

The Politics of Art

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Peter Dickinson's *The Seventh Raven* is a stunning story for adolescents that opens up unfamiliar territory for its targeted readers. Unlike so many other young adult novels, which offer their readers a narcissistic world-view, this novel takes readers outside of themselves, pushing beyond the borders of what traditionally defines the concerns of the contemporary adolescent. *The Seventh Raven* is a self-consciously politicized novel, though it is neither didactic nor full of easy answers. Instead, it asks such very difficult questions as: What are my responsibilities as a citizen of the world? Living in a capitalist society, how is my lifestyle dependent upon Third World labor? And especially, Can art be politically neutral?

The purpose of the Phoenix Award is to resurrect works that have been overlooked or neglected. Therefore, rather than try to theorize the novel, I am here going to offer an idea of why the Phoenix Committee chose to honor *The Seventh Raven*, out of the many, many books that we read that were published in 1981. There are two basic concepts I'll be referring to, ones that recur frequently in the novel: *in the middle* (which includes being *neutral* and being a *battleground*); and *it's just a play* (which includes *actors*, *gestures*, and *symbolic representations*).

The Seventh Raven of the title literally refers to Juan O'Grady, a ten-year-old boy whose father is ambassador to Great Britain from the South American country of Mattea; his father is also likely to be the next president of Mattea when its current fascist leader steps down. Because there is much revolutionary unrest in Mattea, Juan O'Grady is a particularly important symbol for that country's political struggles. Juan becomes involved in the story because his family lives in London and he wants to participate in a children's opera that is put on every year at a London church. This is not your standard *Amahl and the Night Visitors* but a large-scale, original production, often involving more than 100 children, and the adult supervisors have put their collective feet down this year to allow no more than 100 children to participate. The British government, however, as a good will gesture, pressures the adults who write and produce the opera to include Juan in their production, so they put him with a group of six children who do not sing well, and are costumed as ravens. Juan thus becomes the seventh raven.

This year's opera tells the Old Testament story of Ahab, King of Israel, who is caught in the middle between his wife, Jezebel, who worships Baal, and his advisor Elijah, who of course worships Yahweh. Both Jezebel and Elijah are trying to force all Israel to worship their god, and they make Ahab "their battle-ground" (35). Ahab is in the middle, trying to satisfy both. This becomes the driving metaphor for the novel—a character in the middle, between two opposing beliefs. Like King Ahab, Juan O'Grady is in the middle, for, though a child, he becomes a battleground for the opposing factions in Mattea that are fighting for power there.

The story heats up when four Marxist terrorists from Mattea try to kidnap Juan O’Grady on his way to the opera rehearsal at the church. Their attempt fails, and so they take hostage the children and adults in the church. For several days, the terrorists hold out against the British government for the hostages’ release. The narrator of the novel, Doll, a seventeen-year-old girl, is the representative hostage, for when the terrorists talk to the government officials outside the church, she is forced to stand in front of the church with a gun to her head. Doll is neither a child participating in the opera nor one of the adult managers—she shouldn’t even be in the church at all. But since she had participated in the opera for many years and now at seventeen is too old, she is not yet ready to abandon the play (i.e., her childhood) and maintains contact by becoming a gopher for the adult supervisors. Like Ahab, like Juan O’Grady, and like the young adult readers she addresses, Doll—neither child nor adult, but adolescent—is in the middle.

Since the terrorists failed to kidnap Juan, they are led to believe that he is not in the church at all, had simply failed to show up for rehearsal. The amazing thing is that all the children and adults conspire successfully to fool the terrorists and to hide Juan, even though the adults originally resented his presence and many of the children did not even like him. (Since the children must remove their costumes to show their faces to the terrorists, Juan has abandoned his raven costume to become one of the “wicked” women, girls wearing flowing robes and heavy make-up. Thus the boy’s face is, for a time, unrecognizable to the terrorists.) The hostages know very little about Mattea and its political upheaval, but they all agree that they will protect Juan; the seventh raven is a child and is thus neutral. Eventually, Juan’s identity is discovered, and the terrorists are reinvigorated in their demands. The main terrorist, Danny, decides to pass the time, while negotiations are pending, by presenting a mock trial, primarily to educate the children about the terrorists’ cause, using his training as a former drama teacher to persuade them to his view. The trial is not real, he insists, but is only a play. He names himself as the prosecuting attorney; he chooses Angel, another terrorist, who can barely speak English, to be judge; the defense attorney is Mrs. Dunnitt, one of the hostages, the opera’s costume designer who is also a Marxist and is sympathetic to the terrorists’ cause; and the defendant is Doll’s mother, who, though a homemaker, is also a world-renowned concert cellist. Danny chooses Doll’s mother because, as he says, she is “the representation of many people. . . . One person, thinking no harm, staying easy and quiet while in Matteo terrible things are done, and for amusement making music, an opera for the children . . .” (157). Because Doll’s mother is the defendant, the mock trial becomes an indictment against art for art’s sake, including the opera, which she says is produced for charity, but also “it’s for itself. We do it for love” (173). Her music is “superficially neutral, but underneath [is] a vague force for good,” as Danny phrases it (175). Doll’s mother now is in the middle, for though she does play her music for charity functions and even for Amnesty International, Danny condemns her for not being socially aware, for thinking that she can ever be by “neutral.” Danny espouses the traditional Marxist position that art must serve the state; like everything else, art has a political function.¹ Danny literally has a captive audience to whom he speaks these words:

While in this world, anywhere, one person is still a slave, is tortured, is in prison, for what he has said, all nations are still at war, fighting for that one man. No

neutrals, nowhere. Only fighters and traitors. When you do not join the fight, you betray. I have heard you sing in your opera the song of the King in the middle. I tell you there is no middle. This king in your story is a traitor to the God in your story. So in this world, this real place which is not a story, you, and you, and you [as he points to the children] are traitors. You are traitors to man. (176)

Doll's mother is proclaimed guilty by the judge, Angel, who declares that the sentence is to be immediate execution. Of course, this is all just a play, Danny says, not real, and so he continues to smile as Angel points her gun at Doll's mother's head, ready to pull the trigger. He smiles because he had earlier removed the clip from Angel's gun. Danny, though, did not see that Angel returned the clip to her gun. Angel, who speaks only Spanish, does not understand that this is a mock trial, only a play, and is prepared to carry out the execution. She is stopped just in time by another of the terrorists, and the resultant mayhem allows the police surrounding the church finally to gain control over the terrorist kidnapers; all four are arrested, and Juan O'Grady and the 100 other children and adults are rescued. End of hostage situation. But not end of story. Doll's mother, who was on trial for her music, for thinking that she could maintain a neutral position in the middle, escaped death but was shot by Angel in her hand, the hand that plays the cello, and six months later she is still refusing to return to her music; she is even contemplating selling her very expensive cello. To borrow a phrase from another of Dickinson's novels, Doll's mother could have been considered to be one of the "walking dead," a body with flesh and clothes, but no spirit (132). Now, after the hostage crisis, she has been reborn into a living being, socially and politically aware.

In the novel, no one character apparently serves as the mouthpiece for Dickinson's personal and political beliefs. Instead, as a work of art, the novel serves as the battleground for the debate about the purpose of art. Every character seems to symbolize an idea or political position, and all are vying for our attention. All the men and women and children are actors on a stage. Even the narrator, Doll, tells us, "I was part of the play, but I wasn't really an actor—more like a prop, for the real actors to make their gestures with" (93). Perhaps her function as prop accounts for her object-like name, Doll. And because she feels she has a purpose only in the hands of other actors, she feels very much in the middle. Many characters, however, besides Juan O'Grady and Doll, are in the middle, at some point. The child hostages are, of course. But even the terrorists are in the middle; though they have guns, they, too, are held hostage in the church. As Danny the leader points out, only Angel, the female who becomes judge at the mock trial, is a "true" Mattean as she is of African and Indian ancestry. But Danny and the other terrorists, Chip and Al, are all of European heritage; besides, Al is a priest, who obviously has struggled between the violence of terrorism and the nonviolence of Christianity, and Chip, the youngest, is half-American and half-Mattean. Multiple ironies are implicit here, especially since Angel, female and black, is being exploited by three well-educated white men. As the "true" Mattean, Angel manifests the purpose of the three men's fighting, and yet she doesn't even understand what's going on. They are fighting *for* her, with her symbolizing their political ideals. Like a child, Angel does not understand the language that is being used to construct the play; to her, the trial is real.

She is not sophisticated enough to comprehend Danny's theatrics, and because she is not caught up in the notion of acting and play, only she is able to see Juan O'Grady's face underneath the gaudy make-up and exposes him. Angel represents an idea, what the three men are fighting for, and yet her presence as an Amazon warrior corporealizes the idea in a way that the men can barely control.

Besides the characters, there is of course the primary abstract idea that is also in the middle—that is, art. In spite of what Mrs. Dunnitt the Marxist says, that there is little liberty “in a society which has no middle ground, no areas of neutrality” (179) such as art and poetry, I do not believe that in this novel art, though in the middle, is actually neutral. Being neutral is like the self-proclaimed status of Switzerland during World War II—no battles will touch Swiss soil. But being in the middle I liken to being a border state, like Missouri during the American Civil War, where Union and Confederate sympathizers fought against each other. Like a border state, being in the middle is not a safe place. Being in the middle is the site of the struggle of ideologies, the “battle-ground,” a place of contestation. Being in the middle is where art and artists reside. It is a battleground where ideas can be played out, tested, debated. This, too, is where the best children's literature pitches its tent.

The Seventh Raven is a particularly rich novel and deserves our accolades and also our critical attention—not only Marxist and aesthetics critics, and those concerned with ethical dilemmas, but, for example, those who like Jacqueline Rose would have a field day with the idea that the opera in the novel is defined as a children's opera only because it is performed by children but its intended audience is adults (37). *The Seventh Raven* opens up spaces for readers to think about so many questions that simply are not the common lot of young adult literature. This novel is *important*. Let's not allow *The Seventh Raven* to slip by us again.

Note

¹ Marxist criticism does not necessarily or even fundamentally reject aesthetic value. A *Dictionary of Marxist Thought* argues that to position Marxism as opposed to aesthetics is a narrow interpretation. Engels was not in favor of literature “which carries an explicit political message,” stating that “The more the opinions of the author remain hidden, the better for the work of art” (7). For contemporary Marxist critics, the debate between politics and aesthetics has perhaps folded in upon itself, to result in the development of Marxist aesthetics that addresses the question of value not only of art but of art criticism (8).

Terry Eagleton maintains that “. . . culture, in the broadest sense of the term, is also a permanent necessity of our material being, without which we would quickly die” (8). Anthropological criticism, one of four kinds of Marxist criticism he identifies, asks “some awesomely fundamental questions. What is the function of art within social evolution? What are the material and biological bases of ‘aesthetic’ capacities? What are the relations between art and human labour? How does art relate to myth, ritual, religion and language, and what are its social functions?” (7).

Works Cited

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