

What Does the Shadow Know?: Brian Doyle's *Angel Square*

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Brian Doyle's *Angel Square* is an often-humorous work about a serious subject. It is a novel set at Christmas in 1945, just after the end of World War II, in Lowertown, Ottawa, Ontario. The father of Tommy's best school friend, Sammy, is hit over the head and put into a coma by a tool-wielding hooded man while on duty as a night watchman, apparently because he is Jewish. The novel tracks the progress that Tommy and his best Irish Catholic friend Gerald and his best French Canadian friend Coco make in bringing the hate criminal to justice. Tommy's friends call him "Lamont" after Lamont Cranston, the hero of his favorite radio show, "The Shadow." So Tommy's mystery solving, as well as his romantic desire to win the heart of the lovely Margot Lane, is modeled on this popular culture icon.

Although a neighbor being assaulted by a hooded criminal is horrifying to 1945 Lowertown, religious strife on a less murderous level is a tolerated, daily occurrence. Angel Square is the site of three schools, representing differing religious institutions, and every day the children of the schools cross Angel Square four times, defending themselves from (or starting fights with) the children of the rival schools. Tommy, who doesn't practice a religion and goes to the school where most Jewish children attend, has a friend in each school and also earns a little money waxing floors for Talmud Torah, singing in the choir at St. Albany's Anglican Church, which brings him into contact with comparatively rich Protestants, and being an altar boy at St. Brigit's. This does not prevent him from having fights crossing Angel Square four times a day, however. Nothing will stop the fights on Angel Square. And so, of course, the secret knowledge of the Shadow—who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men? The Shadow knows! Heh, heh, heh, heh, heh, is directed at one of the big questions of life: Why is it that religion is so often a source of painful conflict?

I admire *Angel Square* in part because I think that Doyle faithfully reflects the time period that he is describing in a way that is not common in children's books. I am thinking here of a time when religious denomination was something that everyone knew, not something that it would be a personal intrusion to inquire about. Doyle is discussing a window in post-war North America—when religious belief was at about 95% and observance on a given weekend at about 49%¹—and, in the north at least, *Protestant* fundamentalism was uncommon. But the era is also marked by other rarely discussed phenomena: the toleration of a much higher level of physical violence among the young, for example. It was easily accepted in my own childhood that the point of kindergarten recess was to fight over the play equipment with older children; my weekly bloody noses were not remarkable: it was what happens when children play. I wonder now when this changed. In Doyle's book the most aggressive child in the neighborhood has been adversely affected by thinking about killing and bombing, is a war victim as well as a victim of parental loss, but I don't think the war explains it all. The stoicism exhibited by the family in regard to food shortage, Tommy's sister's retardation, and Frank, the family friend's, alcoholic antics—related to a head injury in the war—also appear to me to be time-specific. The kindness of Tommy's father is unusual, but Tommy's family (not, of course, all the families in the book) is of its era. The sweetness is reminiscent of WW II era books for children, where one might argue that

the highest degree of domestic dispute was likely to be over tracking mud in on clean linoleum. Tommy's desire to rescue his not-yet-girlfriend from evil scientists in the manner of Lamont Cranston also ties to his time—in his modeling of male and female roles and his view of science in the post-war horror tradition, a pattern that did not develop on that radio show until Tommy's era.² I find *Angel Square* evocative and authentic—a child who understands it will, indeed, know something about 1945.

Because of Tommy, the narrator's, religious-outsider status, the novel does not address the feelings of the members of various religious bodies about each other. These could come in many varieties, of course: all of these groups would claim to have the only right way of thinking about things, and there is a genuine anxiety involved in the desacrilizing inherent in religious tolerance and comparative text-reading. Language, tradition, possibly economic rivalry would be separating the Irish and French Catholics, who shared a religion. The Jews distrusted the Catholics on both historic and contemporary grounds. The only obvious "reason" for the *Angel Square* situation, in a novel that ignores all this, is the poor children's universal disgust at the Protestants, who are rich, but who are not involved in the daily fights because they don't live in Lowertown. On historic grounds, there is a part of me that would like the *Shadow* to define a little—what *were* these people thinking of? Or, possibly, why is nobody drawing the obvious parallel to the method of building group unity by defining others as enemies that had distinguished the rise of Nazism for the last twenty years? But Tommy, a child and no partisan, has, perhaps, a greater purity of perspective: the war is over and everybody is supposed to be nice. There are no reasons that can adequately explain this absurdity. It is just wrong.

To some extent, the lack of information about the religious situation probably makes it possible for the child of our secularized society to bridge the years to the novel. What does today's child see? Well, perhaps the movies! Tommy and his friends are enthusiastic fans and have an enormously good time acting out gangster films, in particular, as well as the radio program that inspires their investigation. Their films seem to be more devoted to bringing criminals to justice than ours, but popular culture is children's culture in this story, as it is today. While it might be quite impossible to explain convincingly to the completely uninstructed child what it is to be an Irish Catholic in Ottawa in 1945,³ the idea of hate crimes in general must connect, in part because *Angel Square* uses a modern perspective. In a society that tolerated such a high degree of inter-denominational ill will, the anti-Semitism in question could obviously co-exist with a reasonably respectable public reputation. The novel's view that people who want to dislike others for their differences are outcast monsters—the hooded criminal in this case is a barely literate fan of sadistic, sexually charged, war comics, who has dreadful hygiene problems—is anachronistic but firm. Good people are loyal to their friends, play funny jokes, and express their love in their daily activities. The strong should protect the weak; girls are for rescuing and appreciating, not torturing; boys should be brave and outsmart villains.

Finally, Tommy's perspective on the sacred also appears to me as one more common in our era than his. He lives in a sacred world, but it is not based upon organized religion. Tommy frequently finds saints in his daily life—his retarded sister, for example, or the policeman who plays Santa Claus every Christmas, or perhaps the benevolent Quaker on the Quaker Oats box. He responds to beauty in conduct, as well as pageantry, wherever he finds it—in religious ritual, in the movies, in a nice and pretty girl. The "real" saints, like Saint Brigit of the Bloody Thorns or

the graphically crucified Christ at St. Albany's, are less sources of sacred inspiration than they are reminders that life is full of evil lurking in the hearts of men, or, at least, people who are willing to murder in the interests of discouraging nonconformity. A more positive form of spirituality, not animism,⁴ is Tommy's response to beauty in the natural world—the snow, the eclipse of the moon—as well as to beauty of style in writing. As Marcel Gauchet notes in *The Disenchantment of the World*, “When the gods abandon the world, when they stop coming to notify us of their otherness to it, the world itself begins to appear other. . . .” “[O]ur engagement with things is pervaded and articulated by the imagination and is for this reason occupied consubstantially by the imminent possibility of an aesthetic experience—that is, an experience of difference making this involvement irresistibly meaningful for us by showing it to us in an unfamiliar light, by presenting it as other, as opening onto an unknown mystery” (203).

Tommy's own mystery solving is almost entirely instinctual. He senses good; he senses evil. If one is in need of definition for these terms, obviously the place to look is not dogma, nor the God of history, but the uninstructed heart. Tommy is a Romantic hero, but he embodies the authentically religious sensibility more strongly than his neighbors, in Will Herberg's terms, because of his “divine discontent” with the ways things are.

One of my colleagues puts the question “Where do you encounter mystery in your lives?” to her writing classes.⁵ The mysteries in *Angel Square* are several. Who hurt Sammy's father? is the question that Lamont answers within the novel. Why should religion be used to promote hatred? is, of course, unanswered. How should evil be dealt with? By letting people know—Tommy believes in the power of the written word and of explicit discussion to make the world a safer place.⁶ That is probably also the novel's answer to the question “Why tell children who have not been exposed to anti-Semitism or other kinds of hate about Christmas 1945 in Lowertown, Ontario?” Why is the world such a balance of good and evil, beauty and ugliness? It's a mystery.

Notes

¹ For statistics and discussions of this era, the classic is *Protestant-Catholic-Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (1955) by Will Herberg. See also 178f in Michael Harrington's *The Politics at God's Funeral: The Spiritual Crisis of Western Civilization* (1983).

² Discussion from http://nene.essortment.com/theshadowradi_ring.htm by Robert Wheadon.

³ Wayne Johnson's *Story of Bobby O'Malley* and *The Divine Ryans* explore the situation (in a neighboring province) for adults.

⁴ See Atwood's *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972), and James's “Canada, Religion, and Nature.”

⁵ *Icons of Loss and Grace*, page 47f.

⁶On page 37 Tommy discusses this in regards to his sister's safety. His method of bringing the hooded criminal to justice is to write his identity on 200 pieces of paper and put them in neighbors' mailboxes, as well as telling his friend the Santa/policeman about his investigation.

Works Cited

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