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## **THE SWEET HEREAFTER**

*By Russell Banks*

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Of all the fears expressed in myth and folktale, perhaps none is more terrifying on a societal level than that in the Pied Piper: the community's loss of its children. From Exodus to Roald Dahl's *BFG*, that loss robs a people of its chance at renewal, continuity and evolution. With their children dies the society's hope.

In Russell Banks' powerfully unsettling new novel, that has happened to the snowy Adirondack town of Sam Dent. Through the eyes of four successive characters we see the school bus accident that kills 14 children, the town's consequent suffering and tentative start of its healing.

Dolores Driscoll, the bus driver, describes the morning of the accident. Between the lines of her narrative, we see a devoted woman who cares about her husband, her job and her town: "You have to love a town before you can live in it right," she says. Forced to make difficult choices, she tries to "err on the side of the angels." So, she assumed the blur racing in front of her bus that morning was a dog and veered over an embankment, and a moment later 14 children lay dead.

Two of them belonged to Billy Ansel, the second narrator. When he'd returned from Vietnam, Billy married his high school sweetheart, bought a Sunoco station and hired a series of young vets in need of purpose. Ironically, while saving other lives, Billy lost his wife to cancer and now loses his nine-year-old twins. He tries to sound stoic—"I like being the strong, silent man in charge, the boss"—and drowns his mind in alcohol, but Billy is agonized beyond his capacity to admit: "The twins, Jessica and Mason. I can barely say their names without feeling the flesh of my heart turn into iron. This is not bitterness; it's what happens when you have eaten your bitterness. . . . The only way I could go on living was to believe that I was not living." Having driven behind the bus on the morning of the accident, Billy can become a key witness on behalf of those in town who need to fix blame.

Knowing there will be many with that need, the inevitable lawyers swarm in vulturous search of someone with deep enough pockets to sue. Negligence attorney Mitchell Stephens relates the third section and becomes the novel's most intriguing character. Passionate about finding someone to blame, Stephens has the most sympathetic of reasons. He is driven not by greed but anger at negligence and the lives it costs. Make negligence cost, he believes: "That's the only way you can ensure moral responsibility in this society. Make it cheaper."

Stephens himself has lost a child, not dead, but dead to him, his daughter, Zoë, "in L.A., walking around like a tattooed zombie." He makes plain the urgency of the book's horror, its relevance for a nation losing its children. "We've all lost our children," he says.

"It's like all the children of America are dead to us . . . violent on the streets, comatose in the malls, narcotized in front of the TV. In my lifetime something terrible happened that took our children away from us."

Some, however, have driven their children away, like the father of Nichole Burnell, the beautiful, straight-A 14-year-old paralyzed in the accident, who narrates the fourth section. Nichole could provide the focus for a jury's sympathy. But she has an earlier crippling to avenge that only she and her father know about, and she settles her private score rather than the town's.

Despite its engrossing narrators, this becomes more the story of a community than of individuals. As its citizens grieve, grow alcoholic, lose their marriages and turn on friends, the town must purge its lust for scapegoats, let its suffering ripen into compassion, its confusion into understanding. In the poignant final scene, Banks adumbrates how this process may begin.

That is the power of Russell Banks, the quality that made his *Continental Drift* among the most compelling books of the eighties and makes *The Sweet Hereafter* among the important books thus far of the nineties. Balancing sensitivity with toughmindedness, he sifts his characters' private anguish until he finds their possibility for affirmation, and he reflects this quest for grace on a scale that feels immense.

T.S. Eliot argued that his contemplation of the sordid was "the necessary and negative aspect of the impulse toward the pursuit of beauty." Russell Banks contemplates purgatorial affliction and despair as the purifying route toward hope and acceptance.