

## Rehabilitating the Working Man From the Clutches of False Realism

By Anis Shivani

Book Review:

*Welcome to Oakland: A Novel*, by Eric Miles Williamson,  
Raw Dog Screaming Press, 2008.



For the reader used to anodyne fiction of personal travail—so-called survival from illness and marital woe, superfluous tragedies of affluence and mental rot (Eric Miles Williamson’s first-person narrator mocks such prissy self-expression)—*Welcome to Oakland* will come as a kick in the butt—a stab wound, rather—from which those of gentle spirit might or might not recover. This is the latest of Williamson’s shattering novels of hardscrabble working-class existence in the Oakland of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, where Williamson attempts to rewrite the rules of literary fiction, to take us closer to the truth we perpetually want to avoid—even in fiction.

Williamson wants us to stare at the blood and gore and sweat—and the garbage smell, yes, the eternal sulfur—to which the rich consign the working poor, all the while coming up with abstract theories to save their souls, romanticizing their troubles and wishing away their deepest resentments. Every bitterness of the American male—without a secure economic niche—is made manifest; every revenge fantasy and survival strategy is related without fear or prejudice. We receive a vision of life below the radar screen, beyond the surveillance monitors, the census counts, the sociological statistics, and the counseling offices; and we are reminded of how the other America lives. Williamson does it in prose linked in rhythm to the cycles of violence and satiety, the impulses of realism and vanity, and the surges of corporeal ecstasy and disgust.

When Williamson reproduces the dialogue of his Darwinian men, who know little of correct notions of behavior and artfulness, it is with an ear no amount of artificial training can induce in a

wannabe writer. To be any closer to the working man's experience of money and sex and play and anger would be unbearable.

Williamson already pushes us to the verge of the unbearable, so the pages we hold in our hands constantly condemn our cowardice in staying away from these truths.

"I'm not writing for art fags," T-Bird Murphy, the first-person narrator, holed up in a shitty Missouri garage after two divorces, tells us at the beginning of the novel. T-Bird has managed to get himself into some unexplained trouble, leading to his banishment from the suburban, middle-class life he used to loathe in his early years. His expulsion from its securities and vanities is necessary and right. Even if he manages to leave the garage (as we feel sure he must, through sheer force of will), and regain a more livable space, he will never again fall for the trap of acting like the rich.

*Welcome to Oakland* is conscious of the prodigious volumes of dross produced in the name of art by the nation's middle-class and upper-middle-class writers, who have no experience of life below a certain level. The majority remains unspoken for; this is one of the great sources of Williamson's (and T-Bird's) anger, and it is as legitimate an anger as we have encountered in modern American fiction. It partakes of something of Richard Wright's fury, but it is many degrees more cutting because in some ways the white working class today is more invisible than the black minority ever was. It is forgotten, not written about, and when written about—say, in minimalist fiction emanating from the writing workshops—is devoid of the power that feeds revolutions, or even reinventions.

Following where he left off in *East Bay Grease*, in *Welcome to Oakland* Williamson tells us what happens to T-Bird as a young adult. T-Bird's Pop, who works at the Mohawk gas station and lives in a trailer, has met a new woman, Mary, who, though she sleeps around with many people, at least has the virtue of returning home by morning. T-Bird has to give up trumpet-playing because his front teeth were knocked out in a club melee. He drives a garbage truck for a living and hangs out with Pop and other vanquished males—such as Campos, Polizzi, Shapiro, Jorgensen, and Louie—at Dick's Restaurant and Cocktail Lounge, "the vortex of the sadness

of the world." The regulars at Dick's stand up for each other, which includes destroying (or imagining doing so) anyone who messes with one of them: "*Please, say the word,*" pleads Jorgensen, the retired Navy Seal. T-Bird's mother has married yet another rich guy, though she shows up in the end, at Pop's wedding with Mary. The mother breaks up into hysterics when T-Bird tells her about the gruesome deaths of his two brothers—Kent, for one, dragged behind a car and ripped to pieces by the asphalt. T-Bird doesn't have a place to stay, so he ends up living in his garbage-truck cabin, in the middle of a massive garbage dump. There is a lot of garbage in the novel. "I'm always happiest when I live in a dump," T-Bird begins the novel, and the most lyrical passages of the novel describe the earth reasserting itself in the garbage dump.

We encounter every sort of male emasculation in the novel, and every sort of distorted empowerment, including real or imagined retaliation. Both are aspects of the subterranean working-class life readers almost never get to see. As for emasculation, work itself—not "eating fancy sandwiches and drinking wine," which passes for work; or rich people acquiring "life experience" by doing jobs they don't need to do to feed themselves; but real work, which leaves the smell of garbage deep in one's pores, or needs washing off by Ajax or dishwasher detergent at the end of the day—is the greatest source of weakening. The rest—failed relationships, promiscuity, addiction, physical self-destruction, proximity and proneness to violence—are only symptomatic of the debilitating quality of most work.

Work, which only a handful of American writers in the last century have dared to confront in its physical unpleasantness, is Williamson's core specialty, his province. What passes as work in most other fiction, even of the gritty realist kind, is a pleasant substitute for work. The loss of power leads to perverse expressions of power, particularly in enacting vengeance against the fellow oppressed (never against the rich and powerful, though that may change, Williamson warns) and in performing petty acts of retribution (such as letting garbage trucks trail slime in the pretty neighborhoods of the rich, or ruining the car of some arrogant rich bastard who demands full service at the gas station but won't leave

a tip). It is a trap enfolding generation after generation, except for an exceptionally smart person like T-Bird, who gets straight As and loves to read.

The American male is in profound trouble, and Williamson wants us to know why. The reality of work—serfdom in new guises—has reduced him to cipher, and he knows not what to do except to lash out, ruin his body and mind, or at most assert a Darwinian survival ethos, even if it means being as cruel as the next person. Williamson explores in the novel various grown-up versions of male emasculation. There are abject males, such as Blaise, whose women leave them and take them for everything they've got, who are obsessed with women clearly no good for them. There are washed-out musicians, like Farrington and Oscar, who live on the rumors of past glories. There is the garbage engineer, the Dumpmaster Jones, whose philosophy of the dumps eludes the bureaucrats in charge of shaping landfills as the resting ground for fancy condos and golf courses. There is Pop, himself, ribald and savvy (knowing of Mary's infidelities), having a good time at the wedding, a powerful physical specimen whose imminent decline we fear, since the uncertainty of life forgives no one in Williamson's East Bay milieu.

Compared to these fellow sufferers are the weak, mean, spiteful, stingy, hollow men who have made a Faustian bargain by giving up their individuality in return for a trivial share of the economic pie. One such example is FatDaddy Slattern, maker of designer toilet seats, who cons T-Bird into mowing his lawn (though the backyard turns out to be a jungle of impossible weeds) for a mere .75 cents, and who then suffers total misery when various tradesmen turn against him in sympathy with T-Bird and make every part of FatDaddy's house fall apart. In real life, of course, it is difficult to exact even petty revenge against the likes of FatDaddy and his family; but do we not think about it all the time? The narrator says at one point, "Find me an American man who claims he does not want to kill at least once in a day each day of his life, and you've found one lying son of a bitch." These are the kinds of truths we need to hear, and which are fiction's special privilege, though lately we seem to be getting nothing of the sort.

Life and death acquire a rhythm bent to external stresses, so that projects of self-improvement are meaningless in the world Williamson gives us. The prologue is a salvo against those who would tell the narrator to write by the rules of genteel fiction. The first extended section, involving the hapless regulars at Dick's, makes us expect a whining self-indictment of the working-class male that never happens; it borrows from anti-politically correct rants, yet what is to follow utterly subverts this set-up, so that by the end of the book we realize that our sympathy for the comrades at Dick's is false, like all our programmed feelings. The next section takes us to the spontaneous camaraderie among T-Bird's friends and neighbors, young and old alike, who band together, for instance, in exacting revenge on FatDaddy. It is a pleasant interlude, which diverts us for a while from the savage unpleasantness to follow. The section after that involves T-Bird living in the garbage dump, as he speculates that "some goddamn day there's going to be a really good riot, a class war instead of a race war, and we're going to take them out, the fuckers." This, of course, is the ultimate revenge fantasy, and it is never going to happen; what remains to T-Bird is solitude of the most excruciating kind, which makes a mockery of voluntary solitude adopted by chic artist types. In the final section, T-Bird rejoins the community, as Pop's wedding takes place among escalating recognition of class division: "Poor people don't see shrinks. They get a fucking job." The only thing that will cure a working man's blues is revolution; but the revolution of the soul preceding the material revolution is nowhere in sight. The ending, with T-Bird proposing to Rhonda, Mary's stepdaughter, connects us directly to the prologue in the garage, so that the enfolded narrative assumes the quality of dream, hinting toward a collective future so bleak, for all classes, it eludes even the present narrator's courage.

In these masterly movements from section to section, Williamson has done more than reverse the usual causation of beginning-middle-end narrative: He has encapsulated all future endings in his prolapsed beginning. He sharply individualizes working-class characters in a way we almost never experience, but

he always keeps the effect of work as a de-individualizing force at dead center, so that we cannot escape the one irredeemable problem, work itself. All his narrative strategies are geared to fulfilling this central authorial purpose.

How true are the perceptions of the working man when it comes to his joys? Here, too, class realities (and resentments) complicate the picture to a man's disadvantage. Drinking, dancing, music, sex, breeding, a good physical scuffle, these all have to do with re-orientation of the senses toward a higher experience, but they are bound by the reality of the body's mortality creeping in, faster than it does with rich people. Death, sudden and violent, is always around the corner, and it sullies the experience of physical joy. Not coincidentally, Williamson reaches the height of his descriptive powers in the passages where he describes living at the garbage dump, under the auspices of Jones, who constantly builds and alters a monumental junk sculpture. Man and machine connect organically in *Welcome to Oakland*, in a sort of apocalyptic overturning of the Futurist manifestoes of the early 20th century, reduced now to filth and grime and sweat and dust. Man and garbage—sometimes it is difficult to tell one from the other, Williamson suggests.

Jones says, about the hiss of methane, "That's the earth purifying itself, making itself clean again. Everything in the world becomes the earth's garbage. The animals, the plants, the people, all they make and unmake becomes the earth's garbage. And the earth, the earth don't care one bit, it don't. The earth just cleans its own self right back up." In passages reminiscent of Nathanael West at his apocalyptic best, T-Bird lights a thousand small fires in the garbage dump, after Jones has been fired by the bureaucrats and has bulldozed his junk sculpture: "And when I'd lit enough, I climbed to the top of the mound beneath which Jones's sculpture stood and I looked out over the bay at the lights of the city, and I looked back down at the flaming dumps, each gas jet like a home, a campfire, a porchlight left on in welcome, and I sat down and I closed my eyes and I knew that I would never sleep again, not ever."

Young T-Bird is introduced to both Marx and Nietzsche by a sympathetic librarian. It's hard to reconcile the two philosophers. Marx wanted the rich people dead. Nietzsche wanted the weak to become powerful. Williamson knows that, like Jack London—and Theodore Dreiser, James T. Farrell, and John Steinbeck—he inhabits both tendencies. The war between the contradictions produces devastating fiction, such that if George Orwell were around today and surveyed the vast field of American fiction, Williamson is the one writer he might unabashedly endorse, for making us confront the physical core of brutality as Orwell himself did—without fear or prejudice.

*Welcome to Oakland* has a greater urgency and necessity than the much-acclaimed *East Bay Grease*, and deserves a wider readership. This is no less than a manifesto for early 21st-century America, which has made a mockery of the American Dream for the working man, leaving him to inhabit the garbage and mortality we have so expertly banished from our sights. Williamson wants us to smell some of the forgotten smells, see some of the invisible blood, and feel truly and terribly bad about ourselves. His revolutionary asides scatter all over the novel, sanctifying and crucifying the lost American male, giving resounding new literary meaning to the term “revenge fantasy.” With this novel, Williamson’s position in the pantheon of major American writers of the working class is secure, and we eagerly await the conclusion of the T-Bird trilogy, the years between his proposal of marriage to Rhonda at the end of *Welcome to Oakland* and his exile in the garage in Missouri. That should be a hell of a ride.