

The Achievement of Jon Hassler

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If you've ever browsed the current fiction shelves in your local library or bookstore, you'll know the trepidation that any writer – or critic – feels when asked to say why his work – or that of another writer, is “important.” How many of those “current” authors have published more than one book? How many have published as many as twelve? How does one judge “the achievement” of an author like Jon Hassler, who published twelve novels (as well as two collections of stories, a pair of novellas, and a variety of other books)?

Decades after their deaths, the reputations of Walker Percy, J. F. Powers, and Willa Cather rest on less than a handful of books by each. These authors remain important because readers – over decades – return to those books: for insight, for craft, for consolation. **Aside:** By the way: “Consolation” was a word Jon Hassler used; it was one of the few things I ever heard him say – with a certain pride -- about the effect his novels had on readers.

I did not know Jon Hassler well. I invited him to read at Marquette University in 1996. I interviewed him for *Image* magazine, shortly after he had made public the fact that he had – as he then called it – “rigid Parkinson’s” disease. We also corresponded occasionally over the course of several years, when I edited the scholarly journal, *Renascence: Essays on Values in Literature*. Not only did *Renascence* publish some of Joseph Plut’s early conversations with Jon about his novels; it also published the first scholarly article on Jon’s work, . . . in 1994.

BY WAY OF DISCLAIMER I read *Underground Christmas* for the first time this last January. The editor of that long short story claims it is based on real events in Jon’s life. Joe Plut told me in a letter that it is the beginning of Jon’s unfinished novel, *Jay O’Malley*. While a number of his novels and stories contain situations that might make one speculate about marital difficulties, child-rearing problems, and other trials in his life, I don’t presume to read Jon Hassler’s work as an oblique record of his life. It will remain for someone else to write a biography of the man and the artist. My purpose here is to talk about his achievement as a novelist.

ONE FURTHER DISCLAIMER

I am currently over halfway through rereading all his novels and stories, to complete a book on Jon Hassler's work. For that reason, many – but not all – of my examples will come from those first seven books.

My book won't be an arcane, subtle analysis of the novels. It will do enough if it provides something like a guide to reading those twelve books, his two young adult novels, and two collections of short stories; all this in roughly 200 pages or so. But it will suggest some of the subtleties and questions that his novels raise.

SO, FOR THE ACHIEVEMENT

A first part of that achievement as a novelist is his relevance as a twentieth-century Midwestern writer; and a second part, as a Catholic writer. As a Midwesterner, he belongs with Hamlin Garland, Sinclair Lewis, Sherwood Anderson, Willa Cather, and perhaps Wallace Stegner. **Semi-Aside:** On the issue of “regionalism”: one critic has said that every great writer is regional. It's just that the writer makes his or her region universal. That goes for Cather's “great plains.” It also goes for Jon Hassler's central Minnesota.

Among writers who are Catholic and who employ Roman Catholic characters and themes, Jon Hassler's relevance should be compared with writers like Flannery O'Connor, J.F. Powers, Walker Percy, Ron Hansen,

and Tobias Wolff. Measured against any one of these, Jon Hassler has a uniqueness that stands out.

Though likened to O'Connor because of some grotesque characters and situations, Powers is a more obvious comparison. But whereas Powers - - author of the acclaimed *Morte d'Urban* -- specialized in stories about priests, Hassler's range of characters and situations is both broader and more inclusive.

For those of you with a literature background like Hassler's, I'd like to propose that he is a kind of Irish Geoffrey Chaucer (without the meter of poetry of course). In his novels he creates a wealth of characters and treats them all with love, with humor -- with satire -- and with insight, as well as wisdom, and generosity. **ASIDE:** Such generosity, by the way, is, just now, both unpopular and unfashionable among the literary establishment.

His narrators, and even some of the protagonists, display an Irish, self-effacing irony, not taking themselves too seriously. **ASIDE:** Who can forget, for instance, early in *Staggerford*, a mildly inebriated Miles Pruitt repeating that he and his fellow-teachers are "ack-comedians" (instead of "academics"), to the chagrin of Imogene Kite, Wayne Workman, and his other colleagues at the Halloween Party.

At times a narrator can wax melodramatic (this is another Irish trait). But at most times the narrator's goal (in the words of the epigraph from *A Green Journey*) is to make "Things throw light on things/ [so] All the stones have wings."

I have used this quote from Theodore Roethke's poem, "The Small" a number of times to describe how Hassler juxtaposes scenes and incidents with contrasting tones: comedy next to tragedy; the everyday next to the mystical; the commonplace next to the grotesque or the macabre. The result is not chaos or confusion, but a vivid – and often consoling --sense of life; its joys, its sorrows, its mysteries; **heightened in intensity but still recognizably our own.**

Returning to his protagonists: they are a high school teacher, an aging spinster, a retired college teacher, a pair of high school teachers turned college teachers, a ten year old boy, a teenager who grows up to be a priest; then more teachers, and – at the end of this talk – I'll focus on another of his protagonists who has reached old age. **ASIDE:** And, in that instance, it won't be Agatha McGee.

The following page was not read.

Speaking for a moment about Agatha McGee – and giving her her due: Hassler's female characters come in all sizes and degrees of poise and grace – or lack thereof. First and foremost, of course, is the prim and strait-

laced Agatha McGee (who falls in love at age sixty-eight -- and who tries to hold everyone to her strict moral standards). **ASIDE:** Someone asked me how Hassler responded to Angela Lansbury being cast as Agatha in the made-for-TV version of *A Green Journey*. Jon and Joe say a bit about that in their conversation on the novel. I think it was a brilliant choice. Like Angela's character in *Murder She Wrote*, Agatha is great at solving mysteries; not just in *A Green Journey* but in *The New Woman* and *The Staggerford Flood* as well.

Agatha, of course, could be the subject of an entire talk. Her growth from *Staggerford* to *The New Woman* is proof for me of 1) her development as a genuine character and 2) Hassler's skill at sustaining a sense of the character over his entire career as a writer.

Other women characters are almost as memorable. **ASIDE:** And I'm sure many of you have your favorites, and could name them.

They include Barbara Stearns Shea in *Simon's Night*; Rachel Quinn in *The Love Hunter*, Catherine Foster in *Grand Opening*, Peggy Benoit in *Rookery Blues*, and Lolly Edwards in *Rookery Blues* and *The Dean's List*.

Then there all the "hard-scrabble" girls, starting with Beverly Bingham in *Staggerford*, Janet Raft Meers in *A Green Journey*, Gemstone Opal Stott in *Jemmy*, and Libby Girard in *North of Hope*. **ASIDE:** You

know, I had even considered doing this keynote on . . . “Hassler’s Women,” but the possible ambiguity of that title was part of what dissuaded me.

Back to the Irish connection for a moment: like fellow Irishman, the playwright Brian Friel (**ASIDE:** some of whose work Jon saw performed at the Tyrone Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis), Hassler can sometimes become wistfully nostalgic – but not maudlin – particularly about the past: the Catholic Church, certain movies, and some favorite songs. And like Friel’s love for his corner of northern Ireland, Hassler’s love for Minnesota scenes and places, here in the northwoods, is most apparent, and not an insignificant aspect of his achievement.

The oral presentation takes up again.

I think Hassler’s achievement comes into clearer focus the greater the distance we travel from the times about which he writes. **ASIDE:** Perhaps that is one reason that *Grand Opening* – a novel set back at the end of WWII – has worn so well. Even at its publication in 1987, it already had that “greater distance” from events that allowed readers to see the larger picture.

It is from such greater distance that we more clearly see the perennial situations, characters, and conflicts that his novels explore, and the almost classic storytelling techniques that he employs. **ASIDE:** He also employs cinematic techniques – derived from the movies he loved, and perhaps even

some TV techniques (this could be another – more technical -- talk). A *Green Journey*, for instance, is full of cuts from the U.S. to Ireland, and back again, with the cuts to the U.S. -- and the misfortunes of Randy Meers -- providing much of the novel's humor.

ASIDE: But this “greater distance” doesn't mean he writes “historical fiction,” though his novels frequently name contemporary events and characters, allowing readers to orient themselves in a shared [twentieth-century] American experience. The frequent reference to historical events and figures, movies, actors and actresses, songs, and television shows provides further grounding of his fiction in a real mid-twentieth century America.

Grand Opening is probably an exception. Though it is not, strictly speaking, a historical novel, in that novel World War II looms much larger than, say, the Korean War in *North of Hope* or the Vietnam War in some of the later novels.

But history aside, Jon Hassler is, fundamentally, a storyteller, and his continued reputation – and his legacy – will grow as a result of that basic realization. And it is as a storyteller – often a very sophisticated storyteller – that he **explores** – and **evokes** -- primal (archetypal) situations, characters, relationships, images, and their often archetypal resolutions.

ASIDE: What do I mean by “archetypal”? The word is Greek. “Arche” means first. “Archetypal” means “an original form or pattern.” Used by mythologists and myth critics (like Northrop Frye or Vladimir Propp), the term refers to characters, plot components, situations, images – and resolutions -- that can be found in literature the world over, and, back through time, to before written language.

Classic archetypal situations include various fertility rites as well as things like initiation, rites of passage (or coming of age), marriage, exile, trials, recognition, sacrifice, death, resurrection or transformation, and re-integration into the community. These situations evoked powerful feelings and associations in the original auditors of epics like *The Iliad* and *Odyssey*. They also account, in part, for our response to the Christian gospels. And they continue to evoke similar responses when they appear today.

Yes, Hassler uses novelistic (and cinematic) techniques: changing viewpoint, episodes, anecdotes, jokes, and, apt, often artistic descriptions. But I think it is – in large part -- the numerous archetypal resonances that move us, and make his novels that much more intriguing and -- can I say it? - universally significant.

Like many classic heroes, Hassler’s (male) characters are frequently only sons, or have a rival brother (or rival friend). Think of Miles and Dale

Pruitt, Simon Shea and Donald Stearns, Chris Mackensie and Larry Quinn, Wallace Flint and Paul Dimmitburg (in *Grand Opening*).

The principal characters also often outsiders, loners. This, too, is an archetypal feature, often relating the character to his (or her) “enemy” or antagonist. Take a couple instances from *Grand Opening*. Catherine Foster and Wallace Flint become friends because both are outsiders – though for different reasons. Brendan Foster responds to Dodger Hicks in part because, like Dodger, Brendan is at first an “outsider” in Plum. By the way, both boys are also only children.

Hassler’s protagonists experience betrayal, exhaustion, and despair. They undergo – sometimes grotesque or macabre -- ordeals and, following sometimes shocking revelations or recognitions, they experience disillusionment and transformation. Then, as a result, they -- or those around them – often find renewal, rejuvenation, or transformation and . . . perhaps . . . salvation?

Like other classic heroes, Hassler’s are also often surrounded by friends and helpers – and not a few villains. **ASIDE:** What, you might ask, about his heroines? What about Agatha McGee? She, too, goes on

journeys, experiences ordeals, makes shattering discoveries. And who is her best friend? Lillian Kite. Not entirely unlike the archetypal Don Quixote and his comic sidekick, Sancho Panza.

And speaking about villains: **ASIDE:** because villains, too, are most certainly archetypal. Recall the evil characters of fairytales or nursery rhymes: dark and mysterious villains, like *Staggerford*'s "bonewoman" and *Grand Opening*'s Wallace Flint. Hattie Norman is formidable in *Simon's Night*. And in *Rookery Blues* it's Laura Connor and Gary Oberholtzer. In *The Dean's List*, Laura becomes L. P. Connor and Leland Edwards calls her his *nemesis*, an archetypal figure if there ever was one.

As just an example of classic villainy: Recall Wallace Flint early in *Grand Opening*. He tries to send young Brendan Foster down an alley where he might fall into a grease pit. At the end of the novel Brendan saves Rufus Ottman from the exact same fate. What makes these paired scenes uncannily archetypal? Is it the fact that Wallace Flint behaves so maliciously toward Brendan? Yes, Wallace is jealous of Brendan and his family. But here's another way to look at it: The danger to which Wallace exposes Brendan -- and which later faces Rufus -- is almost literally a "stumbling block." Something either of them could have stumbled into.

And what is the archetypal origin of the phrase: “a stumbling block?”

PAUSE. In Matthew’s Gospel, chapter 16, verse 23, Jesus prophesies his Passion and Peter argues with him. Jesus says, “Get behind me, Satan! You are an obstacle in my path.” The Greek word in the gospel for “obstacle,” *skandalon* (from which we get the word, “scandal”), can also be translated “stumbling block.” It is from this archetypal source that the devil has come to be considered a *scandal*, a stumbling block for others.

Am I saying that Wallace Flint is a figure of Satan? Not exactly. But . . . remember, at one point – before their friendship ends – Wallace tells Catherine Foster: “I’ll tell you who’s in hell, Catherine. We all are. Because Plum is hell. And isn’t this precisely the devil’s situation? That he is always in hell, wherever he is?”

This next paragraph was not in the oral presentation.

Sometimes, of course, an apparent villain is merely a mysterious character. (Corinne Kaiser Bingham in *Staggerford*, “the bonewoman,” is finally “rehabilitated” in *The New Woman*). The mysterious poet, Richard Falcon, in *The Dean’s List*, turns out to be a poor man suffering from Parkinson’s disease and hunted by creditors and a stalker. **ASIDE:** The narrator also sometimes tries to “mitigate” a villain’s evil (making that character less evil, less “mysterious”). Even Wallace Flint’s evil is

mitigated by the narrator giving him a variety of vulnerabilities. In *North of Hope*, the evil Dr. Tom Pearsall is afraid of thin ice.

There are also other archetypal situations or images. As in epics and other traditional stories or folk tales, his novels are full of bloody wounds. In *Staggerford* Miles Pruitt goes to the dentist and his mouth ends up a mess. In *Simon's Night* Mrs. Kibbokoski loses a leg. In *Jemmy*, the title character's little brother, Marty, freezes his fingers so badly that he has to have two of them removed. In *The Love Hunter* Blackie Lavoie punches Chris Mackensie in the face, leaving it a mess for days. In *North of Hope* Bob Templeton loses toes during the Korean War.

Violent deaths – or stories of violent deaths – abound, often at the edges of more normal lives, but also sometimes in their very midst. Of course, there is Miles Pruitt's shocking death in *Staggerford*. As one of the final, climactic events in *Grand Opening*, Dodger Hicks is crushed beneath a walk-in cooler – like the Wicked witch by Dorothy's Kansas cottage. In *North of Hope* Fr. Adrian Lawrence tells several stories about violent deaths occurring around Sovereign Lake. Then we witness Roger Upward's concussion and freezing to death in almost clinical detail; and finally, Dr. Tom Pearsall's drowning in much the same detail.

We're also treated to familiar – and significant settings – (**ASIDE:** yes, settings too can have archetypal resonances).

The changing seasons (fall and winter for desolation; spring for hope) are all significant. Are there any summers in Hassler's central Minnesota? **ASIDE:** His first three novels begin – and for the most part -- take place in fall. The late summer of 1949 is a “nostalgic” time at the start of *North of Hope*. But most of that novel is set in one of the coldest winters Linden Falls and the Basswood Reservation have ever known. Only the last chapter returns to April.

Another potentially “archetypal” situation: The characters in his novels often view the world from heights that offer long perspectives. Think of Moses viewing the Promised Land he will never enter. Miles Pruitt surveys his world from the heights of the Staggerford cemetery. Simon Shea loves the hills and valleys of Northern Minnesota. He deplores the western plains. He looks down from the Rock of Cashel in Ireland and experiences a revelation.

In *The Love Hunter* Chris Mackensie contemplates his world from the top of a hill on an island in Lake Manitoba. In *Jemmy*, the title character experiences insight and revelation while looking down from a cliff where eagles soar. In *A Green Journey* Agatha looks down from the heights outside of Ballybegs, just before a major revelation. At the end of the novel

she also sees the stones take wing from a vantage point above the breakwater in Knock, Ireland.

The crises and tragedies in Hassler's novels often occur in crowded, cramped, chaotic, claustrophobic circumstances. Early in *Staggerford*, Miles almost gets lost in the underbrush along the Badbattle River (where, by the way, he meets "the bonewoman" in a particularly uncanny scene). **ASIDE:** for you chasers after literary allusions, Miles also talks about his students' papers threatening to pitch him into the "the slough of despond." That's a swamp made archetypal by John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*.

Miles dies in a chicken-ridden ravine. Chris Mackensie spends part of *The Love Hunter* lost in the midst of Manitoba's Delta Marsh. Dodger Hicks's death -- when the cooler falls on him -- occurs in the burning basement of the Fosters' grocery store. Frank Healy and Libby Girard part for what they think will be forever in the cramped cab of her husband's pick-up as spring rain falls all around.

Rejuvenation and renewal often occur in the open, or in comforting surroundings. Simon Shea feels confined in the Norman Home -- but free and happy in his [cozy] cottage on the river. The end of *The Love Hunter* finds Chris Mackensie and Rachel Quinn walking uphill, through the open aisles of the Rookery cemetery. Young Frank Healy and his beloved Fr.

Lawrence enjoy a summer afternoon, reflecting as they sit on the banks of Sovereign Lake.

I could go on about archetypes. But other aspects of Jon Hassler's achievement ought to be mentioned. Here is a brief catalogue.

There are some items restored to the following catalogue.

- the insightful treatment of teenagers: Of course this is part of what is turning *Staggerford* into a classic: Jeff Norquist, Nadine Oppegaard, Roxie Booth, and of course Beverly Bingham are all true to life (even almost "archetypal" teenagers). I would also include sixteen year old Gemstone Opal Stott – the title-character of *Jemmy*; also the various students in *Simon's Night*, *The Love Hunter*, and later novels like *Rookery Blues* and *The Dean's List*. In *North of Hope* it is the young Frank Healy and Libby Girard (and some of their friends); as well as – later in the book -- Elaine LaBonte and Billy Annunciation. All of them demonstrate Jon's ability to understand, and faithfully depict teenagers.
- Elaine LaBonte and Billy Annunciation remind me that another part of Jon Hassler's achievement includes the **sensitive** treatment of Native Americans (though there are controversies here that I won't go into). One interesting fact in this regard occurred to me

just last week: in each of five of his first seven novels, at least one significant character has Native American blood. It starts with Beverly Bingham in *Staggerford*, “the Indian” and his daughter in *Simon’s Night*, and Jemmy. Then it’s the housekeeper, Marcella Tatzig, in *North of Hope*, and French Lopat in *Dear James*.

- Another part of his achievement: in almost every novel he reverences the little miracles of everyday life. He loves to recount Christmas parties, arguments, and chance meetings. Even when he satirizes everyday behavior, the loving attention to detail is a form of praise.
- He also accepts and reverences the mystery in people’s lives and relationships: he celebrates friendships like that of Simon Shea and Jay Johnson; Chris Mackensie and Larry Quinn. And I could go on at great length about the growing relationship between Chris Mackensie and Rachel Quinn. Their long conversation, after midnight, in the dark auditorium of the Rookery Playhouse; their comic descent through the five floors of Prinn’s department store. And, of course, the twenty-five year friendship of Frank Healy and Libby Girard.
- And speaking about humor: **ASIDE:** I tend to be like Agatha McGee; strait-laced, no nonsense. But for many of you, I’m sure

Jon Hassler's achievement – what you'll remember him for – is his humor. Humor **is** a big part of what makes his novels **work**.

Again, it's the mixture of humor and seriousness. "Things throw light on things."

Curiously, the humor is often mixed with pathos – or embarrassment, as when Miles, preparing to have sex with Carla Carpenter in the family's garage, starts up her father's band saw and cuts his new suit to ribbons. If I tried to list a fraction of the humorous passages, we'd be here all day.

- And in a slightly different direction: As you would expect of a former landscape painter, Jon Hassler offers attentive observation and **loving depiction** of the material world; rivers, outdoor scenes, the sky, the snow, the jackpines, and birds, birds, and more birds (many of them symbolic if not downright archetypal). Geese flying every which way in *Staggerford*, to name just one instance.

- Of course there is also plenty of satire, and the objects are myriad. A whole book could be written on Jon Hassler's Satire. And here is another possible "Irish" connection. In some of its savagery, the satire approaches that of that master Irish satirist, Jonathan Swift. (Consider Blackie Lavoie and his duck camp in *The Love Hunter*, Randy Meers in *A Green Journey*, Dr. Tom Pearsall in *North of Hope*,

the writer Neil Novotny and the editor Emerson Tate in *Rookery Blues*; President O. F. Zastrow in *The Dean's List*.

I'll end with a final aspect of Jon Hassler's achievement: his sensitive – though often humorous, as well as satiric -- treatment of senior citizens, the aged. It began, of course, in *Staggerford*, with Agatha McGee herself – and then her visit to the senior citizens from the Staggerford Senior Center. Next it was the residents in the Norman Home in *Simon's Night*. And, later, it was Grandfather McMahon in *Grand Opening*.

Yes, from the start, Hassler was adept at – but always understanding in -- portraying such “senior citizens.” Agatha McGee is no youngster when we meet her in *Staggerford*. (She's in her eighties when she moves into Sunset Manor in *The New Woman*). But besides the adeptness, the humor, and the satire, there is **courage**. As he himself grew older, and progressive supranuclear palsy – which he referred to as Dr. Parkinson – came more and more to rule his life, he dealt with such diminishment with both humor and insight.

“The Life and Death of Nancy Clancy's Nephew” (an expansion of the short story found in *Rufus at the Door and Other Stories*) is an astounding achievement. It combines a sympathetic narrator and a crotchety, hard-to-like protagonist, W. D. Nestor. A septuagenarian farmer

when we meet him, W. D. is the last in a long line of “senior citizens” whom Jon Hassler chose to study and to understand.

From a writer’s perspective, the novella is also an amazing “performance.” How to make an old man – and his diminishments – the matter for such a story? For Jon Hassler, the overall technique is the same: make “things throw light on things.” And the result: “all the stones have wings.” **ASIDE:** We shall also see a good deal of actual, and figurative – that is, **significant** --“flying” in this work.

In this novella the narrator sees things that W. D. does not, or that he doesn’t note. Often things of beauty. The narrator also occasionally slips into the viewpoint of W.D.’s younger friend, Kevin Luuya.

Like *Simon’s Night*, *Grand Opening*, and *North of Hope* -- this is another “intergenerational” work. “The Life and Death of Nancy Clancy’s Nephew” brings together W. D. and his daughter Viola; W.D. and Kevin, who is a former latchkey child, whom W. D. befriends after the death of his wife Lucille; and finally, a small, unnamed boy, whose father seems to resemble Kevin’s “absent” dad.

Like Miles Pruitt, W. D. (Warren) Nestor has been wounded by life. His brother was shot dead by an unknown hunter, and W. D.’s mother briefly suspected Warren himself. W.D.’s son, Sonny, left home and was

never heard from again. His daughter was a disappointment. His wife Lucille ended her life suffering from Alzheimer's, living in a nursing home.

The story starts in W.D.'s seventy-second year. He is living on his turkey farm with Viola and son-in-law Kermit. For W.D. it is a story of attrition. Like many people growing old, he finds his life is a scaling down, a giving up. As he grows older, he loses more of his independence and prerogatives. His son-in-law has taken over operation of the turkey farm; then he forbids W. D. to run his daily mile, along and inside the fence of the turkey yard. **ASIDE:** A run in which he imagines himself as the 1920s Finnish Olympic runner, Paavo Nurmi.

The story begins with his daughter Viola taking W. D. to a psychiatrist about his outbursts of anger. It is an emblem of how youth often misunderstands old age.

W. D. Nestor's sense of "the good life" is narrow. He is, if not an anti-hero, a rather pathetic example of an unreflective, deprived, emotionally and spiritually "narrowed" person. His life recalls the Gospel passage: "From those with little, that little will be taken away." His acts of love and generosity – such as they are – yield little joy or consolation – for himself, or those to whom they are directed.

W.D.'s response to life is stoicism. He only cried twice in his life, and only laughed twice, too. As he tells the psychiatrist, he “had no role model” for expressing grief -- or any other emotion.

More subdued than the Flannery O'Connor story, “Judgment Day” (which it resembles), “The Life and Death of Nancy Clancy’s Nephew” is a cautionary tale about how narrowing one’s emotional and spiritual arteries can lead to impoverishment of soul and outlook or vision. W.D.’s moment of revelation, the second time in his life that he laughs, and cries, is accompanied by ambiguous images and uncanny omens that suggest – if not redemption – a late but [welcome] “burst” of grace and peace.

On the last day of his life – a fact to which fact the narrator alerts us (175) – W.D. gets a sudden urge to visit his Aunt Nancy Clancy, about whom we’ve heard almost nothing since the story’s start. It is March, just before the beginning of (archetypal) spring – but we don’t learn that immediately, because W.D. has lost track of months as well as days. The narrator’s oblique – but vivid -- description of the natural scene is refracted through W.D.’s failing eyesight and mental capacity. The snow is melting, and “water sparkled so bright on the highway that W.D. . . couldn’t keep his mind on the weekly *Bartlett World*” (174) -- the local newspaper.

We learn that W.D. is now eighty-two. His friend, Kevin Luuya, has returned from the army and is caring for W.D. while Viola and Kermit are wintering in Florida. Kevin notes: “[I]t was incredible how quickly W.D. was failing.” On the ride to town W.D. thinks about his son, Sonny, and this awakens further sad memories.

Arrived in Rookery and the apartment where Nancy Clancy lives, Kevin and W.D. meet a small boy, bundled up for winter, like W. D. himself. Kevin takes notice because “he spoke so clearly for his size. He stood no higher than W.D.’s cane” (183). Again, the precise detail (this time in the perspective of W.D.’s friend). The small boy is amazed to hear that the person W.D. and Kevin are visiting is one hundred years old.

Kevin and W.D. begin to climb the stairs in the building, which has no elevator. Kevin watches W.D., who is ahead of him, “pause with both feet on each step, like a pilgrim approaching a shrine.” Then we’re in W.D.’s mind. “Halfway up the second flight W.D. felt giddy. A fountain seemed to be rising up his spine and bubbling in his brain . . . he felt as though he had outdistanced some vital part of himself – his lungs, his soul – and he was waiting for it to catch up” (183).

Is this the premonition of a heart attack? A stroke? Or is it a moment of vision? “he felt as though he had outdistanced . . . his soul.” The

“running” metaphor here is a brilliant allusion/recollection of W.D.’s former run around the turkey yard.

When Nancy Clancy answers the door, W.D. mistakenly introduces Kevin as Sonny. Nancy invites them in, and Nancy and her nephew start to reminisce. They argue gently, and a tone of pathos grows. One recollection causes W.D. to laugh silently, “but it [the laugh] grew until it shook him like a convulsion and caused tears to spring into his eyes. Kevin had never seen W.D. laugh before” (187). Recalling the humorous incident, W. D. starts laughing again, and this causes him to wet his pants (188). The pathos rises.

Aunt Nancy invites them into the kitchen for tea, and after tea she brings out a photograph album. W.D. misreads the pictures but won’t admit his eyesight is failing. The perspective shifts again, as Kevin grows bored and goes to the living room where he looks out the window. Imperceptibly, the tone moves from pathos to uncanniness. “Caught in a tree over Kevin’s car was a kite and standing under it, looking up at it, was the little boy who spoke so clearly for his size” (191).

Kevin goes down to his car, while Nancy and W.D. continue to look at the photo album. A question from Aunt Nancy, about Sonny, brings back the thoughts that had occupied W.D. on the trip to town. W.D. recalls that

from the time Sonny was eleven, they couldn't sign up for the annual father-son dinner at church because Sonny would refuse to go (192). "W.D. felt tears welling up in his eyes, and he turned away to hide them from Nancy" (192). The pathos has reached a climax.

Outside, Kevin tries to help the little boy fly his kite. An oddly comic scene, at this point, until we remember this is the way that Jon Hassler creates contrast. Kevin and the boy's conversation is a study in miscommunication. It seems clear that the little boy is where Kevin was eight or ten years before; left on his own by a father who – in this case -- built him a kite but is not around to help him fly it. After two attempts, Kevin manages to get the box kite in the air, and then the level of uncanniness rises again. "It was over the house across the street and rising higher and higher. It was like no kite Kevin had ever seen. It had none of the fragility and soaring design of ordinary kites. It looked remarkably heavy in the sky, as though something earthbound had taken flight" (194). PAUSE. Like "all the stones have wings."

Suddenly the boy shouts for Kevin to bring it down. The boy tells him, incongruously -- only now -- that his father had told him **not** to fly the kite "with this string. It's too weak. It will break." Kevin tries to bring the kite down, but "the kite spun in the sky and the string snapped. The boy was crying aloud" (194).

Now, in a series of discrete impressions from which the reader must construct a whole, Kevin gives the boy what's left of the ball of string and turns back toward the apartment. Then he sees W.D. lying in a snow bank. As he tries to help, he hears the ringing of a bell. Looking up, he sees it is Nancy Clancy in her third floor apartment window. The sound is coming from Nancy beating W.D.'s pipe on a brass bowl.

“He's dead, I know he's dead,” she said.

“Looking at old pictures up here, he cried like a baby.

And when he left, I came to the window to tell him he

forgot his pipe, and I saw him fall. The way he fell I

know he's dead. He collapsed right down” (195).

Kevin looks up past Nancy's window and sees . . . a star. And then he realizes that it's getting dark (195-96). A final uncanny moment.

Then, suddenly, we're back with the little boy, as he too lies, like W.D., on a wet snow bank. But he is waiting for a snowflake to fall into his mouth. Then he hears the “bell.” The narrator notes: “The ringing was new to the neighborhood” (196). So the boy walks down the block. As he nears the apartment building, he hears the old lady shouting from her window. The boy turns around and sees the man lying on the snow. He tries to raise W.D.'s arm “but the old man, scowling, seemed determined to stay where he

was” (197). The improbable and strange become grotesque in a way that Flannery O’Connor would have applauded.

From his car, Kevin calls to the boy to come and get in. They’ll look for his kite. At first suspicious, the boy finally gets in. “Did you know there’s a man lying on the ground,” he asked.” Kevin’s response: “Yeah, what a bummer,” said Kevin, putting the car in gear. He felt terrible. He knew now why he disliked old people. He hated the way they died” (198).

With this epitaph “The Life and Death of Nancy Clancy’s Nephew” ends. The flat, mostly external account of the final events in Warren Nestor’s life do little to create a sense of hope, redemption, or forgiveness. Regret, heartache, and incomprehension seem the burden of the tale. Yet something in the style, the detail, and the focus lends not just a sense of mystery, but a sense of value, unrecognized and unacknowledged by the characters. W.D. Nestor’s life has not been a happy one. It is more the story of losses and surrender. Ultimately it is surrender to the forces that attack us all. Yet, despite the narrator’s implicit, and explicit criticism of W.D., his relatives, his young friend, and the alienated world of rural Minnesota, “The Life and Death of Nancy Clancy’s Nephew” pays respectful attention as it affirms the value and the mystery of all that lives.

A kite flying free, the sudden appearance of a single star, a mysterious child, and a mysterious bell. These are hardly unequivocal signs of hope – let alone of forgiveness or redemption. Yet these separated images, like those in Roethke’s poem, bear witness to a sense of grace and presence. If “things throw light on things,” then these images point to a heightened sense of value in what the words describe and name. And, in this way, we might say that grace and a kind of redemption do suffuse the scene accompanying W.D.’s death (as some have said the signs in nature did the day that Jesus died).

Jon Hassler published this novella in the final decade of his life. I think it shows him at the height of his powers, and I hope that, with this final example, I have suggested some of the ways in which Jon Hassler’s achievement – and legacy – are likely to live on. Thank you.