

IN THIS COCKEYED WORLD THERE ARE SHAPES AND DESIGNS, IF ONLY WE HAVE SOME CURIOSITY, TRAINING, AND COMPASSION AND TAKE CARE NOT TO LIE OR TO BE SENTIMENTAL—SOME REFLECTIONS FOLLOWING THE DISCOVERY OF THE 39 MEN AND WOMEN FOUND DEAD INSIDE A REFRIGERATED LORRY ON AN INDUSTRIAL ESTATE IN ESSEX.

Posted on October 27, 2019 by Andrew Brown



The Mann Gulch fire, 1949

Luke 12:54-57

Jesus said to the crowds: ‘When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, “It is going to rain”; and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, “There will be scorching heat”; and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time? ‘And why do you not judge for yourselves what is right?

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Norman Maclean (1902-1990) from his notes written as a possible fore piece to *Young Men and Fire*.

As I get considerably beyond the biblical allotment of three score years and ten, I feel with increasing intensity that I can express my gratitude for still being around on the oxygen-side of the earth’s crust only by not standing pat on what I have hitherto known and loved. While the oxygen lasts, there are still new things to love, especially if compassion is a form of love.

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The Mann Gulch fire was a wildfire reported on August 5, 1949 in a gulch located along the upper Missouri River in the Gates of the Mountains Wilderness, Helena National Forest, in the U.S. state of Montana. A team of 15 smokejumpers parachuted into the area on the same afternoon to fight the fire and rendezvoused with a former smokejumper who was employed as a fire guard at the nearby campground. As the team approached the fire to begin fighting it, unexpected high winds suddenly caused the fire to expand, cutting off the men's route and forcing them back uphill. During the next few minutes, a 'blow-up' of the fire covered 3,000 acres in ten minutes, claiming the lives of 13 firefighters, including 12 of the smokejumpers. Only three of the smokejumpers survived. The fire would continue for five more days before being controlled.

The United States Forest Service drew lessons from the Mann Gulch fire by designing new training techniques and safety measures that developed how the agency approached wildfire suppression. The agency also increased emphasis on fire research and the science of fire behaviour.

University of Chicago English professor and author Norman Maclean (1902–1990) (most famous for 'A River Run Through It') when he was aged 86, began to research the fire and its behaviour for his last book, 'Young Men and Fire' (1992) which was only published, to considerable acclaim, after his death. Maclean, who had himself worked himself in northwestern Montana in logging camps and for the forest service in his youth, recounted the events of the fire and undertook a detailed investigation of the fire's causes.

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[From Young Men and Fire by Norman Maclean \(University of Chicago Press, 1992, p. 37\)](#)

Although young men died like squirrels in Mann Gulch, the Mann Gulch fire could not end there, smoke drifting away and leaving terror without consolation of explanation, and controversy without lasting settlement. Probably most catastrophes end this way without an ending, the dead not even knowing how they died but still "alertly erect in fear and wonder," those who loved them forever questioning "this unnecessary death," and the rest of us tiring of this inconsolable catastrophe and turning to the next one. This [the Mann Gulch fire] is a catastrophe we hope will not end where it began; it might go on and become a story. It will not have to be made up — that is all important to us — but we do have to know in what odd places to look for missing parts of a story about a wildfire and of course have to know a story and a wildfire when we see one. So this story is a test of its own belief — that in this cockeyed world there are shapes and designs, if only we have some curiosity, training, and compassion and take care not to lie or to be sentimental.

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ADDRESS

In this cockeyed world there are shapes and designs, if only we have some curiosity, training, and compassion and take care not to lie or to be sentimental

Some reflections following the discovery of the 39 men and women found dead inside a Bulgarian-registered refrigerated lorry on an industrial estate in Essex.

On Wednesday morning, I imagine like most of you, I began to hear news about the 39 men and women found dead inside a Bulgarian-registered refrigerated lorry on an industrial estate in Essex.

As I listened I began to dread hearing or reading the kind of reporting that would carelessly and thoughtlessly bandy around the word ‘tragedy’, using it not to mean what it once meant — [i.e. a carefully constructed, serious-minded story that seeks to explore in dramatic form profound questions about the meaning of human life and suffering in the universe](#) — but simply to mean an ‘inconsolable catastrophe’, an event that simply leaves us ‘terror without consolation of explanation’, ‘controversy without settlement.’ Once it has become only this then it’s simply a matter of time before most of our media outlets, ‘tiring of this inconsolable catastrophe’, quickly turn to the next one.

But, today, I want both to resist and strongly argue against the thoughtless use of the word ‘tragedy’ to describe this and similar events and, along with the writer Norman Maclean, to say that, ‘if only we have some curiosity, training, and compassion and take care not to lie or to be sentimental’ it always remains possible in this ‘cockeyed world’ to see there ‘shapes and designs’ that can bring a measure of consolation.

But for us to have any chance of finding consolation in the horror that was uncovered when the back of the refrigerated lorry was opened last week, I need to consider with you how the writer Norman Maclean found it in the heat and suffocation experienced by thirteen Forest Service smoke-jumpers in Mann Gulch, Montana, on 5 August 1949.

As I proceed through this address, it’s important to be clear that the shapes and designs of which I want to speak are **not** eternal, metaphysical ones rooted in the supernatural conception of god found in (mono)theism. Not least of all this is because, when faced with events such as the death of the smoke-jumpers or the 39, Epicurus’ two-and-a-half thousand year old set of questions concerning god comes very quickly and powerfully back into view:

Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omnipotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Then whence cometh evil? Is he neither able nor willing? Then why call him God?

This means that the shapes and designs about which I will speak are only this-worldly ones,

natural, human shapes about which we can most certainly judge ourselves just as Jesus once encouraged us to do.

So let's now turn to the Mann Gulch fire. As Maclean notes, in the attempt to tell any true-story about an event of this kind, some parts are always missing. However, more often than not, we are lucky enough that some of the missing parts can be recovered by undertaking a thorough and careful programme of forensic historical and scientific research. Knowing this, Maclean was rigorous and tireless in seeking out and piecing together the accounts of various people involved at the time, the contents of various historical records still available (especially weather reports) and also in learning first-hand the complex sciences related to fire, how it spreads, how fast it can move under certain topographical and climatic conditions and so on. Of course, not every historical and scientific fact was recoverable by Maclean but enough was to enable him to close some significant gaps in the story he felt compelled by compassion to tell. In his case he was able to show us pretty convincingly why when they landed where they did the smoke-jumpers went about their task in the way they did and why doing that under the specific conditions that obtained at the time, they died where there did and how they did. Maclean's historical and scientific researches helped bring real understanding where, before, there was only total incomprehension. In short he espied shapes and designs that significantly contributed to the safety of the next generation of smoke-jumpers and this has, naturally, brought with it some consolation because their deaths were not in vain. ([Click on this link to read an associated report.](#))

But, even as this necessary historical and scientific process is rigorously pursued, it's important to be aware that not all of the 'missing parts' of stories are of this kind. To have anything like a true and complete account — or true and complete **enough** account — we must move beyond what the facts alone can tell us and on the existential, human story.

Here we begin to touch upon the duties of the story-teller who has the responsibility to go further into the minds of his characters than is possible (or proper) for a historian or, indeed, a forensic scientist. Maclean reminds us that:

If a storyteller thinks enough of storytelling to regard it as a calling, unlike a historian, he must follow compassion wherever it leads him. He must be able to accompany his characters, even into the smoke and fire, and bear witness to what they thought and felt even when they themselves no longer knew. This story of the Mann Gulch fire will not end until it feels able to walk the final distance to the crosses with those who for the time being are blotted out by smoke. They were young and did not leave much behind them and need someone to remember them' (Maclean p. 102).

Maclean's skill, genius even, was to be able to find in language some orderly and satisfying way ("shape, form, design as of artistry") compassionately to connect with the dead smoke-jumpers so

as to help them, though dead, to tell us **their** true story rather than our own. What Maclean achieved for the smoke-jumpers in his book was the making of a genuine tragedy, i.e. a well-researched, scientifically accurate, imaginatively constructed, serious-minded, true-story that explored in dramatic form profound questions about the meaning of human life and suffering in the universe. Only such a true, tragic story would ever have been able to stand as an appropriate, unsentimental memorial to the smoke-jumpers' lives and deaths because only it, although it still left us with a sense of terror, was also capable of leaving us with something of the consolation of explanation.

To get a sense of what I mean by this last point let me read you some of Maclean's words found towards the end of his book as he looks down into the gulch from an elevated viewpoint having done all the research possible but not yet having written the book. As you hear his words remember, too, that he was writing them at a point in time which he knew was very close to the end of his own life:

'Looking down on the world of the Mann Gulch fire for probably the last time, I said to myself, "Now we know, now we know." I kept repeating this line until I recognized that, in the wide world anywhere, "Now we know, now we know" is one of its most beautiful poems. For me, for this moment, anyway, the world was changed to this one-line poem. Finding it a poem, I hoped I could next complete it as a tragedy, more exactly still as the tragedy of this whole cock-eyed world that will probably always make its own kind of sense and beauty but not always ours.

There was no water for the horses until we reached Willow Creek. I was sorry for the horses, but I was no longer sorry for us. Such can be the effect of the beauty of a very short poem' (p. 207ff)

The contemporary philosopher, James C. Edwards who has written a powerful philosophical meditation upon this book (in [*The Plain Sense of Things: The Fate of Religion in an Age of Normal Nihilism*, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997](#)) notes the following about Maclean's use of the term 'cockeyed world' in this last passage and the one you heard earlier in our readings:

'Notice that the "shapes and designs" Maclean is asserting to be the proper material of the storyteller are present "in this cockeyed world." I suspect the word is carefully chosen: to see the shapes and designs in the world (in this world: no other is in question) one has to cock one's eye; one has to squint, to peer sideways. And that is what the storyteller is doing, with her "curiosity, training and compassion." She is learning how to squint, to look slant, in order to see the patterns she is needing. She cocks her eye as a way of beseeching things to reveal hidden designs and colours. It is only in "this cockeyed world," the world of one who knows that what one sees is always conditioned by the slant of one's eye; it is only in the cockeyed world that "shapes and designs begin to show themselves.'

This is all connected, Edwards thinks, ‘to what Maclean says about the need for the storyteller to “follow compassion wherever it leads him.”’ Edwards continues:

*It is finally compassion — a “suffering with” — that will allow us to understand what it was like “to walk the final distance to the crosses with those who for the time being are being blotted out by smoke.” And compassion is not, or not only, a function of the intellect or of the feelings; it requires of us that we call upon the imagination — upon the resources of figures, tropes and metaphors — in order to suffer with those we are not. Such compassion is not the writing of sentimental interior monologues for those about to die, words that through the feelings they provoke may falsely console us with the ugly illusion that we now know what it was like for those young men to be “blotted out by smoke.” Such literary empathy is only a fantastic simulacrum of what is wanted. Genuine compassion is a matter of connecting ourselves to them by finding in language some orderly and satisfying way (“shape, form, design as artistry”) for **us** to tell **their** story (always keeping in mind the all-important difference between the two)’ (Edwards, pp. 220-221).*

All in all, it struck me very powerfully this week that everything Maclean and Edwards wrote about in connection with telling the true-story of the smoke-jumpers who died in Mann Gulch is relevant to the true-tragic-story that we can only hope will eventually be told about the 39. They, too, did not leave much behind them and clearly need someone to remember them.

Their story must be formed from a mix between the results of forensic historical and scientific research and, via the storyteller’s imagination as she follows compassion wherever it leads her, a language which tells in some true, orderly and satisfying way the 39’s own story. In the eventual telling there must be no sentimentality, no diminution of the horror of it all but, with the telling, if it is done well, there is a chance there will also come to us and the relatives of the 39, something of the consolation of explanation; there is hope that we can all one day come to look upon that refrigerated truck and say “Now we know, now we know.”

As I noted earlier, Maclean’s ability to see shapes and designs in this cockeyed world significantly contributed both to the safety of the next generations of smoke-jumpers.

The hope I want to express today is that, if and when we come to know the tragic-true-story of the 39 thanks to some compassionate, critical, contemporary storyteller, their ability to see shapes and designs in this cockeyed world might make a significant contribution both to the forestalling, and perhaps even the ending, of the evil trade of people-trafficking and the deeply problematic forms of politics and economics (including, of course, our own) which continues to drive and maintain such an evil trade in the first place.