

Young Lonigan

J. Farrell

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Written in the late twenties it depicts a scene with which the author, as an Irish working class Catholic himself, was intimately familiar with. Thus yet another instance of a young man breaking out of and thereby coming in terms with his constraining upbringing, to which he nevertheless is deeply attached sentimentally. Most of such attempts do rarely travel beyond the immediate circle of the young man, but in the case of Farrell he hit a nerve and for quite some time his novel, or rather the trilogy of which this one is the first part, remained something of a cult-text, although in recent decades it seems to have been mostly forgotten (proclaiming the status of a classic should never be done too soon). I certainly heard of it in the 70's, during my formative American years, but I was never moved to seek it out and read it, apart from Steinbeck, who was in the vogue in the 60's when I read him at high-school, I have never really sampled American working class writing from the first half of the first truly modern century, I am thinking of names such as Sinclair Lewis and Dos Passos, ambitious undertakings to write the great American novel. The present book I found as a Signet edition, published by the New American Library, in the remains of my parents library.

The book is hard-boiled, at least in the sense of trying to present the inner life of an inarticulate teenager. The modern techniques of Woolf and Joyce with their emphasis on inner monologs and streams of consciousness are freely employed, one surmises not unintentionally. But they are handled in a different way, not as elaborately, not as fluently, with a deliberate paucity of expression in order to convey the paucity of the inner world of the main protagonist. Some parts of the text and dialogues are almost incomprehensible to an outsider. Colloquial speech and expressions, are used freely, yet never turned into tedious mannerism. Much may pass by the unwary reader, unless he or she makes a conscious effort to realize that much of the text is actually made up of innuendoes and decides to sample them all. Contemporary readers may have no problem with the slang, but slang dates, thus putting some demands on the reader to figure things out, a subsequent demand enhancing the literary qualities of the novel. One should also recall that at the time sexual explicitness was not a routine, unlike it has become in later years, forcing the author to practice some self-censorship, which actually turns out to be less deplorable than is usually realized, as constraints stimulate the imagination as nothing else.

Not much happens in the novel, there are no adventures, no real plot, more like vignettes to set the scene. We encounter young Lonigan, not yet fifteen, in the throes of fresh puberty, monopolizing the bathroom taking a smoke. He is graduating from a parochial school run by old nuns. He is expected to begin high-school, but he rather not, but will be overridden by parental authority. But before that he has an entire summer with no obligations ahead of him, a paradise of sorts, which modern pupils may be deprived from experiencing to its full hilt, by the efforts to make school a paradise as well. He hangs out with his friends, gets into fights, establishing his reputation as a tough guy. He has

a crush on the young girl Lucy, and once he gets to take her to the park, climbing up a tree and exchanging kisses. The next day the news of it are all over the neighborhood, chalked, as it seems, on every wall. He suffers the humiliation of being thought of as clown, a sissy falling for mere girls. What does his reputation as a tough guy amount to when he has been exposed as a softie? He tries to kill his interest in romantic love, and instead seeks out the favors of a certain Iris, notorious for her availability, not adverse to serving young guys serially during so called shag-sessions, in this case combined with a crap game which determines the order of access. Other scenes, disjointed in their appearance and connections with others, such as swimming and diving in the Lake Michigan with pilfered swimming suits, or playing baseball or basket, are presented. There is also an interesting appearance of a tomboy Helen, with which the young Lonigan has an initially promising rapport.

The action takes place almost a hundred years ago, but nevertheless it provides a very familiar setting, at least to people grown up in the 50's and 60's. There is no TV and private cars are not ubiquitous, but most of the modern conveniences are already in place. Hence one gets the feeling that the setting is suburban, when in effect it is urban, South Chicago in fact, but of this fact, apart from stray references to the 'Elevated', one does not get a sense, which can be seen as a weakness of the presentation, the accurate evocation of the physical setting being crucial in a work of this type. The prose is simple, if as mentioned, at times elusive, and does not have that conscious, almost overworked quality, you would find in say Bellow. The initial volume in the trilogy sets up more of a promise than a self-contained satisfaction. The question is whether subsequent installments will deliver.

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