PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES: SCOTT BRADFIELD AS A CONTEMPORARY WRITER

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ABSTRACT

Often expressing opinions in opposition to glossy propaganda, contemporary author Scott Bradfield places an importance on unconventional characters to convey his views of American society. Bradfield enhances his satirical style in three ways: first by making stereotypical characters somehow extraordinary; second, by letting strong character interactions lead the story, rather than plot carrying the novel. Lastly, Bradfield discusses modern issues of American society beyond the limitations of media-established public opinion.

Two of Scott Bradfield’s books are discussed in this analysis: *The People Who Watched Her Pass By* and *What’s Wrong with America*. Both books satirize a self-centered and blameless American society while leading the reader to evaluate their own decisions and recognize themselves. *The People Who Watched Her Pass By* presents the futility of youth. *What’s Wrong with America* magnifies the preference for a dramatic ideal.

Scott Bradfield creates stories so obscure that the reader is forced to focus on the issues he wishes to present. The juxtaposition of his characters’ motives and actions highlights his own conclusions about American society while asking the reader to question everything.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ABSTRACT</th>
<th>iii</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. THE PEOPLE WHO WATCHED HER PASS BY</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrators and Characters</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character Relationships</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issues Presented</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. WHAT’S WRONG WITH AMERICA</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrators and Characters</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character Relationships</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issues Presented</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. CONCLUSION</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Scott Bradfield is the author of multiple novels, numerous short story collections and critical analyses in which he pushes boundaries and tests limits. In one of his criticism pieces, *Why I Hate Toni Morrison’s Beloved*, Bradfield has a deeper message than just hating the book itself. The article demonstrates what his views in the literary community are, as well as the importance of the “process of reading.” He explains that sometimes books are “bigger than I am,” leaving no room for true discussion of the book for fear it will not fall in line with what is said about the book in the literary community. Bradfield is not against the book in question itself but rather all the hype surrounding the book, and he feels confined to having an opinion in agreement with what has already been established. He explains in the article,

Books are about a lot of things: race, gender, the Napoleonic Wars, sex, death, food, social norms, social outcasts, social incasts, fantasy, fact, dreams, sadness, loneliness, elation, injustice, class, the Mason-Dixon line, language, stupidity, co-habitation and rage.
But ultimately, they are about the process of reading them; they are about the things their authors have known and seen and imagined long enough to write them down. They are by their nature, transitory experiences just like our lives and we shouldn’t judge them or be judged by them.

He continues to explain that the worst thing is not someone saying they love or hate a book, but instead someone else telling us that we must love or hate a book. From a teacher’s and writer’s perspective, Bradfield wants his students and readers to draw their own conclusions, because they are capable of doing so. As a writer, Bradfield uses his characters as a vehicle of critique of American society, confronting readers with issues such as consumerism, child abuse and gender issues, while making the absurd seem normal. He tells a story with such obscurities that the reader must question, “What is happening? And why it is happening?” These questions keep the reader pondering after the thrill of reading for entertainment wears off.

In two of Bradfield’s novels, *The People Who Watched Her Pass By* (2010) and *What’s Wrong with America* (1994), there are three ways that Bradfield portrays an American romantic viewpoint of realistic issues in today’s society. First, Bradfield uses exceptional rather than ordinary characters. The stories reveal unreliable characters that make the reader question the validity of the story and place extra focus on what the narrator is saying or not saying. Second, Bradfield creates such elaborate character interactions that while driving the story, the characters overshadow the plot. Third, the issues that Bradfield presents in his works are usually taboo, such as gender issues, rape, mur-
der, and even the general consumerism of America society. All of these elements of storytelling are used to critique American society. The unconventional characters, rich character interactions and absurd obstacles the characters face – as well as the element of irony – are Bradfield’s way of forcing readers to make conscious choices regarding the issues presented.

In Scott Bradfield’s novels and short stories he uses unconventional characters as well as the reoccurring underlying theme of a materialistic American culture. In his most recent novel, *The People Who Watched Her Pass By*, the story is told from the perspective of a three-year-old girl, Salome. She is abducted by a man who fixes her water heater. The man that kidnaps Sal wants her to call him Daddy and wishes to instill his own beliefs in her. Sal then ventures out on her own and becomes a self-sustaining toddler. The plausibility of a three-year-old being able to support herself by finding food, shelter and keeping herself out of danger while traveling is not very realistic. Bradfield favors the extraordinary over the ordinary and has a way of making the absurd seem normal. Not only does the unlikeliness of each circumstance cause the reader to question every situation, it also forces the reader to be active in the story, filtering and processing each detail. The reader is also forced to decipher Bradfield’s intention by what he is not saying.

In *What’s Wrong With America*, the narrator is a grandma, Nana, who buries her husband of forty-five years in the back yard. This is considered atypical and uncharacteristic by American culture – grandmas are gentle caregivers and physically incapable of such an arduous task as murder of a grown man. Bradfield wanted to break social con-
straints with this book, which is perhaps why he picked someone American society identifies as a caregiver to be a killer. The story is set in Suburban California as Nana breaks the structure of her life and decides to kill her husband. She then writes about it, in a journal to her family. Her family includes her son Thomas, an estranged daughter Cassie and her grandson Teddy. The journaled stories contain unusual characters and ridiculous circumstances that are never identified as anything other than normal. In American society, we are used to seeing characters from reality television shows to the latest memoirs portrayed as “realistic” in the media. However, Bradfield’s juxtapositions of unconventional narrators in absurd situations have a more profound effect, contrasting rather than gravitating toward ordinary. As a writer he seems to use the absurdity of situations to drive home his messages.

Perhaps Bradfield was influenced to erase boundary lines in his writing and character development by Foucault. Bradfield speaks of Foucault’s definition of Transgression in *Dreaming Revolution: Transgression in the Development of American Romance*; “‘Transgression,’ Michael Foucault argues, ‘contains nothing negative, but affirms limited being – affirms the limitlessness into which it leaps as it opens this zone to existence for the first time’” (Bradfield, ”Dreaming” xi). Bradfield discusses Foucault and Nietzsche as philosophers who do “…not return readers to places they have been but teaches them to overleap those places, misremember and surpass them” (xi). He reflects this idea in his critical analyses and in his fiction, constantly seeing other authors push boundaries while seeking limitless options in his own works.
CHAPTER II

THE PEOPLE WHO WATCHED HER PASS BY

Narrators & Characters

Bradfield’s dimensional characters and satirical dialogue engage the reader while producing a grotesque story that leaves the reader feeling uneasy and questioning American society. Bradfield’s narrators are unconventional, unreliable, and cling to the biases of their upbringing like most Americans. In The People Who Watched Her Pass By, Sal seems to be adapting very quickly to her life with the repair man who asked her to call him Daddy. In a scene placed among the dialogue between Sal and Daddy, there is a sunflower with symbolism:

The sunflower was beginning to sag, concerned about all this water that wouldn’t go away. Salome had tried propping it up with sheets of cardboard, sticks, coat hangers, anything she could find, but you couldn’t slow some things down. The sunflower had learned too much. It was tired of knowing. One of its brown arms was falling off, like the sleeve of an old coat. The porous yellow face was
spotty with caterpillars. (Bradfield, “People” 23)

Obviously Sal is the sunflower, learning too much too quickly, and Bradfield has the narrator subtly point and project those feelings on the delicate, innocent flower. Since Sal is three years old, the likelihood of her internalizing and making such a profound metaphor is highly unlikely, just as the events of the story are highly unlikely. A three-year-old would still be developing impulse control and judgment parts in the brain and be unable to realistically process the way Bradfield implies. The way Bradfield projects the feelings on the flower has a more profound effect on the reader, rather than just saying that Salome is like a flower. The reader empathizes with both Sal and the flower. This same flower is mentioned numerous times throughout the story so the reader is kept up with its status and can continue the metaphor.

Bradfield presents other such scenes alluding to or plainly stating Sal’s thoughts and state of being, including an adventure at the Laundromat:

Most of the magazines contained glossy pictures of young ladies who looked the way Sal felt. Detached, slightly petulant, gloaming with fabric and conditioners, they stood in awkward poses, their heads cocked at odd angles to perceive a world beyond the one that kept perceiving them. (36 and 37)

Here the story is progressing and Sal is growing more self-aware, identifying herself as unhappy instead of just suggesting it. Already stated, Sal is an unrealistic three-year-old and highly self-aware which emphasizes the absurdity of the issue. The sentiment relates to feelings that many individuals have in our society today, comparing themselves to
what they see in magazines or in other forms of media. Bradfield uses Sal as a representation of youth and shows how easy they may be manipulated. This scene also presents contrast. The fact that Sal has self-awareness is in opposition to the wishes that Daddy had for her. Daddy, not her real “Daddy” but rather the one who abducted her, wants her to be happy within, seemingly from deliberately rejecting societal expectations. But Sal has become so self-aware that she could never be as blind as Daddy’s wish would require. This juxtaposition of a man who wants a child to be happy abducting an already well-cared-for little girl from a traditional American two-parent home is one example Bradfield uses to highlight the absurd societal belief that everyone’s personal opinion is superior to those of their peers. And Sal’s growth beyond Daddy’s intention shows how futile his presumption was.

Bradfield provides many adult characters that have opinions for Sal. The man Sal meets at the Laundromat has advice of his own to help the little girl: “If you don’t keep your stuff organized, it takes over your life. And once stuff takes over your life, you might as well cash in your chips. They’ll be sweeping you out from behind the dryers, honey. They’ll be dumping you in the trash with all these old magazines” (40). There is a reoccurring topic that Bradfield presents through the Daddy character regarding material possessions; Daddy thinks that too much of society’s desires are placed into material goods. Daddy and the Laundromat Guy have similar lessons about material possessions, but neither have important people in their life such as family or loved ones. All the characters are somehow detached, missing out on what so many believe to be the purpose of life. Bradfield’s use of a three-year-old instead of an older character demonstrates the effect society has on its youth, as well as consumerism affecting youth at an early age.
When Bradfield revisits the sunflower continuously, it symbolizes the natural fragility of children. Bradfield puts extra emphasis on Sal connecting the dots with the sunflower and the magazine. The intended realization may also question if the envy for material possessions can cause people to revert back to the need of immediate gratification seen in children.

**Character Relationships**

The limits of *The People Who Watched Her Pass By* are pushed and driven by character dialogue. Sal’s role is flipped with the adults, as she is portrayed as a remarkably self-sufficient child. Her journey through kidnapping, gender issues, sexual abuse, relationships, and religion causes her to grow up too quickly and harden her emotions against the world. She learns most of her life lessons through interactions with different characters. The synergy of the two main characters that Bradfield creates provokes the reader with a feeling of dissonance with the American Culture. When Sal first meets the man who abducts her, he asks Sal to call him Daddy. Daddy explains to Sal in the very beginning just why he abducted her:

> I care for you very much in my own special way, and not in any of those sick, perverted ways you hear about in tabloids television programs and newspapers. I care about you as a perfect, beautiful little child with a fresh perspective on this sorry world of ours. And it’s precisely this sort of fresh perspective which may yet save us all from total eco-catastrophe and self-annihilation. (3)

Bradfield is twisting the situation of a kidnapper and an abducted child and placing the
blame on someone else. This is a bold plot and Bradfield is able to hold it together through the interactions of the characters. He does not match Daddy’s intention with what Daddy is actually doing. Bradfield has Daddy even state he is not sick, but who would want to steal a child from their home just because they think they could raise the child better than the child’s parents? Daddy places an importance on youth which perhaps parallels Bradfield’s importance on youth in our society. The contrast and interactions of the situation bring more attention to the romantic idea of fixing society.

Daddy believes he is the best for the job of taking care of Sal. From the beginning, Daddy tells Sal what values he wants to instill in her:

“There are lots of things you think you need in this world,” he told her, speaking from deep inside the far-off, rock-hard certainty of himself, “And lots of things you don’t need at all. Once you learn the difference, sweetheart, I’ll have accomplished everything I set out to accomplish on the day I became your devoted and lifetime daddy.” (4)

Bradfield has Daddy claim that he did not want to be creepy; his speech reiterates the fact that he is. Even in this quote, Daddy tells Sal that there are things that you need in this world and things you do not. Could Daddy even be referencing himself to Sal? He does later leave Sal on her own. Bradfield has Daddy pick Sal because she is young and impressionable and still has naïve thoughts about the world. There is also a similarity between Bradfield and the Daddy character regarding the emphasis on youth being impressionable and being targets. Bradfield has Daddy show Sal a way to live without being so dependent on material possession, which presents the idea of consumerism. As the
reader finds out, Daddy is full of contradictions, including feeding into consumerism himself. Ironically, throughout the book we see references to brand name items such as Cadbury Crème Eggs, a Home Cooking Play Corner, Play-Doh, Pyrex, Blue Point matches, Quaker Oats Oatmeal, Heath Bars, and V8 juice – and these on two pages alone (4 and 5). Bradfield uses brand names to connect to the reader instead of detailed descriptions of the objects. Readers identify with brand names. Bradfield simply says “Heath Bars” and readers know what chocolate bar he is talking about, which plays into Bradfield’s themes of consumerism. Daddy’s character is contradictory; he buys things for Sal after he has said he does not want her to be dependent on materials.

He sacrificed everything for her, including the tiny bedroom of their bungalow apartment, which he painted pink and blue with white cloud-like bunnies on the walls and ceiling. He sold the tools from his van to buy her a bed with a flouncy bunny-imprinted duvet and matching fitted sheets. He bought her a plastic telephone, a plastic washer-dryer, and a matching Home Cooking Corner, which interrupted the pale stucco walls like a random glimpse into another world. (4)

It is so absurd that a man who kidnapped a little girl is “sacrificing” things for her; true to his character name, Daddy seems to behave as a father would for his only child. The name “Daddy” even places importance on this character versus the biological. Even if what he does/buys is for the motive of comfort and not desire, it still has the same outcome and is inconsistent with what he says. This is one example of the absurd situations and relationships Bradfield illustrates in his novels. It is subtle enough that it is simply
making the strange and otherwise alarming facts familiar and acceptable to the reader.

Bradfield’s creates character synergy that drives the story. He wants to portray his views and ideas in our society but chooses to do so in a fiction format which causes a greater impact to the reader. Bradfield presents the readers with Daddy’s absurdity to make the reader question what they think is important. Bradfield creates distance using fictional characters, and usage of contrasts has a more profound effect with regard to what is not there than Bradfield speaking directly about society.

Issues Presented

Bradfield presents issues that are dealt with in today’s society. The focus on characters, in this situation of child and adult roles being switched, is established very quickly in the story when Sal becomes self-sufficient. The absurdity of the interactions highlight present-day issues in a way different than just a typical realistic memoir. Bradfield takes the issues and turns the situation upside down, presenting from a perspective so bizarre we actually identify with it more because we distance ourselves from it. Today, society seems to measure a person’s worth and happiness by what material goods that person has acquired; so Bradfield has Daddy resist consumerism:

It’s not an issue of what car somebody drives, or whether they saw the latest cool movie or not. Rather true happiness and fulfillment is a place that’s always inside you, no matter where you’re located on some stupid map…In order to endure the meaningless rituals of this world, one must develop a hardness to material conditions.

Listen to the part of yourself that is resistant to conditions, Sal, and
you will live a perfect life. One where you always remain true to yourself. (7 and 8)

Bradfield comes back to the point of Daddy being full of contrasts with the emphasis on adult and child roles being switched. Today, many children are growing up too soon because of issues they have to deal with like Sal. Still, Daddy tries to give fatherly advice. Daddy has a romantic and optimistic view of life and how he lives, giving advice that is comparable to proverbs of happiness and self-fulfillment. He sees life as he wants it to be – how he thinks it should be - rather than what it is. The interactions between Daddy and other characters, as well as his dialogue, deliver this message more clearly than the words of proverbs could. This leads readers to actively make conclusions for themselves.

Bradfield returns to an emphasis on youth and awareness by switching adult and child roles. Many real children are growing up too soon – like Sal does – because of intense situations. Throughout the book the reader sees Daddy try to give fatherly, idealistic advice while Sal keeps growing up. The situations Sal encounters are more realistic by the romanticism and the depth than some of the “reality” shows today. The characters of this novel do not always make sense. Most react to Sal out of obligation rather than compassion or desire. Throughout the book, Sal learns how to make a division between herself and others she meets. At one point Sal encounters Mrs. Anderson, a landlady with a lot of advice for Sal about boys. She says, “You need a permanent life-long partner if you’re going to survive past forty, little girl. But until you turn forty, you should enjoy yourself with as many boys as possible” (12). The advice is not healthy on an emotional level or a physical level. We have come a long way in our society from people marrying their high school sweetheart or from the Disney fairytales of living happily ever after.
However, what Mrs. Anderson says is realistic with regard to relationships we see presented today, such as reality stars cheating on the cover of magazines; we accept it. Bradfield has the advice of Mrs. Anderson contrasted by Daddy’s advice. Daddy comments right back about how women like Mrs. Anderson treat men. Daddy tells Sal,

We aren’t individuals to women like that, sunshine. We’re producers of profit and fat. We’re only on this earth to fix their hinges, or pay their bills. And so far as our own personal happiness is concerned, well, that’s no concern of theirs at all. We’re just extensions of them. We’re just here to do whatever it is they can’t do for themselves. (13)

The opposing advice from Daddy and Mrs. Anderson teaches Sal about gender roles. This can be a very controversial subject, and Bradfield takes these topics and juxtaposes them with a three-year-old girl.

After Mrs. Anderson and Daddy teach her what they want, Sal moves right along. Sal represents an unwanted child that gets passed around from family to family. Although people like the ‘idea’ of having a child, not many people want the responsibility that comes along with it. It is ironic in itself that someone would want to have a child so bad they kidnap a child, but then abandon the child. Bradfield deftly presents this idea that we live in a throw-away society that does not think twice about losing people. When Sal loses Daddy, her guardian and father figure, she thinks,

In some ways, maybe daddies were like water. Always on their way to somewhere else, forming shapes and losing them, dripping like clocks in secret caverns that you couldn’t see. If they stayed
in the same place too long or assumed the same shape, they’d be
found by the forces that looked for them. They’d be devoured and
transformed into someone different than who they were supposed
to be. (14)

If parents stayed with their children, they might have to act like parents; some people do
not want to accept that role. When Sal’s Daddy abandons her, Mrs. Anderson takes her
in. When with Mrs. Anderson, Sal meets a repair man who is eager to befriend her. Out
of obligation she feels to this man, perhaps because she feels sorry for him, Sal spends
time with him and lets him take her to the park. He tells Sal about times that he feels safe
in this world:

You want to know the funniest thing about sneaking into people’s
houses, kid? It doesn’t feel funny at all. It’s almost like you be-
long there, even when you’re hiding behind the couch and they
come home and don’t see you. It’s almost like they know you’re
there and they’re playing along. Nothing bad can happen to you.
You just feel really safe and warm. (23)

The repair man feels safe when he is invisible. He feels safe, even though he is intruding
on someone and should not be in the person’s house. But he is not safe, and neither is the
person’s space, even if he means no harm. The repair man can harm the homeowner or
the homeowner can harm the repair man. The dialogue of the repairman to a three-year-
old girl is so alarming. This is another instance where Bradfield makes the absurd seem
acceptable to the reader. Bradfield gives the repair man and Daddy similar traits in that
they both let down and/or deceive those that have placed trust in them. They both appear
as antagonists in the story, yet the reader is compelled to listen to their perspective.

Sal learns more about relationships from another antagonist she meets at the Laundromat. The boy named Tim creates an uncomfortable situation; he wants to have a relationship with Sal despite her being a young girl.

‘Love is not a physical experience, little girl,’ he explained. ‘It’s more a matter of two souls adapting to one another over time and space. I don’t expect you to kiss me, or hug me, or even stroke my hair. I just want you to spiritually develop along lines that are appropriate to my personal lifestyle agenda...I adjust to you, and you adjust to me. Throughout the course of our life, we’ll always work things out and make our love stronger. That’s because you and I possess synergy, little girl. Which means we’re more together than the sum of our parts. We’re meant to be together, whether anybody else likes it or not.’ (50-51)

Tim thinks Sal is psychologically and emotionally capable of a relationship of the same level as an adult. Tim takes care of his grandmother and invites Sal over to be with them. There is no evidence that Sal is sexually abused by Tim, but the text does imply that other characters in the book think Sal was sexually abused by Tim. The audience has no evidence to suggest this, but it is never addressed and defined. Sal’s words are manipulated by adults so that she is saying exactly whatever it is they want to hear from her. Bradfield could be speaking on a larger to scale to how sometimes society shapes youth as what we want out of them.

Mrs. Mayhew is one of the ladies who manipulates Sal’s words. Child services
psychologist Mrs. Mayhew believes Sal has Traumatic Shock Syndrome:

Traumatic Shock Syndrome is a very mysterious ailment we are only just beginning to understand, a super-serious form of repression that afflicts even little girls like yourself. To put it simply, sometimes bad things happen to us so often, and so predictably, that we learn to ignore them, or lock them behind a big black door so they can’t frighten us…When we learn to live with this abuse so proficiently that we direct it against ourselves, it initiates something I like to call Self Abuse Steady-State Syndrome, a variation on Traumatic Shock Syndrome that hasn’t been accepted by the closed-minded professional community at large. (56 and 57)

Mrs. Mayhew insists that Sal, who Mrs. Mayhew renames Stephanie, is really just blocking out being sexually abused.

The greatest beauty of children, Stephanie, is their supreme resiliency…But sometimes, this resiliency is like a big soft curtain of unreality which prevents them from learning how to deal with bad people. Children have no sense of right or wrong; they have no sense of injustice. They only have three ideas about how the world operates, and those three ideas can be summarized as negation, acceptance, and control… (68)

Bradfield presents the idea that children are shaped through the way they see the world around them and may be products of manipulation. The adult characters of Bradfield’s novel, all want to shape Sal into what they think she should be. Mrs. Mayhew believes
that children, “...learn to dissemble. And once they’ve learned to dissemble, Stephanie, they can never be children again. They are cut off from the genuine meaning of their lives. They become conspirators in their own subjugation” (69). Children can be physically resilient, overcoming sickness or ailments, but what happens to children emotionally shapes their actions in a positive or negative way. Sal’s experiences seem to develop her into a cold girl.

‘[Dolls are] tiny,’ she said. ‘And helpless. They look at you with those empty eyes that don’t have anything interesting to say. They want you to talk to them, and cuddle them, and give them baths in the sink, but they never give anything back. They’re whiny and useless and don’t care about anybody but themselves. They don’t really care about you. They just want you to care about them.’

(66)

This statement shows Sal’s loss of innocence, loss of imagination, and her motive for relationship exchange. In a sense Bradfield has Sal demonstrate what Mrs. Mayhew wanted - for Sal to dissemble. Bradfield is putting a focus on how youth is shaped by everything they encounter, from magazines to interactions with adults. He wants the readers to question if they themselves are manipulating children. Does society push their own beliefs, values, and opinions on kids? Since the beginning of the novel we see the transformation of Sal. She grows and changes from each conflict, from the sunflowers to the dolls.

Perhaps the most jaded statement from Sal comes when she is addressing Mr. Peterson, the person who helps her say her bedtime prayer while she is in child protective
Her prayer concludes, “Because happiness isn’t about who you are or what you own, Mr. Peterson. Happiness is about all the people you leave behind” (73). The first part of the statement is parallel to what Daddy taught her. The last part of what Sal says could be true if it meant that happiness was about all the obstacles you overcome. However, “leave behind” is a more lonely and cynical statement. Why has Bradfield created a three-year old-character who does not want to care for baby dolls anymore and is happy about leaving people behind? Bradfield has created a story where a toddler is abducted, then travels person to person, is taken to child services and is obviously dissociated from other people. Nothing about the plot is normal, but it embodies the realistic issues of our society. Sal is a vehicle for what Bradfield wants us to see about society. Bradfield juxtaposes Sal’s prayer with the absurdity of its words.

The absurdity of the story continues when Sal is reunited with Daddy. The reader learns that Daddy has “adopted” another little girl, but the reader is not sure how. Sal tells her new little sister about family and how they will move in and out of your life, and how that’s ok. The lessons that Sal has learned throughout the story – that she imparts to the next little girl – summarize what Bradfield wants the reader to realize and, in any way they can, change.

Sometimes, you stay with other people for a while, or they stay with you. You work together like a single individual, and this is called a family, or a business enterprise, or a corporation, especially if it is offers stock options or medical insurance, things like that. But most of the time, and this is the saddest fact of life I
know, we only make progress in our personal journey at the expense of other people. If they get in our way, we have to walk past them and pretend we didn’t notice. And if we get in their way, they have to do the same to us. It’s not cruelty that causes us to act this way. It’s evolution. It’s how people improve across space and time. (81)

Moving on and leaving seems as natural as breathing to Sal. She becomes like the adult characters in the book, no longer the youngest and manipulating youth. Many characters in The People Who Watched Her Pass By do not even have names, and most don’t take the time to learn Sal’s full name. The lack of lasting quality relationships – the lack of stability and safety – paired with the adult situations experienced by young Sal are unsettling and thought-provoking for the reader. It all resonates with the theme of empty self-preservation and America being a throw-away society not only concerning material goods, but people too.

Bradfield conveys the issues that he wants to present by creating dimensional characters. Each character Sal interacts with, nameless or not, teaches her about different issues. The fact that Bradfield uses multiple characters rather than just one also reiterates Bradfield's point of children being impressionable. Each of the character interactions Bradfield creates for Sal teaches her something, whether it be good or bad. Every interaction we have, whether we’re aware of it or not, has an impact.
CHAPTER III

WHAT’S WRONG WITH AMERICA

Narrators and Characters

In Bradfield’s novel *What’s Wrong with America*, Nana buries her husband in the backyard and recounts everything in a journal to her family. This story is thick with irony and each character presents a different issue. Nana admits on the first page that she murdered her husband of forty-five years. Bradfield takes an ordinary archetype who we would assume is sweet, loving and likes to bake cookies, and makes them extraordinary by twisting them into a killer. Nana explains that her husband was irritable and would complain about mundane things, which she believes created a bad aura. When Nana kills her husband, she hopes the Karma around her will change for the better and that birds will start to come around her house again. She addresses her children,

One of your grandpa’s seriously unendearing qualities over the years consisted of loading up his twelve-gauge with birdshot every morning and firing it point-blank into the leaves of the high oak and juniper trees in our back yard whenever the birds got too noisy. (This twelve-gauge, of course, being the very same one I
Bradfield creates a character that kills her husband in the hope that the Karma around her will change for the better. This is interesting because usually Karma rewards good deeds with positive results, and killing someone is often considered a bad thing.

It seems as though Karmic Law is not holding up its end of the natural bargain, and Nana is getting away with murder. On the second day of her journal entries, the visits from her ghostly husband start. While Nana sleeps she experiences visions of her deceased husband, and the interactions seem very lifelike. In the dream, Grandpa Marvin reads her journal and argues he is not being represented fairly. All the reader knows about Marvin is what Nana tells, so there is a good chance that what Nana writes in her journal is not in Marvin’s favor. Nana begins to worry, “What if Marvin was not such a bad man after all? What if I really have over-exaggerated all his faults at the expense of his basically good qualities, which I was too selfish and stupid to ever appreciate correctly?” (13) Once the reader learns this, they begin to question the state of mind and reliability of the narrator. It is also revealed that Nana drinks her “medicinal brandy” and takes Grandpa’s prescription valium, implying the visions could be a result of her drinking and drug abuse. The unreliability in this situation causes the reader to actively question the story progression. Nana is anything but a sweet, boring grandmother, and Bradfield deliberately uses this narrator to actively engage the reader in the story. The reader has to pay attention both to what is being said and what is not said. Bradfield uses his exceptional characters as modes of transportation for his messages.

As a narrator, Nana is unconventional, unreliable and limited. The reader sees
only what is in Nana’s journal. Bradfield uses these aspects to shape the story. We see Nana’s influences and are restricted by what and how she tells us. Nana spends most of her journal reflecting on her past. She dwells on how isolated she felt when her children moved out and her interactions and relationships were so limited. She explains how television personality Mike Douglas became like family to her, and gave her things to ponder. Nana considers a few of the issues, quoting what she saw on The Michael Douglas Show:

“How does a parent explain to his or her child that sexuality and loving are not two entirely different things” and “What is the proper role of sexuality in today’s ‘permissive’ and ‘youth – oriented’ (i.e. for Mike this meant ‘totally sex – crazed’ and ‘communistical’) society?” (62 and 63).

Nana’s (sometimes skewed) thoughts, opinions, and actions ask the reader to form opinions of his or her own, both about Nana and the issues Bradfield presents. The issues that Bradfield has Mike Douglas present regarding sexuality are often taboo issues. Bradfield uses his characters and their views as tools for the reader to evaluate and question the material. Even the journal format encourages the reader to think outside of the box and avoid clichés.

Throughout the novel, Bradfield alerts the reader to the narrator’s unreliability and limited point of view while keeping the reader interested and engaged. Through Nana’s journal entries, the reader learns that her husband seems to be rotting in the ground as well as in her visions: “He is totally filthy with dirt and gray, tangled roots all
over him. There are worms in his hair, and some sort of pale sluggish mushrooms growing on the right side of his face” (68). We learn about Nana through how she perceives her situation, what she chooses to tell as the narrator, and what she includes (or doesn’t) in her journal. She could write “I am crazy” or “I am not crazy” if that is what she believed, or what she wanted her readers to believe. At the end of chapter thirteen, the vision of Grandpa points out that there is now another hole in the backyard, and neither Nana nor the reader knows who is back there. Due to the brandy or valium abuse, Nana blacks out. She could forget to tell the reader her reasons for murder, or she may not know she is the killer. Nana herself even wonders if the events are really life accounts of hers or if she just made them up to spice up her journal, confirming that her narrative is unreliable. The character interactions and lack of clear linear information keep the reader questioning.

Bradfield throws a curve ball in the last section of *What’s Wrong with America*: he changes the narrator. The last section of the book is labeled “December” and is a letter written by Teddy, Nana’s grandson, to his mother, Cassie. The reader learns that Teddy is taking care of Nana and that he has taken possession of Nana’s journal. At the end of his letter he notes, “And considering these diaries are being reserved for posterity, I’ve gone ahead and made just the *teeniest* stylistic emendations here and there, adjustments for rhythm, clarity, dramatic effect, you know” (196). Just when the reader thinks the narrator could not be any more unreliable, they find the (likely biased) information presented may have been altered.
Character Relationships

All the characters in *What’s Wrong with America* - Nana, Marvin, Tom, Cassie and Teddy – have their shortcomings, and all place blame on one another. Since the communication of the characters is through what Nana writes in her journal, the information can be slanted. Nana does include sporadic letters from her daughter, but they are filtered through Nana first - not copied verbatim. Bradfield is able to turn the truth because the reader is limited solely to what Nana – and later Teddy – tells them. Their accountability is almost always in question, and the reader must identify and separate what is not said from what is said to attempt to understand what is truly happening. The most prominent relationship in the story is between Marvin and Nana, and the reader cannot believe that what Nana tells is a true account. What begin as visits from Marvin in her dreams become mixed and clouded with Nana’s reality while she is awake. Marvin’s ghost calls Nana out on accepting responsibility for her actions. He explains that every relationship has two sides, guiding the reader toward the realization that they are not receiving all the facts, and what he says is arguably the closest to any truth we’re told. Marvin confronts Nana:

I want you to know I’m willing to accept responsibility for my bad behavior over the years, Emma. I realize I may not have been the best husband in the world and I could be, you know, pretty stubborn sometimes. But if I do that, Emma, if I’m willing to admit some of *my* faults, then you’ve got to be willing to admit some of *your* faults as well. (143)
Perhaps the guilt is really getting to Nana, or the alcohol and drugs are causing delusions, but here the reader sees a conscience forming. The reader cannot tell if Marvin is truly contacting her through her dreams, or if she is really experiencing hallucinations. One chapter later, Nana pretends she is on the Mike Douglas show with Marvin. They have another conversation about “interpersonal family relationships”. Nana says,

As we all realize, interpersonal family relationships have long been a problem for all mankind. And why shouldn’t they be? Just consider the possibilities. A group of men and women living together in the closest physical proximities. Sometimes sleeping in the same beds, sharing the same toilets and bathtubs. Eating together at the same table night after night, sometimes getting food on their faces, or making impolite, disgusting noises while they digest or masticate (i.e. chew). And this is just the basic animal problems of people living together! We haven’t even touched upon the more serious psychological aspects, which can often be far more complicated altogether. (153)

This passage demonstrates the irony Bradfield plays with. The main focus of Nana’s energy is with Marvin. Nana feels that her relationship with Marvin, the years of being a homemaker and letting Marvin have the upper hand in her marriage, affected everything from her self-esteem to her relationship with her daughter. It’s interesting that Bradfield interjects Media in the form of a talk show to display its effect on Marvin and Nana’s relationship. The conversation turns into a heated debate between Grandpa Marvin and Nana Emma as they go back and forth discussing both of their lists about “What’s wrong
with America”. The conversation is anticlimactic and ends with Nana passing blame on Marvin; the exchange mirrors the lack of resolution and refusal to admit wrongdoing that is often seen American in society.

Before killing her husband, Nana’s submissive behavior aligns with stereotypical gender expectations, affecting the character’s relationships with her husband and daughter. Nana performs as a housewife, as Marvin expects, and he takes advantage of his wife accepting this role by showing a lack of respect for her. Young Cassie sees her mother treated this way and, believing Nana is weak, mirrors the behavior; mother and daughter never develop a compassionate, supporting relationship. This is all used by Cassie as ammunition for blaming her mother for Cassie’s own unhappiness in life and marriage.

Bradfield’s usage of character blame mimics the trend today of not accepting responsibility; it is a common human flaw that Bradfield exaggerates. Ultimately, Cassie marries and divorces a man named Raoul who is forty years her senior. When Raoul re-enters the story, his distinct relationship and philosophical demeanor both make sense and yet do not. His views seep with irony as he abandoned his son and wife and seems to flock to money. Raoul poses,

You know what living teaches you? ...That life’s not the only experience you’ll ever undergo. You know what you learn from your own two eyeballs and ears, your own private sensory assembly of tongue and nostrils and hands? That the world’s filled with an infinity of things you’ll never understand. I hate to get philosophical on you so early in the day, but think about it, the raw ornery contradictoriness of, well, everything. Light and darkness. Being and
non-being. Yin and yang, mortgages and foreclosures, monuments and ants. Life is always in a process of negating itself, because that’s what life is, see. A furious process of negating everything it isn’t. (173)

This is a unique passage because the characters are alluding to Bradfield’s own writing technique of contrasting ideas and investigating what each is and is not.

As with his other stories, Bradfield’s use of dimensional characters is a vehicle for his messages. Each of the characters in this story, through their dramatic opinions and interactions, serve the purpose of introducing problems that Bradfield wants to discuss.

**Issues Presented**

Gun control, transcendence and gender roles are all presented in *What’s Wrong with America*. Bradfield’s platform is not conventional, and by making the unfamiliar seem normal he is able to spread his wings and discus regardless of the taboo label. The book becomes political when Nana is cleaning out her husband’s study and finds magazines that she relates to the cause of her late husband’s woes. Nana implies that media is the cause of the sorrows of the world. She classifies The New York Times, National Review, Science of Mental Empowerment Newsletter, Times and Newsweek as bad publications. Nana thinks Grandpa’s views were shaped by the literature and that it made him grumpy. Ironically, these current events magazines are just recapping present-day issues.

While cleaning, Nana finds a piece of paper titled “WHAT’S WRONG WITH AMERICA” where her husband has listed 10 points. Points one through nine are the

Grandpa criticized and condemned others, and separated himself from any blame for America’s problems. In one of Nana’s visions/daydreams/dreams, she has conversations with Grandpa, and he insists he is not racist when he clearly is. Nana creates her own top ten list of things that are wrong with America, but blame again seems detached:

1. Too much anger, not enough bread. 2. People with overly critical, negative – sounding vibrations who think they know everything. 3. Shopping malls which are too big and noisy, without anywhere to sit down for a few minutes and rest your feet. 4. Not enough gun control. 5. People who use the word ‘coloreds’ to refer to people of the negro persuasion. 6. Too many women on Valium, not enough men. 7. People who still blame everything on the poor Russians (24)

These points seem to be in response to some of her late husband’s answers, however point 4 is ironic: Nana was able to kill her husband easily, due to the accessibility of the guns her husband had owned. Bradfield is contradicting his main character again, having Nana for gun control when she herself fires Marvin’s guns on multiple different occasions throughout the book. It’s obvious that Marvin and Nana have a distorted view of themselves as well as the world.

The role of women in the home is depicted through Cassie and her damaged relationship with Nana. The way Cassie saw Nana and Grandpa interact shaped Cassie’s feelings of how women should behave toward men. Cassie blames Nana and Grandpa for her low self-esteem because of the way she saw Grandpa treat Nana. She explains in
a letter, “Watching my mother slave away in and be co-opted by the malign patriarchal hegemony made me think I couldn’t be happy unless I had a man telling me what to do all the time – no matter how ruthless, cruel, or emotionally unsanitary that man might be” (29). On a larger scale, Bradfield is presenting the social issue of gender roles with Cassie as well as with Nana’s character. Nana and Cassie both break the molds. Bradfield has the women both develop to be arguably more self-sufficient females. However, though she claims to have been healed, Cassie sends her son to live with her parents in the same environment she cites is the cause of all her problems. Normally parents want better for their kids – not for them to repeat their same faults; but it seems like Cassie’s self-absorption is more important than what is best for her son. Additionally, Marvin’s whereabouts are never investigated too thoroughly. The children and grandchild overlook this detail. The characters appear to be too self-involved, while passing the blame for problems they create instead of taking responsibility for their actions, to notice much of anything outside what they want to believe.

Bradfield magnifies human flaws throughout the novel, including lack of self-awareness. Nana claims she has “learned to take responsibility for my own actions, and do not blame them all on my horrible life, or on the way I was treated by Marvin, which is what the younger generation refers to as ‘a royal cop – out’” (55), but she supposedly has committed two murders and hidden them. She clearly does not accept responsibility for her actions. Bradfield showcases other unhealthy attitudes as well, such as when Nana goes into town to make herself feel better; the character looks for fulfillment by obtaining objects as a shopaholic.

I go into town looking for something but I don’t know what. I
have all this deep energy inside my body and can’t sit still even while I’m driving. I go to Ralph’s and buy lots of fresh produce. Green vegetables, canned sweet corn, garlic, cheese croutons, and lo-cal Paul Newman Italian salad dressing. But right away I know none of that’s what I’m looking for. I buy sacks of red winesap apples, a few rusty-looking pears, and some hard greenish bananas, because fresh fruit every day helps balance out your emotional conflicts. (60)

Again, just as in Bradfield’s other works, we see our society filling voids with objects.

Lastly, Bradfield uses the novel to mock American society’s desire for transcendence. By definition transcendence is a state of surpassing ordinary limits and becoming superior, however that is not what Bradfield presents. Teddy’s views regarding transcendence seem in opposition to the philosophical ideal:

Transcendence is what made this country great in the first place, because it’s the dream of better places to go than anybody’s ever been before. Wider horizons, bigger shopping malls, more sex, fatter steaks, warmer beaches, better jobs and higher pay. What Americans want is what they haven’t already got. And that’s why they came here, Nana. To California. To get everything they never got all over again. (120)

Teddy’s idea of transcendence is a more materialistic approach and sounds more like consumerism than surpassing limits of spiritual presence. The last line also hints at a per-
sonal void, just as Nana did at the grocery store. Both excerpts discuss acquiring materials, and contrast that with feelings of lack of fulfillment. Teddy intimates this thought in the last chapter of the book where he assumes the role of narrator. The reader last saw Nana being lured by her visions of Marvin into a dirt hole in her backyard. In a letter to his mother, Teddy explains that she took a bad fall and has been hospitalized, and that the medication she is being given is making her hallucinate. The reader learned to question Nana through the whole book, and so now must question the words of Teddy, a young dreamer. If the reader trusts his judgment more, it might be argued that Teddy irons out some of the final details of Nana’s account; but based upon Teddy’s beliefs, he accepts the American culture and expectations as they’ve been fed to him, just as his mother and grandma did. Teddy writes:

Come to California, Mom, where you’ve always belonged. Run a damp rag across your old garage-encysted dune-buggy, saddle it up and drive back down the only roads you know. California, the home of the next great super-race, bathed in cosmic vibrations, bristling with earthquakes and mighty spiritual thunder. We grow bigger brains out here, Mom. Smoother and rounder buttocks, blonder hair, sandier beaches, better sex, cooler wine coolers, longer woodier piers, flatter stomachs and bluer, more lustrous eyes than all the rest of the world put together. (195)

He finishes the letter claiming that what’s really wrong with America is that California is not America. According to Cassie, Teddy was going through tough times when he went to stay with his Nana, questioning his sexual identity and other aspects of life like a
young person normally does. But the reader develops a sense of dissonance at the end with Teddy because they cannot be sure if Teddy betrayed them and changed Nana’s words, perhaps forcing her into a more unreliable narrator. Bradfield has the young character attracted to the superlative of physical items, and labels that as transcendence. Teddy is the product of a self-absorbed, spoiled family and does not have a stable role model. All he has to believe is the propaganda pushed upon him, and as a result his eyes are caught by anything shiny, even if it may lead to disappointment.
Bradfield’s books presented here, *The People Who Watched Her Pass By* and *What’s Wrong with America*, contain a heavy dose of critique on American society and present issues often labeled taboo. He carefully crafts unconventional characters as vessels for his messages. In *The People Who Watched Her Pass By*, Bradfield uses a self-sufficient three-year-old girl; he uses a drug-addicted, murderous grandmother as his main character in *What’s Wrong with America*. His choice of characters, juxtapositions and ironic events help make the strange normal, and encourage the reader to analyze the material and arrive at their own conclusions. Overall as a storyteller, Bradfield places importance on the cultural messages in his novels and he presents them in an uncensored way. If Bradfield would change one of the elements of his formula, the journey of the reader would not be as effective. Readers travel with Bradfield, follow the unique characters, and go through the absurd situations with the irony, juxtapositions and satirizing encounters so they can experience an organic look at American culture. And, if Bradfield’s intention is successful, his readers will question more than just what is presented.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


