

'Southpaw' interview with Dennis Sweeney

Dennis Sweeney's novel "Southpaw" was released in January to critical acclaim and has become something of a cult underground classic.

Two common complaints of literary reviewers when considering the work of Sweeney are that he is read by people who don't normally read and that their author has a negative view of literature (he prefers the title 'cultural activist' to 'writer'). If either of these claims is true, then they perhaps deserve more credit than lofty condemnation.

If Sweeney really is managing to engage a culturally illiterate audience that has traditionally remained beyond the influence of the bourgeois novel then this is a form of 'cultural activism' most other 'writers' of his generation seem to have turned their backs on.

Q. What inspired you to become a writer?

A I grew up in a place where everybody was a storyteller, but nobody wrote. It was that kind of Celtic, storytelling tradition: everybody would have a story at the pub or at parties, even at the clubs and raves.

They were all so interesting. Then I'd read stories in books, and they'd be dead. I got to thinking that it had a lot to do with Standard English. I mean, nobody talks like that in cinema, nobody talks like that on television, nobody sounds like that in song. In any other cultural representation, we don't talk like that, so why do we in the novel?

Basically, particularly in Britain, it's a hegemonic thing that people who write tend to come from the leisure classes. They can afford the time and the books. They tend to be public schooled, Oxford types: writers. Consequently, you have exactly the same narrative voice. It's alright to do the vernacular in dialogue, but the narrative voice is always kept in standard English. It's a basic question, really: how do people think, in Standard English or in colloquialisms?

Q. If a Scotsman writes a book in Standard English is he selling out to the Sassenachs?

A. That depends to what degree he has become anglicized. But I just wanted to write and remain a member of my own community Whenever I did find somebody from my background in English Literature there they were confined to the margins, kept in their place, stuck in the dialogue. You only ever saw them or heard them.

You never got in their mind. You did find them in the narrative but from without, seldom from within. And when you did see them or hear them they never rang true, they were never like anybody I ever met in real life ... everybody from a Dundee or working-class background, everybody in fact from any



regional part of Britain—none of them knew how to talk! What larks! Every time they opened their mouth out came a stream of gobbledygook. Beautiful! Their language a cross between semaphore and Morse code; apostrophes here and apostrophes there; a strange hotchpotch of bad phonetics and horrendous spelling—unlike the nice stalwart upper-class English hero (occasionally Scottish but with no linguistic variation) whose words on the page were always absolutely splendidly proper and pure and pristinely accurate, whether in dialogue or without.

And what grammar! Colons and semi-colons! Straight out of their mouths! An incredible mastery of language. Most interesting of all, for myself as a writer, the narrative belonged to them and them alone. They owned it. The place where thought and spiritual life exists. Nobody outwith the parameters of their socio-cultural setting had a spiritual life.

We all stumbled along in a series of behaviouristic activity; automatons, cardboard cut-outs, folk who could be scrutinized, whose existence could be verified in a sociological or anthropological context.’

Q. So the development of a culture or society depends heavily on the preservation of the language?

A. Language is the culture—if you lose your language you’ve lost your culture, so if you’ve lost the way your family talk, the way your friends talk, then you’ve lost your culture, and

your divorced from it. That’s what happens with all these stupid fucking books by bad average writers because they’ve lost their culture, they’ve given it away. Not only that, what they’re saying is it’s inferior, because they make anybody who comes from that culture speak in a hybrid language, whereas they speak standard English. And their language is the superior one. So what they are doing, in effect, is castrating their parents, and their whole culture.’

Q What are your feelings about printed paper v. electronic media?

A I like Sega, but only ‘cause it keeps the TV off, and I’ve only got to the end of Sonic I once.

I have to side with the tactile, greasy-paged joy of a paperback in your jacket pocket - I don’t think printed matter will ever be threatened. Anyway you need a book to learn how to work a computer. I don’t see why there need be antagonism between each medium, they should help each other

