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BLUE RIDGE

By T.R. Pearson

Viking. 243 pp.

For decades, mainstream fiction writers have been flanked on either side. On one side lie the minimalists, descending from Chekhov and Hemingway, ushered into our time by Carver and Beattie. While they've never convinced us that less is more, the best of them showed that less can certainly be enough, providing just the right girders from which the structure of a genuine artwork forms before attentive eyes.

But, on their heels, poor imitators followed, offering thin plots and flat sentences, hoping readers would find icebergs of meaning underneath.

T.R. Pearson roams far on the other flank, with Styron and Lee K. Abbott and the other maximalists, who toss looping sentences out far and catch all sorts of things in their nets as they draw them in. They defy imitation. It's easy to do bad minimalism, but one slip for a maximalist sends him plunging to absurdity and gibberish.

In Hemingway, if you're shot, your stolid lips say only, "My legs felt warm and wet and my shoes were wet and warm inside," but when a fellow named Akers gets fatally wounded in an earlier Pearson novel, we're told "(Akers) took notice of the wound, the hole through the jacket and through the shirt and clean through the breastbone as well which that Akers studied and that Akers perused, lifted even his jacket flap for an unimpeded view in advance of raising again his face and paying his last scrap of heed on this earth to Wade alone." [from *Cry Me a River*]

Blue Ridge, however, Pearson's first novel in seven years, shows a maturation of style, as entertaining as ever but with muted self-indulgence.

Pearson's plots, then and now, have always just slenderly shown themselves. The pleasure flows from the Pearson music, the colorful characterizations, tangential anecdotes and mountain canvas so rich with color that you hate to blink.

But there is a story to *Blue Ridge*--in fact two, each a murder mystery linked by their befalling cousins.

Ray Tatum, a vagabond Southern cop, has long wandered from place to place in the wake of his child's drowning. As the novel begins, he takes a deputy sheriff post in the Virginia Blue Ridge. He's there hardly long enough to munch a doughnut before hikers on the Appalachian Trail find a partially buried skeleton, the skull perforated in a way that spells homicide.

Simultaneously, Ray's cousin Paul, a Roanoke actuary, hears that his son's dismembered corpse lies awaiting identification in New York City. This will prove a difficult task for Paul, who hasn't seen the young man for years, the estranged product of Paul's casual teenaged fling in the seventies.

Pearson braids these tales throughout the novel, oscillating the scenery from the grimmest New York streets to the ineffable majesty of the Shenandoah, the cousins never meeting until the final, unexpectedly powerful scene.

Each cousin travels in eccentric company. Paul seeks help in Manhattan from his son's friend Lizzie, "an actress in the way some people are pigeon-toed or color-blind, ... an actress, that is to say, every day and all of the time." Paul himself is stalked by a

gargantuan Samoan and a prosperous drug dealer named Giles, an upwardly mobile felon who, but for his inclination toward murder, would be the most elegant character in the novel.

Each cousin spices his quest with off-beat women, drawn with Pearson's signature flair. In New York, Paul enjoys a moment of quirky congress with Lizzie, who "quivered and quaked a little and loosed shortly the manner of moan that most men only hear after an hour of rigorous instruction, violent cowlick distress and temporary paralysis of the jaw." Even the deadly Giles provides Paul an evening with "a stately creature of Giles's acquaintance with an agreeable disposition, something on the order of Ringling Brothers' flexibility and enough embedded silicone to grout a fleet of shower stalls."

Meanwhile, back in Arcadian Virginia, Ray teams with the frisky Kit Carson, a hot-tempered, foul-mouthed female Park Service agent who likes to grab leering rednecks by the throat, yank them from rusty Torinos, choke them till they turn exotic colors and bark, "Crawl back in that rolling outhouse and get the fuck out of my life."

Carson slowly endears herself to Ray, even as she alienates other Virginians, both because she is African-American and because she eats her fish broiled in this fried-food, lard-cooking country where people think high cholesterol is some arcane Jewish holiday.

Hers may be the only healthful diet in this novel, where dubious food choice itself becomes a leitmotif. Ray's fellow officers spend some time letting all local speeders pass while they ticket every Northern car they see, but spend more hotly pursuing onion rings and cheeseburgers. In Manhattan, it's candy. As Paul attempts conversation with a Giles henchman, this aptly named Spooky is "working to free a scrap of Twizzler from between his teeth with his fingernail and hydraulic bursts of saliva."

Like Tolstoy, Pearson likes to give every character, however brief their existence, some picturesque characterizing brushstroke. Paul rides crosstown with a broken-English cabby who reads maps only while moving; when stopped, "he'd chatter out the window with one of his fellow cabbies alongside us who, like him, had left his home and traveled halfway around the world to sit on a New York City side street in a yellow Crown Victoria."

At such moments, Pearson shows most clearly his true line of literary descent, straight from maximalist Twain. Though he makes it Twenty-First-Century new, there's that same casually outlandish diction, the same selection of the word that feels oblique, surprising, and oddly true. A colleague squeezes Ray's neck "with nearly therapeutic force." On an airplane, Paul sits beside someone who "as he was far too blubbery and sizable for his airline seat, he'd raised the arm between us and was migrating in my direction." As Kit pulls up to the shack where Ray waits outside, "Ray dropped his feet from the porch rail and permitted his mouth to sag open until the view from his adenoids was fairly panoramic."

It was his stylistic opposite, Hemingway, who said, "All good writing is true." Pearson's is a Twain-like truth, purely American in flavor, that captures truly exactly how our most enchanting storytellers lie, the fact-bending, character-enlarging touches we've nurtured in our oral tradition from the ante-bellum South and starlit frontier West. When we read a T.R. Pearson novel, we're not holding a book, we're surrendering to an amiable night around a campfire.

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