

On Lewis Shiner's *Slam** · Brooks Landon

IT SEEMS LIKE YOU CAN HEAR ONE FOR MILES. While the rasping, screeching, knife-grinding sound of a skateboard may not yet rank with that of fingernails slowly raked down a blackboard, it must surely be in the running, cutting through the white noise of urban life with its odd rhythms and relentless repetition—as if some neighborhood sociopath were trying to use a chainsaw to send an interminable message in Morse Code. This may be more a matter of penetrating pitch than of volume, not as loud, say, as a railroad switching yard, but as piercing as a tight, wracking cough in a silent theater, as nerve-jangling as the permanent scream of a stuck smoke alarm.

What's more, the sound of fingernails scraped across a blackboard is *just* a sound, signifying nothing beyond its own unpleasantness, but the sound of a skateboard signifies the presence of a skateboarder and, for that matter, of the subculture that has made the skateboarder such a curiously threatening sign in societies throughout the world. For, unlike the surfers or skiers or ice skaters or gymnasts who are ostensibly the skateboarder's athletic cousins, or even the BMX bikers with whom the skateboarder may seem to share some protective equipment, skaters don't practice their culture on distant beaches or sequestered slopes or clearly constructed courses. Street skaters, the kind most of us see around town, skate anywhere they can.

Indeed, skaters display a kind of genius for refusing to recognize territories and boundaries, replacing geographical categories of "the appropriate" with their casual appropriation of almost any less than vertical concrete surface, anywhere, celebrating and remapping concrete with a physical insistence reminiscent of the concrete-obsessed fictions of J. G. Ballard. Native artists of the surfaces of industrial culture, skaters ride on our streets, our sidewalks, our walking malls, our parking ramps, our drainage ditches, even in our empty swimming pools—making *that noise*, looking unwholesome even when performing stunningly acrobatic moves, dressed rebelliously no matter what they wear, a challenge, an affront, an unpleasantness.

* Doubleday, 1990.

And it isn't clear what, if any, teleology—other than aggression—guides their activity. Rarely seen in groups of larger than three or four—groups almost never including girl skaters—skateboarders compound the challenge of punk style (why on earth would they want to look like that?) with the challenge of enigmatic athleticism (what on earth are they trying to do?). Compared with inferring the goal of a skateboarder who seems to keep trying to negate the function of his wheels by abrading the underbelly of his board on the fulcrum of a curb, inferring the rules of cricket or karate or winetasting seems a snap. Thumb through *Thrasher* or some other skate 'zine and you'll see puzzling pictures of vertical skaters defying gravity in ways NASA had to spend forty eleven zillion dollars to simulate for astronaut training. You'll keep turning the magazine around and around, hoping that some new orientation will make better sense of these bodies in space, but nothing helps.

But that's not all. Skaters also have a language that suggests that their unfathomable moves are in fact much more linked to the worldview of karate than to those of winetasting or cricket. At any rate, the language is infinitely suggestive even if deliciously impenetrable. Operative verbs seem to be *bash, thrash, carve, grind, shred, rip, slash, bust, crush, and blast*, but these atmospherics are often matched by precise technical descriptions. Consider this do-it-yourselfer advice by Britt Parrott in a recent issue of *Transworld SKATEboarding*. The step-by-step tip is for mastering a move called a "Smith Grind to Feeble to Fakie."

First, learn Smith grinds and feebles to fakie. It will make your life easier. Also, don't try this trick on a spineless ramp.

1. Approach the spine frontside, as if you were college-bound.
2. Use your skill and reasoning to place yourself in a Smith grind, making sure that your body gets on top of the spine.
3. Assuming the world is centered around a double-coping spine, you should grind your back truck on the second piece of coping. If this is not the case, bail immediately.
4. You should now abandon all thought of the Smith grind and acquaint yourself with a feeble grind on the other side of the spine, keeping in mind you want to reenter in a fakie.
5. Push down with your back foot and lift your front foot. Don't get ahead of the board. Life will seem rather precarious at this point.
6. Continue that backward motion. Clear your throat.

I mention all of this because Lewis Shiner's third novel, *Slam*, not only spurred me to confront the cultural inscription of skateboarding, but also to realize ways in which this subculture implicated me, as well as Shiner's protagonist, in a number of cultural dialectics, one of the most interesting of which suggests something approaching responsible anarchy as a synthesis rising from the collision of skateboards and computers. Even more important, *Slam* accomplishes this subversively—not through the creaky mechanisms of social realism so much as through exploiting the potential of what, following O. B. Hardison's lead, I'll call the hypertext novel. In *Disappearing Through the Skylight*, Hardison calls attention to the proliferation of databases prepared for the computer-enhanced study of literary texts. These databases allow the user/reader to directly access detailed information about virtually any referential material in the text, so that starting from one of Shakespeare's plays a reader could segue into an almost infinite regress of database information about Elizabethan history, literature, or material culture. Of course, *Slam* is just paper—it doesn't come with an attendant set of hypertext databases, but it consistently calls our attention to the utility and availability of such databases in electronic culture. In doing this, Shiner joins a rapidly growing number of contemporary writers, writers such as William Burroughs, Don DeLillo, Kathy Acker, Mark Leyner, Jay Cantor, and Jayne Loader, whose fictions seem to invite us to trip out down some imaginary hypertext lane. This fiction insists on being part of the world, on refusing to support clear distinctions between its texts and others, urges us to check things out—not through the modernist gambit of allusion, nor through the postmodernist gambit of quotation, but through the simple suggestion that the more we read *around* its texts, the more we will come to know the nature of those texts. For counter example, anyone who can read DeLillo's *Libra* without wanting—indeed without *needing*—the hypertext data of the *Warren Commission Report*, of Derek Pell's *Assassination Rhapsody*, and of at least some of the library shelves sagging with assassination arcana, will probably *not* understand or agree with my contention.

Unlike a hypertext approach to a Shakespeare play, which Hardison rightly acknowledges takes us further and further *away from* the work of art, the hypertext novel actually encourages the idea or the fiction of such database digressions as a way of involving us *more deeply* in the work (think of this as metaphorically technologized deep structure, and think of

works such as *Moby-Dick* as its low-tech ancestors). In this sense, what I'm calling hypertext novels (more accurately novels written for a hypertext world) mark a literary response to the information-intensive nature of electronic culture, sponsoring at least the possibility of seeing the computer as the novelist's ally rather than enemy.

A hypertext reading of *Slam*, then, casts the sometimes slapstick action of Shiner's narrative in a much more serious light. For, beneath the relatively calm surface of Shiner's prose bubbles a radical brew of anarchist propositions, literature, and information nets. This is the world of skater bulletin boards, the world of the Loompanics Press rants of Bob Black (*The Abolition of Work*) and the Reverend Ivan Stang (Doug Smith and his Church of the Subgenius), a world of guerilla underground economies, a world of radical information cheerfully catalogued in computer bulletin boards such as those offered by *Thrasher* and *Factsheet Five*, a promise of a hidden world of marginalized info just begging to be accessed. One of the first things Shiner's protagonist discovers is this genially anarchistic world of countercultural computer bulletin boards, where it is possible to find everything from Ninja tutorials to instructions for making nuclear devices and Coca-Cola. For all the intriguing and refreshingly old-fashioned assumptions I found in *Slam* about the ethics of living responsibly—if illegally—in a postmodern world, what I found most significant was its participation in the new and newly liberating information structures of that world. And, in this respect, it might be accurate to think of *Slam* as a computer virus of a novel.

A “slam” is a skateboarding fall, a key term from the “pocket universe” of skateboarding, but while Shiner briefly introduces us to that universe and its private language, his *Slam* is not really “about” skateboarding any more than Don DeLillo's *White Noise* is “about” the vagaries of academic life. Dave Stokes, Shiner's protagonist, has just been paroled from a Texas Federal Correctional Institute (an older sense of a “slam”) after serving a six month sentence for tax dodging (refusing to repay taxes on unreported cash income from his minimum wage cashier's job in a record store), and has moved near Galveston, where a high school friend, now a lawyer, has found him a job as a caretaker for a house whose late owner had specified that it be maintained as long as any of her twenty-three cats remained alive. Dave's only problem, apart from not liking cats, is that he is alienated from just about everything. A “child of the sixties” now pushing

forty with not much to show for it, he is an adult purely by default, slowly waking from a twenty-year emotional hibernation only to find that the world is still winter, a thoughtful man now forced to admit the loss of a key dream: "That someday I would wake up and be an adult and everything would make sense and I would know what I was supposed to do." Bright, well read, and emotionally stable, Dave has nevertheless also become a misfit by default, unable to figure out what to do with his life, certain only that he "never wanted to be anything they already had a name for."

Dumped by his girlfriend as she gives him a ride from prison to the bus station, nervously greeted by the lawyer friend who has found him the ridiculous-seeming job feeding and cleaning up after a house full of cats, Dave meets his parole officer, a woman who takes a grimly punitive view of rehabilitation. As she demeans and hectors him, Dave realizes that she emblemizes the real point of his twelve years of education. "They had trained him to sit here and feel twisted up inside with guilt because this woman, who was every teacher and every principal and every dean he'd ever known, had passed judgment on him." Visited by his "successful" best friends from high school, Dave realizes that they are as uncomfortable in their lives as he is in his, as unhappy with their work, as unsure of the future, and maybe even less satisfied with themselves. "You're free man," one friend exclaims. "You're the only person I know can say that. You got no ex-wives, no car payment, no mortgage, no job to go to. Christ, if I was in your shoes. . . ."

At which point Dave's shoes start to pinch. Meeting an older woman and a young girl to whom he is immediately and desperately attracted, he knows that sexual desire is robbing him of judgment. Meeting the rhapsodic televangelist leader of AASK, Americans Awaiting Saucer Kidnap, he learns that this UFO prophet represents one of three groups trying to break the will that provides for Dave's parole-insuring employment, each group wanting the house for bizarre reasons. Enter Terrell, a huge black murderer, just escaped from Dave's old prison, where he had summarily raped Dave, then had become a kind of philosopher mentor to him after losing sexual interest in such an unwilling partner. By turns maddeningly unconcerned with his own situation and marvellously astute about Dave's, Terrell offers Dave a disturbing new perspective on "caring" for cats and for himself: "It's like they in jail here."

“You knuckling under, man. Change the rules. You got to live by you own rules, not the ones they give you. Look at these cats. You think they like this shit you feed them? They could have what they wanted, they’d eat cockroach flavor food, or rat flavor food, or bluejay flavor food. People don’t want cats to act like cats so they give them people food. They don’t want people to act like people so they give them a lot of bullshit rules. They want everybody to act the same so we don’t scare each other.”

And skateboarding? Mickey, the young girl Dave meets, lives near him with a small group of skaters in a bizarre but beautifully appropriate abandoned and condemned forty-two room cast concrete mansion, Fonthill, a veritable ode to concrete in which “stairs, desks, ceilings, everything” had been poured from concrete by a visionary architect as at odds with his world in 1910 as Dave is with his some eighty years later. Through Mickey, Dave meets the two extremes of skateboard culture: Steve, a skater so powerful that he has a corporate sponsor and can make a lucrative living going from skateboard competition to skateboard competition, and Bobby, a young runaway who has so far managed only to break his arm in a vicious slam off a partially constructed freeway overpass. “You can’t sit around and cry because they cut down some trees and pave everything,” explains Bobby, a scarred, cynical, but culturally savvy survivor. “Concrete is radical. Concrete is the future.”

If Dave’s parole officer represents all that has been wrong with his education, this cast of characters, including all twenty-three cats plus the computer he finds upstairs in his house, represents a new kind of education about a new kind of world. Dave has no interest in becoming a skater, but skaters provide an emblem for the life he wants to learn how to live, as do the cats who keep giving him mini-tutorials in the paradoxes of true freedom, and the computer nets that suggest an enabling and empowering agency for his new life. What this odd matrix of influences finally gives Dave is a chance to come up with “a working misunderstanding” that will let him survive and build on a world structured by paradox. In Shiner’s hands Dave’s struggles, setbacks, and modest victories are fused into an aesthetic of responsibility, a quietly cheering response to a world where questions of responsibility seem largely paved over by the discourses of postmodernism. “You the citizen of the future,” Terrell chides Dave.

“Except you don’t know what it is you want to do. Well child, you better figure it out, that’s all I got to say.” To his readers, Shiner says that plus a lot more.