, Carl Lee Hailey's attorney in the novel. Not only are author and character the same age; not only do they both drive Saabs; much of what Jake says and does is "what I think I would say and do under the circumstances" (Grisham xi). It is thus doubly interesting that when Carl Lee asks Jake what he would do if "'two niggers'" raped his little girl, Jake replies, "'Kill them'" (Grisham 47). It is the same response Roland Forrester gives to Nathan Slaughter's hypothetical question in *Nick of the Woods*, the same impulse Grisham felt in the courtroom scene he describes in the "Author's Note." And it is what Carl Lee vows to do after seeing his daughter in the hospital, raped and beaten by two white men, with "both jaws broken and her face kicked in" (Grisham 42). Despite Jake's objections and dire warnings, Carl Lee says he will "'never sleep till those bastards are dead. I owe it to my little girl, I owe it to myself, and I owe it to my people. It'll be done'" (Grisham 48). Carl Lee, in other words, feels not simply anger but a multiple obligation to avenge the brutal violation of his daughter.

At an early point in his novel Grisham has thus described the victim, stereotyped the predators, and made us witnesses of a father's revenge. What remains in question is the fate of the avenger, to be determined in this case by the trial of Carl Lee Hailey for premeditated murder. (An additional charge for his wounding of Deputy Looney, whose leg is amputated as a result, melts away when Looney accepts Carl Lee's heartfelt apology.) The impending legal drama shifts the focus of the narrative to Jake Brigance and thickens the broth, as it were, by bringing sideshows of activity to Clanton, Mississippi -- visits by officials of the NAACP, questions from reporters of all persuasions, demonstrations by the black population, counter-demonstrations by the Ku Klux Klan -- with the National Guard finally called in to maintain order. Jake revels in the publicity, feels "a wonderful surge of adrenaline" when he sees a camera crew, and thinks he "looks great on TV" (Grisham 156, 84). His confidence comes from his knowledge of the people in Ford County: "He could talk like the blacks and he could talk like the rednecks, and that was enough to satisfy most of the jurors in the county" (Grisham 102).

Clearly, such confidence is well-placed. Carl Lee's acquittal inaugurates the happy ending of the novel, with the one-time avenger reunited with family and his lawyer enjoying the taste of victory. But the strength of the conclusion lies in Jake's discovery of how and why the jury arrived at its verdict. A woman juror, he learns, asked her fellows to close their eyes and imagine that "the little girl had blonde hair and blue eyes," that she was raped repeatedly by two blacks who "kicked her in the mouth and knocked out her teeth, broke both jaws, broke her nose," then began "pouring beer on her and pissing in her face and laughing like idiots" (Grisham 513). Finally, the woman asked the other jurors to imagine that the little girl was their daughter. What would they do if they had the opportunity? Unanimously, the jurors indicate that they would kill the rapists -- a further instance of the almost canonical response evoked by such a question. By formal vote the jurors then declare Carl Lee Hailey "not guilty by reason of insanity" (Grisham 508). A disconcerting morality tale embedded in the larger compass of the novel touches both a lurking racism and a profound impulse for revenge -- both, paradoxically, in the name of justice.

Throughout the narrative development of *A Time to Kill*, an assortment of details contributes to an image of rednecks as unkempt, benighted, and racist. At their preliminary hearing, Billy Ray Cobb and Willard sit in the courtroom, "mangy, bearded, dirty-looking" (Grisham 41). Two days after the shooting "the rednecks buried their dead" in a "no-frills double service at

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the funeral home." Afterwards, "the pickups and dirty Chevrolets" moved slowly toward the cemetery "behind the single hearse" (Grisham 90). To look elsewhere: Freddie Cobb, Billy Ray's brother, is "an ignorant redneck." Terrell Grist, accomplice in a plan to blow up Jake's house, is identified by the sheriff as a "'local redneck'": "'We found him sleepin' in a red GMC 'bout half a mile'" down the road (Grisham 141, 281). On a more social note, because the restrooms at Huey's bar are "nasty" and small, many patrons find it necessary "to relieve themselves between the pickups in the parking lot. This was especially true on Mondays when ten-cent beer night drew rednecks from four counties and every truck in the parking lot received at least three sprayings" (Grisham 14). As one who knows the territory, Jake gets ready acquittals in trials where one black has stabbed another at a local bar; his formula is to "get an all-white jury full of rednecks" who could not care less about "niggers stabbing each other" (Grisham 194).

The term *redneck*, of course, has a literal meaning, signifying the red necks farm workers and other laborers get from exposure to the sun. Over the years its meaning has expanded conspicuously. Made roughly synonymous with the word *hick*, it came to imply provinciality, naivete, a general lack of sophistication. In Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men* (1946), Willie Stark draws on such connotations to shock rural voters into action: "'Friends, red-necks, suckers, and fellow hicks,'" he begins his standard speech; "'that's what you are. And me -- I'm one too. Oh, I'm a red-neck, for the sun has beat down on me'" (Warren 101). According to *Time* magazine in 1976, a far different kind of politician, Jimmy Carter, called himself "'basically a redneck'" ("The Candidate" 46). If that description added a sense of integrity-by-association to the term, the effect did not spill over to the general population (or to his brother, Billy, some people would say). *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (1989) tells us officially that the word "redneck" signifies "a white member of the Southern rural laboring class" and that it is "sometimes used disparagingly." The many redneck-jokes attest to the latter point. You know you're a redneck, for example, if you and your dog use the same tree (or shall we say pickup) to relieve yourselves. You know you're a redneck if you go to a family reunion to hit on women. Such jokes are scornful, contemptuous, suffused with a sense of superiority. Interestingly, they are also exempt from the unsmiling precepts of political correctness. In her study of gender in the modern horror film, Carol J. Clover suggests why this is so. Transcending its regional foundations, she demonstrates, the image of the redneck "has achieved the status of a universal blame figure." The result is that "anxieties no longer expressible in ethnic or racial terms have become projected onto a safe target" (Clover 135). Clover's analysis of what she calls "urbanoid guilt" over the dislocation of an indigenous population is distinct from the thrust of my discussion here. But her observation that the figure of the redskin has been rewritten as that of the redneck reinforces the notion that the attributes of predators are transferable from one cultural season to another; stereotyped and capable of savagery, the members of such groups are cast in roles society views with trepidation and seeks to destroy.

One example of such transference (and another instance of antic behavior intensifying a sense of atrocity) can be seen in Erika Holzer's *Eye for an Eye* (1993): On Halloween night a youthful gang dressed for the occasion rape and kill the narrator's (Karen's) daughter while they cavort around a table arrayed with treats. The leader, we later discover, bears the name Indio. With "shoulder-length black hair and a band around his head," he liked to play "at being an Indian brave" (37, 41). By means of a gender-variation in the formula, Indio is killed by Karen, the avenging mother, as the climax of a deliberately confusing scene arranged by an organization called Victims Anonymous. The story of Ellie Nesler offers a real-life gloss on the figure of the avenging mother. In 1993 Nesler walked into a California courtroom and with five shots from a palm-sized semi-automatic pistol killed a man charged with molesting four young boys, including her son. The incident was reported nationally, with some people hailing Nesler as heroic and others understanding her impulse but deploring her act. The shooting was both punitive and preemptive. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, the defendant "smirked" at Nesler as he entered the courthouse. Apparently in a rage, she took the gun from her sister's purse moments before the shooting and somehow carried it into the courtroom. Following her arrest Nesler said, "The man's sick. He deserved to die. Maybe I'm not God, but I'll tell you what -- I'm the closest thing to it for

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all the other little boys" (see Arax and Fuller). Four years later, released on parole, Nesler saw her action as a mistake, something that had afflicted the lives of her two children and compounded the pain of the initial situation. She saw, in other words, the *consequences* of what she had done. After melodramatic complexities of plot, the narrator of *Eye for an Eye* uses her public relation skills to make Victims Anonymous into a support group for would-be avengers; after a term in prison, Ellie Nesler emerged as a woman of sorrow made contrite by experience. In some cases, life can be crueler than fiction.

As I remarked in a previous analysis of revenge in the work of Hawthorne, Melville, and Poe, "the urge to get even with someone or something or everything, may be an essential part of the American sense of story," something generated by a deep sense of loss (Martin 87). The pattern of *Nick of the Woods*, *Death Wish*, and *A Time to Kill* -- along with that of many other novels and films -- reinforces such a supposition in a distinctive way. Repeatedly, these narratives enact dramas of revenge for the exuberant defiling of innocents. Repeatedly, they cast antagonists as vicious and predatory, deserving of harsh retribution. And repeatedly, they are ambivalent about what should be done with the avenger, the character who acts out our impulses. Such ambivalence, I believe, is an aggressive part of their appeal. For we know that innocence cannot endure and that revenge can be self-consuming. What remains in doubt is the destiny of a character who subverts civilized codes to punish those who subvert civilized codes. With each new version of the established story, we encounter a fresh and dangerous adventure.

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