

The Recalcitrant Redemption of Dawn Jewell

AMY TIPTON CORTNER

Under consideration:

Trampoline: An Illustrated Novel

By Robert Gipe (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2015)

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My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun—
In Corners—till a Day
The Owner passed—identified—
And carried Me away—

....

Though I than He—may longer live
He longer must—than I—
For I have but the power to kill,
Without—the power to die—

— Emily Dickinson

A native of Johnson City, Tennessee, Amy Tipton Cortner recently retired from Caldwell Community College in Hudson, N.C., where she earned a commendation from S.A.C.S. for her teaching of Appalachian and Southern culture. Author of two chapbooks, one novel, and many essays, her work has been anthologized in Appalachia Inside Out and Listen Here: Women Writing In Appalachia. She has been involved in Appalachian Studies since the days when the field was being invented.

If anyone's life is a loaded gun, pointed right at the heart of the American literary canon, it is Dawn Jewell's. Forget *Katniss of Hunger Games* and the recast Appalachia of District Twelve. Her Artemisian bow may bring down piles of tent pole film dollars, but Dawn's f-bomb dropping, liquor swilling, car wrecking quest to save her mountain, redeem her mother, and get her dead daddy back has shot her smack into the starry field of the classics. Hers is a new constellation, north of Huck Finn's, south of Jo Marsh's, and, if there were justice in in the cosmos of the critics, east of the stars that outline Mattie Ross in *True Grit* and Ree Dolly in *Winter's Bone*.

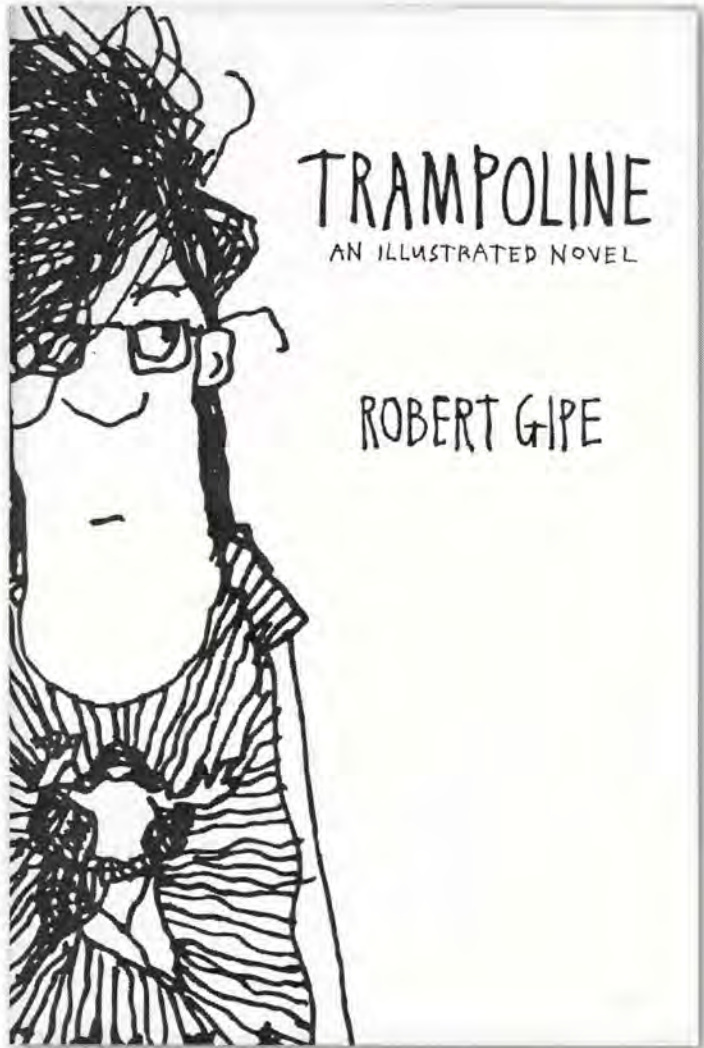
Dawn's story is set in 1998 coal country Kentucky, right at the advent of mountaintop removal mining and right at the emergence of the oxycodone epidemic. As a result, the novel has recognizable Appalachian features: an urban boyfriend who wants to rescue Dawn, a granny woman, illegal drugs and liquor, and modern updates like grassroots activism, ATVs, hippies, patched up trailers, and girl-on-girl fights. But it cannot be said emphatically enough that Gipe is no Johnny Fox Junior

come lately. A superficial reading would be both wrong and wrongheaded. It is strikingly different from other novels about this region.

One primary way it differs is in Gipe's innovative use of illustrations to move the dialogue forward. *Trampoline* is indeed an illustrated novel, but instead of interspersing the text with line drawings at the beginnings of the five parts, Gipe's illustrations, which would inaccurately be characterized as cartoons, flow along with the narrative, indispensable to the dialogue and plot. Dawn's drive to escape is established on the very first page when, through an illustration, she announces, "I had had my fill of Canard County." Throughout the story, other characters appear as shadows in the artwork, diminished and subordinate to Dawn—necessary, but not focal. And

because of the illustrations, it is impossible to ignore Dawn's descriptions of her appearance and to imagine that she is something other than a tall, gawky, large-handed, glasses-wearing 15-year-old. Once the film makers got hold of Mattie and Ree and Jo Marsh (Winona Ryder? Really?), it is all but impossible to see the characters as they were originally described. Gipe blasts away the chance that Dawn will be re-imagined. As surely as the strip miners demolish mountainsides, as surely as she and her grandmother Cora oppose the coal companies, Dawn is who she is.

Like the other protagonists gleaming in her firmament, Dawn is most emphatically not "just another" anybody. She is not in any way whatsoever a knock off or derivative teenage type. Her voice is as unique and compelling, her struggles as individual and engaging, her presence as completely her own as any of her fictional peers, both those long known and long loved and those who have appeared only recently. There can be only one Mattie, one Huck, one Jo, and one Dawn, kindred in singularity—and in other ways as well.



Dawn is the most recent in a long line of adolescent protagonists— orphaned, abandoned, bereaved—who wander the pages of American novels, searching the patriarchy for a lost father. Pamela Boker, in *The Grief Taboo in American Literature* (1997), writes that “One of the on-going controversies surrounding American literature is whether its central mode is escape or quest. The answer of course is that it is both” (22). Dawn, like her counterparts—particularly Ree in *Winter’s Bone*—is trying both to escape and to overcome the deterministic forces that seem to rule her world. Ree’s quest is to prove that her father is dead, and by doing so, guarantee the survival of her family. Her mother, lost to mental illness (as is Katniss’ mother, by the way), can be no help, so she must turn to her Uncle Teardrop—another outlaw—to navigate the treacherous labyrinth of family secrecy that impedes her. Likewise, Dawn’s quest to save Blue Bear Mountain from strip miners drives her story. Despite her best efforts, Dawn keeps getting drawn into the orbit of her own outlaw father surrogate, her Uncle Hubert. In the end, Hubert makes a sacrifice to save Dawn and her also-hapless mother, whose drug abuse renders her incapable of raising her children. What can be seen in their stories—and that of Ron Rash’s Travis Shelton in *The World Made Straight*, and many other contemporary iterations—is an ancient, even archetypal theme, as old as Cain and Oedipus: before the family can be escaped (or destroyed), the family must first be found. And confronted.

As Dawn and Mattie and Huck and the rest struggle with a missing father and a helpless or invisible mother, each is forced into taking on the attributes of the opposite gender. For Huck, doing so goes beyond impersonating a girl in a scene with Judith Loftus. Huck, that boy of all boys, is, in Boker’s words, on a journey

... to escape from the falsity and hypocrisy of masculine civilization and to fulfill his overriding impulses toward a morality based on relational and interpersonal experience—moral incentive that is judged ... to be gendered female. Only by rejecting a masculine identity can Huck perceive the flaws of a civilized, masculine culture—the most notable of which ... is slavery—and discern the greater wisdom of a morality based on “feminine” feelings. (140)

Huck, of course, would find this analysis “hogwash.” He would have to. Nevertheless, from the perspective of his world, Huck has the heart of a girl, the heart of a Mary Jane Wilks, of whom he admiringly said, “she had more sand in her than any girl I ever see; in my opinion she was just full of sand.”

In the case of the girls, the assimilation of new gender roles goes beyond dressing “like a freak,” as Dawn would put it. In an age in which women could serve without detection for months, even years, as foot soldiers simply by donning a uniform, Mattie’s jeans (and her father’s hat) and Jo’s costumes (she always played the men in the Marsh girls’ productions) speak to the fact that in their day, acting like a boy was tantamount to being a boy. Jo sacrifices her hair, her “one beauty,” to provide money (quite a bit of money) so that Marmee can go nurse their father, an act which leaves Jo looking even more “boyish” than before. In *Trampoline*, an attempt to bolster her defiance of her peers and

her solidarity with her grandmother and the “tree huggers,” Dawn agrees to let her mother dye her hair green to “Show them ... they aint broke you” (111). What she did not bargain for was that her mother would also shave her head, which in the eyes of the community completed Dawn’s transformation into an alien creature, a novitiate of anti-mining activism.

As Dawn is leaving with her new, unwanted haircut, Tricia’s accomplice says, “You look like a boy,” that loaded phrase so often used as a pejorative. In fact, all of these girls are told repeatedly that they look like boys. To look like a boy is to be tough like a boy, to fight like a boy, to act like a boy—to live with agency. But to be told “I thought you were a boy,” as Dawn has been over and over, carries with it a warning. Girls who seem to be boys will never find mates, or if they do, those mates will be emasculated. The only hope for a boyish girl is to find a girlish boy—which these girls do in Laurie, LaBoeuf, and Willett. Despite the emphasis on their boyishness, each girl—even Mattie—must have a suitor of some sort to provide reassurance that while she postures like a boy (and not even a good-looking boy, at that) she is just posing after all. Dawn understands this—and she doesn’t like it. She is deeply disappointed when two of the women in her life she admires the most, her aunt June and her neighbor Decent Ferguson—neither of whom has structured her life around a man—each asks her who she is “seeing.” “I was not looking for a boy,” she protests, even as she fantasizes about “sweaty, nasty sex” with Willett Bilson, who, at that point, is still only a voice on the radio.

Of course, Dawn just might look like a boy for another reason. Gipe’s drawings have a strong tinge of the self-portrait about them. It is an intriguing, if somewhat irrelevant thought. Did Gipe transfigure himself into Dawn, perhaps to avoid the jejune criticism that this first novel is autobiographical? It is worth noting that the stories of Dawn, Mattie, and Ree would call down a vastly different load of critical fire if, instead of being girls who act like boys, the trio actually were adolescent boys.

Gender blurring and absent parents, however, are not the only attributes Dawn and Huck and Mattie share. Like her predecessors, Dawn is funny, in that time-honored tradition of sublimating grief through humor. *Trampoline* is practically Aristotle’s *Poetics* replanted in Kentucky. Canard County is certainly no white palace of privilege, full of high-minded brooders. Its very name is a reminder that the novel is a story—and not an aristocratic story at that.

Dawn moves from disaster to disaster, backwoods bacchanal to backyard brawl, lost as Bottom and just as likely to turn into an ass. “It crossed my mind not to be so hateful about people rescuing me,” she observes, after she takes off in her cousin Denny’s truck, leaving Denny behind with Uncle Hubert’s Delta 88, which she has slammed up a tree. (Denny was her second rescuer that night, after Hubert and Tricia dragged her out of a hole.) Her sharp observations

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("The way the waitress chewed her gum reminded me of every girl I ever hated"), often voiced in the illustrations, pierce the narrative as effectively as the antics of Lear's Fool. Without her often laconic comments ("Do what?"), the reader would be buried by the weight of misfortune and mishap, even as Dawn feels she is buried under the weight of her family and Canard County. In the words of her cousin Denny, she can't seem to attain "escape velocity," caroming through her life like a child on a trampoline, who seems to leave the earth and yet stays forever in one place. Without humor, the narrative would

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do the same: catapult the reader from scene to scene, each spiraling further into the realm of tragedy, with no hope that order will ever be established—or despair redeemed. In the end, humor gives this novel bouyancy. Humor

is what drags Dawn by her shorn green hair to her recalcitrant redemption.

After Gipe piles misadventure on mayhem on murderous intent, to the classic point where disorder is rampant and something has to give, Dawn's tale ends, as Aristotle decreed, with unions that bring order to chaos. The first, true to the ancient dictates, is marriage—of a type. Instigated by the powers and principalities, abetted by providential benefits derived from her Aunt Ohio, and illuminated by the final joyous illustration, the novel closes with an affirmation of a marriage to the mountain that Dawn and her grandmother fight to protect. Then there is her mother's conversion into a sort of Pentecostal Bride of Christ. If Dawn and Cora marry the land, Tricia marries the church. (That is, Patricia is converted and baptized, and even though Finding the Lord has an "Okay-I-cry-uncle" air about it, the story needed to put some sort of brake on her drive to destruction.) Dawn's own growing romance with Willett Bilson, rocky as it proves to be, does not end in marriage, and while Gipe does not leave the reader with a promise of happily-ever-after, thank goodness, he does ring down the curtain with Dawn's finding a way of being happy-for-the-moment. The novel closes with that wonderful drawing of Dawn, her hair a spidery veil spread out like the roads and creeks, saying, "Aint that something?"

In essence, Dawn's story, "fuses the local with the mythic," as Faulkner said all enduring literature must do. Like Dickinson herself, Dawn is both the gun and the owner of the gun. Her power lies in her ability to shoot down worn out tropes while affirming that a voice can be both Appalachian and American. For us, it is a very lucky thing that her story does not "have the power to die," as long as there are eyes to read and hearts to hear the tale she has to tell, profanely and profoundly.

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