

THE ROLE OF
COMPASSION IN
DANIEL CLOWES'
“LIKE A VELVET
GLOVE CAST IN
IRON”

BY LEWIS SHINER

IN 1991 TWO WORKS appeared—Douglas Coupland’s novel *Generation X*, and Richard Linklater’s film *Slacker*—both, in Linklater’s words, “speaking about the generation that doesn’t want to be spoken for,”¹ the generation born during the tumult of the 1960s. At the same time that *Slacker* and *Generation X* were reaping headlines, an equally important (though much less self-conscious) generational statement was unfolding: chapters of Daniel Clowes’ *Like A Velvet Glove Cast In Iron* had been appearing in his single-creator showcase *Eightball* since late 1989.

Linklater describes a Dead Kennedys show in 1984 that galvanized him: “In a very short time I went from thinking (as I had been told over and over again) that my generation had nothing to say to thinking it not only had everything to say but was saying it in a completely new way.”

Statistically it is a generation that is less than one percent of the population, the flat line after the bulge of the baby boom. It is the first generation with a lower median income than their parents. It is a generation raised on TV and conspicuous on TV. It is a generation that grew up with not only the cold war, but with global warming, terrorism, and metal detectors in their schools.

The album *Smash*, by the Orange County band Offspring, has sold over 3 million copies; it is the largest-selling independent album to date. The band members’ average age is 28 and, in my opinion, their success is due in no small measure to lyrics such as the following:

*We’re not the ones who leave the homeless in the street at night
We’re not the ones who’ve kept minorities and women down....*

¹ All Linklater quotes from Richard Linklater, “Introduction,” *Slacker*, St. Martin’s Griffin, 1992.

*We're not the ones who let the children starve in faraway lands
 We're not the ones who made the streets unsafe to walk at night....
 We're innocent
 But the weight of the world is on our shoulders....*"²

Much less earnest and far more satirical is a one-page strip in *Eightball* called "Who Would You Rather Fuck: Ginger or Mary Ann?"³ Here Dan Clowes discourses on twenty-something culture through the mouths of slacker characters created by fellow cartoonist Peter Bagge:

"It is a culture of contrived contrariness—we listen to ineptly performed, discordant music and wear ugly, ill-fitting clothes.... Our response to a culture of sadism is to masochistically scar and wound ourselves... [W]e are ... a toothless hybrid, removing the basically serious intent from the movements of the late 60s and late 70s.... We have extracted varied aspects from those two cultures ("alternative media" and self-conscious sloppiness from the former and guiltless worship of junk from the latter) and formed an aggregate that is meaningful only in that it indicates clearly that ours is an empire in sharp decline.... [W]e will now sink into oblivion, to be remembered (perhaps) only by some even more idiotic future generation who will morbidly imitate our mannerisms in a regressive attempt to avoid the horrors that surely lie before us."⁴

This is not the simple "knee-jerk irony" that Douglas Coupland talks about in *Generation X*; the ironies here create a nearly infinite regression. Fans of Bagge's *Neat Stuff* and *Hate!* know these characters to be far more emotional than intellectual, and will react to such high-brow dialogue with an immediate feeling of distance. The criticisms here at first sound like those of a parent, but in fact are much too well-informed and telling; in fact, they are precisely the sort of masochistic wounding that the strip satirizes. And, in the context of the complete strip, the title is not just ironic, but a perfect-pitch summation.

Many of Clowes' stories are similarly short, satirical, and self-referential. His first ongoing series featured a hep private eye named Lloyd Llewellyn, inhabiting an eternal and highly stylized 1960. His short work has appeared in *Weirdo*, *Young Lust*, *National Lampoon*, and the *Village Voice*; one of his most widely printed (though uncredited) works was the design of the OK Soda can, a product targeted specifically at the perceived Generation X market. It is, however, in the dark, complex, and Kafkaesque novel *Like A Velvet Glove Cast In Iron* (completed in 1993) that Clowes creates his most sustained and coherent (though some might argue the latter) vision.

We know very little about Clay Loudermilk, the main character of *Velvet Glove*, but we can make some inferences. He appears to be in his twenties, has no apparent income or responsibilities. He was once married to a beautiful black-haired woman who left him without any real explanation; his search for her forms the spine of the novel's plot.

² Offspring, "Not the One," *Smash*, Epitath/Ada, 1994.

³ Daniel Clowes, "Who Would You Rather Fuck: Ginger or Mary Ann?", *Eightball* 13, 1994.

⁴ All Clowes quotes from Gary Groth interview with Daniel Clowes, *The Comics Journal* 154, 1993.

The story opens with Clay in the audience at a porn theater, watching a film called *Like A Velvet Glove Cast In Iron*. It contains no sex or nudity, but features people in bizarre costumes involved in bondage and s & m. At the end of the film, a masked dominatrix reveals herself to be Clay's ex-wife.

Clay learns the film was made by a Dr. Wilde and his company, "Interesting Productions," located in nearby Gooseneck Hollow. After a series of bizarre and painful adventures, he locates the house of one of the cast members, and actually sees his ex-wife through the window. He takes an apartment across the street and waits another week before trying to approach her.

In the meantime, fate catches up with both of them. On the run from a sadistic killer named Geat, Clay stumbles upon the headquarters of Interesting Productions. There he watches, less with horror than with overwhelming sadness and despair, their latest film. It is called *Barbara Allen*, and it includes footage of his ex-wife being murdered and buried. Clay makes his way to the gravesite, where Geat literally dismembers him, leaving him armless, legless, and powerless.

In a long interview in *The Comics Journal*, Clowes talks about the origins of the story: "It was based on two or three dreams I had had at the time, and one that my ex-wife had had recurring throughout her life." Later he says, "A lot of stuff is taken directly from dreams I've had. A lot of it is just daydreams, where ... I can just have these thoughts that are uncontrolled by common logic, and then I start to see things in a different way. It's sort of the same thing as when you wake up from a long dream and you, for one minute, see the absurdity of the world."

That absurdity is most obvious in the novel's supporting cast: Laura, a sixty-year-old dog with no orifices, who lives on a syringe of water a day; Billings, Laura's most recent owner, with his failed hair transplant like a miniature forest and his obsession with "Mr. Jones," a round-headed novelty character; Tina, a spectacularly deformed dolphin-woman, bright green in color, with pop eyes and scales.

From the beginning, the novel is drenched in surrealism and an idiosyncratic, dreamlike logic. On page 12, Clay seeks information about the film from a swami who holds court in the men's room of the theater and gives accurate and detailed answers to any question asked of him. On page 13 he borrows a car from a friend who has had his eyeballs removed due to an infection and replaced with "rare Asiatic sea crustaceans."⁵

Causality in the novel operates at a level that is not accessible to Clay, or apparent to the reader. Driving his friend's car from its underground parking garage, Clay is accosted by a drunken attendant who spews whiskey directly into Clay's mouth. As a result, Clay is arrested two pages later by two omniseual policemen in sunglasses who offer him a deal: fight them, or risk "ten years at the big rock." At the conclusion of their savage beating, one of the policemen carves an image into the bottom of Clay's foot: the round-headed novelty character, "Mr. Jones." As a result, Clay buys a figurine of "Mr. Jones" at a novelty store, which attracts the attention of Billings, collector

⁵ All page numbers refer to Daniel Clowes, *Like a Velvet Glove Cast in Iron*, Fantagraphics, 1993.

and conspiracy theorist. Billings's orifice-less dog, Laura, chooses to follow Clay even though he tries to send him (her?) away. As a result, Billings believes Clay has kidnapped the animal and sets the madman, Geat, on his trail.

There is no reason to believe that *Velvet Glove* is a parable or an intellectual puzzle to be solved. On the contrary, Clowes seems to have expended considerable effort to keep from pinning down the meaning of the work, to the extent that too much planning seemed "manipulative and contrived" to him. "It would be really hard to mystify my audience when I knew exactly what was going to happen," he told the *Comics Journal*. "So I've been trying to write it while keeping myself mystified as much as the readers ... trying to see what kind of images and ideas excite me and scare me and affect me emotionally.... And I'm also trying to write an honest narrative, a narrative that works by its own rules and goes under its own steam rather than ... contriving things.... And then, on some level, it's kind of a social satire, a comment on the way I see the world in my bleakest moments."

What is available to the careful reader is a consistent, and meaningful, world view. That world view is occasionally bleak indeed, as when Billings rants: "The world is a shithole, filled with swine and sheep." And this is certainly a valid reading of the story. The novel is filled with heartless, greedy characters like Geat and Dr. Wilde, and compassionate victims like Clay and Tina, characters who act, as Clowes says in the interview, "according to their own humanity—or lack thereof."

Another thread that runs throughout the story concerns gender relations. Clowes took the title, a reversal of the "iron fist in a velvet glove" cliché, from the Russ Meyer film *Faster Pussycat, Kill Kill*. "I still don't understand what it means ... basically ... it's something that's couched in femininity, but it's actually very tough and masculine."

Gender roles are very much at issue throughout the story. After his beating at the hands of the (sexually very non-traditional) police, Clay is rescued by a man named Godfrey—"God" to the members of his cult. Godfrey's holy mission is to bring about "Harum Scarum," his version of Helter Skelter, in which, as one of his followers explains, "there's gonna be a worldwide war between man and woman and woman's gonna win.... The new world will be one people, one gender, one culture. Esperanto, the universal language will be spoken...."

Clay is assigned to murder columnist Ann Landers, but escapes. Later in the novel, Godfrey's revolution does in fact take place, with mobs of women running in the streets, beating men up, stripping them, and insulting them. When last we see Godfrey he is in the White House, and his followers are holding Bill Clinton at gunpoint.

The macrocosm reflects the tensions present throughout the story: Haskell, a rival of Billings in the pursuit of the "Mr. Jones" mystery, explains to Clay that "only male Caucasians with certain character patterns" can achieve the mental frequency needed to contact Mr. Jones (p. 97). (Conspiracy fans will enjoy the scene where Billings, having seen the Mr. Jones figure carved in Clay's foot, begins to demand, "What's the frequency, Kenneth?", a phrase allegedly used by a man who assaulted Dan Rather in New York, and the

inspiration for a recent hit by the group R.E.M.) Billings consistently refers to the orificeless dog Laura as “he.” Geat, Clay’s ultimate assailant, abuses women and injects himself with testosterone (p. 79). A film poster in the offices of Interesting Productions shows a Popeye-like character over the title “No Use for Wimmen” (p. 107). Godfrey, who is clearly portrayed as a hypocrite and manipulator (he tells Clay, “we have no use for your pig play money” then two panels later asks his lieutenant “Where’s my change?”) is only ever seen naked, his penis in constant view.

The two most compassionate characters are much less sexually stereotyped. Clay, as his name suggests, is extremely malleable, allowing others to direct his moment-to-moment actions. At one point we even see him idly trying on a woman’s wig (p. 84), and his passive nature is the opposite of Geat’s aggression. Tina, the most emotional of all the characters, attempts to seduce Clay by laying her eggs in his bed (p. 52).

My preferred reading is to see the films in the novel as reality, and the filmmakers as personifications of the forces who shape our existence. The sight of his ex-wife as a character in a movie is the impetus for Clay’s quest. When he takes his quest too far, he becomes part of the movie himself—his dismembering forms the climactic scene in Dr. Wilde’s latest “Interesting Production.” The punch line is that the plots of Dr. Wilde’s films are dictated by a preadolescent, pipe-smoking girl whom he calls “Precious.” Her casual, spur-of-the-moment suggestion was the cause of the on-screen murder of Clay’s ex-wife, not to mention untold other deaths and savageries.

An extreme view might hold that Clay’s acts of compassion are the very cause of his undoing; his concern for his ex-wife, his kindness to Tina, and his adoption of Laura lead only to pain, humiliation, and finally mutilation. Gary Groth, Clowes’ interviewer, points out that “It’s a fallen world,” has become a catch phrase in *Eightball*. Clowes talks about his first experience with the punk scene in New York: “I thought, ‘Wow, this is made for me. This is really speaking to my generation.’ Basically, my attitude was that we were all going to be blown up soon, and it didn’t really matter. Life was hopeless....”

He perceives his audience as being “college kids and disenfranchised teenagers—basically what we were 10 years ago. That’s who I get letters from.” And it is in that particular adjective, disenfranchised, that I believe the key to *Velvet Glove* lies.

The most striking thing about Clay Loudermilk, in retrospect, is his powerlessness. In the course of the story everything is taken from him—his borrowed car, his clothes, his wallet, his identity, finally even the use of his limbs. When he rents a room, the same room is rented again to another person, without Clay’s knowledge or consent. Even the object of his search, his ex-wife, is murdered virtually under his nose. He saw a body bag being carried out of the building across the street (p. 95) without realizing until much later that his ex-wife was inside. His powerlessness comes in part from lack of money and position, but mostly from his unwillingness to hurt others (e.g. Ann Landers). For this he is repeatedly punished.

But this is not a generational issue. It is an issue of power and enfranchisement. Just as it is unfair to brand an entire age group as “slackers”

or “generation X,” it is equally unfair to assume that only young people are disenfranchised. Crippled and powerless people of all ages are on the fringes of *Velvet Glove*—Tina’s mother, an alcoholic with broken dreams of a mysterious lover; Sal, Tina’s middle aged fellow waitress, with whom Tina escapes from reality in soap operas; a lonely, disfigured man on all fours (p. 66) who gives Clay directions; there is even a statue in the town square (p. 48) of a one-armed, one-legged man.

When Richard Linklater talks about the message his generation has to offer, he says, “each individual had to find it in their own way, and in the only place society had left for this discovery—the margins. I think that’s where *Slacker* takes place....”

This is also where *Velvet Glove* takes place. And if it offers little in the way of false hope or artificial panaceas, it does hold out the reassurance that those of us who have been disenfranchised by our violent, doomed society are not alone.

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