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From "Water Liars" to *Yonder Stands Your Orphan*: Pastimes, Sports, and Games Inside/Outside the Frame of Barry Hannah's Eagle Lake Stories

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Abstract

For most of his career, Mississippi author Barry Hannah was deemed the postmodern heir to William Faulkner and is best known for the short fiction in his landmark collection Airships (1978), which begins with the much-anthologized story "Water Liars." *Like many of the meta-fictionalist masters of the 1970s (Barth, Coover, etc.), Hannah stepped inside/outside the frame of his fictions, often in his case by using highly elevated language, and syntax to depict a rogue's gallery of down-and-out characters, as well as the construction of numerous autobiographical personas, which wink and wave to his initiated readers. Thus, Hannah's fiction is not only funny, it is playful, as if to invite the reader into some fictional game. As Hannah's career developed, this sense of gamesmanship only seemed to increase as the characters and settings of many fictions began to reappear or return for cameo appearances. The characters first introduced in* "Water Liars" *reappear intermittently throughout Hannah's thirty-year career and populate the community we come to know as Eagle Lake, the setting for Hannah's final novel* Yonder Stands Your Orphan *(2001). While other critics have examined Hannah's passions for tennis and golf as having thematic significance, this article will focus on the pastime of fishing as well as many other intertextual games played inside/outside the frame of Hannah's Eagle Lake Stories, to reckon with how they inform his swan song,* Yonder Stands Your Orphan. *Ultimately, the paper will consider to what extent writing itself is a literary game on a meta level, a dynamic in which writers and tellers of tall tales strive against not only their peers but also their forbears.*

Keywords

Barry Hannah, William Faulkner, Southern Literature, Postsouthern Fiction, Game Theory in literature

In the late 1970s, Barry Hannah embarked upon the part of his career he is most remembered for, publishing his dynamic short fiction in *Esquire*, under the guidance of Gordon Lish, as counterpoint maximalist to Lish's minimalist master of the story, Raymond Carver. In Hannah's landmark collection, *Airships* (1978), much has been made of "Water Liars" as the book's opening salvo, a story that depicts a young man's fascination with a circle of geriatric fabulists. "Water Liars" is a story about the pastime of fishing, but more precisely, it is a story about a game played by old men swapping "fish stories," another vernacular phrase that indicates playful exaggeration or even a tall tale.[1] While many have written about Hannah's interlocking stories involving the old men who populate the community we ultimately come to know as Eagle Lake (an oxbow lake near Vicksburg), nothing has yet been written about Hannah's final novel, *Yonder Stands Your Orphan* (2001), as an extension of these stories. Often remembered as a postmodern William Faulkner, Hannah's literary reputation has recently been bolstered by Clare Chadd's book *Postregional Fictions* (2021), which investigates the importance of sports such as golf and tennis in Hannah's

1 For more on the "tall tale" and "fish story" in American literature, see for example Barry Sanders, "How to Tell a Story in America: (Make It All True, Damned Near)," *The North American Review* 284, no. 1 (January–February 1999): 38–42. The trope is central to Daniel Wallace's 1998 novel *Big Fish: A Novel of Mythic Proportions*.

fiction. In an interview with Dan Williams, Hannah compares the act of writing a story to the game of tennis, one of his passions, featured in his novel *The Tennis Handsome* (1983). The rules of stories are simple, they have "a beginning, a middle, and end and thrill me."[2] With this sports analogy, he adds, "There are not many rules in tennis; it's just difficult to play well."[3] It is therefore clear that Hannah thinks that writing is indeed a game, or at least we can talk of writing with the operational metaphor of a game. Still, conversely, in another interview with radio personality Don Swaim, Hannah says he is not sympathetic with metafictional authors who toy with the reader, and "provoke the audience into laughing at the whole idea of narrative." Hannah instead wants to play a game for stakes, a game in which the story is felt and taken seriously.[4] In this article, I will analyze the games played in three Eagle Lake stories and how they lead up to Hannah's swan song, *Yonder Stands Your Orphan*, and how, in their totality, the Eagle Lake stories prove to be perhaps the most ambitious of Hannah's fictions, as he attempts to match tall tales as well as the seriousness of not only Faulkner, but also Herman Melville.

The critic Mark J. Charney argues in his book *Barry Hannah* (1992, in the chapter "Crucified by the Truth") that all of Hannah's *Airships* (1978) protagonists embody the wounded psyche of the narrator in "Water Liars," that is, the "inability to face the 'truth' about themselves […] is the characteristic that binds together most of the narrators."[5] This sentiment might be extended to Hannah's entire career. Ruth Weston in *Barry Hannah*: *Postmodern Romantic* (1998) sees the story "High-Waters Railers" in the collection *Bats Out of Hell* (1993) as "a sort of coda for this theme which runs through Hannah's work."[6] Ultimately, *Yonder Stands Your Orphan* collects characters from "Water Liars," and "All the Old Harkening Faces at the Rail" in *Airships* and "High-Water Railers" and "Nicodemus Bluff" from *Bats Out of Hell*. More than one Hannah reader has paired "Water Liars" and "High-Water Railers" together as career bookends. The novelist Marianne Wiggins, in a 1993 review essay on Hannah for *The Nation*, was probably the first to observe that "'Water Liars' is the first story in *Airships*, and 'High-Water Railers' is the opening tale in *Bats Out of Hell*; and for any fan of the former, it's a tender reunion to open this new volume and on the first page find old joy reflected. (Clever, too, is Hannah's reflected use of the words 'liar' and 'rail' in each story: One word is the other spelled backwards)".[7] This is a bit of a wink to Hannah's constant readers, much as he winks at us through the names of his novels' protagonists, who have handles that are variations of his own name or nicknames: Harry in lieu of Barry in *Geronimo Rex*, Ray from *Ray* (1980), *Captain Maximus* (*Esquire* editor Gordon Lish used to refer to Hannah as both "Captain Fiction" and later "Captain Asshole")[8] from "Ride, Fly, Penetrate, Loiter" (1985) and "Ned Maxy, He Watching You" (1996). All these protagonists later seem to morph into Max Raymond from

2 Daniel E. Williams, "Interview with Barry Hannah," in *Perspectives on Barry Hannah*, ed. Martyn Bone (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 158.

3 Williams, "Interview," 158.

4 Don Swaim, "Barry Hannah Interview," in *Conversations with Barry Hannah*, ed. James G. Thomas. Jr. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2016), 90.

5 Mark J. Charney, *Barry Hannah* (New York: Twayne, 1992), 21.

6 Ruth D. Weston, *Barry Hannah: Postmodern Romantic* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 86.

7 Marianne Wiggins, "Ride, Fly, Penetrate, Loiter," *The Nation* 256, no. 22 (June 7, 1992): 805.

8 [8] Brad Watson, "Dragged Fighting from His Tomb," in *A Short Ride: Remembering Barry Hannah*, ed. Louis Bourgeois (Oxford: Vox Press, 2012), 191.

Yonder Stands Your Orphan, who shares many attributes of these former characters, attributes of Hannah himself. It is the old men, however, originally introduced as the liars and the railers that populate *Yonder Stand Your Orphan*, characters Hannah once referred to as "the people of the Cove," that is, Farte Cove: Sidney Farte, Hugh Ulrich, Peter Wren, Dr. Harvard, and Melanie Wooten (the widow of "Wootie," one of the original railers).[9]

These literary games ring of what has commonly been categorized as postmodern metafiction. Hannah objected, however, to his fiction being labeled as such. When the radio host Don Swaim asserted that Hannah could "fit in" with people like William Gass, Robert Coover, and John Barth, Hannah responded to the contrary:

> I don't think so. I have been called postmodernist because I take a lot of freedom with form. But postmodernists are generally provoking the audience into laughing at the whole idea of narrative and satirizing almost every sentence. I don't like that. I like to believe a story. I am fairly traditional. I like the old-fashioned tale.[10]

But Weston is undeniably onto something when she writes "[t]hat Hannah's fiction is in some sense autobiographical [and this] only adds to its surfictional character."[11] Weston judges that Hannah's "complex narratives are more accessible than most metafiction, for even those narratives most obviously on the border between fact and fiction are recognized as belonging to the category of 'story'" (69).[12] This is what Hannah calls "the old-fashioned tale."[13] Despite Hannah's playfulness and confessed openness to form, the author desires an earnest relationship with the reader and considers it something organic and sincere, just as his characters do when talking (telling tales) to one another.

Wiggins indicates that she thinks that even the stories in the collections (*Airships*, *Captain Maximus*, and *Bats Out of Hell*) seem to be talking to one another, sort of like ham radio operators, but with a limited sense of who is at the controls of the other stations: "there is a lot of phantom imaging going on, a lot of shadow hiding, or what the moon people [NASA] call 'coherent backscatter.'"[14] Ultimately, this backscatter is swept up and collected in *Yonder Stands Your Orphan*, but before we peer into the novel or the stories themselves, we have to investigate the status of such games in Hannah's work, and why he seems so interested in the dramatic or tragicomic possibilities of pastimes, sports, and games in his fiction.

In Clare Chadd's *Postregional Fictions: Barry Hannah and the Challenges of Southern Studies*,[15] Chadd is taken by the way the author juxtaposes the horrors of the Vietnam War to the decorum of golf in his widely anthologized story, "Midnight and I'm Not Famous Yet":

9 Williams, "Interview," 158.

10 Swaim, "Barry Hannah Interview," 90.

11 Weston, *Barry Hannah: Postmodern Romantic*, 68.

12 Weston, *Barry Hannah: Postmodern Romantic*, 69.

13 Swaim, "Barry Hannah Interview," 90.

14 Wiggins, "Ride, Fly, Penetrate, Loiter," 805.

15 Clare Chadd, *Postregional Fictions: Barry Hannah and the Challenges of Southern Studies*, Southern Literary Studies (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2021).

> While Hannah writes in relation to an established American tradition of sportswriting in relation to masculine frontier mythology and 'boys' own' fiction—where writers such as Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Faulkner, and Ring Lardner have written about (and against) the hegemonic figure of the American sportsman—the ironic difference here is that golf is not hunting, bullfighting, football, or boxing. It is a different kind of mastery and independence that might appear to pertain to the hegemonic figure of the southern gentleman: as the most noncontact of sports, golf gets its masculinist credentials from its 'play-by-the-rules' sense of its own propriety.[16]

If tennis and golf become operational or structural metaphors for the game of fiction, in fact the pastime ("pastime" in the sense of Eric Berne—see below) of fishing is what Hannah most often uses as a vehicle to question the whole notion of "masculinist credentials."

"Water Liars" opens Hannah's first collection of short stories, *Airships*; it also introduces the characters of Farte Cove, so it is the natural place to start. In "The Narrative Structure of Barry Hannah's 'Water Liars,'" David Thoreen observes that even though "'Water Liars' appears casual and meandering and therefore related to the oral tradition, this spontaneous orality is an illusion, behind which lies a deliberate and traditional architecture."[17] To understand this seemingly spontaneous architecture, it is worth consulting Eric Berne's 1960's classic of popular psychology (a/k/a transactional analysis) *Games People Play* (1964).[18] In the past, Berne has been a favoured approach to discussing the vicious parlor games that structure *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962): "Get the Guest," "Humiliate the Host", etc.[19] Like *Who's Afraid…?,* "Water Liars" examines a male ego threatened by lack of financial and career success as well as female sexual desire and experience. After overindulging at his thirty-third birthday party, the narrator, a substitute secondary school teacher, recalls he and his wife "both waking up to a truth session about the lovers we'd had before we met."[20] After "fishing" for information, for truth, the narrator is surprised that his wife's sexual history was as "mildly exciting and unusual" as his own, and the news that she was not a virgin when they married has "dazed and exhilarated" him for several weeks: "Finally, it drove me crazy, and I came out to Farte Cove to rest, under the pretense of a fishing week."[21]

The narrator has come to Farte Cove specifically to see the liars, or the community of retired old men, although "the lineup is always different, because they're always dying out or succumbing to constipation."[22] Sidney Farte is "a great liar himself. He tells about seeing ghost people around the lake and tells big loose ones about the size of the fish those ghosts took out of Farte Cove in years past."[23] Eric Berne in his chapter on "Pastimes," defines a pastime as "a series of semi-ritualistic, simple, complementary transitions arranged around a certain field of material."[24]

16 Chadd, *Postregional Fictions*, 88.

17 David Thoreen, "The Narrative Structure of Barry Hannah's 'Water Liars,'" *Mississippi Quarterly* 54, no. 2 (2001): 224.

18 Eric Berne, *Games People Play: The Basic Handbook of Transactional Analysis* (1964 New York: Random House, 1994).

19 See Joy Flasch, "Games People Play in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?". *Essays on Modern American Drama: Williams, Miller, Albee, and Shepard*, edited by Dorothy Parker (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), 121–129. <https://doi.org/10.3138/9781487577803-011>.

20 Hannah, "Water Liars," *Long, Last, Happy,* 8.

21 Hannah, "Water Liars," *Long, Last, Happy,* 8.

22 Hannah, "Water Liars," *Long, Last, Happy,* 7.

23 Hannah, "Water Liars," *Long, Last, Happy,* 7.

24 Berne, *Games People Play*, 16.

The material is "adaptively programmed" so that each pastime player must manage "procedures" and "rituals," in an effort to play correctly: "The better his adaptation, the more he will get out of it [the pastime]" and the more status the player will accrue inside the circle.[25] Pastimes might be determined sociologically by age, race, sex, or socioeconomic status, so for instance "'General Motors' (comparing cars) and 'Who Won' (sports) are both 'Man Talk.'"[26] The old men in "Water Liars," with their poles, not only engage in the sport known as fishing but also play a ritualistic pastime, which I will call "Big Fish." Big Fish is "Man Talk," where fishermen compete to tell fish stories that take on tall-tale or even legendary levels of exaggeration. Big Fish, as we will see, defines itself as a pastime for the old men in which sex may be spoken about in fanciful or even fantastic terms, but not in realistic or personal ones.

When the narrator arrives at the cove, Sidney Farte, "prevaricating away," is telling a story about a fisherman who was once reported to have "intercourse" with one of the ghosts that haunt the Yazoo River: "'Intercourse,' said an old-timer […] with long disgust, glad, I guess, he was not involved."[27] Unlike the narrator, for the old men sex is no longer a subject they relish, at least not with eros, although Sidney does not mind using it to make others feel shock or discomfort—it is a subject fit more for horror than arousal. Sidney goes on to talk of ghostly Indians, an oft-told tale about seeing "Yazoo hisself," but this well-polished chestnut fails to interest. Yet another old man picks up the game by complaining of wild teens, who threw "a party off the end of the pier, them drunken children. They was smokin dope and two-thirds of them was nekid swimming in the water. Good hunnerd of em."[28] The talk of naked teens makes the narrator feel uneasy, as he imagines his "wife in 1960 in the group of high schoolers she must have had. My jealousy went out to the stars."[29] Finally, the story is passed to "a new, younger man, maybe sixty but with a face of a man who had surrendered," who begins to tell another ghostly fishing story, only when he tracked down the otherworldly moaning on the edge of his favorite fishing spot "the big unhuman sounds" turns out to be his "*own* daughter" making love to an older man with a mustache, a stranger "and them sounds over the water scarin us like ghosts."[30]

The novice violates the unwritten rules of Big Fish, which call for tall tales, not true ones that shame and hurt. According to Berne, pastimes serve as a "social selection process."[31] Sidney Farte wastes no time in banishing the newcomer, "'Tell your kind of story somewhere else.'"[32] At thirty-three, the narrator is far too young to speak in the circle of the water liars, so the narrator invites the man exiled from Farte Cove to fish with him as he sees them as "kindred" and both "crucified by the truth."[33] Neither of them can reconcile their possessiveness with the idea that women might be as curious or experienced sexually as themselves. This sense of sex as something

25 Berne, *Games People Play*, 16.

26 Berne, *Games People Play*, 17.

27 Hannah, "Water Liars," *Long, Last, Happy,* 9.

28 Hannah, "Water Liars," *Long, Last, Happy,* 9.

29 Hannah, "Water Liars," *Long, Last, Happy,* 10.

30 Hannah, "Water Liars," *Long, Last, Happy,* 10.

31 Berne, *Games People Play*, 17.

32 Hannah, "Water Liars," *Long, Last, Happy,* 10.

33 Hannah, "Water Liars," *Long, Last, Happy,* 11.

dangerous remains an ongoing theme in Hannah's fiction, along with his lying narrators; teenage sexuality and, more specifically, the exploitation of teens will be the thematic crux of *Yonder Stands Your Orphan*.

Thoreen, among other critics, finds the closure to "Water Liars" pat and unsatisfying, and Robert Klevay in "'He tossed his line out grimly': Barry Hannah's Literary Parables" is equally unimpressed by the "crucified by the truth," ending, but argues that the pat ending comes from the limited wisdom of the narrator.[34] Klevay gives an incredibly nuanced reading of "Water Liars" in which he compares the story to the first chapter of Melville's *Moby-Dick*, "Loomings," as well as Hannah's own return to Farte Cove in "High-Water Railers," where Klevay convincingly argues that Hannah's sense of play and allusion is actually a sly meditation on artistic ambition and accomplishment.

It is perfectly reasonable for us to say that fiction writers are playing the game of literature, which is a game played both on and off the page. Wiggins apprehends that Hannah is a player in both his fiction and his life as a fiction writer. In her review, she paints him as a bit of a rascal, who has a loose affiliation with a generation of literary rascals. Wiggins observes that Hannah "goes out of his way to lead us to believe that he is a hard writing, hard-drinking, hard-balling man. His male friends [...] are all hard-living Southern coots and snards, most of whom played football in their younger days."[35] This coterie does not really, however, constitute a literary movement: "My own experience is that writers do not run in packs […] but often writers swim in common currents until they need to break for shore, or until one of them drowns."[36] In Hannah's case, Wiggins says Hannah's "swim team" includes Tom McGuane, Jim Harrison, and Willie Morris. What Wiggins finds interesting in this swim team is how active they all are as they are always "fishing and drinking, or grilling meat and drinking, or cutting horses, shooting clay things out the sky, hopping on Harleys, cruising through our big two-hearted playgrounds in giant cars," (804).[37] Living in London, Wiggins assures us that English male writers "love to show off in front of one another in the form of recitation—not debate, actually more a game of talk, fun with one another," often in "Fa-rench accents."[38] The game of literature is measured not only on the page or by prizes or sales, but in one's ability to impress his or her peers. Ultimately, what constitutes literary longevity, or even canon, other than a roster of anachronistic peers who, over centuries, have been the most superior players of the game?

We should turn at this point to Robert Klevay, who proposes that "Water Liars" has a mimetic relationship to *Moby-Dick*. According to Klevay, "'Water Liars echoes the first chapter of *Moby-Dick* and defines artistic goals for Hannah's fiction in relation to Melville's famous novel at a time when Hannah was not yet a success."[39] Klevay further asserts that "Water Liars" creates a "competition between bawdy jokes and a pat spiritual revelation," while "High-Water Railers"

34 Robert Klevay, "'He tossed his line out grimly': Barry Hannah's Literary Parables," *Mississippi Quarterly* 64, no. 1–2 (2011): 129–148.

35 Wiggins, "Ride, Fly, Penetrate, Loiter," 804.

36 Wiggins, "Ride, Fly, Penetrate, Loiter," 804.

37 Wiggins, "Ride, Fly, Penetrate, Loiter," 804.

38 Wiggins, "Ride, Fly, Penetrate, Loiter," 804.

39 Klevay, "'He tossed his line out grimly': Barry Hannah's Literary Parables," 129.

"consciously parodies such a rivalry."[40] In the opening chapter of *Moby-Dick*, "Loomings," a penniless and depressed Ishmael confesses, "Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is the damp, drizzly November in my soul […] then I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can," not as passenger nor officer but as a common sailor.[41] Klevay juxtaposes Melville's passage with Hannah's opening lines, "When I am run down and flocked around by the world, I go down to Farte Cove off the Yazoo River and take my beer to the end of the pier where the old liars are still snapping and wheezing at one another,"[42] If we consider that *Moby-Dick* is one of the greatest fish stories of all time, then perhaps we can agree with Klevay that "'Water Liars'" is a series of fish stories that undercut the grandfather of fish stories; more specifically it is a "parable about Hannah's admiration for scabrous humor over self-revelation."[43] While Klevey sees Hannah's story as criticizing the transcendental nature of *Moby-Dick*, the narrators are quite similar in their longing for company: "[b]oth narrators also identify with the unusal communities which they are entering, that of common sailors in Ishmael's case and that of the old liars in the case of Hannah's narrators, even though the communities often seem ridiculous and discomforting to outsiders."[44] Also both communities, "are inspired by the water before them and its mythology: the one activity that they take part in is fishing, drawing on the cliché of the fictional giant catch that got away."[45] According to Klevay, by comparing the common themes in Hannah's fiction and Melville, in which both create narrators that "seek asylum from their depression and the pressures of the outside world among a group of unattractive outsiders," we can also mark the differences.[46] For Hannah, "water means not dealing with the real 'truth' of the world and comforting oneself with outrageous fictions; Melville's simple sailors are conduits for truth their superiors could not appreciate."[47] Of course, the pressure on the community of "Water Liars" is intensified over time in Hannah's fiction, as the world they inhabit in the initial short story is challenged and complicated in *Yonder Stands Your Orphan* by existential questions not dissimilar to *Moby Dick*. Hannah brings evil to Eagle Lake in the final novel, and many who found sanctuary in the fishing circle before will be tested and found wanting in the greater world of Eagle Lake, much as all the sailors are tested in *Moby Dick*.

"In High-Water Railers," the fecund oxbow lake (yet to be identified as Eagle Lake) has rejuvenated, as if one of Sidney Farte's mythic lies had become a genuine miracle: "Many eutrophic lakes, their food chains unbalanced by man or nature, simply died. But this oxbow had come back in the nineties. Bass, sunfish, perch, bluegill, gar, buffalo, carp, and now small alligators popped to the surface."[48] While the fisherman regard this bounty, they seem to pass around lies less frequently after the death of one in their circle, the former college president, "saintly Wooten had established

40 Klevay, "'He tossed his line out grimly': Barry Hannah's Literary Parables," 129.

41 Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 2.

42 Hannah, "Water Liars," *Long, Last, Happy,* 7.

43 Klevay, "'He tossed his line out grimly': Barry Hannah's Literary Parables," 132.

44 Klevay, "'He tossed his line out grimly': Barry Hannah's Literary Parables," 134.

45 Klevay, "'He tossed his line out grimly': Barry Hannah's Literary Parables," 135.

46 Klevay, "'He tossed his line out grimly': Barry Hannah's Literary Parables," 137.

47 Klevay, "'He tossed his line out grimly': Barry Hannah's Literary Parables," 138.

48 Hannah, "High-Water Railers," *Long, Last Happy*, 135.

a certain spirit on the pier that was not recanted at his death."[49] Sidney Farte and Peter Wren are still prodigious liars, but Lewis, a naturalist, is more earnest. It is he who changes the pastime of Big Fish to "sins of omission," that is, confessing the sins one has omitted to commit. Lewis sets the tone for the game, saying he regrets never having a "significant pet," and muses it "would be nice to have an old dog harkening toward the end with me," echoing the title of "All the Old Harkening Faces at the Rail" from *Airships*. Ulrich, who earlier appeared in that story, admits he missed "the Big Money" as he could have been the "Howard Hughes of individual flight."[50] Again we think of the many pilots featured in *Airships*. Sidney blurts out, "I wish I had a heart" like the Tin Man in *The Wizard of Oz* and confesses he never cried at his wife's funeral and, "Begun lying 'cause there wasn't nothing in true life that moved me."[51] Peter Wren ends the game by declaring he that he never had "sex with a child."[52] The railers are shocked. Wren waffles, "I mean a youngish girl, say fourteen."[53] Being members of an older generation, the old men are left to wonder if Wren was now "adjusting himself": "Fourteen was suddenly too legitimate, hardly a story at all. In their youth, fourteen was open season."[54] This sin of omission anticipates the plot of *Yonder Stands Your Orphan*, whose villain, Man Mortimer, exploits orphan girls of fourteen into homemade pornography and prostitution.

The old men fall into a reverie of past sins committed rather than omitted, and the vile Sidney begins to brag of his teen conquests when he is interrupted by Wooten's visiting widow, Melanie, who uses language straight from Berne's *Games People Play*, "Don't mind me, don't you dare. I like man-talk."[55] Now in mixed company, the railers end their game of comparing sins and instead decide to fulfill Lewis's wish for a pet. "That's hardly a dream you have to defer" says Wren, and they all walk together to Melanie's station wagon parked above the pier, "All in, they set out over to Vicksburg to find Lewis a dog."[56] According to Klevay, "High-Water Railers" is a reversal of sorts, "a telling contrast with the self-important revelation of 'Water Liars'" but also the awkwardness created by shunning those outside the circle.[57] In the later story, "the absence of a dog proves a uniting force to the old men as the exaggerated sense of sexual betrayal which unites the narrator and the stranger in 'Water Liars.'"[58] Klevay concludes that Hannah's rough humor is a rejection of the "philosophical humor of Herman Melville," but that both authors are interested in questions concerning community.[59]

Moby-Dick is often compared to William Faulkner's "The Bear" in terms of its quest narrative and mythic construction, in which both crew and hunting party respectively seek a legendary

49 Hannah, "High-Water Railers," *Long, Last Happy*, 137.
50 Hannah, "High-Water Railers," *Long, Last Happy*, 139.
51 Hannah, "High-Water Railers," *Long, Last Happy*, 139.
52 Hannah, "High-Water Railers," *Long, Last Happy*, 139.
53 Hannah, "High-Water Railers," *Long, Last Happy*, 139.
54 Hannah, "High-Water Railers," *Long, Last Happy*, 140.
55 Hannah, "High-Water Railers," *Long, Last Happy*, 140.
56 Hannah, "High-Water Railers," *Long, Last Happy*, 142.
57 Klevay, "'He tossed his line out grimly': Barry Hannah's Literary Parables," 145.
58 Klevay, "'He tossed his line out grimly': Barry Hannah's Literary Parables," 145.
59 Klevay, "'He tossed his line out grimly': Barry Hannah's Literary Parables," 146.

creature with an old if not supernatural reputation. If Hannah alludes to the first in "Water Liars," then he writes something of a parody of "The Bear" in "Nicodemus Bluff," the last of his stories to feature characters that frequent Farte Cove, namely Peter Wren (in this story he is known as Colonel Wren) and Dr. Harvard. Wren, in particular, is proven a fraud and an object of ridicule in the story. "Nicodemus Bluff" at first seems to be about hunting rather than fishing; the setting of Farte Cove is traded for a hunting camp in Arkansas, just on the other side of the Mississippi River. If "Nicodemus Bluff" is a challenge to Faulkner it does so in the form of the "old-fashioned tale," for it is a story that is unusually traditional for Hannah, almost as if he had decided to write something from an older age, perhaps a tale in the voice of an Edgar Allan Poe story like "The Fall of the House of Usher." Ruth Weston reckons it among Hannah's most ambitious stories:

> That Hannah is still concerned with adolescent initiation in *Bats Out of Hell* is apparent in 'Nicodemus Bluff,' […] it presents a parody of that quintessential southern story of a boy's initiation into manhood—Faulkner's 'The Bear.' In this story of nineteen pages, Hannah manages to include the themes of initiation and of the relations between races, classes, genders, and generations. In addition, contemporary problems—drugs, war, corruption in business, and sin in general—are raised.[60]

Told from the perspective of a recovering drug addict, Harris recounts the traumatic event he experienced as a ten-year-old that set him on the path to mental obliteration. Despite his father Gomar's lack of education, Harris grows up with suburban wealth, "we had the lawn, the porch, the two cars, the nice fishing boat" but it is all the result of a loan from the banker Garrand Pool and Colonel Wren, among others.[61] Garland Pool considers himself a "Renaissance man, a Leonardo of the backwater" when it comes to all gentleman's pastimes, "hunting, golf, chess." He thinks of himself as a "peer of the realm" but grows demanding "like an old Czar" from his "dormant serfdom, that is people in his employ or in his debt."[62] Gomar and Harris are invited to a hunting camp owned by Pool, Wren, Dr. Harvard, etc. When the hunting is ruined by heavy rain, Pool offers to release Gomar from his debt if he can beat him in a chess tournament since Gomar is rumored to be a chess genius. Pool knows that despite having a country club membership, Gomar is an embarrassment at golf, and "it couldn't be a man from my father's circumstances could come forth with much of a chess game."[63] Hannah deftly reframes the narrative structure of the communal sport of hunting (Faulkner's sport of masculine, competitive, but also cooperative community) into a winner-take-all game in which competitors are pitted against one another.

The story's supernatural elements are twofold, one inside the frame of the lodge and one outside in the woods: Gomar's prowess at chess is a result of his split personality or, more likely, possession by a spiteful feminine spirit, "the chess game as it went on, changed him more and more into a woman, a crafty woman."[64] The woods outside the lodge are haunted by the mournful Nicodemus, a black man who perished near the bluff by the river. Pool functions much like the lordly General Compson in "The Bear" and Colonel Wren plays his aide-de-camp Major de Spain.

60 Weston, *Barry Hannah: Postmodern Romantic*, 24.

61 Hannah, "Nicodemus Bluff," in *Bats Out of Hell* (New York: Grove Atlantic, 1993), 364.

62 Hannah, "Nicodemus Bluff," 370.

63 Hannah, "Nicodemus Bluff," 370.

64 Barry Hannah, "Nicodemus Bluff," 368.

Ike McCaslin is recast as Harris (both are ten years-old), and Gomar is something of a Boon Hoganback, uneducated and strange, but both the victors of the stories' games—Boon in the hunting of Old Ben, the legendary bear, Gomar in the three-day chess tournament. As for Ash, General Composon's black cook in "The Bear" (just shy of a minstrel show character), his counterpart is Nicodemus, Hannah's titular ghost. Nicodemus was previously a cook and general factotum for Pool, but is rumored to have been shot near the bluff that bears his name by Pool himself because "[h]e owed Pool a lifetime's money. Couldn't afford a hospital. He asked Pool to shoot him and so they [Pool or Pool's father] did."[65] Ash/Nicodemus are black characters on the periphery of a white social matrix that still thinks of itself as being organized in feudal terms.

This attitude is satirized in *Yonder Stands Your Orphan*, when the gambler and pimp Mortimer and bitter rival Frank Booth, the lover of a woman Mortimer hopes to exploit, find common ground in their love of Civil War history:

> It was common wisdom that the South would have given the slaves their freedom the instant they kicked the North's ass, but that the slaves would have chosen to remain. This thought had brought tears to the eyes of many, many old southern frauds, some of whom still owned retarded black men as slaves, retainers, hostelries, cooks, deer dressers.[66]

Needless to say, Mortimer is not so different from Pool, as he ensnares his human traffic with a combination of usury, gambling, and aspirational lies.

As for Gomar, he defeats Pool because he has been "'invested' by the woman" and thus liberated from Pool's snares by her superior skill.[67] In "Nicodemus Bluff," the chess game works similarly to other games in *Go Down, Moses* (1934) in its totality. Thadious Davis asserts in *Games of Property: Law, Race, Gender, and Faulkner's Go Down, Moses* (2003), in the Chapter "Playing to Win," "The contests in hunting, in cards, dice, and courting depicted in *Go Down, Moses* all signify challenges to transcendent social order. The convoluted games signify the convoluted economics of slavery. The economic motive is never far from the surface of play".[68] The chess game in "Nicodemus Bluff" might be compared to another story in *Go Down, Moses*, "Was," in which the mixed-race slave Tomey's Turl wins his right to marry Sophonisiba (and thus claim his manhood) via a poker game.

Conversely, "Gomar" loses his manhood and his dignity by being possessed by the spirit of "the woman." When Garrand Pool admits defeat, Gomar gloats, "'It's all mine free and clear I won it! I won it!' he said, shrieking in that woman's voice."[69] Pool beats Gomar with a long, hard pepperoni stick in front of young Harris and then drowns him in a puddle of stinking rainwater. When Pool holds Gomar up from the puddle, he orders Gomar to "'Show him. Talk for your son. Let him see who you are."[70] Harris shudders to recall his father, "spilled out in the cracking,

65 Barry Hannah, "Nicodemus Bluff," 378.

66 Barry Hannah, *Yonder Stands Your Orphan* (New York: Grove Atlantic, 2001), 62.

67 Hannah, "Nicodemus Bluff," 368.

68 Thadious M. Davis, *Games of Property: Law, Race, Gender, and Faulkner's* Go Down, Moses (Durham and London: Duke University Press), 64.

69 Hannah, "Nicodemus Bluff," 379.

70 Hannah, "Nicodemus Bluff," 379.

cackling female voice, 'I won! I won!"[71] Victory at the game has no power to preserve Gomar's dignity, and he dies a few days later, hit by a car while walking the perimeter of the country club where he never fit in, excluded from the games of the prosperous. Like "High-Water Railers," the recovered drug addict Harris ends the story by going to find a dog, or dogs rather, "the animals out at the shelter need me. I want to look into this."[72] Harris now finds community and purpose in giving his time to animals that are always in the moment. "Nicodemus Bluff," inside the frame of *Bats Out of Hell*, bookends with "High-Water Railers," and both are juxtaposed outside the frame of *Yonder Stands Your Orphan*.

The title *Yonder Stands Your Orphan* is drawn from Bob Dylan's song "It's All Over Now Baby Blue" in which Dylan warns, "The highway is for gamblers/better use your sense..." Hannah's villain, Man Mortimer, is a gambler and pimp, whose mobile bordello resides "in giant new sports utility vehicles with flattened rear seats, good mattresses […] the aphrodisiacs of new car smell and White Diamond mist working side by side."[73]

"…Take what you have gathered from coincidence," sings Dylan (the next phrase following is the title of Hannah's book). John B Kachuba's article "Breadcrumb Trails and Spider Webs: Form in *Yonder Stands Your Orphan*" could also have been entitled "Take What You Have Gathered from Coincidence": in the article, Kachuba asserts that Mortimer and protagonist Max Raymond do not share or cross paths, "so much as they collide with them and set off other collisions, like a good break on a fast pool table: new narratives continually emerge, each time involving in a combination of characters, mixing them up, setting up new and sometimes difficult combinations."[74] This is especially true of the liars and railers that weave in and out of the novel. Kachuba observes, Hannah uses what J. Hillis Miller describes as *anastomoses*, that is, a telephonic connection, to organize this novel. Originally drawn from biology, Miller borrows the term "anastomosis" (the interconnection of blood vessels or nerves) to describe how narrative structures in postmodern fiction interconnect, overlap, and loop into one another. Instead of a linear progression (beginning, middle, end), postmodern novels often create networks of stories, digressions, and intertextual references that "branch" and "rejoin" unpredictably with the implication that meaning is not found in a simple plot but in a network of connections. This might well align with what Hannah himself identified as a "freedom of form." We might juxtapose this "freedom of form" to more conventional metafiction, described as the "Chinese-Box effect," in Brian McHale's *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987).[75] In the Chinese Box effect, one fiction contains another, allowing a reader to explore various ontological levels of being more neatly. Hannah's novel's telephonic connection structure may cause "confusion and vertigo," while the metafiction of John Barth, Robert Coover, etc. is vertical, ontological, and easier for the audience to get a hold of. Hannah's characters manage to hook up "in a lateral direction as each of the other characters manages to link up with another in

71 Hannah, "Nicodemus Bluff," 379.

72 Hannah, "Nicodemus Bluff," 382.

73 Hannah, *Yonder Stands Your Orphan*, 7.

74 John B. Kachuba, "Bread Crumb Trails and Spider Webs; Form in *Yonder Stands Your Orphan*," *Mississippi Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (Winter 2004–2005): 76

75 Kachuba borrows the concept of anastomoses from J. Hillis Miller's *Ariadne's Thread: Story Lines*. (New Haven: Yale UP, 1992); Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1987).

a complex web of relationships."[76] Subsequently, "Every character in the novel can be linked to any other character through sexual activity of some kind in a vast network of anastomoses, no matter what point they enter the network."[77]

It would seem me that these networks go beyond the scope of the novel itself and reach out of the frame of the novel and into the frame of Hannah's earlier fiction. Kachuba illustrates the principle of anastomoses by showing how the word orphan is plucked from Dylan's song and circulates through the novel. Betsy, a thirteen-year-old prostitute living with Mortimer says, "You and me old man are orphans from normal."[78] Raymond's wife, Mimi, pities her husband "as you might a deaf and dumb orphan around Christmastime."[79] And when the deranged couple Gene and Penny Ten Hoor organize a camp for orphans to fill the psychic hole left by the death of their child, it has a profound effect on the liars and railers of Farte Cove. Max Raymond, Melanie Wooten, Peter Wren, Sidney Farte, and Hugh Ulrich "collide with the narratives of the orphans" as the connections become more complicated.[80] "'Did you see them orphans?' asked Sidney. 'Orphans?' asked Ulrich. 'Who isn't an orphan, I ask you?'"[81] As Kachuba rightly points out, "Ulrich's declaration"[82] echoes Betsy's statement that they are all "orphans from normal," but it also rephrases one of the most famous lines from Melville's "Loomings": "Who aint a slave? Tell me that."[83] Thus, we are not bound by the confines of the book. Anastomoses returns us to "Water Liars" on a number of levels, via the liars themselves, the "nekid" teenagers on the water, and even Hannah's previous engagement with Melville. Hannah's "backscatter" helps create the Yoknapatawpha-like Mississippi, which he constructs not only with returning characters, but also with literary allusion.

As Mortimer scours the casinos and highways for women in trouble, he keeps an eye out for jailbait as "he had developed a taste for young and younger flesh. This was thrilling and meant high money. Men and women in this nation were changing and he intended to charge them for it."[84] But in the South, young flesh has always been in demand, "open season." This can be attested to by the love lives of Elvis Presley and Jerry Lee Lewis (Hannah has written derisively about both), whose child brides were fourteen and thirteen, respectively, when they seduced them. Making Mortimer look like Elvis might have been too Gothic even for Hannah. Instead, Mortimer resembles rock-country heartthrobs Fabian and later Conway Twitty, which we might juxtapose with the unglamorous Dylan.

Hannah will eventually liberate the liars and railers from Farte Cove, when Dr. Harvard constructs a pleasure barge that allows the oldsters mobility. This will only bring them into greater conflict with Mortimer as the residents of Eagle Lake "collide." Hannah claims, "I am not patterning anything after Faulkner, but it just seems to me that simply to endure is not a surprising piece of

76 Kachuba, "Bread Crumb Trails and Spider Webs," 83.

77 Kachuba, "Bread Crumb Trails and Spider Webs," 85.

78 Hannah, *Yonder Stands Your Orphan*, 322.

79 Hannah, *Yonder Stands Your Orphan*, 38.

80 Kachuba, "Bread Crumb Trails and Spider Webs," 78.

81 Hannah, *Yonder Stands Your Orphan*, 46.

82 Kachuba, "Bread Crumb Trails and Spider Webs," 78.

83 Melville, *Moby Dick*, 5.

84 Hannah, *Yonder Stands Your Orphan*, 49.

philosophy, but the people of the Cove just simply take it, and it's a miracle that they do take it."[85] Perhaps Hannah is not right to distance himself from Faulkner here. However, it seems he spent a lifetime forging a style in opposition to both the high rhetoric of Faulkner and, according to Klevay, the philosophical musings of Melville, in "Water Liars" at least. Hannah's acerbic style derides what Faulkner scholar and editor Noel Polk has called the "legending" of the fiction writers that came before. Hannah has killed peacocks to spite Flannery O'Connor in *Geronimo Rex* and reduced Eudora Welty with attacks of flatulence in his *Boomerang* (1989). Polk argues in "Even Mississippi: Legending in Barry Hannah's *Bats Out of Hell*," that throughout Hannah's career, he has attacked the arch seriousness of old guard modernism, specifically Faulkner, "[f]or example in his first novel *Geronimo Rex*, wherein his young more or less autobiographical hero shoots and kills a neighbor's peacock—a peacock not incidentally named Bayard—thereby scoring a palpable hit not just on Flannery O'Connor but also on William Faulkner."[86] Polk asserts, "Hannah is thus out to destroy the legends and the legending, to free the spirit of illusion at whatever cost to peace and order."[87] Hannah has often been accused of having an oedipal relationship with Faulkner which manifests in a Bloomian anxiety of influence, but here I submit that Hannah is not so much killing sacred cows (or peacocks) as attacking the most often copied aspects of Faulkner and O'Connor. He is attacking clichés rather than icons. He is attacking the reverence of a readership at worship, rather than a reader who marvels at a game of Big Fish. While *Moby Dick* is biblical in its construction, we must not confuse it with the Bible: Melville's narrator is, after all, playing with the reader, as a fisherman plays with a fish. The liars and railers in *Yonder Stand Your Orphan* still possess the imagination to trade tall tales inside the frame of Hannah's fiction. Some stand up to Mortimer, others fall into his sway (Sidney Farte and Peter Wren have already been exposed as lechers in the stories), but all of them "take it" and endure: "The saints are coming through," sings Dylan. At the same time, Hannah's fiction seems to be jousting with the legendary tall tales of masters like Melville and Faulkner. Polk sees Hannah as heir to Faulkner, not in terms of style or vision, but in terms of what he is willing to risk: "we get access to a completely uncorralled imagination and so to a brand new southern landscape and cast of characters; we get the artistic courage of a sort I haven't seen since William Faulkner, the courage to risk misunderstanding and failure."[88] It is a feat Hannah accomplishes without satirizing the whole notion of the story itself, and thus he attempts to join the circle of master storytellers: trading tall tales and fish stories at the same time, he takes them to task.

85 Williams, "Interview with Barry Hannah," 159.

86 Noel Polk, "Even Mississippi: Legending in Barry Hannah's *Bats Out of Hell*," in *The (Un)Popular South: Proceedings of the Southern Studies Forum Biennial Conference*, September 6–9, 2007, Palacký University, Olomouc, Czech Republic, ed. Marcel Arbeit and M. Thomas Inge (Olomouc: Palacký University Press, 2011), 139.

87 Polk, "Even Mississippi: Legending in Barry Hannah's *Bats Out of Hell*," 150.

88 Polk, "Even Mississippi: Legending in Barry Hannah's *Bats Out of Hell*," 150–151.

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