Anticipated Results
by Dennis E. Bolen

Reviewed by J.M. Bridgeman

On first looking into Bolen’s Anticipated Results, I began to feel apprehensive. Oh, no. A bar full of drinkers, a world of lonely old men. Do I really want to spend my time at this beer-stained table?

Anticipated Results is a collection of linked stories seemingly told by the same “I,” the unnamed narrator, about himself and his fading-fifties buddies trying way too hard to seem hip, urbane. That the eighteen stories of urban angst are collated into three parts titled Problem, Process, and Outcome suggests some sort of guiding intelligence behind the design of the collection. The titles of the six stories in “Problem” – “I Drove,” “The Pathetics,” “A.A./N.A.,” and “Detox” – reinforce my fear of booze-fuelled forced hilarity. We are expected to laugh, but at what? At the irony of meeting in the bar to organize an intervention?

In the first story, “Paul’s Car,” a taxi driver relates his tale of coming to consciousness upside down, strapped into his cab overturned in a water-filled ditch. Paul describes to the listeners at his table how he cried about the down-time, the impact of the accident on his income. The narrator, however, attempts to push him into a literary discussion on the structure of his narrative. “Paul, you get relevance by virtue of the story structure . . . the banal beginning. The banal ending here in the bar. The unconscious middle . . . You let the first and last determine the centre” (18). He expands on his theory that Paul’s natural storytelling style uses “Elision. The act of leaving out. You suggest the first and last, and the middle fills itself in. Brilliant” (18). Bill objects: “You can’t make a silk novel out of a sow’s newspaper item” (19). This is the prompt, the challenge of the collection. After this, Paul’s “I’ve got to adjust my idle” (220) can be read in more ways than one.

Will these be stories then about what is not said, about what is missing from the telling, from the idle lives, of this rather pathetic bunch playing with hobby farms or guns, swapping stories and women? Or am I expecting too much? Maybe the stories will just be about what on earth these men will do when they have to quit drinking? Will I read for entertainment or for meaning, ever hopeful of learning something about these worlds I do not inhabit?

In the second part, “Process,” there are stories of acceptance and family, bailing out, scoring, dysfunctional parenting. In the third part, “Outcome,” the stories focus on suspicion, career disappointments, memories of abuse, squandered potential, more failed interventions, the secret to career promotion, and feeling secure. In remembering his childhood in “Qualicum Beach,” the narrator comes to realize “The injustice of it became the start of my darkness, the portal to a black will inside my soul” (197). He expresses disappointment at missing an opportunity to have “grown up together” with his father (202). Yet this revelation does not seem to carry over into the story about the narrator’s own angry child, Lena, objecting to being used, her needs still unmet, in “Clean or Dirty?”

Finally, in “Arch Sots and Tossspots,” the last story, about a cross-generational dinner party, the teller speaks again. The allusions to earlier stories – the cab in the ditch, the failed intervention, the failed dinner party, the lost cat – help tie the collection together. But, after expressing gratitude for
having missed the era when men were “indiscriminately screwing just for comic relief” (224), one of the innocent three Fates makes the mistake of asking the “boomer boys” (232): “What do you think is the source of your dysfunction?” (232) Booze and a ready audience make the narrator only too happy to respond. The answer includes Vietnam and JFK and Moloch, the young-man-devouring machine demanding sacrifices to war.

Is this a little Canadian sub-genre, the post–Vietnam War traumatic stress story? David Bergen’s *The Time In Between* and Johanna Skibsrud’s *The Sentimentalists* are both award-winning novels about former American soldiers who sought sanctuary in Canada. It’s as if American cultural imperialism has been so strong that even Canadians who did not have to fight in Vietnam appropriate that war as defining our generation, as the moment America began to fall, taking the rest of us – Canada, the world, the boomer generation – with it in the race to oblivion, with JFK’s assassination as the starting gun, and failed interventions at both the beginning (Vietman) and the end (Afghanistan).

Can the reader trust Dennis E. Bolen’s narrator, habitually inserting himself into other people’s lives to avoid looking at his own? Is there any evidence that he has matured any more than did the abusive father in “Qualicum Beach,” angry at the world for not meeting his needs, for changing faster than he can change himself? What has happened between the first story and the last, between the cab in the ditch and this party peopled by ever younger girls? There appears to be something missing. He turns and returns to the stray cat stranded for days under the bed. Suggesting what? Paralysis and dread in Kits? That nobody cares about the pussy? That cat was the only non-human living creature in the whole concrete city, scrounging, abandoned by its partner, surprised, starving for nurture, trapped by fear. ☭

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