

AUTHOR'S AFTERWORD

Who do I think I am to have written *Crepuscule W/ Nellie*?

Perhaps the best answer I might offer to this question is to tell you that I am a person who has riddled himself with this very same question over and over again and again, all through the life that has been both the writing and the not-writing—the procrastination, the shuttings up and away, the abandoned salvage and salvaged abandonment—of this novel. Such a pronouncement that “I know... I know *Crepuscule W/ Nellie* may have been a difficult, or suspect, or just too uncomfortable reading experience,” is, I also know, bound to be an answer insufficient for some of you. And as loathe as I am to try and justify my authorial endeavors in terms of my biography, I understand that I must expose myself as much as possible in the interests of opening up some space in which this book may no longer be read as mine, but as ours.

I was born in 1972 (by coincidence, the year of Thelonious Monk's effective retirement from public performance). I was born and raised in Dallas, Texas, a place as Southern as it is Western. Dallas is also a city possessed of its own weird provincialism-cum-cosmopolitanism, to be sure, but it neither was nor is any Manhattan (much less Harlem). I am the product of a Catholic education that extends, in its official certifications, beyond catechism and college's finishings and into the supposed mastery of more than one advanced degree. Yet jazz was not an art form of which I was schooled (formally or informally) growing up, nor was it a music which, when I did become aware of it, I quickly or early on developed habits of enjoying. If anything, jazz was, for much of my life, an attenuation of what I later learned it had been. To paraphrase Eric Dolphy, jazz as an aesthetic was just another uncapturable essence going its way into “gone” in the post-Jim Crow air I breathed. (And, because I was gulping that air, I could not apprehend how jazz's own breath / breadth still respired in its humidity.) What I know about jazz I primarily owe to the acquisitive autodidact in me, and that person is not entirely admirable. He is manic, frequently unable and / or unwilling to distinguish telling detail from excruciating minutiae, and susceptible to hoarding. Most crucially, I am—or, based upon my appearance would be classified as—white. This despite the fact that my heritage, my class background, and my extended family experience with “blending” are

all more complex than that colorless designation would propose. Yet I cannot extend my family to you any further than to name my Aunt Pat in my dedications and acknowledgements. Hypocritical as it may seem, I certainly could not live with a self that would use my loved ones and their struggles with sacrifice simply for the sake of making up bona fides for what is, after all, mere fiction.

Not that the fictive either excuses or amends anything. Or anyone, whether they never asked to be born or were. Certainly not a white male, a person of privilege, writing with pretend insight and self-aggrandizingly “enlightened” intentions about African-American experience. About the perils, many of them stereotypes, of the jazz life. About female experience. About African-American female experience. Do we really need more of this? Absolutely not, and yet, having prepared more, I cannot secret its excess from you. No, there is no intrinsic importance to any plot or character or world detectable in these pages. I did not write *Crepuscule W/ Nellie* in the hopes of forcing some reckoning. For what business of it is mine? Don't you see my grammar squirming? It has to; the problematics activated in the many assumptions threaded through *Crepuscule W/ Nellie*—from its conception through its execution and into whatever reception it receives—are themselves so slippery, so canny in their bedeviling that a true recounting of them can only be tongue-tied. In no way is this paragraph an attempt to stall outrage in paraphrases of my opening query. Nor am I trying to satisfy myself by demonstrating, here in plain view, that I have satisfied all questions. Besides, I am uncomfortable with such questions. Not because I fear answering to them, but because they presume a significance. An anything worth signifying. But only readers can judge these words' significances with anything resembling finality.

So, what business, what right do I think I have? I have no right; the answer is none. Because of the power I have arrogated to myself in writing this book, I have surrendered any ethics I may have genuinely held to those freedoms (not all of them free from ideology, not by any means) that only the imagination can enjoy. As such, I perhaps retain only one right: the right of all daydreamers, which is to apologize for the miscarriages of a sympathetic imagination. If only we might gather together every one of these botchings—our catastrophes—and fashion a kind a commonwealth out of them.

But to hell with my ponderings and protestations. Of course this book is “about me,” my vaunting myself into authorship. I clearly have positions; I can’t disown my owning them. In the tradition of all self-appointed authorities, I assume myself before the assumption of what others may already be. Assuming, further, that I am being asked to deliver an opinion, I will press ahead and characterize *Crepuscule W/ Nellie* as a work of speculative historical fiction. (Let all of us here please and at least momentarily acknowledge that all fictions are historical in that they are “untrue” primarily within the context of the historical record.) Although some, though not all, of the characters in the novel have been derived from and named after actual historical personages, the events reported and the relationships explored here are almost entirely invented.

At the time the novel was first conceived in 1994 (first as a short story; over the next 4 years, before I laid it aside for other endeavors, a novella), only a little biographical information about Thelonious Monk and his family had been entered into the official categories of the factual. What was available to me, and in some abundance, was a canon of myth and hagiography. Partly out of necessity and, later, as a matter of aesthetics, I took up—sampled; appropriated—these narratives, as well as their complicated associations with anything resembling “the researchable,” as the raw materials for the novel I realized (just not with adequate horror) I wanted to make of *Crepuscule W/ Nellie*. And as much as I didn’t know it then I understand it now, here, in the midst of this afterword: I chose the novel’s forms because literature is a social art.

Yet, because my perception of “my” novel and the conversations in which I see it engaged are all publicly philosophical rather than political (for who will administrate the imagination?), I argue with myself that I must cleave to no perspective on *Crepuscule W/ Nellie*’s potential to offend. Really? Am I that stupid? Or just that lazy? To believe I might win this argument is to give in to the temptations of a naïveté almost existential in its proportions. For, as much as I want to claim that the issue of race is incidental to *Crepuscule W/ Nellie*’s not bigger or greater but only more obsessed-over concerns, I cannot. As much I want to posit that race only conveniently provides a thematics and repertoire of tropes recognizably American in their novelistic orientation, scope etc.,

I cannot pretend that race is only rhetorical in the novel's schemes. And as much as I want to make race in *Crepuscule W/ Nellie* a matter of metonymy—race as a figuration opening a shared discourse, and one more shared for being so broken— and thus an image in which each phenomenal mass of Subjectivity, of Prurience, of Difference, and of Empathy may be arraigned and interrogated, I have discovered that race ultimately resists such extrapolations. I can fail, but I cannot fall down, not so far as the bad faith of saying that race is its own distraction in these pages. One reality of my being is that I belong to a generation very probably incapable of resolving the contradictions that attend to coexistence, black and white and across other spectra, in this country. I can only try and survive the brutality of those contradictions, and, in trying, strive as only I can, which is no differently—though perhaps less beautifully—than anybody else. Because, here at day's end, this is America; America, grievances from sea to shining sea. Let us at least be thankful that the future, unlike the past, does not respect that same geography, those same boundaries.

Maybe my last and therefore most abundant hope is that this novel may lend an ear to what could have been, some “new past” therefore more apt to inspire a reinvention of our present. In short, that this novel may listen as much as it babbles, warbles, and squalls out of its multiple mouthinesses. For *Crepuscule W/ Nellie's* imaginings are rooted in the experience of listening. Specifically, my own attempts, as that individual rather removed from the specific cultural, historical and artistic milieus that produced whoever it was Monk et al. were, to form a personal appreciation for his music. To love it, as I felt every bit of jazz I had heard up until then had moved me into a position from which to try. More origins: this appreciation initially expressed itself in the form of a fascination with two of the composer's most famous ballads, both dating from the mid-1950's. One he dedicated to his wife—“Crepuscule With Nellie”—one to his close friend the Baroness—“Pannonica.” In considering each composition as a musical portrait of the woman after whom each was named, I was struck by the contrast between the two. Obvious differences in race and class aside, how different were Nellie and the Baroness? What was the nature of Nellie's character? The Baroness'? Monk's ballads could be construed as asserting a single, terminally masculine point-of-view... but what other points-of-view were

possible? What would those alternate points-of-view disclose? And to what distortions would those alternate points-of-view be susceptible? Would they be distortions more or less attractive, more or less dubious, and / or more or less obfuscating than the distortions introduced by Monk himself in his music?

As I began to read the liner notes, period magazine and newspaper accounts, scholarship (musical analyses, by and large), and actual general history required to achieve a new perspective on these three individuals, an “official narrative” of the Nellie-Monk-Baroness triangle soon emerged. I was unable to uncover any evidence to suggest that the Baroness’ intimacy with Monk was anything more than Platonic. Nor was I able to find any information to support a vague certainty I had that the Baroness’ presence in the Monks’ life was disruptive, destructive, or a source of conflict. In fact, nothing in the literature I reviewed in this novel’s early years suggested that any jazz historian, critic, journalist, etc. had ever bothered to speak at any length to either the Baroness or to Nellie. Both women were, in essence, silent figures, important only insofar as they served Monk and made it possible for him to transform his possibilities—ideated and unideated alike—into a recognizable art.

Because of who I am and what I myself have experienced, I was not willing to accept this official narrative. More than my instincts convinced me that some other story was not just possible, but likely. However, given both the dearth of information available and the relative absence of either Nellie’s or the Baroness’ voice in the historical record, I felt that fiction was the only option I had available for communicating what the lives of these women might have been like. No one else, to the best of my knowledge, had attempted such a communication. Nor did I see anyone else trying, at least within the limited scope of I brought to my own notice. So, whether blind or merely without vision, I wrote. And though I certainly do not conceive of myself as any holy fool, I did decide to hitch my foolishness to the folly of continuing to write under artistry’s influence. And with that—my commitment to fiction—I had to consign history and its always-accruing-ness to the realm of the paraliterary. That this repositioning of the structures of historical fiction may be a perverted inversion of what that genre is meant to perform, much less be, this dunce leaves to you to determine for yourself.

Since the late 1990s and early 2000s, however, our collective knowledge regarding *Crepuscule W/ Nellie's* principals has grown, and grown considerably. Extensive critical biographies of both Thelonious Monk and the Baroness Pannonica De Koenigswarter have been published in the past decade. Our understanding of the dynamic I first triangulated nearly twenty years ago is now truly dynamic: many-angled, dimensional, and possessed of outlines drawn with much greater resolution by authors far more industrious and rigorous and capable of witness than myself, saddled as I am with softly humanistic notions of definition. Consequently, I strongly encourage any reader interested in the actual story of those individuals treated as characters in *Crepuscule W/ Nellie* to avail him- or herself of the following resources (or, if you prefer, correctives).

- Kelley, Robin D. G. *Thelonious Monk: The Life and Times of an American Original*. New York: Free Press, 2009.
- Kastin, David. *Nica's Dream: The Life and Legend of the Jazz Baroness*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2011.
- Rothschild, Hannah. *The Baroness: The Search for Nica, the Rebellious Rothschild*. London: Virago, 2012; New York : Alfred A. Knopf, 2013.
- Koenigswarter, Pannonica. *Three Wishes: An Intimate Look at Jazz Greats*. New York: Abrams Image, 2008. [A collection of the Baroness' own photographs.]
- Shapiro, Nat, and Nat Hentoff. *Hear Me Talkin' to Ya: The Story of Jazz by the Men Who Made It*. New York: Rinehart, 1955. New York: Dover Publications, 1966.
- Gitler, Ira. *Swing to Bop: An Oral History of the Transition in Jazz in the 1940s*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.

Finally, those of you who have seen the book through as far as this closing statement may care to put reading aside and to avail yourselves of the general availability of the films *Straight, No Chaser* (1988; directed by Charlotte Zwerin) and *The Jazz Baroness* (2009; directed by Hannah Rothschild), as both provide glimpses of these men and women as they truly were—all heroes I could never be, and thus would name “my heroes.”

— JM, 01/08/2014