John Brown’s Body: Your Electric Picture Radio Box Matters #4

One of my long-standing hobby horses is the story of Osawatomie John Brown. In 1986, through happy accident, I found myself at the Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, National Historic Park. I dutifully read the plaques and displays and wondered how I had never heard of this guy and his adventures. Aside from owning the album by Kansas that featured John Steuart Curry’s iconic painting of Brown on the cover, my exposure to Brown’s story was nil.

It had never occurred to me that this guy was an actual real

person.
I carried around my meagre crumbs of knowledge (abolitionist, seditionist, likely crazy as a shithouse rat) for a dozen years or so. In 1998, Russell Banks published his novel *Cloudsplitter*, a historic fiction tale told from the POV of one of Brown's surviving children that recounts Brown's life in great detail, much of it, perhaps, true. Or at least truthy. That led me into yet another obsession, lots of reading and trying to tease a coherent picture out of multiple-and-often-conflicting renditions.This was likely the germ seed of my not-yet established Civil War mania.

All that I was "sure of" was that the cat was deeply committed to the abolitionist cause (undeniable) and he was a bugfuck crazy fundamentalist loon (not so fast there).

The latest novelization of Brown arrived in 2013 in James McBride's National Book award winner *The Good Lord Bird*. This tale, seen through the eyes of Onion, a fictional slave boy Brown freed and took under his wing, is as much a re-imagining of *Huckleberry Finn* as it is a reliable historic document. But damn the facts and up with truthiness: This tale is a romp and a decent meditation on Brown's last act on history's mortal stage and the kind of impact his actions had on a nation teetering on the edge of dissolution. And as told by McBride, it has the added benefit of being pure dee high-larious, largely stemming from Brown's misapprehension of our narrator's gender. Onion was wearing a burlap sack when Brown freed him, leading the Old Man to assume he was a she and to mishear his name Henry as Henrietta. Onion, shrewd enough to recognize an opportunity and meal ticket, went along with the notion. Hijinx ensue.

Now this thrilling tale of mistaken identity and derring do is available via your Electric Picture Radio Box in a seven episode series on Showtime. And that gives me an excuse to ruminate anew on one of my favorite historical figures.

I typically approach askance any filmification of great books, but my skepticism here was well-misplaced. *The Good Lord Bird*, starring Ethan Hawke as Osawatomie Brown and newcomer Joshua Caleb Johnson as Onion, is a knockout. The graphic design and music is pitch perfect. All the performances are outstanding, especially Daveed DiggsAnother product of the *Hamilton* juggernaut. as a fairly buffoonish Frederick Douglass, the only Negro in the series who does not recognize that Onion is a he passing as a she; in this he stands in lockstep with all the white folks who see him as a saint.

From the moment Henry is mistaken for a girl, the parallel with Huck is set. His adventures with Old Man Brown as his Jim feature the same kinds of mishaps and sudden violences that Clemens bestowed upon his character. And like Huck in drag, Onion has more confidence in his costume than he should. Just as the women in Twain spotted Huck's fakery in an instant, so did every Black character – save for Douglass – see through Onion's flimsy imitation. Most people see what they want to see, or what they are told to see. Once Brown pronounced Henry as Henrietta, the question was settled for everyone who did not have to keep their antennae sharp to survive. People like the comfortably ensconced Douglass. For those steeped in the life and death necessity of seeing things as they really are, Onion's subterfuge holds no water.

I have to admit that amping up the clown makeup for an African-American icon – one depicted more than a little hagiographically 99.9% of the time – struck me as more than a little bold, and generally to McBride's credit that he took the character there. It presents a stark comparison between Douglass, the man of words, versus Brown, the man of action. Douglass here is a vainglorious toff, all puffery and pretense. Upon meeting the man Brown calls King of the Negroes, Onion calls him Fred, demonstrating all the manners and refinement of a Huck Finn. Douglass bristles:

> *Do you know you are not speaking to a pork chop but rather a*

> *fairly considerable and incorrigible piece of the American Negro diaspora?*

Later we find Douglass and Onion drinking bourbon, with Fred chasing the not-a-girl around the parlor like a dog after a pork chop.

So why spoof up the icons this way?

> *I think heroes who are not flawed are not believable. John Brown was clearly flawed in real life. John Brown was clearly flawed in real life. He did some terrible things, but he did some things none of us would have had the heart to do. His moral leanings were unquestionably admirable.*
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> *James McBride in Publisher's Weekly, July, 2013*

But. He was on the right side of history, on the side of the future. Like James Baldwin 100 years later, he knew that white people were doomed until we dealt with the reality and responsibility of slavery. He was not just out to save Negroes from bondage; he wanted to save the whites who were being consumed by the evil, too.

Okay, all that aside for a second: This is Ethan Hawke's party, a chance to create an epic character, and he makes the most of it. In the first screen portrayal of Brown since Raymond Massey in *Seven Angry Men* (1955) and *Santa Fe Trail* (1940)Twice in the same historical role!, Hawke adds more depth to Brown's character than popular culture typically acknowledges: more compassion and generosity, a dash of doubt and despair. But it still leans hard on the one thing *most* people seem to agree upon: That Old Man Brown was crazy as a loon.

“My name is John Brown.”

I italicize *most* because there is a growing pushback among Brown scholars (and some of his descendants) regarding this tricky notion, one that I have held as self-evident since I first heard of Brown. I mean, and come on here, isn’t violence spurred by religious zealotry the very picture of insanity? Can’t we reasonably agree that Guy Fawkes or Timothy McVeigh or Osama bin Laden – not to mention our current crop of Christo-Fascist nutters marauding the Capitol and beyond – are wacko, bonkers, round the bend, cornery, all the way fruit loops?

Brown intended the Harpers Ferry raid to spark a slave revolt, an uprising of the Negro race against their oppressors. (So, for that matter, did Charles Manson when he unleashed his bloodletters on Los Angeles.) He understood the Nation to be at an unavoidable crossroads over the Peculiar Institution of slavery, and that it was an issue that would only be settled through bloodshed. This idea was not only *not* crazy, but with benefit of hindsight, almost blindingly obvious. But very few people were willing to see this reality, much less act upon it.

Brown's letters reflect a man of intelligence, sobriety, and firmness of will. They do not betray a closet lunatic, and his popular image in his time was of a good and decent man committed to a righteous and just cause. Unless you were on the wrong end of his sword, in which case you were a slaver or supported slavery. And it is worth noting that Brown considered violence a last resort of self defense against an implacably cruel and savage oppressor. (In this, he is not unlike Malcolm X.)He writes, foreshadowing future musings.

Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry is widely considered the first battle of the Civil War. Coincidentally, the Federal force that defeated Brown's crew was led by Robert E. Lee and J.E.B. Stuart. If this were not true, it would be a preposterously overdetermined plot gambit, but indeed, it was Brown against the future military brain trust of the Confederacy. The plan was wildly overambitious, almost certainly a suicide mission, but despite the fact that the local slaves did not rise up in response, the skirmish set in stark relief the fracture that was to engulf the nation, and foreshadowed the carnage inevitable.

The elevation of John Brown, Crazy Person™, was as necessary a part of Lost Cause revisionism as was Lee the Noble the Slaver. It would never do to have such a character seen as *compos mentis* if the aim was to rewrite the history of slavery to fit the gauzy focus of *Birth of a Nation* or Tara. The Lost Cause demands that we see the Peculiar Institution as largely benevolent, despite the few bad actors that gave slavery a "bad name."

Thus, John Brown *must* be seen as extremist, unstable.

The great pitfall of any kind of hero worship is that every hero has clay feet. This makes it easy for determined debunkers to undermine the actions that make heroes heroic in the first place. Brown has always been one of my favorite characters in history, but not because I find him the most

admirable role model. It is his complexity – whether crazy or not – that makes him so fascinating, just as Nixon's bizarre juxtaposition of conflicting facets make him the most fascinating of our ex-presidents.

I have always been troubled by one idea regarding Osawatomie Brown: Who Would John Brown Scourge in our time? His fundamentalist bent is all too familiar to anyone observing the madness being wrought by the extremist right actors of pro-life terrorism, *molon labe* fantasies, and imaginary Constitutional justifications for, oh I dunno, things like storming the U.S. Capitol or opening fire on/gunning a car through a crowd of 'godless' protestors. Would John Brown fill a truck with fertilizer and park it in front of a government building if he believed his cause righteous?

Would Old Man Brown be on the side of the angels these days? Depends on which angels you got in mind, I guess.

Whatever. *The Good Lord Bird* is a great electric picture radio program and an even better novel. It's worth the coin to enjoy both. (And you can probably get a trial subscription to Showtime and watch the series in a binge for nothing.)

PS – I'll be back with another YEPRBM essay real soon. It's a big season for reclaiming the cardboard flat depictions of our heroes.