

April 7, 2021

Dear Book Group members,

I must admit that your general reaction to *Sharks in the Time of Saviors* was a relief. I expected a much more adverse judgment of its unironic insistence on the reality of myth and sacred presences. In fact, I feel that something of an apology is in order for my underestimating your acceptance of Washburn's essentially "spiritual imagination," which is very rare among novelists in our skeptical age. Summoning the old gods to the stage, as it were, was common among classical poets and survived into the Renaissance, but the Age of Enlightenment with its strict adherence to Reason as the final arbiter of truth more or less disabled belief in Myth, which Mircea Eliade defines as "a dramatic breakthrough of the sacred into the world."

I addressed these things in my last letter and also suggested that Washburn's "craft" didn't measure up to his "vision." Let me elaborate very briefly because several of you asked about the distinction. By craft I mean the mechanical tools the writer employs to make his vision into an artifact. Take, for example, the depiction of dialect. A lesser craftsman might undertake to reproduce, say, the Southern or African-American dialect with total fidelity, whereas a superior craftsman, such as William Faulkner or Toni Morrison, will know that such fidelity, while accurate, actually impedes the vision of the work, as in Faulkner's routinely completing a word that, when spoken, would not include a final consonant, as in this exchange from *The Hamlet*: "Here. Bring me a piece of pie while I'm waiting." "What kind of pie, Mr. Bookwright?" the counterman said. "Eating pie," Bookwright said." In life, Bookwright would not have sounded the final "g" on two of his words, but Faulkner did so because he judged that to replace them with an apostrophe would have most likely been a distraction to the reader. Similarly, Toni Morrison has a highly refined sense of presenting dialect, which contrasts sharply with another African-American writer, Zora Neale Hurston, who wrote during the Harlem Renaissance and was heavily questioned for her much more literal use of dialect in her novels and stories.

All I'll say about our next book, *Hamnet*, is that here vision and craft coalesce. In fact, Maggie O'Farrell's writing is so nuanced and gem-like that we're likely to take it as carrying historical weight, although she herself says in the "Author's Note" that "this novel is the result of my idle speculation." But it seems to me that she is not in any kind of competition with the Shakespearean record; she doesn't claim for *Hamnet*—or for herself—any undue credit or praise. In fact, her story is really about Agnes—or is it Anne?—a truly memorable character whom Shakespeare in the novel recognizes as one who sees "the world as no one else does." And part II is, I thought, particularly original and powerful. This is writing to savor—but then rarely do we all agree about a book. So I look forward to seeing you on the 13th or the 21st.

Warmly,
Larry

