RUSSELL BANKS

Kevin T. McEneaney

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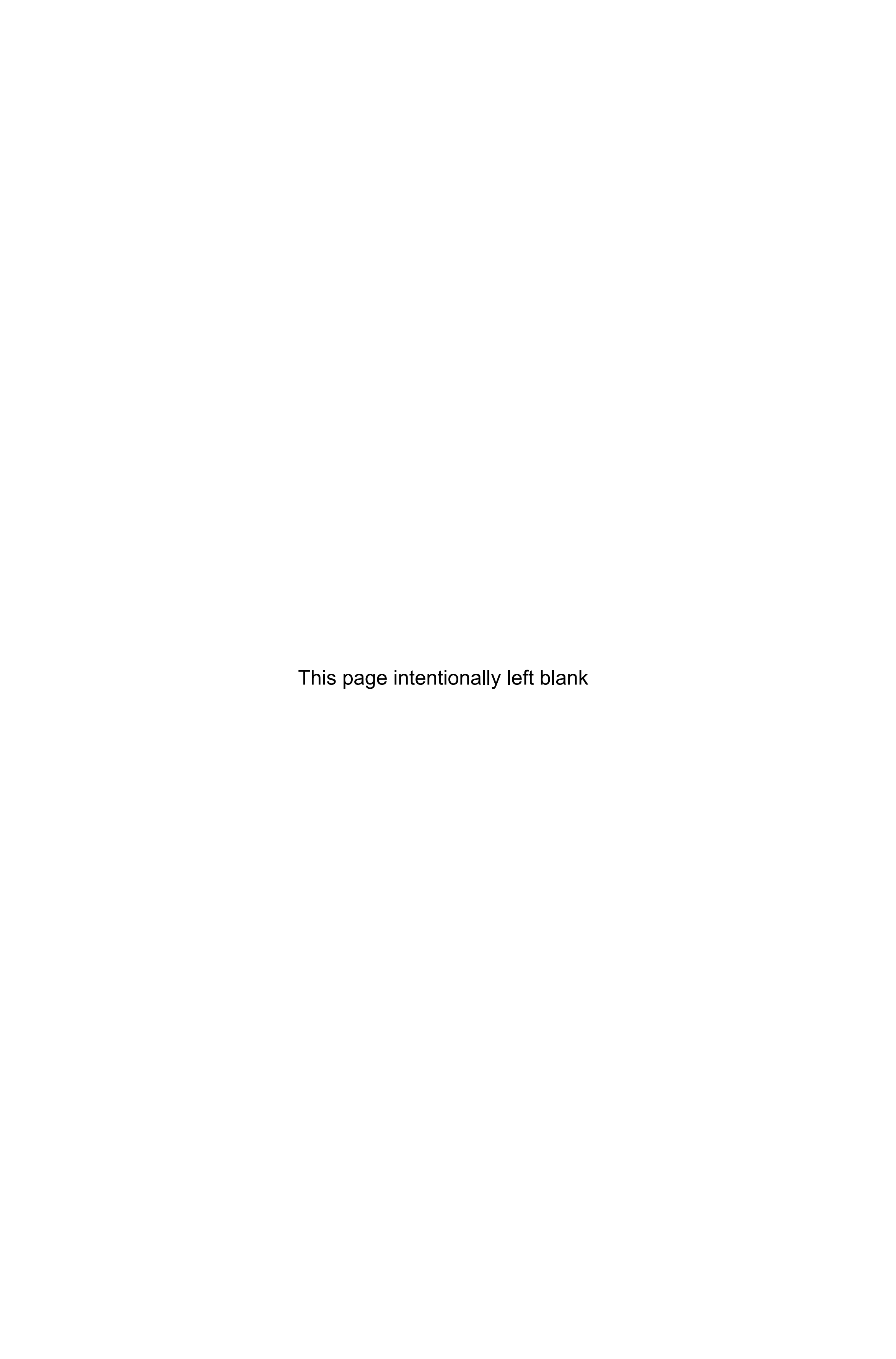
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RUSSELL BANKS

In Search of Freedom

KEVIN T. MCENEANEY

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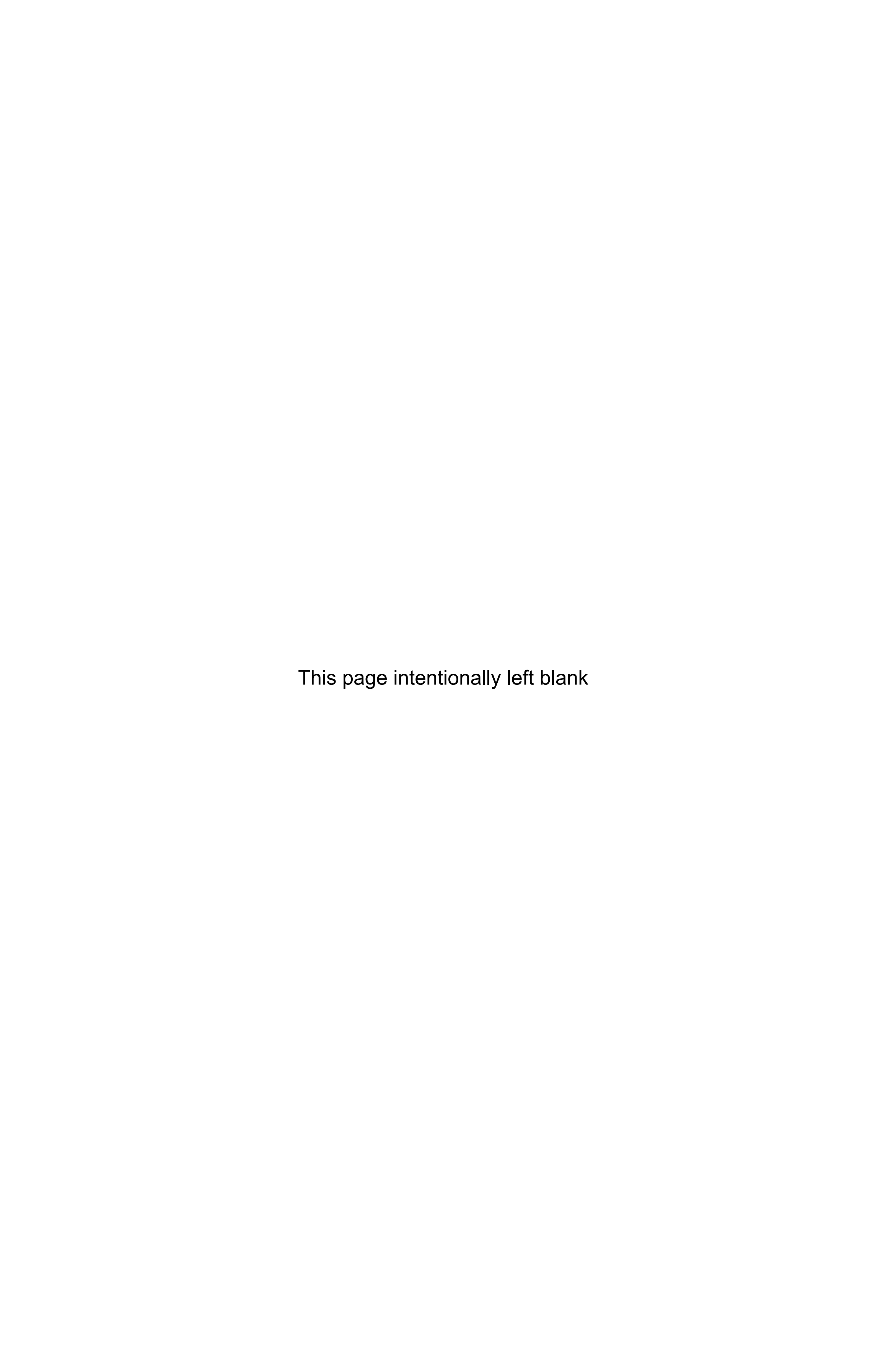
To Bob, Frank, and Joe
brothers in the light



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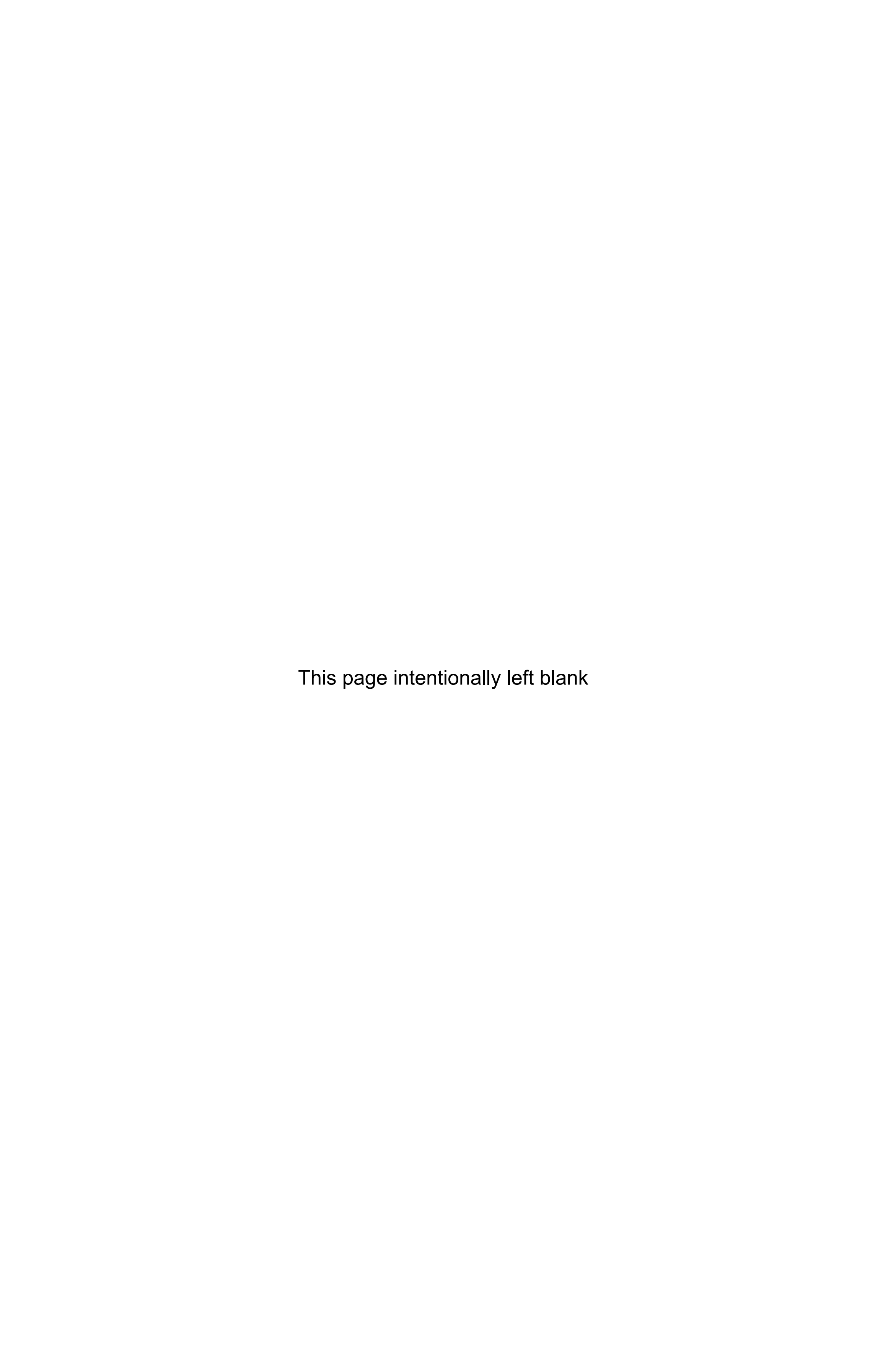
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Preface

Russell Banks finds himself revered, both in America and abroad, as one of the most prominent literary figures on the contemporary landscape. Yet, there exists a paucity of commentary on his remarkable output, even though his work has been translated into over 20 languages. While Banks has achieved wide name recognition in the public through two highly successful, award-winning films, *The Sweet Hereafter* (1996) and *Affliction* (1997), his work needs more commentary. Only one book in English on his work has appeared in the last decade. One reason for this may lay in the fact that Banks's individual works appear to be so seamless, often approaching the mystery and eloquence of a poem one would not wish to tamper with. On the other hand, reviewers, quick off the mark, have at times embarrassed themselves by underestimating the complexity of Banks's narrators, as well as Banks's intent or achievement.

Fundamental to Banks's liberal bias remains his critique of how freedom operates in America—psychologically, historically, and sociologically. As a writer, Banks has managed to adapt working-class realism to postmodernism, usually by employing narrators who project a limited understanding of American society. Characters (depending upon their self-knowledge) may have partial access to their unconscious or little access. Banks's critique of freedom and its limits falls as severely upon the left as the right, dramatizing illusions of freedom. Much of the perspective in this book attempts to underline ironies inherent in the lives of the diverse characters Banks has chronicled in his varied portraits of Americans. At the center of Banks's narrative strategy lies the conundrum of character: How well do we know ourselves or each other? What are our limits and the limits of the society we live in?

One of the goals in writing this book was to extend the context of debate around Banks's work—to broaden rather than narrow possible interpretation of his work. For this purpose, there is the presence of metatexts with which to compare and contrast Banks's narrative purpose at any given point. In many cases, these metatexts were consciously or unconsciously present to Banks's

mind, but even if they were not, they remain diligent tools for highlighting parallels or contrasts. Since the basis of Banks's approach to writing remains poetic as Albert Camus advised, this approach illuminates both the architecture of his work, as well as important passages that might appear opaque to the general reader. While Banks has described his books as islands rather than a sequence, this is an attempt to chart a continuity of technique and philosophy in his approach, as well as a vision of the limits of freedom in his characters.

Banks's reading audience has continued to grow with each book and today perhaps it finds more resonance with the young than the old, a healthy sign of endurance. While much of Banks's work remains rooted in the landscape of the Eastern seaboard or Caribbean, his stories meditate upon the mythos of what makes us Americans, even as they raise questions about our hopes and illusions, our aspirations and problems as a society. In the final analysis, Banks writes about ordinary people in such an extraordinary way that he leverages our emotions and intellect to enter into the mystery of life's common challenges by creating debatable dialogue out of his primary technique, monologue.

I wish to thank my wife, Veronica Towers, for putting up with me during this blinkered process, my generous friend Martha L. Moffett for reading the manuscript, and my editor Daniel Harmon for his continued encouragement. My gratitude also extends to the librarians at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York, Bobst Library at New York University, as well as the librarians of the Mid-Hudson Library System for their gracious assistance. And to my grandson Joshua whose patience was occasionally tested by my need to finish a sentence.

1

AMERICAN ODYSSEY: BLUE-COLLAR INTELLECTUAL

> Dean and I had the whole of Mexico before us. "Now, Sal. We're leaving everything behind us and entering a new and unknown phase of things."
>
> —Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*

There's no way of knowing when or where a great writer will be born. Such writers have displayed an ability to overcome tremendous odds or to recover resiliently when handed a seemingly thunderous defeat—for example, Homer. He lost his eyesight after writing the *Iliad*, had another epic stolen from him in his blindness, then bounced back to write the *Odyssey*, one of the most beloved, deeply subtle, yet entertaining and wise stories ever sung.[1]

On March 28, 1940, Russell Earl Banks, a first generation American (his father was Canadian), the eldest of four children, was born in Newton, Massachusetts, to Earl Banks and Florence Taylor. Like his father, Earl Banks was a plumber who followed his father's footsteps into the plumbing business during the Great Depression when he was only 16. Earl felt trapped by the confines of family and the economic tensions of work, frequently finding refuge in drink. It was a chaotic household where Banks grew up, amid the snows of Barnstead, New Hampshire (near Lake Winnipesaukee), with much yelling and winter claustrophobia, burdened with economic duress, "There was never enough money, and they were always packing up and moving out of an old place, where things had gone wrong, into a new [place] where everything would improve."[2] But nothing ever did. His background ran counter to the writer he would become:

> I come from a people who viewed success as a criticism of their life. Because if you're moving up, there's a kind of betrayal of the family. My father made a mockery of anybody who aspired to move up, unless you moved up as a wheeler dealer. That was a little different. If you could finagle a piece of real estate or a used car lot into something more lucrative, that would be all right. But to move up in the sense of moving into the world of ideas and trying to live your life through language—that was a betrayal.[3]

The illusory dream of moving out to imaginary better pastures haunts many of the characters in his stories.

From a young age, his eyesight in one eye was severely impaired—by whooping cough according to his mother, but Banks thinks a blow from his father might have created the affliction.[4] At the age of nine, knapsack bobbing on his back, Banks attempted a premature odyssey by bicycling to the airport at Concord, New Hampshire, with the intent of stowing away on an airplane, but was nabbed by police.[5] When he was 12, his father, accompanied by a girlfriend, fled to Florida. The subsequent divorce left Florence stranded without financial support. She quickly moved the family from New Hampshire to Wakefield, Massachusetts, finding steady work as a bookkeeper, but precarious economic conditions kept the family once more hopping from house to house, apartment to apartment.

Banks conscientiously became the substitute father in the family, helping to raise his younger siblings. A bright boy, he received high grades at Wakefield Memorial High School; he was even offered a scholarship to exclusive Phillips Academy in Andover for his senior year, but during the summer he accompanied a friend who pinched his father's car. They drove out to California where his friend, in an attack of guilt, confessed to a Catholic priest their theft and escapade. The priest turned the boys in to their parents, ending their little two-month odyssey.[6] The scholarship offer was abruptly withdrawn, yet in his senior year Banks, a popular jock with the nickname *Teacher*,[7] won a full scholarship to Colgate University in Hamilton, New York. In the autobiographical *Success Story*, Banks wrote:

> In this Ivy League school, however, among the elegant, brutal sons of the captains of industry, I was only that year's token poor kid, imported from a small New Hampshire mill town like an exotic herb, a dash of mace for the vichyssoise. It was a status that perplexed and intimidated and finally defeated me, so that, after nine weeks of it, I fled in the night.[8]

When lights were doused for the night, he carried his bulging duffel bag through into a whirling snowstorm. This tension between an intellectual gift and a desire to engage with the real world, conjured a prophetic dialectic in life and work.

Just after New Year's Day, Banks, under the influence of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957), hitchhiked to Florida with an impassioned desire to join the heroic rebel army of Fidel Castro because of Ernest Hemingway's endorsement of the photogenic-bearded Castro.[9] Once he arrived in Miami, Banks realized not being able to speak Spanish might be an impediment to becoming a revolutionary in Cuba. Hitchhiking to St. Petersburg, he worked at various menial jobs, including furniture mover. While working at a department store where he dressed mannequins and painted signs, Banks met 17-year-old salesgirl Darlene Bennett (the comic anecdote of how they met in the store appears in *Success Story*) and they impulsively married. Good at drawing, Banks fancied

himself a burgeoning artist in paint, yet he also began dabbling with poetry and stories.[10]

Shortly thereafter, with Darlene six months pregnant, they moved to Boston's Back Bay neighborhood where Banks worked as a bookstore clerk and listened to regurgitated recitations of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl and Other Poems* (1956).[11] Banks became cool, snapping his fingers to jazz musicians like Miles Davis and Thelonious Monk.[12] At 20, Banks befriended an older unpublished writer, 27-year-old Leo Giroux, Jr., who acted as Banks's mentor in reading, encouraging him to read classics as well as avant-garde authors. Russell and Darlene had a daughter named Leona in May 1960, but their marriage, under the influence of bibulous bohemian bibliophilia, irretrievably broke down when they realized they had nothing in common.[13] Leona (Lea) rejoined the Banks household in early adolescence.[14]

Separated in 1961, Darlene and Russell returned to Florida. Distraught, Darlene moved into her parents' home, while Banks returned to Boston. That fall, Banks found the social life of the beatnik scene in Boston a distraction to his work—he deposited himself farther south in the Florida Keys. At Islamorada Key, he slouched for six months in a trailer park, working as a gas-pump attendant, as Nelson Algren once did, while scribbling. When he could no longer endure the stench of gasoline in the pages of the books he was reading, he pushed farther south to Key West where he found himself stranded at a cheap boarding house that was part bordello. He drank too many daiquiris at Sloppy Joe's Bar, Hemingway's old haunt, got fleeced at cards, and saw a man stabbed to death.[15] At the rooming house, he met an ex-convict and a rogue sailor who was AWOL (absent without leave), with whom he undertook to deliver a drive-away car to Los Angeles, but the three spent six weeks of rollicking good times in New Orleans. Dropping the sailor off at his Oklahoma home, they routed a diversionary detour into Mexico, delivering the car three months late.[16] That route roughly imitated the final drive depicted in Kerouac's *On the Road*, that leg being a tribute nod to Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano* (1947). Banks traveled west to visit his mother (who has recently written an unpublished memoir) in San Diego, where she was working for the Raytheon Corporation. Banks stayed a few uncomfortable months, and then thumbed his way back to New Hampshire where he reconnected in Concord with his father who helped him acquire a union card and find work as a plumber's apprentice. He purchased a pickup truck.[17]

Darlene had quickly remarried, and at 21, Banks's tenuous relationship with Mary Gunst, an ebullient Emerson College theater major, appeared to be ending, especially when she transferred down to Virginia Commonwealth University for her senior year. Banks phoned her one last time to conclude the affair, but she surprised him by appearing on his doorstep the next day, dropping out of school to renew their relationship. They were married on October 29, 1962.[18] Banks continued to work with his father, achieving a rugged rapprochement with him.

In August 1963, Banks attended the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, originally founded by Robert Frost. That summer, Algren, who had a reputation for being an erratic teacher, headlined the seminar, becoming the center of unpredictable, amusing events and entertaining gossip.[19] While Algren did not attend all classes, he scrupulously read his students' manuscripts, publicly singling out Banks's work, and referring him to his agent, Candida Donadio. Algren scandalized everyone by nailing a steak to the outside door of his room in protest at the lack of decent meat in the communal dining hall. Since Algren did not drive, Banks drove him into Middlebury bars, where over drinks, he encouraged Banks by telling him he was a real writer, giving the young man the validation an aspiring writer needs.[20] Toward the end of the conference, Algren carried on a flagrant affair with one of his students, Carolyn Gaiser, a young journalist from *Glamour* magazine posing as an apprentice poet.[21]

On July 7, 1964, Banks's daughter Caerthan, who has since become a screenwriter and director, was born. In the fall, Banks at 24, financed by his mother-in-law, attended the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.[22] It was here where "race became a meaningful part of my sense of self and sense of American history"[23] when an integrated party he attended was broken up by Ku Klux Klan gunfire.[24] Banks experienced a political awakening.

While at Chapel Hill, Banks had recruited Algren for a reading and lecture at the university. Algren disdained the elegant antebellum inn where the university planned to board him, so he bunked with Banks who had met him up at the airport. When the university refused to pay Banks's grocery and liquor store bill for the week (they would have gladly paid the much more expensive hotel bill), Algren undertook a public letter writing campaign in newspapers until the university paid up in order to shut him up. Algren quickly remitted the check to Banks.[25]

After failing to exert some influence on *The Carolina Quarterly*, Banks co-founded the journal and press *Lillabulero* with the poet William Matthews (1942–97), who was studying for a master's degree at Chapel Hill. *Lillabulero* evolved into a successful literary magazine which ran for nine years. In 1967, the magazine featured Banks's first published short story, "The Adjutant Bird," while the press published a chapbook featuring five of his poems in *15 Poems*, the other two poets being Matthews and Newton Smith. At Chapel Hill, Banks founded a chapter of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and participated in anti-war protests as well as civil rights protests.[26] Even today, Banks says, "I don't see American life, generally, across the board, without a racial or class dimension."[27]

In 1967, Banks hosted a party for Kerouac when he received a call from a local bar. Kerouac was in town, looking for a place to crash for the weekend. Since Banks was the only student renting a house, he became the host for Jack and the three Mi'kmaq Indians[28] driving him down to Florida. Kerouac had just been paid an advance for *The Vanity of Duluoz* (1968), which became the last published book in his lifetime. Banks described the bipolar behavior of Kerouac, careening from the wise and learned *Memory Babe* (his nickname)

to a raging, bigoted drunk.[29] Kerouac was important to Banks not for the personal manner of his writing, but as a working class writer from his region who had received literary recognition.

Banks graduated Phi Beta Kappa within three years, receiving a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship in 1968. Shortly after his third daughter Maia (now a musician) was born on May 17, 1968, the family moved to Northwood Narrows, New Hampshire, where they purchased a rural Victorian house. Banks began teaching at Emerson College in autumn 1968, staying for two years and publishing his second chapbook, *Waiting to Freeze* (Lillabulero, 1969).

On January 13, 1970, his fourth daughter, Danis (now a college teacher) was born. That fall, Banks began teaching at the University of New Hampshire (Durham) while publishing stories in small magazines. His narrative poem *Snow: Meditations of a Cautious Man in Winter* (Granite Press, 1974) appeared. The following year he became Visiting Professor at New England College. He published his first collection of short stories, *Searching for Survivors* (Fiction Collective, 1975), and his first novel, *Family Life* (Avon, 1975). As for his early poetry, Banks dismisses most of his poems as juvenilia, "I cringe a little over some of the early poems."[30]

Banks became Writer in Residence at Princeton University and Sarah Lawrence College in 1976. Later that year, he was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation which allowed him to put aside teaching and spend 18 months with his family in Jamaica from May 1976 to September 1977, but the protracted working vacation resulted in divorce. Banks returned to teach at University of New England from 1977 to 1982, but while in Jamaica, he completed his second novel, *Hamilton Stark* (1978), an existential novel about identity, and a second book of short stories. He also gathered material that would become *The Book of Jamaica* (1980), a novel about a deluded academic that established him as an important writer, the novel winning the American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation. He had also completed the mordantly witty novella *The Relation of My Imprisonment* (1983), which he had trouble placing with publishers. Banks's father passed away in 1979 at the age of 63 due to liver failure.

Looking back, Banks considers travel beneficial for young writers:

> because you have no real sense of who you are until you get outside your own backyard and look at it from the other side of the fence. It's like when you think you don't speak with an accent until you go someplace where everybody speaks with a different accent. . . . When I traveled into the South, it was the first time I heard a New England accent. . . . Because everyone around me had this southern accent. . . . It's something that young writers used to do as a matter of course. It was like, I've got to work on a Merchant Marine boat; or I've got to go to France and hang around Paris; or I've got to visit India or Mexico or, like in my case, the Caribbean.[31]

Through developing an ear for accents, rhythms, and local idiom, writers eventually arrive at creating authentic dialogue; they also can arrive at a larger

cultural assessment of their own background through contrasting experiences and examining alternative historical points of view.

Trailerpark (1981) presented 13 stories of working-class characters interlinked as a novel. In 1982, Banks married Kathy Wilton, the director of the Associated Writing Program. Wilton persuaded Banks to experience urban life and they settled in Brooklyn, New York. Banks landed jobs teaching creative writing at Columbia University graduate school and Princeton University, while Wilton found work as an editor at Harper & Row,[32] which from 1985 on would become Banks's publisher. Banks also taught briefly at New York University and the University of Alabama. With the publication of his breakthrough novel *Continental Drift*, which garnered the John Dos Passos Prize for fiction and was voted one of the best books of the year by *Library Journal*, Banks was recognized as not only an important American writer but a writer of international stature.

In 1988, Banks and Wilton divorced. That same year Banks married the poet Chase Twichell, author of *Northern Spy: Poems* (1981), *The Odds* (1986), and subsequently *Perdido* (1992), *The Ghost of Eden* (1998), *The Snow Watcher* (1998), and *Dog Language* (2005). They purchased a summer home in Keene, New York, and she taught with Banks at Princeton when he was offered a professorship in 1982. With Robin Behn, she co-edited *The Practice of Poetry* (1992), a handbook on teaching poetry that remains widely employed in college classrooms.

Banks published another collection of short stories, *Success Stories* (1986), many of which in a humorous vein feature a semi-autobiographical character by the name of Earl Painter, as well as social parables displaying the influence of Jorge Luis Borges. Both new and selected stories, *The Angel on the Roof*, appeared to great acclaim in 2000.

The gritty novel *Affliction* (1989) about the mental breakdown of a police officer received mixed reviews, yet was translated into a successful 1997 movie directed by Paul Schrader. Actor James Coburn won an Oscar for Best Actor in a supporting role as Glen Whitehouse, while Nick Nolte received an Academy Award nomination for best actor in a leading role of Wade Whitehouse, landing the award for best performance at the Golden Globe Awards. The film also picked up numerous awards at other festivals.

Banks's novel *The Sweet Hereafter* (1991) received international critical and popular acclaim. The film version was directed by Canadian Atom Egoyan who transferred the Adirondack setting to British Columbia. At the Cannes Film Festival, *The Sweet Hereafter*, starring Ian Holm, won three awards, including the Grand Prize of the Jury. In America, Egoyan received Academy Award nominations for Best Adapted Screenplay and Best Director. In Australia, the film won Best Foreign Film and many other awards at various festivals. Banks played a cameo role in the film; he can be seen discussing the film on the DVD release.

Rule of the Bone (1995), set in the Adirondacks and Jamaica, presented the wild picaresque adventures of a 14-year-old boy in his own racy idiom.

It has been called a modern classic that resembles Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), and the novel has been found to be not only a pleasurable read but an engaging tool for students. Often cited as Banks's culminating masterpiece, *Cloudsplitter* (1998), a Pulitzer Prize finalist, recounts the story of the abolitionist John Brown from his son Owen Brown's point of view, yet Owen remains a fictional character, not the historical Owen. The novel examines problems of race, the difficulties of being the son of a legend, and the tragedy of repressed sexuality. A novel about class structures and the relevance of art, *The Reserve* (2006) occurs during the Great Depression.

Banks has penned a meditation on the history of America and its favorite myths in *Dreaming Up America* (2008), which was prompted by his appearance in a French documentary by Jean-Michel Maurice. His French publisher at Actes Sud was so excited by the oral transcript of the interview, that she had it published in 2006 as *Amérique notre histoire*. Subsequently, the book appeared in Spanish and Italian, and Banks decided to bring out an American edition in 2008 with a small press.

For most of his life, Banks has been a successful teacher as well as productive writer. He enjoyed the Howard G. B. Clarke Professorship at Princeton from 1982 to 1997 when he retired, yet he has continued to teach at other schools, particularly the University of Maryland and the University of Nevada at Las Vegas.

Although one of America's most accomplished short story writers, winner of the St. Lawrence Award for Short Fiction, the O. Henry Award, and Best American Short Story Award, Banks remains best known, both critically and popularly, for his novels, which employ the monologue format (exceptions being *Continental Drift* and *The Reserve*). Narrative voice, its timbres and nuances, constitute an essential aspect of his stories as they are colored by irony. Banks often shuffles chronology around in the memory of his narrator. Two of Banks's most distinguishing hallmarks lay, on the one hand, in an avant-garde experimentalism and, on the other, an earthy realism grounded in working-class sensibilities. This dialectic has yoked both characters and methods that were hitherto thought to be separate or unrelated. While nearly all of his antecedent literary models are American realists, a deep, inward psychology, more common in French or Russian novels, appears in his characters. As a former poet, his cadenced prose sometimes exhibits a natural poetic polish unusual in American letters. Unlike many authors who discover a successful formula and repeat themselves, each novel by Banks provides a completely new voyage for writer and reader.

Recently, Banks has been more active in screenwriting. He has written a screenplay of Kerouac's *On the Road* for Francis Ford Coppola to be directed by Gus Van Sant, director of *Good Will Hunting* (1997) and *Milk* (2008). Banks has penned screenplays for *Rule of the Bone, Cloudsplitter*, and *The Darling*.[33] Martin Scorsese will direct a film on the latter, based upon Banks's screenplay. Banks himself is producing *The Book of Jamaica*; he wrote the screenplay for *Trailerpark*, which is scheduled for release in 2010.

As for how Banks's working routine operates, he says, "I work in the mornings. I have a little studio about 200 yards from the house. It's a renovated old sugar shack once used to water down maple sap into maple syrup, and usually I'm here in the mornings and I work until early afternoon."[34] Banks's working habits validate Kerouac's observation that, "sketching language is undisturbed flow from the mind."[35] Banks usually employs a computer when composing:

> anything that will speed up that initial composition helps me deceive that internal censor and editor that tends to judge and to close me down and restrain me. And the closer that speed gets to conversation, the more spontaneous I can be, the more surprising I can be to myself, and the more easily I can tap my own unconscious, to be honest.[36]

Yet unlike Kerouac or other writers like Thomas Pynchon or Don DeLillo who shun the press, Banks likes to circulate when not writing, "I'm a gregarious and sociable person. I grew up in a big family. Writing is a solitary process. I like coming out of the cave and seeing if anyone is there."[37] Banks continues to be accessible to readers through his numerous public readings, recorded radio conversations, and the many interviews he has given, especially to small literary magazines that may have difficulty sustaining circulation. When young, Banks cultivated an older audience, but as time went on, younger people discovered his writings, becoming his predominant audience.

Banks now lives in Miami Beach, Florida, and Saratoga Springs, New York. He has had the honor of being named a New York State Author and is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters as well as PEN International which awarded him its Hemingway Award in 2004. Banks has been a past president of the International Parliament of Writers (which offers safe haven to writers under threat) as well as the founding President of the North American Network Cities of Asylum. His papers have been placed at the Harry Ransom Center, the University of Texas at Austin, whose collections include papers of Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and D. H. Lawrence, as well as many notable American writers. Close writer friends include William Kennedy, Toni Morrison, Paul Auster, Jim Harrison, Richard Ford, Salman Rushdie, J. M. Coetzee, Caryl Phillips, and Madison Smartt Bell, who was once a student of Banks.

Like the young roustabout Japhy[38] from Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums* (1957), at the age of 64 and sporting a bad knee, Banks in the company of novelist Phillips, the Caribbean-born author of *Crossing the River* (1993) and *A Distant Shore* (2003), climbed the more difficult route to the summit of Mount Kilimanjaro (Hemingway's favorite peak) in Africa.[39] In his spare time, Banks still paints watercolors and pastels.[40] Two of Banks's later novels, *Rule of the Bone* and *The Darling* exhibit a deep appreciation for the music of Charles Ives, but in his CD player you might just as well find Tin Hat Trio, Clifford Brown, Bill Jackson, Jimmy Rodgers, or Duke Ellington.[41]

2

Finding a Voice: Early Stories

> But the doctor would not laugh with his friend. There were three things which he hated in this world, he said often and angrily: death, venereal disease, and organized religion.
>
> "In that order," the doctor always amended. "And the story, clean or otherwise, that can make me laugh at one of these has never been thought up."
>
> —Grace Metalious, *Peyton Place*

Searching for Survivors

The literary ambitions of Russell Banks began with poetry, yet swerved toward fiction; he wanted to be a poet, "but had not the gift"[1] as he modestly notes. His first book, *Snow: Meditations of a Cautious Man in Winter* (1974), presents an excursion into narrative introspection. While the poetry displays competence, it's not remarkable—thought indulges in discourse more than lyricism. For nine years, he co-edited a small poetry publication he co-founded with the poet William Matthews, *Lillabulero*, penning four poetry chapbooks between 1967 and 1974, before publishing his first novel, *Family Life* in 1975. Robert Niemi offered an astute discussion of Banks's poems[2] which employ metaphor as background and ambiance for the foregrounding of personal narrative, a general weakness in the methodology of those who practiced the technique called *projective verse* (sometimes *objective verse*), which was one of the avant-garde American fads of the sixties and seventies (epitomized by poets Charles Olson and Ed Dorn) that has not worn well over time. When Banks began to pen short stories, they exhibited a relaxed and unselfconscious lyricism he never quite achieved in his poetry. He became especially adept at employing one of the most common and effective poetic techniques: Eloquent lists conjuring up mood and atmosphere, a painterly quality of evocation that would mark him as distinguished stylist:

> He listened to the beer in his mouth and throat, and to the rain, the footsteps overhead, a muffled radio somewhere down the hall, to the cars on the street

> below hurriedly splashing past the building, a bus sloshing to a stop at the corner. He got up again and went to the window, pulled back the heavy, red velvet drape with one hand and looked intently out.[3]

The publication of *Searching for Survivors* (1975) the year after his meandering poem launched Banks's career as a young writer to be watched. Banks's early story "Searching for Survivors" exhibits an obsession with linking the historical past to the present through the history of the Hudson River, the explorer Henry Hudson, the automobile named the Hudson, and the narrator's dog named Hudson. While the narrator fails to reconnect with a childhood friend, he conjures the past to inhabit a fantasy future: A land-bound New Hampshire resident familiar with Hudson's adventures imagines discovering Hudson's lost journal and wonders whether or not he would have joined the mutiny against Hudson or departed in the small boat with Hudson when he was set adrift in Hudson Bay. He imagines Hudson survived into old age, telling the stories of his adventures. The preposterous fantasy offers an obvious displacement for the narrator's undisclosed problems, left as mysterious as the death of heroic Henry Hudson. While not a notable story, it signals in embryonic fashion Banks's future obsession with a haunted monologue set in a historical framework, both real and imagined. The theme of survivors bracketing the book's 14 tales foregrounds history in the first survivor tale and it will foreground the personal in the book's closing story. The inset about the childhood friendship that does not survive into adulthood in this story adumbrates the greater personal tragedy revealed in the book's last story.[4]

The longest piece in the book, "Survivors II," presents an extended meditation on family grief. Inspired by the death of Banks's younger brother, the work is more of an exercise in collage, yet its narrative moves in the mode of realism. The younger brother decides to take a train from Los Angles to Boston, arguing that trains are safer than planes, yet he's killed in a train accident (like Banks's younger brother Steve). Photos provide theme and structure: All eleven sections post like verbal photos from different points in time; readers are invited to put the photos in any order they choose.[5] The effect of the framing highlights a circular meditative pathos: Photos were placed around the casket of the departed brother at a wake, the last section being the one that precedes the opening section. (Banks will once more use an eleven-part circular structure in his novel *Hamilton Stark.*) The story explores mutual grief amid the difficulty of communicating sincerely when family members have not seen each other for long periods. The family shows signs of self-conscious repression; this creates an awkward pathos among them, yet there is a flicker of happier moments that serve to deepen the poignancy rather than deflecting it. While the combination of realism and experimentalism works in harmony, the story reads more like autobiographical documentary than fiction.

Employing contemporary history for background, "With Ché in New Hampshire" signals Banks's interest in radical politics. This story supplies a variation on James Thurber's seminal story, "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty."[6]

The narrator provides a blustery monologue of his imagined radical friends and leftist activities on a global stage as the most trusted secret agent of Ché Guevara. This fantasy of James Bond derring-do occurs as the narrator has his beard removed in a barber shop located in small-town New Hampshire. While Thurber's mild-mannered Mitty possesses a humorous, vengeful edge, Banks furnishes satire on those leftists who are all talk and no action. This whimsical story becomes an accusation against small-town isolation and indifference to the world at large, and a send-up of those who think revolution a glamour affair divorced from grim realities—an illusion that receives routine servicing in American movies and television, perhaps even more so today. A less successful companion piece, "With Ché at the Plaza," depicts a narrator meeting an elegantly dressed man at The Plaza Hotel in New York City, imagining him to be Ché Guevara. The narrator entertains fantasy dreams of gambling with Frank Sinatra. This impish satire on celebrity worship indirectly illustrates how damaging an obsession with media stardom corrupts the consciousness of ordinary people, permitting them to lead deluded, wasteful lives.

With both stories, the winsome enthusiasm of the narrator seduces the reader, yet it is precisely this charm that becomes the target of an irony that perceives the world to be an extension of adolescent narcissism. Such delusional enthusiasm can also be found in the war vignettes of Ambrose Bierce as illustrated by his most famous story, "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," where the Confederate estate gentlemen finds himself seduced by the charm of the Union soldier provocateur dressed in a Confederate uniform. While Bierce employs the techniques of romantic storytelling within the deluded mind of the rebel as he frames the story's beginning and end with the cold technique of reportorial realism, Banks remains content to let his narrators be not so much unreliable in a modernist manner as delusional in the postmodernist manner; the connection between delusional narcissism and perception remains common to both Bierce and Banks. Banks's subjects would like to escape the smallness of their lives, they have hidden problems, yet the brevity of the stories forbids further exploration; Banks hints at a larger cultural malaise within New England and the country at large. Banks would like to liberate Americans from the facile, "I'm okay, you're okay" psychology Americans shower in, because the world remains more complex and perilous than Americans are usually willing to acknowledge. At this stage, Banks is not yet able to articulate the complexity that he implies, yet his agenda contains a subtle political edge, marking him as unique among contemporary American writers.

"With Ché at Kitty Hawk," the third Ché story (later slightly revised and renamed "Theory of Flight"), provides slices of life as they focus on the pathos of folly and the way a divorce with children imprisons the wife rather than the husband (men can fly free of the Earth, while women are bound to Earth by children). Set on the Outer Banks near Kitty Hawk before the area became crowded with luxury rentals, tourist flip-flops, and Jacuzzis, "Theory of Flight" displays considerable success depicting the consciousness of a woman victimized by patriarchy and the biological imperative, something most male writers are not able to do in a

convincing manner. This feminist story stands out in a collection that often appears to dwell, even if in slyly satiric manner, on the rampaging rants and narcissism of the male ego.

"The Neighbor" tenders a satiric sketch of the counterculture injunction *back to the land* as it depicts a black husband in his fifties and his white wife with four teenage children, two daughters from the current marriage and two stepsons, who decide to remake their lives as rural farmers by living off the land. Since they know nothing about farming and animals, the neighbor has contempt for their incompetence and perhaps an unwelcome attitude toward the racially mixed marriage. The self-indulgent and excited children ride a newly bought horse to death when the parents are away; bringing the neighbors to view the family as normal human beings, wayward children being something a neighbor easily comprehends. The neighbor displays sympathy amid the family's ignorance concerning farm life, helping them with his tractor to bury the dead horse. In the end, the old rural values of New England rise above racism, yet the future of such inexperienced city folk in the country portends the kind of tragic pathos that Robert Frost penned in such poems as "Out, Out" where the young boy loses hand and life to a chain saw.

"The Neighbor" paints a darker picture of New England, as if the two stories comprise a dual portrait. In a more blatant postmodern technique that relies on summary instead of linear narration, "The Lie" offers an explanation for evil: New England guilt going back generations, the theme and explanation that Hawthorne chose to explain his liberal social leanings, although he was a political conservative. Banks's explanation for inherited evil in New England presents a psychological pattern of generational lies rather than some mythical pact with the devil as in Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown." There's no midsummer *Walpurgisnicht*, merely an accidental murder by a boy and his father's pinning the murder on a local homosexual who's innocent. Hawthorne and Banks derive their liberalism from anxiety focused upon generational guilt and the public confession of it admits the quest for justice and liberty as part of the process of discovering freedom. In both Hawthorne's (descended from one of the judges of the infamous Salem witch trials) and Banks's sociology, inherited evil lingers as a haunting aspect of New England identity and as an explanation for the surviving family lines of New Englanders.

Both pathos and mild irony find evocation amid nostalgia in "Defenseman." The troubling aspects of a son's insecure identity come to the fore when he tries to imitate his father by becoming a hockey player, falsely believing that by doing so he will free himself. Later in life, he recognizes both the joy he has found in recalling his father's pleasure in teaching him to skate and the quiet pleasure mere skating now affords him when free of youthful competitive games and oedipal rivalry. He describes his skating as a dreamlike glide through a matrix of pleasant memories. (The matrix metaphor will acquire more sinister ambiance in *Hamilton Stark*.)

"Investiture" conjures a fable about a secret assignation of a country's leader when he sets out to mingle with the populace. The assassin deals a death blow

with a blackjack to the back of the leader's head, claims the leader was hit by a hit-and-run Japanese truck. Despite not being a Catholic in an apparently Catholic country, he succeeds in becoming the new leader, vowing never to mingle with the populace. This boasting monologue has a conspiratorial tone and that intent creates an archetypal ambiance evocative of some of the timeless fables of Jorge Luis Borges. Although not particularly effective, it prefigures the fable format of Banks's novella *Family Life*.

The shortest and most enigmatic entry in the book, "The Nap," comprises a single anecdotal paragraph offering a prose-poem meditation on the nature of stories. A reader lying in bed grows bored by the book he's reading and puts the open book down on his stomach, then takes a catnap, "a private tradition." When he awakens, he expects to understand differently what he's reading, and that this time there's nothing different. He's reading a contemporary spy thriller. The gnomic meditation on reading presumes the reader has a passing acquaintance with Aristotle's concept of *catharsis*, whereby the audience (or reader when transferred to the closet drama of a novel) discovers something different that they've never seen or understood before. Aristotle in his *Poetics* defines what distinguishes great transcendent drama from mediocre drama that evokes sympathy for the characters. Although the spy story that the reader follows appears to be sufficiently complex to be considered art, it remains ineffective art. The spy thriller genre, even at its peak, cannot change the consciousness of an attentive reader. The reader's occasional catnaps while reading paradoxically inculcate a discipline that on the surface appears to be laziness, but in fact offers the greater discipline of a fully attentive reader.

"Impasse" introduces the character Ham, the father of a young baby, who works at a bookstore; he begins an affair with a woman named Rosa, rationalizing the affair as natural since he doesn't love his wife. Leaving the bookstore on a rainy day when business slows, he *innocently* visits Rosa; they make love in her apartment. Ham's complacent in accepting Rosa's sexual advance yet it has been made clear he's been actively pursuing her with an affair in mind. The poignant irony, after their sexual climax, of the story's last line echoes tragically, "And oh, the clarity that would follow." Divorce initiates a muddle rather than anything resembling clarity and the enthused exclamation calls attention to the character's delusional self-indulgence. The use of time displacement within the story and the joking use of the character's third-person reference to himself signals the prelude for much more intricate and experimental ways to investigate a character named Ham in Banks first full-length novel, *Hamilton Stark*.

"The Drive Home" presents a rambling satire on a dedicated narcissist. A man has an argument with his wife, and then he leaves his wife and daughter. He takes a bus from Boston home to his parent's house; on the bus there is a folk singer whose guitar the main character breaks to display anger and physical superiority. He arrives in New Hampshire finding his parents moving out of their house. The alienated narrator resembles the narrator of "Blizzard," about a man who leaves his wife during a snowstorm. Neither of these two stories with