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"My Favorite Critic" by David Meischen

Half an Hour with Leslie Fiedler

A really good short story radically alters the way I see fiction and the world. Few literary readers would argue with me about that. But over the course of my reading and writing life, I've also learned that an excellent critical essay does much the same, igniting that volatile spark called epiphany.



Years ago, in a high school literature class, one of my students defined epiphany as “a blinding flash of the obvious.” I might have dismissed her phrase as merely snark, except she was right. The truth gleaned from an epiphany can look remarkably like cliché—Raskolnikov’s moment of transformation in *Crime and Punishment* summed up in a lyric by Lennon and McCartney: “Love is all you need” (yeah, yeah, yeah).

What makes an epiphany so transformative, however, is not the little nugget of words—repeated ad infinitum like a litany or a bad dream—but the flash by which a truism is made manifest, the way we feel the revelation in our bones.

The first piece of criticism that got my attention in that way was Leslie Fiedler’s classic essay “Come Back to the Raft

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Ag'in, Huck Honey!"—an audacious and irreverent assertion that at the heart of several great American classics beats a mythic desire for a pure and perfect love *between two men, a white protagonist and a man of color*.

Fiedler was a mid-twentieth-century literary titan. In a 2003 *Slate* memorial essay, Sam Tanenhaus calls him “the original chest-thumping extrovert of American criticism.” His “Come Back to the Raft” was originally published in 1948 in the *Partisan Review*, decades before I’d heard of it, and the title refers, of course, to Huckleberry Finn and that famous rafting trip down the Mississippi River with his friend, the escaped slave Jim. Fiedler wrote:

At the focus of emotion, where we are accustomed to find in the world’s great novels some heterosexual passion...we come instead on the fugitive slave and the no-account boy lying side by side on a raft borne by the endless river toward an impossible escape, or the pariah sailor waking in the tattooed arms of the brown harpooner on the verge of their impossible quest.

Fiedler gave more space to the sailor and his harpooner, *Moby Dick*’s Ishmael and Queequeg, about whom Melville was quite explicit:

I found Queequeg's arm thrown over me in the most loving and affectionate manner. You had almost thought I had been his wife.... [H]e still hugged me tightly, as though naught but death should part us twain.... Thus, then, in our heart's honeymoon, lay I and Queequeg—a cosy, loving pair.



QUEEQUEG AND HIS HARPOON.

Fiedler followed Melville's "step-by-step exposition" of this marriage: "the initial going to bed together and the first shyness overcome, that great tomahawk-pipe accepted in a familiarity that dispels fear; next, the wedding ceremony itself."

In my early twenties, forty-plus years ago, I felt like I'd been slapped awake when I read this essay. It was the spring of 1970. I lived in a shabby Austin boardinghouse a block or so from the University of Texas. A mere two years removed from the family farm, I was dabbling in literature, and though I didn't know it, I was ready to be shaken out of my provincial torpor.

What amazed me is that *I had read Moby Dick*. I had perused the very same passages Fiedler quoted. Just short of my nineteenth birthday, in my first college literature course, I had encountered Ishmael's description of two men abed together. I must have thought it was all "symbolic"—that the words didn't really mean what they so plainly say. I was still unaware that the word *classic* had worked a kind of reverse magic on me, turning certain books into objects of reverence: *Look but don't touch*.

"Come Back to the Raft Ag'in, Huck Honey!" changed all that. The title itself was a treat—no hint of the stuffy language I'd come to assume was the province of literary criticism. Then, what the words, the pages, the voice did to me: Fiedler blasted away the tired old tropes about plot and character and theme, the symbol hunting that passes for life as an English major. He took the blinders off me and said, *Look, the myths we live by, our secret longings—the great books lay them bare, if only we have the courage to see*.

And not just to leer, but to understand that terrible longing gives rise to myth, that myth can brazenly posit the polar opposite of lived truth—white male violence against men of color in America transformed into Huck and Jim, Ishmael

and Queequeg, exiles from the civilized world, at peace upon the water. As Fiedler wrote:

Our dark-skinned beloved will take us in, we assure ourselves, when we have been cut off, or have cut ourselves off, from all others, without rancor or the insult of forgiveness. He will fold us in his arms...he will comfort us, as if our offense against him were long ago remitted, were never truly *real*.



ON THE RAFT.

Huck and Jim, Ishmael and Queequeg *lived* in Fiedler's commentary. The trick I discovered, seeing them so brazenly new, was to read without tricks, to read naked. This is not to suggest that we should unlearn how to read intelligently, but to release what we've learned into the subconscious so the words come to us fresh. This tension makes reading a paradox, a balancing act between right and left brain, between the perceptive and critical eye—much like the writer's task of lassoing both the creative and editorial impulse.

A critical insight that sticks is like the aleph in the Borges story of the same title (also the title of his second story collection published in 1949). In the Borges tale, an aleph is "the only place on earth where all places are—seen from every angle." The story's skeptical narrator, humoring an acquaintance who insists his cellar harbors an aleph, descends a dark stairway and positions himself as instructed. Expecting nothing but gloom, he sees the aleph:

[Its] diameter was probably little more than an inch, but all space was there, actual and undiminished. Each thing (a mirror's face, let us say) was infinite things, since I distinctly saw it from every angle of the universe.

Reading books, reading about them, I have occasionally discovered this kind of critical keyhole—an essay, a paragraph,

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a moment during rigorous study, when everything is revealed: the passage before me, the books I've read before, the books to come. None of these cancels out the others. Each contributes to the shared light.

Fiedler's take on the white man/man-of-color relationship in American classics; Hemingway's discipline distilled into a single stunning paragraph; an essay by Robert Boswell suggesting that a half-known world, open to mystery, is always preferable to a fully determined, fully understood story—these are personal alephs in my critical journey, each lighting my way forward as reader and writer.

Publishing Information

- "Come Back to the Raft Ag'in, Huck Honey" by Leslie Fiedler in *The New Fiedler Reader* (Prometheus Books, 1999). Originally published in *Partisan Review*, June 1948.
- ["Fear and Loathing: How Leslie Fiedler Turned American Criticism on Its Head"](#) [4] by Sam Tanenhaus, *Slate*, February 4, 2003.
- "The Aleph" by Jorge Luis Borges in *The Aleph and Other Stories* (Penguin Classics, 2004). Originally published in *El aleph* (Buenos Aires: Emece Editores, 1949).

Art Information

- ["Leslie A. Fiedler"](#) [5] (September 28, 1967); courtesy of the Netherlands National Archive; Creative Commons license.
- ["Queequeg and His Harpoon"](#) [6] (from 1902 edition of *Moby Dick*, Charles Scribner's Sons); public domain.
- ["Huckleberry Finn and Jim, on Their Raft"](#) [7] (from an 1884 edition of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*); public domain.



David Meischen won the 2012 Talking Writing Prize for Short Fiction with ["Agua Dulce."](#) [8] His first published story ("Yellow Jackets") also appeared in *Talking Writing*. His short stories have since appeared in the *Gettysburg Review*, *Bellingham Review*, and elsewhere. Meischen's poetry has been published in the *Southern Review* and *Southern Poetry Review*, among others.

Coeditor of ["Wingbeats: Exercises and Practice in Poetry"](#) [9] (Dos Gatos Press, 2011) and *Wingbeats II* (forthcoming), Meischen is currently serving as a juror for the Kimmel Harding Nelson Center for the Arts.

Learn more about David Meischen at his website [Meischen Ink.](#) [10]

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