

AUSTIN'S BEST NOVELIST

By Michael Ventura

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"Time flies, fun or no fun," my friend Deborah is fond of saying. It will soon be 40 years since Billy Lee Brammer (1929-1978) published *The Gay Place*, written while he was an aide to Lyndon Johnson and featuring a Johnsonian character, Arthur "Goddamn" Fenstemaker. It is still the finest novel written by a Texan, and with Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men* it gracefully holds its place as one of the two great political novels in American literature. When it came out in 1961, few were interested in looking subtly at how politics is conducted; despite some superb reviews the book quickly fell into obscurity and remained out of print for many years. Now perhaps its title works against it -- the meaning of "gay" has altered since Brammer wrote. He took his title from a verse by F. Scott Fitzgerald: "I heard Helena/In a haunted doze/Say: 'I know a gay place/Nobody knows?'"

That place was Austin -- 40 years ago a backwater burg less than half its present size, where the tallest buildings were the Capitol dome and the UT Tower. No freeways. Almost no air conditioning. Few sidewalks. No music scene. No suburbs. No apartment complexes. No city buses. Almost no national franchise stores. No market for a newspaper like this one. About four, maybe five, movie theatres (one screen apiece), not counting the drive-ins. Almost no Yankees. And, blessedly, almost no precious self-consciousness. No one else in the country was looking at Austin and, except for Brammer, Austin didn't seem to be looking at itself.

None of which should be taken nostalgically -- Billy Lee, after all, describes a state of corruption and confusion that's shockingly contemporary. But what's remarkable, re-reading *The Gay Place* now, is the consistency of the spirit of the place -- a constancy of tone, in spite of all the changes. As though an invisible steam of fumes seeps out of the Balcones Fault and, as it's inhaled, all the newness takes on a tint, a mood, that Brammer (had he lived to see it) would find familiar.

His mastery is evident from the first mysterious sentence of his book: "The country is barbarously large and final." How strange to call such a constantly transforming country "final" -- yet the very consistency of tone over the years, the groundnote of the land which the book witnesses to, testifies to that finality. We can ruin it, but we can't change it, not its essence -- which could mean that ruin was implied from the beginning. And that may be what his next sentences signify: "It is too much country -- boondock country -- alternately drab and dazzling, spectral and remote. It is so wrongfully muddled and various that it is difficult to conceive it all of a piece." And a few sentences on, there's this evocative phrase: "the flawed dream of the cities." As though, as idyllic as his Austin may look to us, he didn't expect it to become anything but what it's become: even more "wrongfully muddled." "The rivers run deep," he writes, "like old wounds." His descriptions all echo back to that first uncompromising adverb, "barbarously" -- for all the sweetness of the air there's a barbarity present, hard to pin down yet evident in the "flawed dream." Intentions that don't seem barbarous on the surface nevertheless keep making everything uglier, their hidden barbarity revealed in their results.

On the next page, when he gives a kind of aerial view of his Austin, what he describes is peaceful, yet there's a barely contained tension in its seeming peace:

"The city lies against and below two short spiny ribs of hill. One of the little rivers runs round and about, and from the hills it is possible to view the city overall and draw therefrom an impression of sweet curving streets and graceful sweeping lawns and the unequivocally happy sound of children always at play. Closer on, the feeling is only partly confirmed, though it should seem enough to have even a part." Notice how that last sentence is both precise and vague; what does it mean, really? The vagueness is very quietly, very gently sinister -- this will be a novel of lives falling apart, and Brammer's sonority, combining an intentional mix of precision and imprecision, lets you sense (without being conscious of it, perhaps) how insubstantial the apparent peace really is. He goes on, then, almost conversationally: "It is a pleasant city, clean and quiet, with wide rambling walks and elaborate public gardens and elegant old homes faintly ruined in the shadow of arching poplars. Occasionally through the trees, and always from a point of higher ground, one can see the college tower and the Capitol building. On brilliant mornings the white sandstone of the tower and the Capitol's granite dome are joined for an instant, all pink and cream, catching the first light. ... Then the light came closer, touching the tall buildings and the fresh-washed streets. The nearly full-blown heat came with it, quick and palpitant."

All that lovely lush ease, and then suddenly the heat is "quick and" -- marvelous word -- "palpitant." In those last two words we feel suddenly that the heartbeat of the place may be too fast, erratic -- something is out of control here. (Oh yes, Billy Lee would recognize the city of today as his.)

Many novelists have given up the art of description. They tend merely to name, not describe. Brammer understood the subtleties possible in description: That in describing the outer city one can describe the inner city, the psyche of the city; and, if done well enough, the inner description will hold true even after progress has changed the outer trappings.

It's not my intention to trace the intricate, many-charactered story of *The Gay Place*, or to detail how, in one tour-de-force scene after another, Billy Lee Brammer makes the distinct viewpoints of several characters converge on a single cohesive insight. As a novelist myself, bowing to my betters, I just pour another drink and wonder how the hell he did it. That he's often spoken of as a failure because he never got it together to write another novel ... amazes me. Yes, his personal life dissolved into an early death and that is a personal tragedy. But there are many such personal tragedies -- many, many, many -- without a fraction of his achievement. Twenty more "failures" like Billy Lee Brammer, or even 10, and we'd have a contemporary fiction that would be the glory of the world.

Does this passage remind you of anybody you know?

"They were all such amateurs, he thought. Risen out of innocence, out of grace, passing into awareness and a kind of hollow sophistication with hardly a corrupting experience -- a genuinely horrific crime -- in between ... You could trace the wornout derelictions right alongside their politics. It wasn't enough; not enough to break through

into awareness and good intentions; not enough, moreover, to stand away and point to how the public and private business ought to be carried on, clucking your distaste and disapproval. It was insufficient -- in fact, it was ruinous."

And the parties of Billy Lee's Austin are eerily familiar:

"I'm hungry,' Cathryn said, putting her head against Willie's shoulder. 'I'm drunk and I'm hungry.' She closed her eyes. 'We'll go to the kitchen,' Willie said. 'Some Southern fried chicken for my Southern fried lady love.' They moved off through the crowd. In the kitchen they helped Cathryn onto a high stool and brought the food to her. She chewed on a wing and said: 'I may be fried; I suppose I'm Southern, but this chicken is neither. It's barbecued.' 'They have a Mexican who does it,' Willie said. 'He knows how to barbecue a Southern fried chicken.' 'This barbecued chicken,' Cathryn said, 'is fraught with ambiguity.'"

I've known some grand Austin women (they mostly had red hair) who could have said that, and in fact have, or close enough. Because the chicken is fraught with ambiguity, ambiguity is the air we breathe and the barbecue we eat. And the women still suddenly tell you, as Billy Lee's Ellen tells you: "Quit squandering your lousy radiance and focus on someone who needs it."

Or how's this for an Austin dis-ease: "Not so much long gone youth as adulthood never attained." Or: "She hasn't changed much -- your girl, yours and mine -- still pushing the myth of herself." Or (and I'll have another drink and go to bed on this one): "There was a silence during which his lips moved in a gabble of incoherent prayer."

Brammer played for high stakes, still believing that the job of fiction was to dare the big questions. "Was there a limit on your sympathy or a boundary to despair? How did you involve yourself in mankind?" Let those words stick in your craw with the chicken, while Billy Lee rests in what I hope is peace.

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