

You Shall Know Our Velocity by Dave Eggers (Hamish Hamilton)

30 November 2003

A random check on the Internet suggests that this novel has met the fate of so many eagerly-awaited second books: after the near-cataclysmic success of Dave Eggers's first book, the autobiographical *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, this one, his first novel, has met with at best mixed reviews. Reviewers seem to feel that Eggers is now old enough to have dropped the self-conscious charm, the free-wheeling egocentricity of his first book. Non-American reviewers, in particular, have taken umbrage at the book's plot-line of a young American man, acquiring a sum of money through a windfall, setting off with a friend to distribute it in less fortunate countries. The world has seen too much of that naively heavy-handed generosity of late.

Well, yes. There is something jackass, at best, in the book's plot premise, and the whole On the Road movement-at-all costs compulsion has become over-familiar from the movies and, more damagingly, from better novels like Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March*. Furthermore, there is something profoundly tasteless about the spectacle of two Americans rushing around the world throwing money at impoverished natives, the more so that one suspects that neither the protagonist nor Eggers himself can really see this.

But for this reviewer, Eggers' sheer virtuosity remains exhilarating, and his crazy imaginative riffs are as spell-binding as ever. I must confess also to finding the novel's emotional under-pinning quite moving. *AHWOSG* was premised on Eggers's bringing up his young brother Toph, after the near-simultaneous death of their parents. Here, too, loss plays a part: Will Chmielewski, the protagonist, and his best friend Hand, are in their different ways trying to cope with the death of their common friend Jack in a car accident. In addition, Will has recently, while retrieving Jack's possession from a warehouse, been very badly beaten up by three thugs. Receiving, out of the blue, \$80000 for having his picture used on a light-bulb advertisement, Will decides to spend most of it in a week of non-stop travel with Hand.

The action consists largely of their frustrations in getting from one continent to the other on their mission of promiscuous charity. Countries require visas, airlines do not take off as scheduled – and it proves to be quite awkward to find a non-patronising way of offering large sums of money to people.

Nevertheless, in its apparently unstructured way, the book offers the interest of an off-beat fictionalised travelogue: the vagaries of plane timetables and visas determine an itinerary as varied as it is unplanned: Senegal, Morocco, Estonia and Latvia, with strange encounters, mostly at night, in all these places. These literal destinations are vividly, almost surreally, rendered. But, as the genre dictates, movement itself becomes a metaphor for the restless search for meaning that home no longer provides. As Thom Gunn put it in his poem "On the Move": "At worst, one is in motion; and at best,/ Reaching no absolute, in which to rest,/ One is always nearer by not keeping still." The title of Eggers' book is taken from a tale told by Hand about a mythical Chilean tribe, the Jumping People: confronted with the goal-directed aggression of the Conquistadors, they cleared out, leaving behind the book's title as an inscription on the rocks as motto. As Hand explains: "They moved on. They kept moving."

So too do these modern travellers: “We tried to explain the need for us to move. Hand made motions with his hands implying lots of movement, circling, spinning.” By the book’s end nothing has been achieved, and we know that Will, at least, will keep moving – if only because we are told on the first page, which is also the book’s cover, that he will drown, with his mother, in a burning ferry in East-Central Colombia.

Running concurrently with their frustrations and adventures are imaginary dialogues Will has with various people, often hinging on the question of Jack’s death and its aftermath. From these it appears that Will has not really yet processed the death, that his deepest driving force is grief that can not be dealt with as that. Sharing this loss with Hand, he is yet at times tempted to blame Hand for being somehow responsible, if not for Jack’s death then for the beating-up that followed it.

The two are quite often taken for lovers, and indubitably heterosexual as they are, the bond between them, as so often in the American buddy movie tradition, is the realest thing in the novel – apart, that is, from the gap left by the absent Jack. For what Will ceaselessly laments is the loss of their community of three – a relationship, one might say, in which friendship is liberated of the special demands made by an exclusive relationship. Picking up a hitchhiker in Estonia, he feels secure: “It was good to have him in the car. Three felt good. Three felt right.”

Will’s fantasy for the three friends, before Jack’s death, is worthy of Holden Caulfield’s in *Catcher in the Rye*, the great American dream of returning to a pastoral idyll that has so strangely spawned so many utopian communities in America: “I’d gotten the idea that even if we lived in different states for a while, eventually we’d buy land together ... The land would be on the lake, but if not, a valley ...”

Indeed, it is Holden Caulfield’s strange generosity and agonised fury at society that one most often recalls in reading this book. If, at twenty-seven, these men are considerably older than Holden, and if, in invoking Bellow, Gunn and Salinger, one is aligning Eggers with a tradition now more than fifty years old, that may suggest not so much that the men are immature and that the book is dated as that the tradition still speaks to the imagination.