

THE NOVELS OF WILLIAM ATTAWAY

By Peter Donahue



RETROSPECTIVE REVIEWS

"Day-o, day-ay-ay-o / Daylight come and me wan' go home." These may be the most recognizable words penned by William Attaway, who cowrote the lyrics to "The Banana Boat Song," made famous by Harry Belafonte in 1957. However, Attaway first caught the public's attention nearly two decades earlier with the publication of *Let Me Breathe Thunder* (1939), a dramatic Depression-era novel set in the Yakima Valley.

Born in Mississippi in 1911, Attaway moved with his family to Chicago as part of the Great Migration of African Americans escaping the segregated South. After discovering the works of Langston Hughes in high school, he determined to become a writer. To gain experience of the world, he left home for two years, working various manual labor jobs throughout the country. It is most likely during this period that Attaway ventured into the Northwest.

In the mid 1930s he returned to Illinois and joined the Federal Writers' Project, where he befriended writer Richard Wright. In 1936 he graduated from the University of Illinois and published his first short story. Shortly thereafter he went to New York City to begin work on his first novel, *Let Me Breathe Thunder*.

The novel's main characters are two young drifters, both white, named Step and Ed. Like thousands of others during

the Depression, they rode the rails "looking for a job of work." The novel opens with Step and Ed on a "hobo Pullman" out of New Mexico where they encounter Hi Boy, a nine-year-old Mexican boy separated from his family because of troubles, it is suggested, stemming from their status as illegal immigrants. As they head north the two men adopt Hi Boy, who speaks little English. In Seattle, looking to have a "hot time," Step gets into a scrap in one of the "underground dives," and the two men, with Hi-Boy in tow, flee the city, spending their last few dollars for seats on an eastbound train.

Attaway describes the mountain pass—"the rim of a gorge...great jagged shadows...each successive range more cloudlike than the one before"—with dutiful awe. In the diner car, Step and Ed are recruited by a man named Sampson to work on his place in the Yakima Valley, where he grows apples and raises sheep. They arrive in "sunlit Yakima" and quickly note, "The girls here mostly wore pants, drove their father's trucks into town, and took steps like men."

Step soon looks up an old friend, Mag, who is a former prostitute. While Attaway's main characters are white, *Let Me Breathe Thunder* is deeply concerned with issues of race. Ed is shocked when he meets Mag, who is "fat and black as a tar ball." Having lived in Yakima many years,

Mag knows, "It ain't like the South." In Yakima, she declares, the law will "run white out of town as well as black, once they get riled."

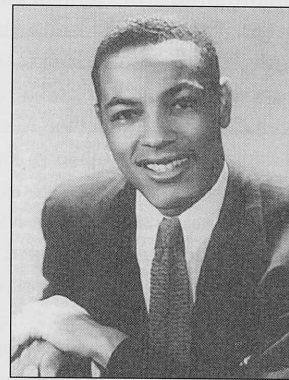
The distinction between the Northwest and the Jim Crow South also arises

when Step and Ed meet a black hobo outside of Yakima who remarks how "guys on the road ain't got prejudice like other folks," and recalls the girlfriend down South he's going to send for and marry once he finds work, since he can't imagine "raisin' colored kids in Alabama." Yet, as if to anticipate Wright's *Native Son* (1940), *Let Me Breathe Thunder* cul-

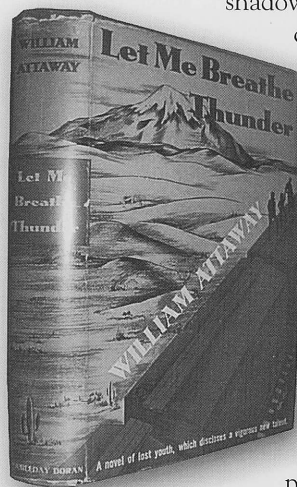
minates with the alleged rape of a white woman by a black man in Yakima and the lynch-mob reaction that follows.

Attaway would more forthrightly confront the ugliness of racism in his second novel, *Blood on the Forge* (1941), about three black half-brothers who escape their brutal life as sharecroppers in Kentucky to find work in the equally brutal steel mills of Pennsylvania—a novel the *New York Times* warned "is not for those who shun the unlovely aspects of human nature."

The issues addressed in *Let Me Breathe Thunder*, while distinctly American, are particular to life east of the Cascades. The black hobo Step and Ed meet reminisces fondly of having "knocked apples" near Yakima. Meanwhile, Sampson epitomizes the hard-working orchard owner, a man devoted to his apples. "I love my orchards like another man loves a woman," he tells




William Attaway.



Step, and adds, "An apple sure is a beautiful thing." Even with the price of apples falling, he remains committed: pruning his trees, irrigating the desert, breaking ground for auxiliary trees, and making sure his crop is crated and shipped to market.

Throughout the novel, Attaway's characters share a simple, lyrical appreciation for the landscape of central Washington. Admiring the desert, Ed says, "The purple and green of the thistle and sage, the stretches of cactus, mesquite and tumbleweed make it sort of a big back yard." The mountains, within "hock-and-spitting distance," are ever-present, especially Mount Rainier. The novel's title derives from an Indian legend recounted by Sampson of the mountain as a tormented old god that "sometimes breathes thunder."

Let Me Breathe Thunder captures the literary naturalism of writers such as Willa Cather and Eugene O'Neill, two authors Attaway admired, according to his daughter, Noelle Attaway Kirton. Attaway, who died in 1986, went on to serve in World War II, march with Martin Luther King Jr., and publish two nonfiction works, *Calypso Song Book* (1957) and *Hear America Singing* (1967). However, for devotees of vintage Washington state literature, he will be most remembered for his sharp-eyed depiction of Yakima and the Yakima Valley in *Let Me Breathe Thunder*, which was reprinted in 1955 (as *Tough Kid*) and again in 1969 (with original title).

As the novel closes, Step and Ed hop another freight train to flee the mess they have made of their situation in the Yakima Valley. As they cross eastern Washington, Ed recognizes the opportunities he has squandered and becomes fixated on the clack of the wheels, which mournfully sing to him, "Ya-kim-a, Ya-kim-a, Ya-kim-a." 

Peter Donahue is author of the novel Madison House (2005) and coeditor of Reading Portland: The City in Prose (2006) and Reading Seattle: The City in Prose (2004).



Additional Reading

Interested in learning more about the topics covered in this issue? The sources listed here will get you started.

Life and Death at the Tacoma Narrows

- Bridges and Men*, by Joseph Gies. Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1963.
Bridging the Narrows, by Joe Gotchy. Gig Harbor: Peninsula Historical Society, 1990.
Spanning Washington: Historic Highway Bridges of the Evergreen State, by Craig Holstine and Richard Hobbs. Pullman: Washington State University Press, 2005.
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Glittering Prospect

- Alaska: An American Colony*, by Stephen Haycox. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002.
The Klondike: The Last Great Gold Rush, 1896-1899, by Pierre Berton. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985.
The Nature of Gold: An Environmental History of the Klondike Gold Rush, by Kathryn Morse. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003.
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On the Banks of the Mid-Columbia

- When the River Ran Wild: Indian Traditions on the Mid-Columbia and the Warm Springs Reservation*, by George Aguilar Sr. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005.
Death of Celilo Falls, by Katrine Barber. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005.
Northwest Passage: The Great Columbia River, by William Dietrich. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995.
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Invasion of the Boardheads

- Planning a New West: The Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area*, by Carl Abbott, Sy Adler, and Margery Post Abbott. Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 1997.
Devil's Bargains: Tourism in the 20th-Century American West, by Hal Rothman. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998.
Empty Nets: Indians, Dams, and the Columbia River, by Roberta Ulrich. Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 1999.
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L. N. Rosenbaum

- Family of Strangers: Building a Jewish Community in Washington State*, by Molly Cone, Howard Droker, and Jacqueline Williams. Seattle: Washington State Jewish Historical Society, with University of Washington Press, 2003.
 "Bella Weretnikow: Seattle's First Jewish Female Attorney," by Judith W. Rosenthal. *COLUMBIA* (Spring 2004).
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The German Occupation of Fort Lewis

- "The Fort Lewis POWs," Fort Lewis Military Museum Association newsletter, *Banner* (Winter 1993).
 World War II veteran's monograph about his time as a prison guard at a Fort Lewis POW camp, by Wayne Shoemaker. Unpublished manuscript, Fort Lewis Military Museum, 1992.