It's Not All That Money: Class in Jim Grimsley's *Comfort & Joy*

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Abstract
Until recently, discussions of class were overshadowed by explorations of race, ethnicity, and gender in American literary and academic circles. One of the modern novels that daringly explores the ramifications of class is Jim Grimsley's Comfort & Joy (1999), which portrays the budding relationship between two southern men which, to a large degree, is continually undermined by their belonging to different classes. Dan Crell is a hospital administrator, while Ford McKinney is a pediatrician in the same hospital. Moreover, while Dan comes from a low-class North Carolina family, Ford belongs to the Old Savannah aristocratic milieu. Class interferes not only in the men's relationship with each other but also in their relationships with their families of origin. More important, the novel convincingly demonstrates that class is not only a matter of money but perhaps even more so of culture inbred in the family.

Keywords
American literature; southern literature; gay literature; class; family; Jim Grimsley; *Comfort & Joy*; American South

Class is a strange beast in American culture. While the American society is as stratified as any other Western society, class is still an underrepresented topic – it seems to have been overshadowed by discussions of race, ethnicity, and gender in the public discourse. American scholar Paul Fussell commented on class in his 1982 work *Class: A Guide through the American Status System*: "Although most Americans sense that they live within an extremely complicated system of social classes and suspect that much of what is thought and done here is prompted by considerations of status, the subject has remained murky. And always touchy."[1]

Southern writer Jim Grimsley (b. 1955) is one of those authors for whom the issue of class is a primary preoccupation, as he comes from a low-class background which sets him apart from many other prominent authors of American literature. In his collection of interviews with emerging authors of gay literature Richard Canning appreciates "Jim Grimsley's implicit challenge to the middle-class orthodoxies evident in so much literary fiction."[2] In his interview with Canning, Grimsley then admits that the issue of class can influence one's perception of literature as well, when he describes how he had to come to terms with Edmund White's fiction: "There were times when I used to be impatient with him. All his books were about upper-class gay men. But that's who he is and what he writes about. I realized you can't always judge literature as bad because you're jealous of the upper class."[3]

Grimsley is far from being the first prominent southern author who came from a lower class. Waldemar Zacharasiewicz, expanding observations made by Fred Hobson, notes that since the 1950s and 1960s many authors have appeared "who came from simple folk and were interested in popular rather than high culture like Bobbie Ann Mason and Richard Ford, or like Harry Crews and Dorothy Allison represented the

1 Paul Fussell, *Class: A Guide through the American Status System* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), 15.

2 Richard Canning, *Hear Us Out: Conversations with Gay Novelists* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), xvi.

3 Canning, *Hear Us Out*, 127.

experience of poor whites."[4] Indeed, there are many affinities between Grimsley and Allison, but while they share a low-class background, as well as many themes in their writing, including class, sexuality, or child abuse, much less critical attention has been paid to Grimsley so far than to Allison.

When, in the 1990s, Grimsley published three largely autobiographical novels, portraying the life of his novelistic alter ego, Dan Crell, and his mother Ellen, class was a major theme in the trilogy.[5] In terms of narrative chronology, *My Drowning* (1997) portrays the childhood of Dan's mother when she was growing up in extreme poverty in North Carolina. *Winter Birds* (1994) depicts a stormy episode in the life of the family at the time when Dan was eight. Finally, *Comfort & Joy* (1999), set many years later, describes the adult Dan's relationship with another man.

While the setting of *My Drowning* and *Winter Birds* is low-class, and the effects of the extreme poverty of the protagonists permeate the novels, it is in *Comfort & Joy* that the class difference between the two protagonists becomes the driving force of the narrative. The novel focuses on the budding relationship of Dan Crell, a hospital administrator, and Ford McKinney, a young pediatrician. The key events of the story revolve around Christmas, as the title, alluding to a well-known carol, "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen," suggests. While the two men have noticed each other for years, they start a relationship one Christmas, after an emergency situation at the hospital brings them together. They spend the following Christmas separately with their families, and on their third Christmas they visit Dan's family, to which they have been invited and, on a whim of the moment, also Ford's family, who did not expect their visit. The relationship between Dan and Ford is not an easy one because from the very beginning it is hindered by two issues. First, Dan, a hemophiliac, is HIV positive,[6] and second, Dan and Ford belong to different social classes, which undermines not only their own partnership but also the relationships of the families to their sons' partners.

Social stratification itself is a complex matter. John Brooks admitted that "in the new American structure there seem to be an almost infinite number of classes."[7] According to Paul Fussell, many sociologists prefer a five-class model (upper class, upper middle class, middle class, lower middle class, and lower class), while he makes an even finer distinction into nine classes in the United States (top out-of-sight, upper, upper middle, middle, high proletarian, mid-proletarian, low proletarian, destitute, and bottom out-of-sight).[8] While a coarser distinction (upper class, middle class, lower class) is sufficient for the purposes of the present article, Fussell's argument of how class manifests itself is highly pertinent for the analysis of Grimsley's novel: by exploring various symbols in American culture, Fussell systematically demonstrates that class is not only a matter of money; it is primarily a matter of culture, typically passed on via

4 Waldemar Zacharasiewicz, "Introduction: The Many Souths: Class in Southern Culture," in *The Many Souths: Class in Southern Culture*, ed. Waldemar Zacharasiewicz (Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 2003), ix.

5 The novels were not published as a trilogy. However, as the three narratives are interconnected to the degree that some of them quote, in the form of memories, texts from other books in the series, I am treating them as parts of one larger narrative.

6 The National Hemophilia Foundation points out that from "the late 1970s to the mid-1980s, about half of all people with hemophilia became infected with HIV after using contaminated blood products. An estimated 90% of those with severe hemophilia were infected with HIV." National Hemophilia Foundation, "HIV/AIDS" (New York: National Hemophilia Foundation, 2015), https://www.hemophilia.org/Bleeding-Disorders/Blood-Safety/HIV/AIDS.

7 See Fussell, *Class*, 27.

8 See Fussell, *Class*, 27.

many previous generations. This can be observed at the very beginning of the novel, when the men's journey to Dan's family is described:

> *Ford, being a McKinney, had bought first-class seats. Dan had a suspicion that the McKinneys of Savannah, Georgia, had bought first-class and only first-class tickets on every form of conveyance since the Ark, and that no McKinney had ever so much as walked through coach. In Ford's case, since he was not merely a McKinney but a McKinney the Third, and a doctor, the question had simply never come up.*
> *Whereas the Crells of North Carolina had only recently taken to air passage at all, and were in fact unfamiliar with most forms, and even the idea, of travel.*[9]

As can be seen, the class difference between the two men is neither a matter of the price of the ticket nor simply a difference between the middle-class hospital administrator and the upper-class medical doctor – it goes much deeper into family histories.

As "McKinney the Third," Ford, who comes from Savannah, Georgia, represents "old Savannah" – a traditional southern upper-class family. Ford's social standing is thus defined not only by his prestigious profession as a medical doctor, the third in line, but primarily by his belonging to an old family. Their upper-class status is further upheld when it is revealed that the children have an independent income from trust funds, which is available to them after they turn twenty-five. Jonathan Daniel Wells points out that the social standing of medical doctors was not extremely high in the 19th-century South and they were elevated from middle class to upper class only after they founded "professional organizations and medical societies throughout the Old South to raise professional standards."[10] However, the upper-class status of Ford's extended family is not based only on the medical profession, though details of the sources of the family's affluence are not revealed in the novel.

However, neither Ford nor his sister quite lives up to the family's expectations that they will maintain their upper-class standing and, in their parents' eyes, they lower their social position: Ford decides to become a pediatrician rather than a surgeon, choosing a specialization associated with a lower prestige and a lower income than those of surgeons. His sister, Courtenay, not only violated the social expectations associated with her status when she refused to make her debut, that is, to be formally introduced into Savannah society, but continued her presumed social decline by dating a New England carpenter. Moreover, one major conflict between Ford and his family arises when they try to get him married to a suitable Savannah girl.

On the other hand, Dan's class background is described in much less detail in *Comfort & Joy*, yet readers may rely on the story of *Winter Birds*, depicting the situation in the family when Dan was a young boy. At that time, the family belonged to the lowest class in the South, called "white trash." While the McKinneys are threatened by downward mobility, the Crell family aims upward: as a university graduate and a hospital administrator, Dan has safely advanced to the middle class, his brother Allen has become a branch manager for a bank, again a typical middle-class position, and Dan's mother and her second husband now own and operate a cemetery, which is

9 Jim Grimsley, *Comfort & Joy* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin, 1999), 6.

10 Jonathan Daniel Wells, "Middle Class, Development of," in *Social Class*, ed. Larry J. Griffin and Peggy G. Hargis, vol. 20 of *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, ed. Charles Reagan Wilson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 174–175.

certainly an advance on their "white trash" status, though they remain in the lower-class category because of their lifestyle.

Another difference between both men lies in the level of their self-acceptance as gay men. Dan's homosexuality was not explored in *Winter Birds*, as Dan was only eight at the time. *Comfort & Joy* does not show his coming out, either; he is openly out and presented as a balanced man as far as his sexuality is concerned. On the other hand, Ford's road to sexual realization is dealt with in much more detail in numerous flashbacks; in this respect, the novel really can be read as a coming-out novel. In spite of this difference, both men are rather inexperienced in long-term relationships. At his first dinner with Ford, at which he has revealed his HIV status, Dan remarks: "It's really funny. I guess 'funny' is the right word. I've had two lovers in my life. Two. But I've had blood from thousands of men. In my veins."[11] Ford had experienced a quiet heterosexual relationship at college and another, a tumultuous one, with a male drunkard and perpetual student. This lack of experience with long-term relationships makes both the men susceptible to disruptions and pressures from the outside world, many of which are related to their different class backgrounds.

The strongest external pressure comes from Ford's family in Savannah. The Old Savannah family means not only three generations of doctors, but also the considerable affluence of the extended family. They lead "cool, ordered lives among the Savannah elite"[12] and Ford is expected to do the same. Belonging to the upper class is reflected in an intricate network of social expectations rather than only in its money. The pressure to marry as soon as possible that the family puts on Ford is part of their expectations. Ford later comments to his therapist: "In my family, in Savannah, you get married. You just do it. No matter what. I'm already late."[13] The same is true of his choice to become a doctor, about which he says: "I want to be a doctor because my father was a doctor and my grandfather was a doctor. I never really thought about my own reasons. It was enough to think about my father and my grandfather."[14]

Life in Ford's family is highly ritualized and it is seen by Ford's parents as their duty to preserve the family traditions. As Ford's mother says, "Not everybody comes from a family with so much of its history preserved. I think we have a duty to that."[15] Yet this perceived obligation to family history is often far from pleasant, which shows in the yearly Christmas parties with the extended family. When Ford's mother accuses her son of ruining her Christmas, he answers: "Mother, I didn't ruin your Christmas. Your Christmas was ruined a long time ago,"[16] referring to the holidays being spent with the extended family every year according to the same script.

Moreover, the members of the McKinney family are skilled communicators, at the cost of frankness. During a discussion about Ford's unwillingness to get married, when an argument is imminent, the conflict is prevented by Ford's mother, when the "social guise, which [Ford] had seen [his mother] assume in many other situations, kicked in automatically"[17] and she diverted the conversation to a banal topic. Ford is perfectly familiar with this culture of avoiding conflicting topics. At one point, he asks

11 Grimsley, *Comfort & Joy*, 104–105.

12 Grimsley, *Comfort & Joy*, 31.

13 Grimsley, *Comfort & Joy*, 43.

14 Grimsley, *Comfort & Joy*, 42.

15 Grimsley, *Comfort & Joy*, 86.

16 Grimsley, *Comfort & Joy*, 180.

17 Grimsley, *Comfort & Joy*, 80.

his sister self-mockingly: "Are you asking for direct communication, in the McKinney family?"[18] Yet these skills, which are related to Ford's class, are double-edged. While they seemingly make conversations with others easier, they act as a barrier where intimacy is expected or required. When Ford visits Dan's family and at one moment he has "forgotten the need to charm,"[19] both Dan and his mother realize with relief that he is capable of frankness.

Dan, on the contrary, comes from a family in which the situation seems reversed: they seem to be preoccupied with money, while the cultural dimension of class only appears in a by-the-way manner. This can be seen especially in Dan's mother, who, having spent virtually all her childhood in hunger, is proud of her "refrigerator full of food"[20] and her vegetable garden, which "bore witness to her careful frugality."[21] She disapproves of Dan's wasting too much money eating in restaurants or spending too much money on Christmas presents.[22] Her way of looking at the world through money is revealed even when she comments on Ford, after meeting him for the first time, to Dan: "Ford seems like a real good person. . . . He has a lot of money, doesn't he? You can tell."[23]

Dan and Ford's relationship has thus been influenced by the men's belonging to different classes from the very beginning, a difference they both realized and everybody around them could see. Just after the first exchange between Ford and Dan, when Ford was asking Dan to dinner and the scene was overseen by a colleague of Ford's, the onlooker commented rather contemptuously: "Getting acquainted with hospital administrators, Dr. McKinney?"[24]

At the same time, Dan also makes fun of Ford's background, both cultural and financial, from the outset of their friendship. Even on their first date he remarks: "Savannah boys grow up to be Savannah men, don't they? Something to do with evolution of a higher order of being."[25] When Ford is afraid there might not be a car available for rent at the busy time at the end of the year, Dan remarks, deadpan: "You can always buy one."[26] When it is revealed at the end of the story that Ford's family owns a beach house on Tybee Island, Dan reacts: "Well, naturally. I should have known."[27]

This is only possible because class is significantly more visible, as well as more stable, in Ford than in Dan. Dan's lower-class origins are much obscured and the visit to Dan's family was a revelation for Ford. When Dan shows Ford one of the houses of his childhood, Ford is appalled. As Dan admits later to his sister, "It scared him. I had told him we were poor, but I don't think he realized what I meant till he saw where we lived."[28] Indeed, the term "poverty" is a relative one and the real meaning is often beyond the imagination of those who do not have first-hand experience of it.

18 Grimsley, *Comfort & Joy*, 66.

19 Grimsley, *Comfort & Joy*, 184.

20 Grimsley, *Comfort & Joy*, 129.

21 Grimsley, *Comfort & Joy*, 135.

22 See Grimsley, *Comfort & Joy*, 133, 140.

23 Grimsley, *Comfort & Joy*, 134.

24 Grimsley, *Comfort & Joy*, 59.

25 Grimsley, *Comfort & Joy*, 98.

26 Grimsley, *Comfort & Joy*, 282.

27 Grimsley, *Comfort & Joy*, 280.

28 Grimsley, *Comfort & Joy*, 153.

But a childhood spent in poverty usually has lasting consequences for people, regardless of how high they may have climbed the social ladder. This was seen in Ellen's pride in a full refrigerator, and it is seen in Dan's life as well. The narrator describes daily life during the second year of Dan and Ford's relationship in the following way:

> *Summer brought the beginning of the last year of Ford's residency, a promotion for Dan, a new car. They fought about money, the house, Courtenay; they went to gay bars, and Ford got all the attention; Dan came home jealous and threw plates. They had a dinner party for Ford's friends and then one for Dan's. At the hospital, their relationship became common knowledge, to the point that one day Dr. Milliken asked Ford to use his influence with Dan to get a new ventilator for the neonatal intensive care unit. As if the request should seem perfectly ordinary.*[29]

It is significant that money and the house (owned by Ford) occupy the top place on the list of arguments. When Dan moves in with Ford, he insists on paying rent, a proposal that offends Ford. However, it is vital for Dan, who at one point says: "You're not my landlord. I'm living with you because I've never wanted to do anything more in my life. So I have to find some way to stay here, in this house. With you and all your money."[30] In other words, it is vital for his self-image and self-respect that he is not "kept" by another man and that they share the living expenses. The issue of same-sex partners with significantly different incomes is relatively common and it has recently been subject to research by economists.[31]

But in this case arguments about money became a threat to the relationship. During a trip to New Orleans, Dan refused to travel first-class because of the extreme cost of plane tickets, so Ford ended up in first class and Dan in economy class on the same plane. The argument reappeared when Dan insisted on paying his share of the hotel bill, which Ford reluctantly accepted.

Money issues also hinder Ford's acceptance into Dan's family. Ford had talked to Dan's mother on the phone many times but they met in person only after two years of his relationship with Dan – and it was revealed that it was actually Dan who insisted that Ford should be invited for Christmas. In addition to that Amy, Dan's sister, discloses to Dan that their mother was afraid and talked about Ford as if "she thought he was going to walk in the house with his nose up in the air, or something." Amy actually shares this fear when she appreciates that Ford "doesn't act like he's better than us at all."[32]

Even though the visit goes well, eased by Ford's social skills, he does commit one faux pas: his Christmas presents for Dan's family are "lavish by family standards,"[33] including a red wool jacket for Dan's mother which costs more than both Dan and his sister spend on her. Dan is angry with Ford, even though he knows that his partner can afford such a present. This situation nevertheless continues their fights about money: "I better hush. The one thing we fight about is money,"[34] Dan admits to his sister Amy, who warns him: "That's what me and Hank fought about most of the time. … You better

29 Grimsley, *Comfort & Joy*, 271.

30 Grimsley, *Comfort & Joy*, 237.

31 See, e.g., Maree Burns, Carole Burgoyne, and Victoria Clarke, "Financial Affairs? Money Management in Same-Sex Relationships," *Journal of Socio-Economics* 37.2 (April 2008): 481–501.

32 Grimsley, *Comfort & Joy*, 152.

33 Grimsley, *Comfort & Joy*, 168.

34 Grimsley, *Comfort & Joy*, 156.

be careful. You don't want to end up like I did"[35] – she broke up with Hank and is bringing up their son on her own in an unenviable economic situation. This is another proof of how dangerous quarrels over money are for relationships; even though the reader does not learn more about who Hank was, Amy and Dan share an obsession with money because of their lower-class roots.

While Dan's reception in Ford's family was much less friendly (he was coldly asked to leave by Ford's parents), even the previous brief contacts between Dan and Ford's parents were marked exclusively by the social skills of Ford's mother during telephone conversations with Dan in which the obvious nature of Ford and Dan's relationship was entirely ignored. The self-delusion was even stronger in Ford's father, to the point of being ridiculous; he insists that Dan is Ford's roommate and appreciates that Ford is "frugal" because "[h]e wants to keep that house payment down."[36]

Grimsley is one of the authors who pay particular attention to class, both in the context of southern literature as well as gay literature. While his previous books *My Drowning* and *Winter Birds* are excellent studies of poverty, *Comfort & Joy* is an exploration of the whole class system in the American South. By choosing two partners of different classes in a relationship, Grimsley is able to provide a comparative view in all its dimensions, both financial and cultural. The family backgrounds help explain how class is constructed and reproduced from one generation to the next, not only in the early stages of life, when the family is the most important socializing element, but also in early adulthood, when people, unless they sever their ties with their extended families of origin, are still under their influence. This, however, does not suggest that the protagonists need to remain in the same class, as can be best seen in Dan's rise from the lower to the middle class.

Grimsley's *Comfort & Joy* as a study of class is also interesting in the context of gay literature, especially when we consider the lower-class roots of Dan. In American gay literature there certainly are novels with lower-class protagonists, such as John Rechy's *City of Night* (1963), but in this case Grimsley keeps class issues free from any countercultural undertones. Poverty is thus not the entrance ticket to an underground existence; on the contrary, there is still a chance to move up the social ladder, as both Dan and his brother Allen show. While *Comfort & Joy*, which remains open-ended after both men are thrown out by Ford's parents, was published to much lesser critical acclaim than the other two novels of Grimsley's trilogy, it is more comprehensive and useful than the other novels in the exploration of class in the contemporary American South.

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35 Grimsley, *Comfort & Joy*, 156.

36 Grimsley, *Comfort & Joy*, 256.

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