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SAVE ME, JOE LEWIS

By Madison Smartt Bell

Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. 317 pp. \$23.95

The seven novels and two story collections comprising the *œuvre* of Madison Smartt Bell at 35 make him one of our most prolific and precocious talents. What grows clearer with each book is that Bell's unique wedding of intelligence and craft to a signature angle of vision mark his as one of our most courageous and large-souled talents as well. He is perhaps the most necessary American writer of the generation now reaching full literary maturity.

Bell is a regional writer. His region is the foggy border buffering purgatory from hell in the sootiest creases of contemporary society. The plots he sets in motion there, if merely described, would sound as sensational and bizarre as Stephen King's. What places them well within the sphere of art, however, are Bell's sharp insight into and extraordinary compassion for his outcast protagonists. Since his first novel, *The Washington Square Ensemble*, with its cluster of heroin dealers, Bell has always written with conspicuous sympathy for the alienated and the bruised. He searches for characters beaten down by a combination of life and poor choices, whose hearts (to paraphrase a line from Bell's wife, poet Elizabeth Spires) are a bit off-center, yet who retain, however vague or unconscious, a desire to seek affirmation.

In *Save Me, Joe Lewis*, Macrae, 23, is AWOL from the army and living in New York's Hell's Kitchen. He hasn't enjoyed much of anything since his teen years in Tennessee when he was in love, without knowing it, with a spirited photographer named Lacy. Broke and wandering in Manhattan's Battery Park, Macrae spots Charlie. They ask each other for a handout and "circle each other like two strange dogs," then team up to rob the first of a series of victims carrying ATM cards. No guns, no violence, just forced withdrawals of \$400, the maximum allowed. "Relax," Macrae tells female victims, "I'm not a rapist. I'm a thief." Charlie prefers the term "aggressive solicitation."

Petulant and lost, Macrae often takes "a wrong fork in the criss-cross trails of conversation" and blindly strews mines along his own path. He forms unfortunate attachments, one to a prostitute whose pimp decides to blow half her head off. Macrae's most dangerous alliance is with his increasingly unstable partner Charlie, whose rationale "Ain't nobody cares that much what you do" faintly recalls Flannery O'Connor's Misfit. After they've made New York too hot for their comfort, they head south to Baltimore where they add a third partner, a benign dog-loving young black man named Porter, fresh off a jail term for a bar fight that turned inadvertently gory. The three hold up an armored bank truck, but police arrive, bullets fly, and the trio heads full speed for Macrae's blind father's farm outside of Nashville.

Were trigger-happy Charlie not with him, Macrae might feel he's returned from far east of Eden. There's the potential for a wholesome life in Tennessee. Adjacent to Macrae's land is the farm of Thomas Laidlaw, the hero of Bell's 1989 *Soldier's Joy*, who'd done much two decades earlier to rid the area of injustice. Not only is Laidlaw there, still playing banjo with his bluegrass band and still with Adrienne Wells, but the beautiful Lacy has returned home from art school in Philadelphia. That she still loves Macrae is clear to everyone but him, who keeps stumbling aimlessly in restless confusion. After a robbery attempt which they botch even worse than the Baltimore fiasco, Macrae, Charlie and Porter flee to the South Carolina coast. There it grows obvious that Macrae may have outlived his usefulness to Charlie, and that the book's final page won't be big enough to hold both of them.

Bell has visited most of these settings and walked with these dangerous drifters many times before. Over the last decade, he has put before us heroin addicts, murderers who plot to set off nuclear bombs in New York City, alcoholics, grizzled survivors of urban jungles, unemployed sound men slipping from the human community in dingy Greenwich Village bars and insomniac hypnotists who keep pet boa constrictors and stalk nighttime streets while haunted by Renaissance mystics. He invites us to care about characters who offer scarcely an inch of ground to build affection on, no more than, say, some foolish old man who gives his kingdom to two satanic women while disowning the only child who loves him.

Yet, by combining subtle technique and native compassion, Bell inevitably succeeds.

Bell establishes his authority immediately by the careful accretion of accurate technical detail. Whether he describes audio equipment or tae kwon do or Port Authority Terminal, his minute realism wins the reader's suspension of disbelief. Holding fast to that trust, he edges us into the murky world his people inhabit, like Porter's gin mill where "most of the seats at the bar had been taken by the ageless career boozers damp, tangled clothing twisted into their wrinkled skin, leaning in tight to their ashtrays and glasses." From there he gradually draws us into the smoky and dark caverns of the characters' minds. He makes us feel Macrae's discomfort, his reluctance to hurt people, his affection for those close to him, his unvoiced hope to know a simpler world he can inhabit with Lacy, herself the potential healing agent who blends an allure, vitality, loyalty and self-possession that once again reflect Bell's affection and respect for women, even when they sleep with killers.

As Bell descends with Macrae into his underworld, he takes us with him, and we see the crucible that forged Macrae held our trials too. Here lies Bell's trademark gift, how he moves among modern thieves and lepers with charity. His is a Robert Browning empathy that creates no character so defiled that Bell cannot ask, "What is at the heart of this man that is in me as well?"

In *Macrae*, Bell once again takes a character you'd be disturbed to find living anywhere near your neighborhood, then moves relentlessly against the grain of popular thought to find the embers of Macrae's humanity beneath the ashes of his pain.