
DREAMTIME U.S.A.: CONFRONTATIONS
WITH AMERICAN MYTH by REILLY,
BERNARD, EDSON, HANSEN, KITTREDGE,
APPLE, BAUMBACH

The Biography Man / Gary Reilly

"Your autobiography!" he said to them, standing gilded in the morning sun like a sparkling tournament trophy. "We will write your very own story! Take it from me. My company. . . ." His company, a back-Eastern somewhere wholesale publisher making books inexpensive like fine wines in the cellar. "The more who buy, the cheaper they come!" hailing them from the wagon all circus curlicue red yellow and golden with a steed stamping and whinnying on the dusty streets. The children first saw him arrive, an edge of town voyager in the dawn with leather straps, champing horse, all silver buckles, spokes and copper rims, pulling into the townsquare at day-break and throwing the side open for everyone to gaze upon leather and goldtrim books. "Your own biography, your own life story!" printed on quality paper, inexpensive labor of speciality house "... can afford it because ..." because of pot-boilers which allow the philanthropist owner (everyone knows how crazy philanthropist millionaires are) to take huge trash-novel profits and send wagonmen through green little midwest towns to offer books, books, "... everyone loves books!" books about your very own life. Bound and goldtrimmed, don't forget that, printed and sent to you and see these here on display now, from Bainbridge over in Ohio, and Star City back in Indiana. Anyone have relatives in Star City? The crowd pushing closer to the wagon now like leaves blown against autumn trees, staring up at the traveling salesman, possible snake-oil man for the suspicious sheriff to run out of town. Up closer now, necks like marionettes, twisting to see the books. "Step up! Browse! Thumb through the life stories of your cousins!" Children dashing under the quiet nibbling horse's legs, chasing with gunsticks, and parents hollering to be quiet. The leading citizens, the mayor and city councilmen, all pinstripe and tophat and smile-vote formality, standing to one side on the way to the office for coffee and business. "Only ten dollars!" he shouts, "to leave a legacy for your children, your grandchildren, your great-grandchildren!" This last striking that golden note in the hearts of all men who sire children, as every man wants to be immortal, every man has his pride. Now perking up, husbands turning and smiling and nodding at wives, a twinkle in their eyes, this sounds nice doesn't it now, a life story to give to

the heirs of a hundred years from now? Wives squint-eyed, doubting with a slow nodding of the head, arms akimbo, listening to the wagon man, counting egg-money hidden from the small-town husband who drinks a little too much, but, oh well, it sorta would be nice now, wouldn't it, to have a book like this here to pass on down through the generations, of course, after all, what is there to say about our lives here in the flatlands? "Remember that day you had your first smoke?" he hollers from the wagon. "Remember that first drink? Hey, remember that first kiss?" and a crowd of milling people now grin foolishly down at the ground and, "Then again, maybe you'd rather not say anything about that around the spouse!" and guffaws from the crowd and everyone shy together on the townsquare. "Remember that hunting trip? How about that fishing trip where you almost caught that giant bass, pike, trout, pneumonia? The day your first wagon made tracks on your front lawn?" And everyone toe-digging the street, with far-off looks in men's eyes and the stories they told around whiskey campfires, and the women at their sewing circles, and well, it didn't seem all that important then, but now that you mention it, there was a thing or two in my life that. . . "How many of you were kids?" he laughs, little kidhands clapping and dogs barking, "Any you people ever had parents who got you up and sent you off to a school-house? Or whipped you when you got up to no good? Or sat with you on cold October evenings in front of the fireplace?" And the crowd now in mystic memory of childhood and "The smells! Do the smells of childhood come back to you? Fresh paint, smoke, pinewood and clover? The things you wish you could tell your descendants, what it was like in this midwest valley? Ten dollars!" Only ten dollars and everyone now early-morning shuffling as the crowd grows to hear the biography man. Ten dollars and a nice leatherbound and gold wholestory book.

Now the mayor passes through the crowd, everyone separating because he's a friend of the people (including the ones who didn't vote for him) and also the law in town whose job it is with the sheriff to determine just who among traveling salesmen are out to cheat the people, climbing up onto the wagon in front of the polished wood display with two hundred books at least, velvet drapes and glass, very home-in-the-parlor America, now standing there introducing himself to the wagon man as the mayor with a solid judge-a-man handshake. The mayor picks up a book to determine the quality of the literature, being a literary man himself who has been known to dabble in Dickens late at night. He looks at a book about a man in Idaho, farmer, wife, children, so much like these people here, the words coming together and a scene of farming on a day when the sun is just coming up over the morning fields. The mayor reads along and nods his head. Everyone in the crowd nods along with the mayor and now a clerk from the grocery shyly steps up to the wagonstage and lifts a book and fingers the deli-

cate pages and stops to read a passage, nodding with the mayor in the sales morning in the square.

"Now, folks! Folks, only ten dollars to have your lifestory printed up in leather and kept next to the family Bible. Poembooks they are, the narrative-lyric of your life." The mayor nods, ascertaining the fine prose value of the books, putting one aside, picking up another about a dock worker out of New Orleans, reading until he grows embarrassed dwelling overlong on a particularly bawdy description of a New Orleans cathouse while the salesman shouts to the people "Only ten dollars!" putting the book down and picking up another about a young woman in eastern Kansas who lived in a prairie sod-house, with Indians coming at one time to steal corn and horses. "Very nice, very nice," says the mayor, nodding to the wagon man and stepping down to the street so that no one really knows what to think as the mayor smiles, shaking vote-hands and standing back in the crowd to watch while others cautiously ascend the steps to examine the library until soon the whole town is caught up in the circus atmosphere of the strangest salesman yet to come in to town with novel novelties with next-to-Bible-over-the-fire-place possibilities to hand down through descendants to attain immortality.

The biography man raises the remaining sides on struts and a breeze flows through the lacquered shiny wagon as more people ascend to see the books, to browse, and to stand and study in thoughtful never-make-a-quick-deal wisdom of old Yankee trader stock. "Remember, this offer is made possible. . . ." Possible. "Possible through the generous personal contributions. . . ." of a terribly rich quick-buck bestseller publisher and eastern philanthropist who knows the lifestory of everyman is a story in itself which should not be lost. "You do not have to be rich! You do not have to be famous! You *do* have to have ten dollars!" and laughter from the crowd of suspender-snapping and bonnet-adjusting smalltown folks of the prairie day.

Stores unopened on the ten o'clock street, all the customers now crowded around the bright carnival wagon, men stamping dust off their boots and spitting discreetly. Soda-fountain and dry-goods doorlocks untouched, hours late now as the town gathers around. No one worried—though banker-types with inbred duty rush to open businesses, only to stand in doorways alone while the wagon man draws bigger crowds, the money lying in tellercage drawers, the tweed and wool suits itchy in the already hot summer sun. Dogs barking and children chasing each other through the holiday-from-school streets, ducking down wooden alleys, tipping over rain-barrels in fun, the electricity catching like a disease, everyone wondering and hemming-and-hawing, and a few I-don't-knows in the crowd who set their heads at an angle and figure out the advantages of having their own biography on the shelf over the mantlepiece, next to the family Bible.

The display books well-looked-at now, people stepping back down off the

wagon, lifting skirts and glancing back thoughtfully. Men pulling watches from burgundy vests and gazing at timepieces, already late this morning.

"Ten dollars! We make all the arrangements, place the orders and begin the publication process and you will receive one hardbound book guaranteed to last past a lifetime!" to be handed down, and will look so fine on the shelf and it will cause a chuckle or a tear to reopen the book on fall evenings to read once more about that time the boys all got together and raided the orchard, and laugh, slapping knees, because those fellows wrote it down just exactly the way it was, got it down to a T, and listen here, that night we drove to the dance out at the armory, remember that? Oh yeah, yeah, and riding back home in the buggy past Miller's lake where the moon was oh so, yeah, they wrote it up just exactly like it was, and ain't it nice to have it up there, even if it is sorta, you know. . . . And then the people begin to look at one another out of the corners of their eyes, and everyone is beginning to think the same thing. The sin of Pride, and how would it look to go around having a book about yourself. Shameful? Is it not rather, well, but still. . . . "Abraham Lincoln was one of your kin! There are literally hundreds of biographies about our sixteenth president! And he was the humblest among men!" and they look up at him and nod, well, yes, ol' Honest Abe was a humble and great man and we study him in school, but, it seems, I don't know, we are not a famous people and have nothing to crow about, but still, there were nice times which would be pleasant to read about in our old age and to show to the grandchildren. "But it's a shame," old ladies in the crowd whispering Christian Duty and sinful Pride-dreaming until people begin to stroll away, trying to think now, ol' Abe, yes, but still, and there is that Pride to watch out for, but famous people got to be that way, and, well, better think it over, although it certainly does sound nice, and so cheap, only ten dollars, which we certainly can afford in these times which are not so bad. "Everyman has a story to tell!" People wondering, not quite sure now, turning and heading for banks, dry-goods stores, blacksmiths, time for business and thinking it over, though I'm not gonna be the first to climb those steps and plunk down ten dollars in front of the whole town to have them think I'm some kind of looking-glass fiend, we'll just wait to see if anyone else does it first.

Hot windy dusty day of dry wood and heat rising from hardbaked street-dirt. The biography man sitting sunshaded on a wooden folding chair with pillow, now gazing out with a sad smile on his lips as townsfolk drift by on wooden storefront sidewalks in gingham dresses and bluejean workpants, children racing past the lone wagon on dares while kids shoot like Indians at the covered-wagon in their territory. Sipping on a cherry phosphate from the soda fountain, resting next to the golden leather books standing on the polished brownwood display case, leaning back for more shade,

head nodding at the folks who look up and maybe smile or nod with approval and howdy while stepping on down the street to go to the hardware store or even to the saloon for an afternoon beer before getting back to work. The salesman slyly peeking out from under the brim of his hat and mind-nodding to himself without moving. There goes the mayor, and the salesman nods to himself at the mayor who imagines himself a great orator whose legend befits a man of his stature, sitting up late into the night, drinking tumblers of scotch, staring at his cluttered desktop, he will look down over the town from the third-story pinnacle room of City Hall and spy on the biography man in the street, thinking maybe he'll just slip out in the dark and pay that salesman a visit and just keep the book locked up in a safe until old age, handing his lifestory to his son when he reaches his majority, still wondering about Pride, but thinking no one shall see him in the dark, the biography man promising to stay all night until moving-on time in the morning.

The salesman now glancing at the young farmhand looking out through the grimy hardware store window, and the salesman nods to himself again at this young buck who fancies himself a pirate-casanova with a tale or two to tell, getting back to work later that afternoon and recollecting those nights when he slipped over into the next county to drink moonshine with the Willamet boys, and that horse race he won out at the lake last summer impressing not-yet girlfriends, and all the man-adventures he'd had in the valley since he was a boy which would impress a girl or two the next time he was dressed up and out for a dance at the armory, raking hay and sweating in the workafternoon sunshine, thinking maybe he'd just grab a ten-spot out of his ol' sock buried under the floorboards of his bedroom in the shed out back of the barn and maybe just hop on over there after dark when no one can see him to poke fun or laugh about his Pride.

The salesman sips his phosphate, leaning back and shuffling his shoulders against the wall of the wagon, brushing buzzing summerheat flies away from his face, crossing his legs, rubbing his nose, tipping his hat and nodding at the young girl shyly looking away behind her mother as they come from the millinery and dry-goods with bolts of calico for dresses, curtains, bedspreads, walking prim down the sidewalk, and the salesman nodding at the girl who sits up late at night with gothic novels from the five-and-ten, secreted away from Ma and Pa, to be read in candle-lit darkness, alone in the bedroom where every night dashing young heroes lie on her bed to gather her up in their arms and caress her hair and press lips against hers while she wide-eyed and breathless reads page after page of a novel that, really now, *is* quite a bit like her own life. After all, did she not kiss that Roberts boy at the dance in Waynesville that time she went to visit her relatives in Illinois that year after high school graduation? Certainly her life

would be as exciting to read as anything written by famous female gothic novelists. Those days of lake-wading, love-discovering, classroom beaus, friendship rings, all culminating in a passionate novel. Why, if her biography were ever put on paper, it might become an eastern bestseller, leading perhaps to starring roles with Broadway New York Nightingales and opening-night parties, and after-dinner drinks in blood-red candle-lit apartments with handsome leading actors and famous novelists as she herself might someday be. Her heart pounding at the thought of maybe taking just a little, only ten dollars, from the graduation money her parents surprised her with for hopechest dowry with a possible trip to visit her aunt in Philadelphia someday. Just to take a walk in the evening streets past the townsquare and when no one was around, step out into the street and maybe get nerve to talk to the good-looking stranger, always did like older men really, that Roberts boy was *such* a child, and after all, only ten dollars, Ma and Pa never to know about it, hiding the biography in back of her closet where Pa never looks and Ma doesn't bother with. Really, it would seem a wise, if not sensible, investment. Only ten dollars. And that salesman, well, she knew about salesmen. She would giggle about this, following her mother down the street into the notions shop.

Handing the empty glass to a short-haircut boy who turns to dash back to the drugstore to show the wagon man that he is the fastest runner of any kid in town, he leans back, his head not moving, but always watching, waiting, in the hot summer afternoon of clouds and a cool breeze now and then, no customers yet, but knowing, always knowing what is in the hearts of the people who will come in the night.

A farmer now, rigging by with horses and wagon, tipping his straw hat very politely, wife beside him, happy-gone kids sitting on flour sacks in back, squatting up and down, grinning at the carnival wagon as they start back to the farmhouse now just a mile or so out of town. The salesman looks into the farmer face and nods with a hat-tip and smile as the wagon rumbles clink past with dust rolling from under wheels and the leather smack of reins on horses' backs. He nods. And the farmer will drive on now, past and out of town, thinking with a grin of dadburn good ol' days of swimming and helping birth foals, and barnfires, and that time in Texas when he rode the bull in the rodeo and now wouldn't that make a whopper of a story to go sticking in a book! Not the cathouse stuff now, wife would kill him with an ax, but still all the good times when he belonged to the militia long ago in Oklahoma and all those oil-rich Indians causing trouble, and him staying out two whole weeks during the riots and almost getting to fire his rifle. Exciting days. That mule trip back into Wyoming not ten years ago for hunting and maybe goldfinding before he finally came home and settled down and got hitched and, oh yeah, there were a couple things

that might make good reading just for fun and all, and I don't care, I think it'd be damn nice to have a book about myself to read when I'm old and to give to the kids and I don't give a goddam but that I think I just might ride back into town towards nightfall and maybe drop in on that salesman and chew the fat and see what it's all about here now. I don't care what anybody'd think. I think it'd be damn nice.

So flies buzz in the heat shimmering off the street as the sun goes down and cool shadows start to sprout all over town with evening pulling in, and the salesman gets up and stretches his legs and goes into the tiny bed-back-shack part of the wagon to get out forms and pens and ink and wait now for the customers who'll be coming in the night to whisper secret dreams, coming in the dark so that no one might see them and think them just a little too Proud and avoid them maybe on the streets later, now that they want one of the books.

And they came in the night. Quietly tapping on wagon wheels, the salesman leaning out into the dark and inviting each customer into the yellow light of the office-bedroom to discuss details and explain publishing. The street lit silver by a crescent moon making barely-discernible silhouettes flitting in and out of the darkness whenever the street seems deserted and no one seems to be there to see what anyone might be up to around the biography wagon at this time of night.

Silent, still, crickets in the weeds.

Dawn in the town, people crowded around now, staring at the wagon tracks coming into town but not leaving. Great silent horse hoofmarks still embedded in the dirt, wagon tracks coming into town to vanish in thin air, like spook-waif, gone in the morning sun. The sheriff examining the tracks, not knowing what to make of the strange mysterious disappearance of the wagon, suspecting foul play, wondering if it was possible those crazy Willamet kids from the next county mighta come in the night and spirited away the whole set-up in a practical joke, like the wagon in the courthouse foyer last Halloween, but no, no tracks, just a few footprints, no clues. Then, a panic-stricken mother running up to the sheriff, daughter gone, salesman gone, get a rope, catch him, hang him for fooling a young girl and whisking her off to the east, New York! A tear-streaked face crying up at him, the perplexed sheriff not knowing what to tell her or where the salesman could even be. And then a councilman stopping by and asking where the mayor is, had a meeting at eight o'clock and hasn't shown. Then a wagon from out of town with a farmwife frantic to know if her husband got drunk and is in jail sobering up, and the sheriff having no answer for her nor the cowering children on the buckboard. The street crowds with people in the town-square, stepping all over the wagon tracks which come into town but do

not leave. Roll right up and stop across the street from the dry-goods store, then vanish like morning fog, and everyone scratching their heads and looking around at each other and wondering, and wives, husbands, fathers, clamoring, pulling on the sheriff's vest, "Where are they? Where are our husbands? Our wives? Our daughters? Our sons? Where have they gone?" And the sheriff shouting, trying to calm down the people and looking worried over his shoulder, wishing the mayor would come strolling down the street to help solve the mysterious disappearances. Crying in the street, wailing, embarrassed folk shyly looking away, not used to emotion and tears of shocked mothers and distressed pale husbands and bawling children. The sheriff finally telling the ones with lost relatives to come to the office one at a time and he will fill out a form and, well, I'll just take down the information and we'll send it up to the state capitol and maybe they'll send someone down here that knows about these kinds o' things. Now y'all just calm down and everyone else go home and the rest of you come over to my office and we'll just try to get things straightened out here now.

Months, seasons, rainfall, silent mourning nights pass slowly, quiet wagons moving down the streets now, the crying and wailing ceasing long ago, reports to the capitol going back-and-forth until red-eyed mothers and white-faced husbands have melted into silent giving-up. Streets a little sadder now, no word from outlying districts.

An afternoon by the dry-goods store, teamsters pull up with deliveries, unloading crates onto the street, receipts, back-breaking heaving of boxes and storeroom shelving, the clerk frowning as wagons drive off to the next county with more deliveries as he counts the number of crates and re-checks the stockroom until he finds the mistake which is a crate that he opens, and there, goldtrimmed leather books which the clerk stares at for only a moment until he is running across the street and dragging the sheriff over to his store to look before word gets around town. But the frantic running to the sheriff's office has the town interested, now that the loss of relatives in the mysterious sad summer has been all but forgotten. They begin to follow, to drift into the store, and back into the stockroom where the sheriff silently pulls out book after book, and looks at titles. Biographies. All familiar names of souls lost, dozens, every name on the reports to the capitol. People crowding around for a better look until a scream shocks everybody and a woman is grabbing at a book with tears falling, clutching the book to her breast, her daughter, the book, held with knuckle-white fingers. The sheriff wide-eyed as the crowd turns slowly, like water coming to a boil, until arms are grabbing and pulling and knocking stock to the floor with the clerk shouting frantically to stop, please now, hold on, until the sheriff, not knowing what, begins to shout orders and people back up and the scurry on the floor of men and women settles.

Books now being pulled out one-by-one and handed back into the crowd as silent onlookers gaze in fear at the names printed in gold on each of the book covers. The store silent, lone figures leaving, stepping out into the street, books dwindling until a few lie untaken by relatives who had packed up and moved on. These he will send to the state capitol.

Teddy and I Go Kong / Kenneth Bernard

It has been months since Teddy and I have been home. Sometimes it seems like years, but I know it has only been months because here and there I get intimations of real time and space. Teddy is my infant son. He was just born, but already he is aging rapidly. In the beginning he was all flippers and stumps, but then things began to grow out. I thought, for a time, he would be octoploid, but I was wrong. After the fourth month he settled down nicely. He loved his nursing but gave it up early, in fact after his seventh week. I took him, on that occasion, to see *King Kong*. It was a hit with him from the start. He cooed and gurgled throughout the movie. And we have since seen it a dozen times or more. Soon he will be a match for Kong, but of that later. It started out as a perfectly ordinary occasion. That is, Teddy was dressed especially for the occasion by his mother. He wore a blue sailor suit. I was given a diaper change and a bottle. In the theater I bought popcorn and thoroughly enjoyed it. Between the first and second showing of *Kong* I washed it down with orange soda. Between the second and third showing, I urinated. There was no fourth showing, but the theater remained dark, and Teddy and I slept like babies.

That night the paraplegics in W-4 held a strategy meeting. They were playing the C.P. basketball team the following night and, although they had only three good limbs among them compared to a full count for the C.P.'s, the C.P.'s were all violent shakers and could not call their plays fast enough. It was, as expected, a slaughter, the paraplegics winning 2-0. Four broken wheelchairs and some mangled mechanical limbs, but that was a matter for Properties.

The next day we went down to Times Square, had a quick orange drink and donut, and made the 10:00 a.m. movie. It was an early Wayne war movie, and the Japs fell like flies. I offered Teddy his bottle, but he knocked it out of my hand. "Corn," he said, meaning popcorn. I immediately gave him some. He had never spoken before. Overnight he seemed to have grown. I thought about calling his mother, but the day was still young. The second time through the war movie I felt I was having double vision.