Deliverance

Hank Malone

1970

a review of

Deliverance by James Dickey. Published by Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston. 1970, $5.95

Eight years ago James Dickey began working on a first novel while he was in the process of becoming one of America's finest, most popular, and most controversial poets. During those years, while producing an enormous amount of first-rate poetry, he became a "public figure," barnstorming the college lecture circuits with tremendous success.

Somewhere along the line he also began to pick up ominous personal epithets: he was called a "fascist," a "red-neck racist," and a "pervert" (whatever that means). At the same time, Life magazine hailed him as a great writer. He had also been chosen as the Poetry Consultant to the Library of Congress in 1966, and won the National Book Award that year.

Formerly a star college athlete, night fighter pilot in W.W. II and Korea, advertising executive, and college instructor, Dickey began a full-time career as a poet at age 38, giving up everything he had in the world except his wife and kids. A few years later, he was earning better than $25,000 a year as a full-time poet.

The man is clearly a pack of wild-eyed contradictions!

American as cherry-pie, eccentric as hell, Dickey pursues one of America's "craziest" and most marginal occupations (writing poetry) and turns it into an enormously profitable venture; he also elevates the status of writing poetry (as a kind of career) in America; and better yet, he writes, in the process, some of the finest poems of the era!

Clearly we are talking about a man of some genius. No simply "good poet" is capable of pulling-off such an incredible series of capers. In the long run it's probably up to genius (not poets) to stand the world on its head; to synthesize every seemingly insurmountable contradiction.

Dickey's novel, *Deliverance*, is important stuff. Consider the following: he's seemingly a cherry-pie American, origins in the rural South, accused of every crime imaginable, a genius, a first-rate poet, a "public figure" like Norman Mailer, and author of a long-born novel about the "deliverance" of an American psyche—a novel currently at the top (or nearly) of the bestseller list. We'd better check this one out.

First, it's a fine novel.

And what's it all about? Four average suburban American men; a mutual funds salesman, a supervisor in a soft-drink company, an art director of a consulting firm, and an "outdoorsman" (a champion archer) decide to take off on a three day canoe trip down a particularly wild section of a river in the heart of today's South. They do it because they're bored to death, in search of some kind of desperate personal "deliverance."

On the morning of the second day, two of the group are viciously attacked and raped by mountaineers, and from that moment on the novel becomes a genuine nightmare of weird violence and murder and strangeness.

The novel is a fantasy of violence about men attempting to cover-up (by means of fantasy) the real violence of their human lives. Presumably a simple story, the ultimate scope of the effort echoes and resounds with political and personal implications.

Dickey's political stance is finally pretty clear: the State is oppressive, and one must lie like hell through almost every social reality in America in order to protect the personal integrity of one's own very personal incommunicable life.

The narrator, a man not unlike Dickey himself, ultimately achieves a kind of personal (if paranoid) "deliverance" by the end of the book. He has taken on life in such an utterly strange manner during his three day voyage that the only salvation seems to lie in absolute personal integrity covered-up by a ferocious manipulation and deceit of the State.

And he wins! Flat out. The narrator literally gets away with murder. And this little message is at the top of the best-seller list!

Some explanation is needed. Dickey, like any good poet, has been for a long time acutely aware of the profound limitations of language—the limitations of "social communication."

At times the book becomes a kind of funny, wildly exaggerated, movie scenario, highlighting the limitations of "talking about" certain kinds of human realities.

Suppose, for instance, that for very legitimate reasons one night you commit a murder. Suppose you are the victim of sodomy, beforehand, and suppose you cut-out on your wife as well, for the "most human" motives. How the hell, asks Dickey, can you talk about this to anyone? How can words and social realities in this kind of society seat such events so as to be intelligible to anyone?

We all know that we are stuck with this dilemma, that there are hundreds of things we cannot talk about because "human communication" will not stretch so very far, because "reality" described precisely is usually so painful and disjointed that convenient rhetorical and psychological fictions are preferred by others, and enforced!

Deliverance is really a very complicated novel, far deeper than it seems. It speaks to the secret realities we all contain within us, speaks with subtle outrage at The State of political and social affairs in America that prevents us from "telling the whole truth, the way it really happens."

Deliverance explores, in microscopic detail, the deception of The State by the three surviving average suburban men who are the heroes of this tale. It is ultimately a story of stone rebellion—a story about the commission of great crimes (according to Hoyle), and how three average men (fascists, perhaps, redneck racists, perverts, etc.) achieve the "deliverance" that enables them to digest their "crimes" and disregard the laws of The State, which means the good old world we live in.

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