



## PRAIRIE FIRE REVIEW OF BOOKS



### Toy Gun

by Dennis Bolen

Vancouver: Anvil Press, 2005, ISBN 1-895636-68-X, 303 pp., \$26 paper.

*Toy Gun* is another Dennis E. Bolen novel (after *Stupid Crimes*, *Krekshuns*, *Stand In Hell*) about Parole Officer Barry Delta, seemingly a cad, screwing around and screwing up. Delta swims in a school of women--female bosses, work associates, cocktail servers, mistresses, wives. Is he shark or abandoned orca, predator or needy orphan? Or is he one masquerading as the other? Delta drinks; he needles his boss; he fends off any hint of intimacy with sarcasm, repartee, and inappropriate chauvinistic remarks. In mock-epic convention, he roll calls through past failed relationships--the one-night stands, affairs, co-habitations, marriages. Darkness shadows him as he juggles charges of assault, of professional incompetence, of emotional betrayal, and the pain of a vicious mugging. With his antiquated attitudes and the slacker disposition of a burnout, it is difficult to root for this character. It is difficult not to feel that, soiling as he does both his beds and his desk, he deserves the muck that mires him.

*Toy Gun* is, however, more than a simple novel about an unappealing protagonist. Hints within the story suggest insight into both the "male problem" of how to be a man in today's urban world, and about the larger question of why so many people, male and female, fail to thrive. By exploring the connections between past and present on the personal and social levels, Bolen compares the lost and addicted parolees Delta is supervising and the lost man supposedly in charge of their fate. In a moment of almost intimacy, Delta shares with a client that "I'm the son of a guy who grew up in difficult times and felt hard done by. We could have grown up together. . ." (296) Thus, *Toy Gun* is a novel about the parallel effect--about how people who work with society's "troubled," with the adult children who populate the social work rosters, tend to exhibit some of the same self-destructive habits and patterns as their clients. Does a thankless job create monsters, or do thankless jobs caring for the world's unwanted attract workers who feel a kinship? As a Leonard Cohen narrator once said: "My interest in this

pack of failures betrays my character." (*Beautiful Losers*, 5)

Beyond exploring the link between character and career choice, Barry Delta's jaded view of his profession offers a critique that can only come from the inside. The work he does is important, yet neither his supervisors nor the people who allocate the necessary funds (to ensure a manageable caseload, to pay for overtime or for parolee drug-testing) appreciate what is required. Delta is squeezed from all sides. Yet, ironically, Barry Delta's personal wasteland of lies, betrayals, and intimacy avoidance parallels the bureaucratic environment he seems to despise, with its CYA-attitude, back-stabbing, competition and come-uppance, emotional dishonesty, and withholding/withdrawal of support. Huge anonymous caseloads and the reliance on statistics as evidence of professional competence leave no room for the compassionate insight of John, the retired mentor, or for Barry's lost ideals. Yet he seems to be unaware of his own hypocrisy, of how he is reproducing in his intimate relationships the injustice he feels is being done to him.

Finally, *Toy Gun* suggests that "ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny," that what is wrong with individuals is also wrong with the system and thus, with society as a whole. Barry Delta knows that he is "stupid, sick, dishonest, nugatory" (131); he wants to "do right" but he is afraid; he desires "personhood" and "redeeming love" (303) but seems unable to achieve either. Delta, the system, society all throw inadequate resources at symptoms and ignore the underlying causes of personal and social problems. Like the parolees and the officers and the system, society tries, but it suffers from indecision and inadequate follow-through, from insufficient love, from an inability to love. For the intimacy-phobic, violence becomes the only connection: "He was as alone as alone could be as the blows rained and he wished ever so tightly that his beaters would at least speak to him." (255)

Bolen relies heavily on dialogue to tell his *Toy Gun* story. Barry Delta's pontificating highlights his feeling of being unheard. Description, although minimal, is carefully integrated into the action and reflective of the narrator's depressed affect, as in the opening line: "The building wept . . ." (7) The mock-epic conventions suggest that Barry Delta is the modern urban hero, wounded, wounding, plodding, passive-aggressive, alone in a hostile city, doing battle over the telephone, in offices, on buses, in the street, suffering defeats, retreating from bed after bed. He has a key to the city, but he cannot find a gate. Like the parolee's toy gun, it may get him what he wants, but for sure it will get him killed. So, even if the protagonist is not particularly likeable, even if his redemption is so tentative as to feel suspect, the book has much to offer--the story, the style, the Vancouver setting, the jaundiced critique of a starved and almost-abandoned correctional system, and of the larger society wants to do right but is constrained by fear and the bottom line. The plot perfectly informs the theme of good intentions with ineffective insufficient follow-through. How very Canadian. How self-revelatory. Bolen forces us to face things about ourselves that we would really rather not admit.

**J.M. Bridgeman** <bridge@uniserve.com> writes from the Fraser Valley.

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