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Boomerang

By Barry Hannah

Houghton Mifflin. 150 pp.

As a kid, Barry Hannah ordered a boomerang out of the back of a comic book for \$1.98. He never quite mastered its flight, nor does he entirely master it in this his eighth book as a metaphor for the flights he takes into his past and back again. Still, before its trip is over, *Boomerang* passes over a good bit of country worth seeing.

As in his 1987 *Hey Jack!* Hannah muses upon and frequently brings to vivid life the actions and attitudes of his native Mississippi with all their elemental flair and immediacy. He leaves no doubt that his Deep South speaks to the core of his spirit, as when he and friend Willie Morris return to McComb, Mississippi, "this pretty and humane town to practice secular humanism as hard as we can. That is when we're just staring out of windows trying to see even the rough face of God in the clouds or in the vapor over the oil spots in the parking lot of the Jitney Jungle."

That's pure Hannah speaking. In fact, the entire volume feels like pure Hannah speaking, which reflects one of the book's two main problems: he calls *Boomerang* a novel, "a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously." That disclaimer may well be the closest thing to fiction in this "novel." The book is a collage of passages that read far more like transcribed reportage than shaped art, and throughout it Hannah drops the names of the famous: writers Jim Harrison and Thomas McGuane, editor Gordon Lish, singer Jimmy Buffet. What we have here, then, feels like journal entries, loosely assembled entries at that, lacking even the little cohesiveness of plot present in *Hey Jack!* That encapsulates the book's other main problem, its disjointedness.

But if viewed from a distance the books reeks of chaos, its up-close moments can be staggeringly effective. The Hannah they reveal is attractive only for his earthiness and his honest appraisal of his frailty, but that honesty itself is arresting. In an entry dated "Another Sunday, 1988" he writes, "All this day I've worried about what to do with this third marriage. It is a cold day in April and my wife has never offered to lick me or serve me food. She is on the picket line of feminism. . . . I've told about flying jets in Vietnam so long and so faithfully, I think I deserve a woman on her knees. Besides, she has wonderful blond hair. I will snap my fingers almost anywhere and there she is, on her knees. But she's on the picket line now. I never took her to Shiloh. I never took her to Graceland. Yes, yes. There's so much I've not done for her yet.

"She's off the picket line now. My great sullen manliness is controlling her and she has no self-esteem anymore, which is exactly the way I want it. I am a terrible man." Whether the voice is his own or an echo of his wife's, Hannah seems always willing, even eager, to stand naked to our censure.

Although his memory is not always accurate (he states that the Coasters' hit song "Searchin' " was out before Elvis appeared, when in fact Elvis had been to the top of the Billboard charts six times before "Searchin' " reached there in May, 1957), it paints with bold, affecting strokes. Sometimes the

strokes are loving, "I saw [my father] pitch one into the hole from about forty yards out one afternoon, on a green with a horrible left incline. He was so happy and his friends were so happy, I felt proud of the old dude and will remember the afternoon forever. In fact, I love my father into the deepest fathoms," and sometimes not, "My first wife worked hard for me and rushed me into marriage. She was an army brat who thought my parents were rich. She was a painter and a lover and a wife, but foremost she made sure we were married. She hated all my friends. Her cooking was soulless. She had the great talent for taking the heart out of any situation that gave me joy. She had no friends. Everything scared her."

Anyone planning to marry Hannah might do well to read this book first. It contains sexual attitudes that could have the same perverse appeal to women as George Wallace's civil rights platform had for blacks, i.e., thoroughly repugnant yet unabashedly candid enough to have a refreshing clarity about where he stands. He writes of women as if his other hand held a club. His advice to women: "I must rescue our women. There's only one way to do it, ladies: make a big pot roast with onions, carrots, and potatoes in it and then get naked except for your high-heeled shoes, if you've got any legs and fanny left. He'll eat the roast and then sleep, dreaming about some bitch five counties away. You've done everything to please him but it's not enough. Good thing I finally get up and take care of the little woman, heh, heh." Irony? Perhaps, but there's too little of it elsewhere to credit him with it confidently here.

What we can credit Hannah with, though, are flashes of insight, even profundity. They are not sustained over the course of the book, seldom even over the course of a page, but when they do come they hit with the surge of a powerful truth newly recognized: "We are all so loaded up with what our good mothers did in the past that we walk through life like darlings," "The past will cost you fifty dollars a day in worry if you let it."

The past, here, is a boomerang flying recklessly. This is not the Hannah of *Airships*, the 1978 collection serving notice of a talent for short fiction that could be among the best in the nation. It is a Hannah grappling with how to structure a full-length novel as cohesively as the *Geronimo Rex* he wrote in his student days two decades ago. Yet this is a ripened Hannah whose observations often ring true and hit hard, and who is right: the past really does come back at us like a boomerang, over and over, so that who we are is simply an adult standing precariously on the shoulders of the earlier people we have been. A writer who can show us that with the energy and conviction *Boomerang* contains is one always worth our attention.