

Narrative Disruption: Metafiction in Fred Chappell's *I Am One of You Forever*

Jacob Rogers
English
The University of North Carolina Asheville
One University Heights
Asheville, NC 28804 USA

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Erica Abrams Locklear

Abstract

Fred Chappell's *I Am One of You Forever* is largely a novel about storytelling. There are three characters who especially figure into this theme: Jess Kirkman (the narrator), Joe Robert (his father) and Uncle Zeno (from his mother's side), all of whom tell many tales. As a result of these disparate storytellers, there is also a strong current of metafiction running within this novel. This essay examines how metafiction, and storytelling—especially in regards to Uncle Zeno—address and more importantly, dispel, stereotypes about Appalachian stories and Appalachia as a whole: in short, it contends that Chappell uses metafiction to re-write commonly accepted narratives about Appalachia. Many of these stereotypes were a product of the Local Color fiction tradition of the late 19th and early 20th century, and Chappell's inclusion of Zeno in the novel serves as a way of getting rid of stereotypes, and as a model for how Appalachian stories should instead be told.

1. Body of Paper

Fred Chappell's 1985 novel, *I Am One of You Forever*, is one in which Chappell disrupts many preconceived notions and stereotypes about Appalachians and Appalachian literature. Each chapter is told as its own self-contained story, narrated in first-person by Jess Kirkman, a man of about thirty recounting the days of his childhood. It is a novel imbued with the idea of storytelling. However there is also another layer of storytelling embedded within the novel represented by Chappell's and Jess's inclusion of a chapter about Jess's storytelling uncle, Zeno. Zeno's appearance in the novel also marks the entry of a major theme of metafiction. The chapter entitled "The Storytellers," is mostly comprised of Jess' observances about Uncle Zeno and of Zeno's stories; it is a chapter about storytelling, in a novel told in the form of several stories.

One of the most important observations that Jess makes about Zeno is one that his father, Joe Robert, first points out to him: there is an interesting similarity between Uncle Zeno and the Greek poet, Homer. Neither man seems to leave a physical trace in the world; they leave only their stories in the heads of whoever heard them, stories so compelling that they appear to use up reality. Uncle Zeno tells his stories without regard for his audience's reaction, and if considered within the context of Appalachian literature, the inclusion of him in the novel represents a major point by Chappell about that literature.

Appalachian literature has been negatively impacted by the much of the fiction written about the region, especially by Local Color fiction, because much of it has engendered a false, stereotypically-based set of expectations from readers of Appalachian stories. Much of the fiction written around the region has been the low-brow sort of pulp literature that does not do a good job of depth in its characterization of Appalachian people and culture—Appalachia is not associated with a strong tradition of literary fiction, but rather a low-brow one that accords with the national perception of it as a region which lacks culture. Chappell uses metafiction in this novel for the purpose of disrupting those expectations; Zeno's role as a storyteller, alongside Jess and Chappell, makes clear Chappell's point that, in order to disrupt and move beyond the damaging stereotypes which have haunted Appalachia for over a century, Appalachian

stories need to be told without giving thought to one's audience.

Many of the false stereotypes from Local Color gained national traction from the writings of one man in particular: John Fox Jr. Scholar Darlene Wilson has heavily criticized his fiction, stating that his motif was “a sort of reliable field guide to the spotted hillbilly, which demanded from the audience a predictable response to easily detectable features of mountain people and mountain culture.”¹ She states that “the Fox motif thrives and remains visible, only slightly modified a century later in hillbilly iconography and in stereotype-drenched reinterpretations of contemporary Appalachia.”² The expectations that American readers have when they read Appalachian literature are very heavily based on the stories of authors like John Fox Jr. and Mary Noailles Murfree that became such a fixture in the national consciousness. These stories tend to portray Appalachians as such: “a buxom, scantily dressed, mountain she-cat and her lazy, unkempt male relatives clutching either a Revolutionary War-era firearm, a jug of moonshine, a flea-covered hound, or any combination of the three.”³ Chappell disrupts expectations such as these constantly in this novel and especially challenges the notion of an illiterate Appalachia. At one point Jess states: “After lunch I took a book of science out to the porch to read” and at another he says that “[Joe Robert] borrowed my book of Norse mythology and committed a good half of it to memory.”⁴ Not only are these characters reading, but they are reading complex material such as science and mythology, and in Joe Robert's case, committing much of it to memory in a very short amount of time. The stereotypes generated by Local Color are so pervasive that national audiences are still expecting to encounter those same people and those same types of simplistic stories. Chappell disrupts these stereotypes by telling stories about where he grew up and shows that the best way to overturn those very stereotypes is to write stories true to the people and the region, with characters, not caricatures, .

The novel itself, in the way it is structured and the way it is told, is also a disruption of reader expectations. Though it is split up into chapters, the chapters follow no strict, chronological order. In one chapter Jess may be telling a story about himself when he was eleven, and in another, later chapter, he may be nine; the chapters, if they are ordered in some manner, are at the least not ordered chronologically. Likewise, the way Zeno tells stories mirrors this apparent disorder: “there was little arrangement in the telling. [Zeno] would begin a story at the beginning, in the middle, or at the end.”⁵ That is just one of the metafictional aspects of this chapter, but it does illuminate one of the major points of the novel. In his essay, “Metanarrative and the Story of Life,” critic J. Spencer Edmunds touches on this point briefly, with his claim that “Chappell invites us to recognize Uncle Zeno's expansive, wandering narrative, or story, as a reflection of the larger, intertwining, often unanswerable question of life.”⁶ In other words, Zeno's narrative is reflective of life itself. There is a sense of reality present in Zeno's narratives which stems from his unusual, non-linear, non-audience-oriented storytelling style. This contrasts starkly with the writings of Fox, who “perpetuate[d] the myth...that his characters were drawn from real people living near the [Big Stone] Gap in the last decade of the nineteenth century.”⁷ Chappell's story—a novel ingrained with magical realism and with a metafictional storyteller who absorbs reality with his stories—feels more realistic than Fox's work because the characters in it are not based on stereotypes, but real people.

Zeno's stories are even capable of blurring the line between fiction and reality, between story and history. The story that takes up the greatest portion of this chapter is the story of Buford Rhodes, a man who went out searching for his lost dog and ultimately remained in the woods for years. This story puts Joe Robert into a mania, believing he knows Buford Rhodes, and he “wanted to see if Uncle Zeno had ever met and talked to[him].”⁸ Joe Robert's search for Buford is fruitless, spurring Jess' keen observation:

What if Buford Rhodes had ceased to exist upon earth *because* Uncle Zeno told stories about him...What if Uncle Zeno's stories so thoroughly absorbed the characters he spoke of that they took leave of the everyday world and just went off to inhabit his narratives...The only place you could find Achilles these days was in the *Iliad*.⁹

This passage calls into question the nature of fiction versus reality. It raises this issue within the story, in that it makes one wonder whether Zeno's story was so good, so realistic, that Joe Robert believed he truly knew Buford, or whether it in keeping with the magical realism of the novel, Zeno's story really did absorb Buford's existence. Certainly this is another significant instance of metafiction, as it also calls Chappell's novel itself into question; it has been remarked that this novel is somewhat autobiographical—Hilbert Campbell calls it “Chappell's tribute to his Appalachian boyhood...[his] urn of cherished memories” —which makes one wonder how much of this story is invented, how much of it is based in reality, and where the distinctions lie.¹⁰ Though this novel could be read and enjoyed at a very basic level, Chappell's use of metafiction greatly complicates reader understandings of the novel in the way that it calls into question what a novel, a story, really is. In this way, he challenges and rejects the simplistic, unrealistic narratives of Local Color, advocating instead for complex narratives and not necessarily literary realism, but realistic depictions of people and place.

In addition to encouraging readers to consider the stories and how they are told Chappell, also makes a point about the storytellers themselves. Chappell's description of Zeno is that he was a physical non-presence, and that his voice was "Dry, flat, almost without inflection."¹¹ Most readers, or in Zeno's case, most listeners, would probably not think of such a voice being able to tell captivating stories, and yet Jess says that he and his family "were soon enrapt by Uncle Zeno's monotone narrative."¹² It appears that, contrary to intuition, Zeno's stories are successful despite this quality of his storytelling. In his interview with author Shelby Stephenson, Chappell states his belief that "real writing, terrific writing, avoids the personality of the writer."¹³ This statement is consistent with the success of Zeno's "monotone narrative," and actually suggests that Zeno's stories are successful *because* of his monotone delivery, not in spite of it. This notion is certainly counter-intuitive, but only on a surface level; if good writing "avoid[s] the personality of the writer," Chappell shows that it should instead opt for the personality of the narrator, whoever it may be. Once again a facile understanding of the text is complicated by Chappell's subtle inclusions of metafictional themes in this chapter. In some ways, it seems that Zeno is being portrayed as a model of good storytelling because of the way he is infused with qualities Chappell praises, and the way he rejects the old-fashioned qualities of Local Color and some other regional fiction.

Zeno's function as a model for other storytellers is also linked to his complete indifference towards his audience. At one point, Jess observes that "[Zeno] took no interest in our reactions. If the story was funny our laughter made no more impression upon him than a distant butterfly."¹⁴ Additionally, one day as Jess is wandering about, he spots Uncle Zeno with his audience: "the white clouds and fallen tree, the blue daylight and sweet green grass."¹⁵ Zeno is unaware of Jess's presence, and yet Jess hears him continuing the story of Buford Rhodes, which Zeno, as he was wont to do, had previously left unfinished while telling it to the Kirkman family. Clearly Zeno's purpose in telling his stories is not in pleasing an audience. He tells the stories because that is what he does, what he needs to do. Stories are such an integral part of Zeno's life that stories *are* his life. Zeno is certainly being juxtaposed against the other storyteller, Joe Robert, thus the chapter title: "The Storytellers." Whereas Zeno is a model for storytellers—Jess compares him to Homer, whom Chappell refers to as one of "the greatest writer[s] that ever lived"—Joe Robert is an anti-model.¹⁶ Jess aptly describes the difference between the two:

Stories passed through Uncle Zeno like the orange glow through an oil-lamp chimney, but my father must always be seizing objects and making them into swords, elephants, and magic millstones, and he loved to end his stories with quick, violent gestures intended to startle his audience.¹⁷

Zeno cares nothing for his audience—being "content with an audience of mica rocks and horse nettles"—but Joe Robert tells stories for the express purpose of pleasing his audience. In his essay, Edmunds references Raymond Carver's self-motivational writing cards, one of which says "NO TRICKS... 'writers don't need tricks or gimmicks...'" And while Zeno's narratives seem consistent with this credo...[Joe Robert's] would more likely read TRICK OR TREAT."¹⁸ Taken symbolically, Joe Robert's "tricks or gimmicks" could represent the use of stereotypes by Fox, whose "overweening ambition to succeed as a literary figure" led to his desire to play on the national appetite for stories about the "spotted hillbilly," stories meant solely to entertain.¹⁹ In this case, Zeno and Joe Robert's differing styles represent a sort of metafictional microcosm of Chappell's perception of Appalachian storytelling. Zeno represents the positive, personal, and complex form, which leads away from damaging portrayals and towards a truer Appalachian literature, and Joe Robert represents the old, simple, gimmicky, stereotype-drenched stories which Chappell is trying to reject and move past.

Appalachia as a region has had to deal with countless major hardships throughout its American history. Many have been political, economic, natural, but underlying much of it, there has been the issue of public perception—being so bogged down by the stereotypes surrounding the region. For years, and even today, the stereotypes are reinforced by various sources in the media which we take in. However, now there is also a thriving community of people writing about, talking about, and creating things to help overturn stereotypes. Among these people are authors who are gaining, or have gained widespread attention, such as Fred Chappell, Lee Smith, Silas House, Ron Rash, and many more. Fred Chappell's work, especially in *I Am One of You Forever*, shows how the road to a thriving honest portrayal of the region, by its own residents, is paved by them. But, as the scholar Hilbert Campbell writes in his essay about *I Am One of You Forever*: "Something like a kaleidoscope or a many-faceted gem, the book seems to undergo its own transformations in meaning or tone as it is approached from slightly different angles."²⁰ Just as Chappell disrupts national audience expectations of Appalachian literature in countless ways in *I Am One of You Forever*, so too does he provide countless different ways to approach this novel thanks to its structure and complex narrative layers. Each reading can provide a new view on a certain chapter, a certain character, or the overall order and form of the novel itself, making it a potent work of art, capable of influencing readers far into the future.

2. Endnotes

1 Wilson, Darlene. "A Judicious Combination of Incident and Psychology: John Fox, Jr. and the Southern Mountaineer Motif." *Back Talk from Appalachia: Confronting Stereotypes*. Dwight B. Billings, Gurney Norman, and Katherine Ledford, eds. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 102.

2 Ibid., 104.

3 Ibid., 99.

4 Fred Chappell, *I Am One of You Forever: A Novel* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 111, 105.

5 Ibid., 98.

6 Patrick Bizzaro, ed., *More Lights than One: On the Fiction of Fred Chappell*, Southern Literary Studies (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004), 94.

7 Wilson, Darlene, "A Judicious Combination of Incident and Psychology: John Fox, Jr. and the Southern Mountaineer Motif," 103.

8 Chappell, *I Am One of You Forever*, 107.

9 Ibid., 113.

10 Hilbert Campbell, "Fred Chappell's Urn of Memory: 'I Am One of You Forever,'" *The Southern Literary Journal* 25, no. 2 (April 1, 1993): 104.

11 Chappell, *I Am One of You Forever*, 97.

12 Ibid., 104.

13 Stephenson, Shelby, "Fred Chappell: The Way it is." *Appalachia and beyond: Conversations with Writers from the Mountain South*. Ed. John Lang. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2006), 21.

14 Chappell, *I Am One of You Forever*, 98.

15 Ibid., 110.

16 Stephenson, Shelby, "Fred Chappell: The Way it is," 23.

17 Chappell, *I Am One of You Forever*, 103, 104.

18 Bizzaro, *More Lights than One*, 95.

19 Wilson, Darlene, "A Judicious Combination of Incident and Psychology: John Fox, Jr. and the Southern Mountaineer Motif," 102.

20 Campbell, "Fred Chappell's Urn of Memory," 103.