

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Broken Hat by Barry Lank

A. L. Diaz · Wednesday, November 13th, 2019

In a world where popular opinion touts new as better and abandons the old, Barry Lank's *Broken Hat* surmised the frustration people have when they are no longer relevant. Set in the fictional San Gabriel town of Broken Hat, the novella follows Sheriff Eric Mulliner's journey from being the only sheriff in an unincorporated desert to becoming an intrusive presence in the blossoming company town as he investigates the disappearance, and reappearance, of an unstable senior citizen. At the end of the story, the reader shares in the frustration as nothing goes back to normal and they must accept the changes. A feeling all too relevant in any age.

The book is narrated by Mulliner, who talks about the mostly farming and cattle town filled with people he knows. That is, until they are all pushed out and replaced with nuclear families and picket fences. His narration is blunt with little description, a reflection of his personality. This does not fit well with the bubbly newcomers who see him as a novelty of California desert life. Readers can see this in one section when a neighbor invites him to a Fourth of July party: "Rita walked by in a yellow dress that looked like it was made partly from sunlight. 'Everything is going great!' she said, touching me lightly on the collar as she breezed by. Dan sat by a kiddy pool, in short pants and a collared, button-down shirt, holding a highball like it was a theatrical prop" (9). The main plot, though, focuses on Mulliner while he investigates a missing woman by the name of Anne Lacraw, only to find her in an abandoned house of her relative. The woman is mentally unstable and has wandered off; however, three migrant workers are arrested for her disappearance. And to cover up the family's history of mental illness, the woman's relative, a partial-owner of the company town, has the innocent men deported, an injustice only Mulliner sees. When watching the news today, this plot seems almost too familiar. Gentrification and anti-immigrant rhetoric everywhere, one cannot tell if this takes place now or in the 60s. The only difference is the racism is much more subtle in the story.



Mulliner's narration blends factual observations with sarcastic comments with an occasional fourth wall break. For instance, he says:

By the end of that week, I'd accomplished nothing, except hauling in Leonard for giving alcohol to minors. A kid was weaving around on his bike after he left the Fahey house one afternoon. Ever make a drunk 11-year-old walk a straight line? You'll laugh until you die. Make him do it a couple of times. Tell him he's getting

better at it (15).

The asides and basic description rather than sensory images give the readers a feel for Mulliner as a sheriff. Mulliner is rough, almost like any character Clint Eastwood might play, but the reader can sympathize with him as he deals with suburbanites and the various problems they bring such as kids vandalizing properties and a security guard hired by the company town's owners acting as the police. As one might say, he is the kind of guy you would share a beer with. Or at least listen to the crazy stories he has. Like this one at the end:

A few days later when I finally moved away, I actually got lost on my way out of town. Once again, I had unconsciously been using some boarded-up building as a landmark, and suddenly the place wasn't there. In this case, it was the old Campbell mansion. The scene of the Great Stabbing, Broken Hat's only legend, had been leveled. A sign announced they were putting up a new supermarket and a broasted chicken place. I thought that was kind of too bad, but I also thought that having a broasted chicken place nearby would be very convenient" (56-57).

Mulliner does not disappoint.

Most fish-out-of-water stories end with the protagonist fitting in or things going back to normal. But in real life, much like this story, that does not happen. Corporations win, innocent laborers get punished, and no one cares too much since it does not affect them personally. Sometimes things reach a point where it becomes too much, in which case some will choose to move on to where they do fit in.

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