

It Is, and It Is Not

Review of If This Is Your Land, Where Are Your Stories?

by Robert McDowell

(originally published in *The Hudson Review*)

The critic Frank Kermode corrected our mistranslation of Aristotle's word *hamartia* (tragic flaw), suggesting that a more accurate and useful interpretation would be *missing the mark*. Kermode's preference is appropriate. The concept of a *tragic flaw*, after all, is strangely comforting, even absolving. It gives us an out, suggesting a divine inevitability in all our works that come to loss, or worse. But *missing the mark* lays at our door an inescapable burden of responsibility.

J. Edward Chamberlin's new book is all about people and societies missing the mark.ⁱ

It is a strange experience reading such a book in this climate of curmudgeonly political discourse. I wish I could use the word *debate*, but in good conscience it is impossible to do so. As our presidential candidates and their minions square off, the newsprint and airwaves bubble with shameless deceit. Manipulative, greedy, arrogant, and cold, sounding more than ever like ludicrously scripted professional wrestlers, our politicians prove every day that they will do and say anything, anything at all, to be elected (or, as the case may be, reelected). Consensus and bridge builders in name only, their rhetoric must be cited for what it is, discourse rooted in cynicism and division. In fact, politicians always seem to be perceiving advantages in keeping people apart, and even better, at each other's throats. In the midst of what Brian D. Biro calls "this epidemic of declining faith,"ⁱⁱⁱ *If This Is Your Land, Where Are Your Stories?* ought to be required reading for every politician and would be politician in our time. In its pages they would discover a provocative exploration of the agreements, and lack of them, that determine the quality of the communities we build, share, and all too often shatter.

It's not news that many of us appear to be most talented at shattering things. In every culture we learn early. In the west our house is better than the neighbor's house. Our part of town is superior to someone else's neighborhood. Our family car is cooler, our school clothes sharper, our teachers smarter than yours. Even our God is more righteous than other gods. As we grow older, we attach our feelings of superiority to our jobs and choice of partners, our appearance (our teeth are whiter, our waistlines slimmer), our cars (again—cars are lightning rods all through our measuring lives). If we make more money than someone else, that's all that really counts. We are better than that person. We spend our lives, it seems, defining ourselves and those we care for as superior and apart. We like the warm glow that comes of the conviction that we are separate and outstanding, chosen by a higher power to bask in spotlights while the less fortunate plod along elsewhere.

This would all be pathological enough, but we don't often stop there. Self-righteous, troubled in mind and spirit, we also build walls to keep others out. We dance our celebrative dance of the self in our houses of mirrors and attack the safe havens of others. We want them to be like us, or even better, to serve us. If they hesitate in honoring us, we want to tear down their walls and houses, their art and history. We want to tell them how and what to worship, what to eat and wear, where to work, and how often (and in which ways) they can have sex. We want the wrinkles that make them unique and intriguing ironed out. If that doesn't work, we want to kill them, erase them. We want to leave no trace of them to remind us that there are obstinate Others who will not be just like us. We want to be rid of the cold heat that their mysterious presence fans in us.

We do these things because we don't feel right. "We have just enough religion to make us hate," Jonathan Swift said, "but not enough to make us love one another." No matter how many creature comforts we accumulate, no matter how secure we think we are, we know that something is wrong, terribly wrong. The cause cannot be us. It has to be them. *It has to be.*

That others disappoint us can be conveniently explained away, or enough so that we needn't trouble ourselves much with responsibility. It must be *their* tragic flaws that make them fail to measure up in our eyes. If it is their fault, then we can avoid the hard look inward that reveals the tragedy, not of individuals, but of the Us/Them scenario we compulsively create.

"*Believe it and not*—rather than *believe it or not*—is the challenge of every metaphor, of every myth, of every religion, of every community. When we forget that challenge, myth degenerates into ideology, religion into dogma, and communities into conflict." This is Chamberlin's basis for beginning to see things differently, and it's worth serious consideration.

A Canadian author of *The Harrowing of Eden: White Attitudes Towards Native Americans* (1975), and *Come Back to Me My Language: Poetry and the West Indies* (1993), among others, Chamberlin shares numerous stories illustrating the anxieties that compel us to come together and break apart. This book's recurring questions are *Where is home?* and *Where do we belong?* These are unbearable questions. The more we have to ask them, the more we admit that we are lost, that we do not know. Struggling for answers, for peace of mind, we settle too readily for pat or received positions which can be summed up by the words *Us or Them*.

In his *Introduction* Chamberlin describes an all too familiar, disturbing, and encouraging example. At a meeting between an Indian community in northwest British Columbia and government officials, an unusual moment took shape. The government intended to claim the community's land. Then an Indian elder asked, "If this is your land, where are your stories?" The elder proceeded to tell a story, in English and in Gitskan, about his people and the land. During the recitation in English and the strange rhythms of a language that few understood, a transformative shift occurred. A momentary confusion

reigned, then fertile, uneasy silence from which officials and tribal members slowly opened up, listened, and began to forge a new respect for each other. Shortly thereafter, they began to negotiate solutions that were meaningful to all. More important to them than making sense of any particular story came the realization that “stories give meaning and value to the places we call home; how they bring us close to the world we live in by taking us into a world of words; how they hold us together and at the same time keep us apart.” Out of this process came a new way, for both parties, of seeing.

This transformation of point of view is nothing less than sacred, representing as it does our best hope for lives that honor the mysterious, the differences that make living such a rich experience. Yet how often we take for granted the opportunity to realize similar precarious, precious altering moments on every step of our own personal journeys.

The potential for such moments are all around us. One needn't be in extreme crisis to define them. Throughout his book, Chamberlin remind us that occasions of understanding, of seeing in new ways, are constantly offered up by the natural world and the communities in which we live. The process of opening up to them is endless in every life, in every facet of every life.

Consider for a moment one of our principle amusements. In sports most team games are quintessentially Them or Us. But observe the catcher in baseball. He is the only participant who plays defense from the perspective of the opposing offense. Like no one else on his side, he sees what they see. Throughout the game he banters with the arbitrator, the home plate umpire, subtly (and sometimes not so subtly) representing his club's interests and appealing for fair play. He will even visit with members of the offense as they come to the plate to bat. Some of this discourse is gamesmanship, a gambit intended to distract the batter, but some is meant to maintain or establish camaraderie, a sense of belonging, of fraternity. In this regard the catcher's banter creates and expresses mutual respect. It acknowledges those qualities the catcher and batter share—skilled players of the same difficult game—rather than obvious oppositions—most symbolically stated by the different uniforms the two players wear. Perhaps in baseball it is not surprising to discover this remarkable example of competitive respect given the constraints that are built into a game that differs so from hockey and football, which express more primitive, brutal, and divisive urges and instincts. Baseball's capacity for finding common ground with a perceived enemy places it far ahead of other sports on the evolutionary chart, and makes it an apt icon of popular culture that mirrors not only our divisions but encourages serious and meaningful debates over ways in which we may simply get along.

Dozens of similar reassessments of our uncomfortable comforts occur on every page of this marvelous, troubling book. Its eleven chapters include pregnant headings such as *Babblers*, *Doodlers*, *Gaelic Is Dead*, *There Goes the Neighbourhood*, *Riddles*, *Charms*, and *Ceremonies*. In the chapter on riddles, Chamberlin suggests that our most important leap of faith must be to “believe it *and* not. Not ants, but ants. The word *riddling*,” he continues, “comes from the same root as *reading*, and reading, as we have

seen, depends on our ability to recognize that a word is not what it is and yet it is.” Extending the connection in a later chapter, Chamberlin discusses contracts and covenants, how like riddles and charms “they give communities a sense both of obligation and entitlement.” They are all about “singing songs together, sitting down together, agreeing to set aside this place as sacred, acknowledging that place as special.” How good to be reminded of this, especially in this litigious age when it is easy to accept the impression that contracts are really all about securing advantage, Me rather than You.

One of the recurring pleasures of *If This Is Your Land, Where Are Your Stories?* is Chamberlin’s wide reading and access to diverse (some would say opposed) arenas of knowledge. His restless intellectualism curiously mirrors the expansive lives of the nomads and Australian cowboys he so much admires. This is an author with the mind of a world class scientist and the heart and prose of a poet. He is comfortable quoting the wisdom of Rastafari, William Wordsworth, Shakespeare, Galileo, Henri Poincare, Lewis Hyde, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Albert Einstein, Philip Larkin, and Eduardo Galeans, among others. He reassures us that the scientific-minded and religious followers share faith in a grand design. His goal is common ground, the altering of consciousness and perspective that creates it. Every story he tells in some way teaches tolerance and understanding. When he writes-- “...mathematical limits focus our attention on the approach rather than the arrival. Prayers work a lot like this, too; so do parables, and the godfather of them all, the proverb or aphorism.”—Chamberlin makes crucial connections between math, art, and religion that we in our sickening historical moment of specialization and addiction to facts would be wise to welcome into our barnacled hearts.

It is so hard to do. Changing perspective requires waking up calm and receptive in a clearing as we draw in a series of deep breaths and shed our cumbersome armor. It requires listening, serious listening. It asks us to open up to the world, to become expansive and engaged witnesses. To *witness* is to inhabit a graceful, selfless role that acknowledges the testimony given and the individual giving it. The Greek word for witness, Chamberlin points out, is also the root of our English word, *martyr*. Witnessing arrives at truth; the process involves suffering but does not end there where too many on the journey break down and freeze.

“It is only through the pressure of our imagination that we can resist the pressure of reality. This is what charms do. In this sense, all stories are resistance stories and all songs are songs of resistance, pushing back against the tyrannies of the everyday as well as the terrors of the unknown. They give us a way of responding with intelligence and invention when we’re confronted with situations and events that are at best incoherent and unstable. Through these stories and songs we discover faith in the possibility of order and significance, and a way to move out into the bewildering world of events without being diminished by it. We recognize the strangeness of reality in the strangeness of our imaginations; and this recognition comes to us in moments of wonder.”

As enjoyable and at times exhilarating as *If This Is Your Land, Where Are Your Stories* is to read, I couldn’t help feeling sad that not enough people will read it. As I

write this review, the book has only appeared in Canada. Should it surprise us that it has made no splash in the U.S.? Alas, no. With all due respect to the latest edition of the South Beach Diet and Dr. Phil's tome on weight loss, J. Edward Chamberlin would do so much more for us. But for that to occur, Chamberlin realizes that we must do something most of us find antithetical to the patterns we've inherited. We must settle down in uncertainty, which is to say that we must learn to see things from different perspectives. Uncertainty vanquishes notions of exclusivity and superiority. It opens our minds and hearts. It is the key to understanding that this land is not yours, not mine, but nobody's, and *ours*.

ⁱ *If This Is Your Land, Where Are Your Stories? Finding Common Ground*, J. Edward Chamberlin, Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 2003, 276 pages, \$24.50

ⁱⁱ *Beyond Success: The 15 Secrets to Effective Leadership and Life Based on Legendary Coach John Wooden's Pyramid of Success*, Brian D. Biro, A Perigee Book, New York, 1997, 301 pages, \$14.95

Appeared in *The Hudson Review*