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From the Word to the Place

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Stopping Time in *The Red Menace*

Kevin Cloutner

I met Michael Anania on a fall day in Omaha so sunny and reasonable people could do little but stare into the sky in mute disbelief. Indeed, the colleague who introduced me to Michael did precisely that while Michael summarily dismissed a poet of some notoriety whom we both knew. I prodded at his objection: was this poet too clever, too coy?

Trivial was his verdict. I knew we would get along. We made plans to get together a few months later when we'd be in San Antonio for a conference.

Coronavirus prevented that meeting. This was the week before everything shut down. From my hotel, I got Michael on the phone. For seventy-five minutes, we talked about Omaha, where I live and he grew up. The Omaha he described was both recognizable and not. I suppose that's always the case when someone describes a place as it existed seventy years ago.

He would describe a street corner, and I would think of it as it exists presently, but then he would note some element—a nightclub, a streetcar—and I would remember that we were moving through different worlds. Michael Anania grew up in a housing project in a neighborhood that was—and remains—mostly Black. His mother was German and his father Italian. Anania spoke those languages, as well as English, in the home. My family is Irish, and my wife's family is Cuban. Our kids go to a neighborhood park where half of the kids are Asian. Omaha is a more diverse place than many non-Nebraskans realize; it has been for a long time.

When Anania left Omaha to pursue his graduate studies, he increasingly saw the place as both strange and familiar. He'd surrounded himself with writers who felt that way about Europe. He realized he could write about Omaha the way others were writing about Rome. Plus, he'd seen things. He went to school with Gale Sayers and Bob Gibson. "Bob would pitch," Michael told me, "and you could hear it." For the uninitiated: Bob Gibson was better at pitching a baseball than almost anyone who has ever lived. Gale Sayers was among the most gifted people to carry a football on planet earth. "If you look at a place," Michael told me, "its mythology emerges."

After we spoke, it was his novel, *The Red Menace*, that called to me. Maybe that's because I'm a fiction writer and always a little in awe of poets who write novels (think Ocean Vuong, Anne Carson or Michael Ondaatje). *The Red Menace*, published in 1984, is interested, from the first chapter, in the movement of time, forward and backward:

We turned onto Cummings Street and entered the ordinary school traffic, so we could pass by the malt shop, a vestige of the school's failing link with the middle class. Eventually the building itself would be pushed over by highway improvements. In the afternoon it was packed with customers for malts and sodas; mornings, it was a place for serious coffee drinkers, high school seniors mostly, working at being adults. It was an artifact of another world, another class, a passing era. Cheerleaders in furry sweaters preened over danish pastries; their boyfriends in earnest cardigans and sport shirts buttoned to the neck practiced looking like men with irreversible morning habits. (Anania 18)

The first sentence is set firmly in 1950s Omaha, but by the second sentence, the protagonist is thinking ahead to the pernicious effects of "highway improvements," perhaps the segregation that followed the construction of Highway 75. When he returns to the 1950s, he is in "another world," a "passing era," with sartorial details rooted in the moment: "furry sweaters," "earnest cardigans," and most evocative of all, "sport shirts buttoned to the neck" that signify "men with irreversible morning habits." Such temporal elasticity is reminiscent of Muriel Spark

or even Marcel Proust. Various Omahas exist in the character's—and, by extension, reader's—mind simultaneously.

If *The Red Menace* were published today, it would be classified as autofiction. It is an intensely personal novel. Unsurprisingly, the death of Anania's father holds particular resonance. After suggesting that "fathers who die young are all thus shrouded in odd intensity by their sons," Anania produced this remarkable sentence:

I alone have, then, these islands of clarity, like the evening of the day after the fight where every detail is completely available, the drawer in the oak cabinet from which Old Man Merritt counted out those five cigarettes, for example, or the way my sister stared at the chocolate on my hand as though in addition to stealing him away for nearly an hour I had also managed to steal something precious and irreplaceable from her ice cream cone, the fresh marks of the scoop along the edge and more dear, even, those rills and furrows the chill holds on the surface so briefly. (54–55)

What is autofiction but "islands of clarity," tastefully cultivated? How does one account for the memory where "every detail is completely available" when the vast majority of experience is lost forever—why this and not that?

Here *The Red Menace* puts itself in the company of Frank Conroy's *Stop-Time*, another story of mid-twentieth-century American adolescence that distinguishes itself through its precision of detail, that isn't sure if it's a novel or memoir. Anania was stopping time when he kept his father for himself, a time that stretches out of proportion in memory. Nothing is more ephemeral than a son's time with a father who dies early, not even the "rills and furrows the chill holds" on a melting ice cream cone.

The Red Menace is not always so personal. Sometimes the protagonist disappears, so as to make room for other characters—mostly young men—who travel North 24th Street. Often, these men are portrayed not only as they existed then but also for who they would become. Consider Alvin, a not atypical case, for whom "high school and his carefully bordered delinquency provided a pastoral interlude before

the weight of lower-middle American life"; at the end of one chapter, he's "rocking around the clock, with all the dedication and sense of limitation that implies" (105). Is Alvin aware of his fate? It seems so. In refusing to divorce present Alvin from future Alvin, the protagonist presents the character as a continuum.

Not much happens in *The Red Menace*. A lesser poet would compensate in the novel with action; Anania felt no such pressure, choosing his spots judiciously and giving them space. Here is another remarkable sentence, this time from the last chapter:

Arnie swings back into the right lane just as he crosses a small bridge, the kind your tires thump over quickly, almost unnoticed, and the Oldsmobile Rocket 98 jumps up like a clown from a jack-in-the-box, skidding sideways briefly on two wheels, then nosing forward into an end-over-end front flip, chrome accessories, headlights, Arnie, Linda, Darlene, and Meatball lifted up into the fog as well, arms and legs spread wildly, swimmers just for that instant, and you recall the chill that snatched at your legs as you kicked through the quarry's skim of sunlit warm water, the terrifying cold that grappled at you all day long from the farthest corners of the cut stone below. (145)

The shift to second person happens quietly—"almost unnoticed"—and so surreal is the accident that Anania jumped from simile to metaphor: the car is a "clown from a jack-in-the-box," its inhabitants "swimmers just for that instant." So awful is the carnage that Anania again stopped time to leave the accident and meditate on a very different memory, one of cold, deep terror.

Eleven years later Tobias Wolff would publish a famous story in *The New Yorker*, "Bullet in the Brain," which travels just as abruptly from tragedy to memory. As a bullet plows through a bank patron's brain, the character considers a day from childhood when he found himself mesmerized by another child's diction (206). From tragedy to memory: there is something instinctively human in that journey.

In the midst of the coronavirus shutdown, I drove the length of North 24th Street, the setting for much of *The Red Menace*. The housing project where Michael Anania grew up is gone, as are almost all of the

schools and businesses detailed in the novel, but the street remains important, particularly to Omaha's African American communities. Among the recent successes is the Union for Contemporary Art, which moved to North 24th Street in 2017 and was founded on the premise that "years of disinvestment and the stigma of race and poverty had drawn an obvious line between North Omaha residents and the rest of the city" ("North Omaha").

On this day, the street was abandoned. Sidewalks were empty, and buildings had their lights off. I looked from blank window to blank window, wondering who would be the next artist to imagine this world into existence.

Works Cited

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