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Sitting in the Club Car Drinking Rum and Karma-Kola: Subverting Tradition as Beginning

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Abstract
Patricia Waugh, in Metafiction: the Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction, defines the metafictional novel in terms which are useful when considering Paulette Jiles' novel Sitting in the Club Car Drinking Rum and Karma-Kola (Club Car). In simplest terms, metafiction is 'fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and realit/ (p. 2). Jiles invites her audience to take part in the very process of her writing. We, as readers, are aware that Jiles' text is artifice. She is self-conscious about that text, the process of writing it, and the manner in which it appears on the printed page in book form. I would suggest that the appeal of Club Car lies, not only in its playfulness and humour, but also in the premium Jiles places on the role of the reader. Jiles allows the reader the same freedom which, as author, she demands for herself. We are asked to contemplate that which is being presented and, consequently, Jiles challenges traditional notions of fiction, fictional representation, and the employment of stereotypes. Through this text, the playfulness of which knows no bounds, Jiles subverts traditional forms of narrative fiction dislodging the critical consciousness of her audience in the process. We are forced to think about what we are reading, the manner in which it is presented to us, and what we expect from it. In her discussion of 'frames and framebreaking', Waugh suggests that 'each metafictional novel is a fictional Mythologies which, like Roland Barthes' work, aims to unsettle our convictions about the relative status of 'truth' and 'fiction' (p. 34). Moreover, the kind of fictional playfulness which occurs in Club Car provides us with a means of re-evaluating what Waugh refers to as 'the traditional procedures of communication and allows release from established patterns' (p. 36). An analysis of Jiles' text will provide evidence of how the reader is made aware of its metafictionality and how the text, as metafiction, disrupts the psychological, cultural, and historical assumptions we bring to our reading of a fictional work.
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Patricia Waugh, in Metafiction: the Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction, defines the metafictional novel in terms which are useful when considering Paulette Jiles' novel Sitting in the Club Car Drinking Rum and Karma-Kola (Club Car). In simplest terms, metafiction is 'fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality' (p. 2). Jiles invites her audience to take part in the very process of her writing. We, as readers, are aware that Jiles' text is artifice. She is self-conscious about that text, the process of writing it, and the manner in which it appears on the printed page in book form. I would suggest that the appeal of Club Car lies, not only in its playfulness and humour, but also in the premium Jiles places on the role of the reader. Jiles allows the reader the same freedom which, as author, she demands for herself. We are asked to contemplate that which is being presented and, consequently, Jiles challenges traditional notions of fiction, fictional representation, and the employment of stereotypes. Through this text, the playfulness of which knows no bounds, Jiles subverts traditional forms of narrative fiction dislodging the critical consciousness of her audience in the process. We are forced to think about what we are reading, the manner in which it is presented to us, and what we expect from it. In her discussion of 'frames and frame-breaking', Waugh suggests that 'each metafictional novel is a fictional Mythologies which, like Roland Barthes' work, aims to unsettle our convictions about the relative status of 'truth' and 'fiction' (p. 34). Moreover, the kind of fictional playfulness which occurs in Club Car provides us with a means of re-evaluating what Waugh refers to as 'the traditional procedures of communication and allows release from established patterns' (p. 36). An analysis of Jiles' text will provide evidence of how the reader is made aware of its metafictionality and how the text, as metafiction, disrupts the psychological, cultural, and historical assumptions we bring to our reading of a fictional work.
In capturing her audience's attention, Jiles achieves a two-fold success: her audience will be entertained and their expectations of a fictional work will be challenged. Her parodic treatment of cinematic and dramatic techniques, and narrative conventions will be given support through the willing participation of her audience. Peter Nichols, a contemporary British playwright, comments in an introduction to his own work that 'some thought has always been given to casting the audience, a method that works best when they're not allowed to settle comfortably into any one role. It's one way of accepting, while at the same time exploiting, the limitations of the form' (p. xiv). Although the form to which Nichols refers is drama, I would suggest that Jiles casts her audience with the same self-consciousness: we are not allowed to settle into any one role, and particularly not that of the 'passive consumer' (Waugh, p. 13). Further, *Club Car* draws on the traditional form of the novel, while, at once, exploiting that form.

It seems to me that our assumptions about the novel, in general, are disrupted before we even begin to read *Club Car*. The self-reflexive title and the mock dust cover (the publisher chose to glue the cover on my edition) call attention to the 'bookishness' of this book. And the photograph of Jiles *frames* her within the context of a train window wearing a pillbox hat (her heroine's prop). Jiles' flippant attitude toward her work is apparent from the very outset: she pokes fun at the fictional illusion to which we have yet to be introduced. Once into the text, we further recognize its self-consciousness. Iconographically, we are constantly reminded that the fictional illusion presented to us is one of a train trip. An architectonic plan is provided so that we might learn our way around the central metaphor of that illusion: the club car. And in Shandean fashion (though Jiles' train is amoral in contrast to Sterne's moralizing fingers!), the icon of the train appears with each scene heading, headings which, in themselves, are self-revealing.

Through the actual structure (or in this case, deconstruction) of the narrative, we are aware from the outset that Jiles intends to parody and exploit almost every plot technique with which we are familiar. At once, she employs the standard techniques of cinematic, dramatic, and literary media. Her employment of scene headings is Brechtian: they are explanatory yet are more humorous than they are alienating. The breaking up of the novel into a series of vignettes lends it a dramatic quality: *Club Car* is comprised of scenic units which, at times, function as stage or film directions. Further, the opening scenes employ the figurative system of the 1940's cinematic leave-taking scene at a train station: the only thing missing is 'whistling steam' emitting from the very page itself! The storyline (as it were) exploits the romance film and detective-plot narrative which were so popular in that period. Again,
the iconographic train points us in the direction in which we should turn the page. The metaphoric and figurative trains, however, remain the closest things to any sense of linearity to this text. Though Jiles' characters are confined within a train and to the rails on which it travels, our imaginations and the author's thoughts are not. And when she appears in danger of becoming a little traditional, the author quickly chastises herself and presents a solution on which her heroine then acts: 'Oh bizarro...this is turning into plain icky regular prose fiction... What can you do but get up and walk away from it when things are turning plain icky and regular. “Excuse me,” she says, and gets up and walks out of the bar in time to some very offbeat rhythms...' (p. 25).

Jiles' manipulation of the narrative is obvious on a number of levels: at times explicit and, at others, implicit. The following example shows the complexity of her construction. Jiles directly addresses her audience, comments on fiction as illusion, and confuses the author and heroine in just two sentences: 'She has the capacity to invent stories, as long as she has an audience, as long as she has you, the reader, for whom to invent them. They are often outrageous lies, having gone beyond the bounds of “story”, but they are engaging and oddly believable' (p. 7). Jiles' playfulness extends from the external, physical existence of the book through to the internal structuring of it: in the use of headings, narrative manipulation, and in the very essentials of language. (I particularly like her use of parenthetical parentheses; p. 24.) She interrupts the plot to ask why she has interrupted the plot: 'for the plot, of course' (p. 16). And throughout the text, we are exposed to the self-consciousness of its typography. Italics, spacing, and UPPERCASE type are used for emphasis, and repetition 'just keeps happening over and over, it just keeps happening over and over' (p 71).

The characters, too, are self-conscious about their roles, histories, and stories. Jiles places them in a state of flux, avoiding the use of 'pin-downable' types. She presents us with stereotypes while simultaneously undermining them. We are never quite sure who these people are, where they are from, or, indeed, where they are headed. The absolutes of stereotypes, and those of the conventional prose narrative, with its predetermined sense of development and closure, are continually being denied us:

She's guarded behind her glossy contemporary stereotype; she's loving every minute of being encased in that expensive binding like a book somebody is giving a big sell. He wants her to come out of the character she's playing. Will you come out of there, he would say to her, and give me a straight answer? (There is no straight answer.) But the story of his pursuit is becoming so compelling that he can't remember his ending. (There is no ending.) (p. 53)
In continually referring to the practice of employing stereotypes, Jiles points to our dependence on them as representatives of reality. She forces us to question the validity of such 'typing'. She parodies and breaks the frame in which these stereotypes generally function causing the reader to make a distinction between fiction (and fictional illusion), and the reality it traditionally purports to represent (as in the nineteenth-century realistic novel). Waugh suggests that 'in providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text' (p. 2). I would suggest that this is precisely what Jiles' text asks us to do. Metafiction, and in particular *Club Car*, functions as a means of deconstructing assumptions about reality. Jiles, in undermining her own characters and their 'stories', denies the reader the comfort of coming to a definitive interpretation of them or the text. Jiles suggests, ultimately, that absolute truth and reality cannot exist - we are left not with absolutes, only differing perspectives. Moreover, in constantly referring to itself as an illusion, *Club Car* does not provide the reader with any given reference point from which to define it: this text is a curious subversion of traditional notions of fiction and reality, finally avoiding an absolute resting place. *Club Car* is a detective novel, a romance story, a film script, and a stage play. And, paradoxically, it is none of these forms, in a traditional sense, since Jiles undermines their conventions at every turn through parody, humour, self-reflection, and intrusive commentary. In the process of exploiting (and subverting) the conventions of creating a fictional illusion, methods of characterization, and mode of presentation, Jiles succeeds, I would suggest, in deconstructing our assumptions about fiction: What we expect from it and how we respond to it as a representation of reality. Jiles' text defies definition (exception perhaps as metafiction). Its off-the-wall humour and textual manipulation disrupts the cultural and psychological assumptions which we bring to the reading of it. Waugh refers to these assumptions as 'implicit cultural and literary codes which are activated by the reader in the reading process' (p. 66).

I think it is reasonable to assert that *Sitting in the Club Car Drinking Rum and Karma-Kola* is the culmination of a development in Canadian literature which began self-consciously with A.J.M. Smith. Smith's poetry smashed, with unequalled determination, the conventions of the Romantic tendencies of the poets who preceded him. Crossing genres and periods of the twentieth century, this development of breaking with the more formal and rigid practices of an earlier period is evident in the works of Hugh MacLennan, A.M. Klein, Rick Salutin, George Ryga, Joy Kogawa, and Timothy Findley, to name just a few. These writers,
in turn, have questioned the absolutes of literary conventions, mythical and historical assumptions, and cultural perspectives. This questioning is manifested as innovative and alternative treatments of history in MacLennan’s *Barometer Rising*, Salutin’s *1837*, and Kogawa’s *Obasan*; in Findley’s manipulation of myth in *Not Wanted on the Voyage*; in Klein’s metapoetic novel *The Second Scroll*; and in rendering a deconstruction of cultural assumptions in *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* by Ryga. Jiles, in a short, but deceptively rich and complex text, manages to synthesize and exploit the techniques used by these writers. While drawing on the literary and cinematic conventions which preceded her, as the basis for her parody, Jiles succeeds in debunking myths established by those conventions. Her work is, at once, engaging, disruptive, humourous, and provocative.

Waugh writes ‘if metafiction is to be seen as a positive stage in the development of the novel, then its relevance and sensitivity to the increasing and diverse manifestations of self-consciousness in the culture as a whole have to be established (p. 28). I think Jiles has established the relevance of metafiction to the larger cultural consciousness in which it functions. Although it does not explicitly comment on otherness as it occur in the Canadian context, *Club Car* (and works like it) can successfully disrupt the type of cultural and psychological patterns which can be detrimental to functioning in a multi-cultural society, and the increasingly syncretic global experience. In literary terms, the dismantling of the traditional or conventional novel form through the manipulation of narrative, stereotypes, form and content, does not suggest that the novel as genre has reached its limitations. Rather, in producing a metafictional work, Jiles asserts that the possibilities of the novel have not been exhausted, and that, in essence, the novelistic form is both dynamic and regenerative in a Bakhtinian sense. Moreover, this particular work is of profound significance to the development of Canadian literature. At worst, Jiles’ readers are entertained. But the sensitive reader will recognize that this text is more than just playful prose. It forces us to question our assumptions about reality and fiction by disrupting sometimes narrow and often destructive literary and cultural perceptions.

In Jilesian fashion, it is appopriate that *Club Car* is not resolved and that we leave it at ‘The Beginning’.
NOTES


WORKS CITED


