

Letter to the Editor of McSweeney's.

This letter to the editor was published, though not easily linked-to. I include it despite my fear that, when read along with my takedown of their infamous "pile of mail" issue, it will appear as if I have some sort of grudge against McSweeney's magazine, which isn't true at all – I've never submitted any writing to its editors other than this letter, which was readily published, and I think they publish some good writing amidst all the strenuously clever po-mo gimmickry. (I'd also add, as evidence of my lack of animus, that my marketing firm is called McSweeney & Antman, except that it's probably not the most compelling evidence – my former partner was coincidentally named McSweeney.) In any event, though I doubt they'll be soliciting any manuscripts from me any time soon, I do enjoy reading McSweeney's now and again.

BTW, I never did get that check for \$2.20

Dear McSweeney's,

Has there ever, I mean ever, been a more dispiriting beginning to a short story?

I'm referring to the opening clause of Rick Moody's contribution to the latest McSweeney's, to wit, "My father was for Midwestern values..."

That's all I needed to know. I shoulda stopped reading right there. Because when an American writer of fiction (or, in Rick Moody's case, appropriator of fiction) creates (or, in Rick Moody's case, allows someone else to create) a character who believes in Midwestern values, the writer (or, in Rick Moody's case, the typist) will, as sure as the sun sets in the Midwest, destroy said character in a spiritually and economically humiliating manner. It's nothing less than a tradition among lazy litterateurs.

Because Midwestern values have no positive value whatsoever except in the real world, where, of course, they do.

The maudlin predictability of the story that followed (bear in mind that it would have been predictable even if I hadn't many years ago read the superior Sherwood Anderson story it was gawkily borrowed from, simply on the basis of the photo-manipulated two-headed ostrich on the cover and the singly ironic title -- Moody couldn't even bestir himself to create a doubly ironic name for the ostrich farm that would be expressive of his protagonist's inevitably failed optimism) -- is not what bothered me the most. It was the even greater predictability of the group-think assumptions that Moody larded into the story like Crisco into a tasteless cake.

Big, family-farm-devouring corporations. Serial killers. Rabbit raising (sorry, Rick, Michael Moore already cornered the market in ironic rabbit raising in his documentary *Roger and Me*). A "chromium dump" which, of course, has engendered a cancer cluster. (In the real world, which Rick Moody may have heard tell of, the connection between environmental toxins and cancer clusters is still highly debatable among scientists, although I recognize that scientists are not as credible on this score as facile fictionists from writing workshops.)

And, of course, that arrogant, anal-leakage dribble of an ending, where the Moody Guy uses the names of fast-food franchises and retail stores as a lazy signifier of his contempt for middle America.

Yeah, like he's never had a Whopper and fries in his life.

If you really can't find any better writers to fill up your cleverly designed boxes, why don't you give this Moody fellow some Cheever or Nabokov to help him understand that it is possible to write (note the verb there, by the way: Not borrow, not steal, but write) about the American landscape critically, and yet with nuance and grace and insight and compassion. (Contrary to the assumption of most writing workshop graduates, compassion is neither a quality possessed only by writers of fiction, nor an exercise selectively and insincerely applied to the homeless and minorities.)

On second thought, forget the Cheever and Nabokov. Let Moody keep on selling rotten eggs.

Because it's working for him so far. After all, just as surely as ostriches bite, and real writers write, Moody is selling, as the Irish would put it, shite. And people are buying it, thanks to the good offices of McSweeney's. In fact, I'd be willing to bet I'm the only reader of your journal who's bothered to write asking for one-tenth of his or her money back (some of the other contributions weren't so hot either, but at least they tried).

You can mail me a check for \$2.20 (representing one-tenth of the price I paid for the box at Quimby's, a bookstore that specializes in "subversive" literature) at the address below. Since I don't need the money, I'll add it to my next contribution to the Nature Conservancy, which actually improves the American landscape, instead of merely sniping at it.

By the way, here's a genuinely subversive idea for your next issue of McSweeney's. How about publishing a story that manages (as daring and as counter-intuitive as it may seem) to portray a businessman who succeeds? A salesman who's honest? Or a Midwesterner who's sophisticated and successful? Now I realize that people like this don't actually exist except in the real world, but wouldn't it be taboo-breaker if you published such a piece?

You might even be banned by Quimby's bookstore!

Last but not least, I didn't notice the "apologies to Sherwood Anderson" credit line until I'd finished suffering my way through the story. I don't doubt that this was because the line was reproduced in a font smaller than that on some sleazy sales and service contract at some soulless Home Depot somewhere in southern Iowa. I'm sure, even if the copyright hasn't lapsed, that you're covered legally. But I've got news for you: The spirit of Sherwood Anderson does not accept your apologies.

Sincerely yours,

Michael Antman