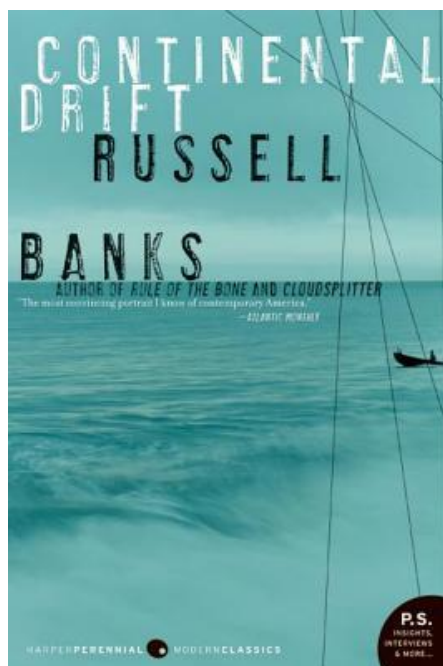




Continental Drift

Russell Banks

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A powerful literary classic from one of contemporary fiction's most acclaimed and important writers, Russell Banks's *Continental Drift* is a masterful novel of hope lost and gained, and a gripping, indelible story of fragile lives uprooted and transformed by injustice, disappointment, and the seductions and realities of the American dream.

Continental Drift Details

Date : Published March 13th 2007 by Harper Perennial Modern Classics (first published 1985)

ISBN : 9780060854942

Author : Russell Banks

Format : Paperback 408 pages

Genre : Fiction, Contemporary

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From Reader Review Continental Drift for online ebook

Maciek says

It's not memory you need for telling this story, writes Russel Banks in the italicized introduction with which he begins *Continental Drift*: With a story like this, you want an accounting to occur, not a recounting, and a presentation, not a representation, which is why it's told the way it's told.

This is an American story of the late twentieth century, writes Banks and he means it: this is a powerful novel of hope and loss set in the recession of the early 1980's, concerned with characters who could not be different but who both strive for something they feel is within their reach: a different, better life.

The novel begins with the introduction of Bob Dubois, an American everyman: 30 years of age, he has lived all his life in Cattamouth, New Hampshire, working as a repairman for the Abenaki Oil Company since he finished high school. At 30, Bob is married with two daughters and another child on the way. He lives a small duplex in a working class neighborhood and rents the back to four tenants (whom he calls hippies), drives an old Chevrolet and owns a 13 foot Boston whaler he built from kit. He still owes the Cattamouth Loan Company a little over \$22,000 in payments for the house, car and boat. A question haunts Bob Dubois, which is relevant to many of us: "I am smart - why I am not rich?"

"We Have a good life", his wife tells him, but Bob longs for more: he wants out of the small New Hampshire town with its snowny hopelessness, where nothing ever seems to change; he longs for a slice of the American Dream for himself. When his brother offers him a job with Florida, Bob thinks that this is his chance to start again. A new hope waits in the unexplored land down south, where ripe oranges hang from trees all year round and success wait for those willing to grasp them.

Vanise Dorsinville also longs for a better life: a native resident of Haiti, she longs to escape its instability, poverty and violence, and secure a better future for herself and her baby. She saves up enough money to pay the coyotes to smuggle her to America, the promised land where Haitians have been taken to and prospered: she is aware that the journey is dangerous but is willing to take the risk to get to the city of Miami, where there is a Haitian community which will help her accomodate and start a new life.

For Bob, a native New Englander, Florida is also like a different part of the world: although still a part of his homeland, The United States, it is so far removed from New Hampshire both geographically and culturally that it might as well be a separate country. Having lived in homogenously white New Hampshire all his life, Bob experiences a true culture shock when he sees so many people of color: *hundreds of them, thousands!*. In Florida it is Bob and his family who are seen as curiosities, "white folks" and strangers. Elaine, Bob's wife, is amazed, and asks: *All those black people working in the fields and everything, they're not really Americans, right?*, to which he replies: *I've read they're from Cuba and those kinds of places*.

Bank's Florida is a place where people wake up from their dreams, and not fulfill them: as Bob and his family drive through central Florida, their first reaction is of disappointment: they keep their eyes away from the horizon to avoid seeing the flat landscape, spotted with endless franchised stores and restaurants, lonely and isolated neighborhoods which turn into miles of grids of trailer parks, automobile graveyards, *vast and disordered, dreary, colorless and indestructible..* As they see more of Florida, the realization that they no longer can return to New Hampshire fills them with fear, as they know that this is their home now. A place where people play dirty to get rich quickly, where violence is commonplace and crime prospers. Bob has made the bed, and he must now sleep in it: as the novel progresses it becomes obvious that he has not successfully transformed his life but merely lost his past, the job and possessions which gave him a sense of status, in exchange for the life which is slowly spiralling out of his hands among the palm trees and

scorching sun.

Right in the introduction Banks writes that the "sad story of Robert Raymond Dubois" will end in the back alleys of Miami, on a February morning in 1981. The ending is indeed powerful and striking, if not unexpected, but the novel is all about the journey: about Bob's life disintegrating further and further, and Vanise's hopes for reaching Miami, and their lifelines intersecting. Banks develops Bob's character with significantly more detail than he grants to Vanise - he seems to try to make up for that with references to Haitian culture and customs, of which there are plenty, but Vanise herself is more of a personification of the general immigrant dream. As he admits in his epilogue, the purpose of the book is to "destroy the world as it is"; this is a strongly ideological work, with an important message. Therefore, his characters never seem to not be controlled by the fate predestined for them by their creator: Bob's life goes out of control almost too neatly in its tragedy, and Vanise is almost saintlike in her complacency: her only active decision seems to be the escape from Haiti, and she remains resigned throughout the rest of the novel

Nevertheless, this is a powerful and important novel about the failure of the American dream and the struggle of the working class, and made me want to read more of Banks's work. Bob Dubois is a fragile character who seems to have been already broken and put back together from different pieces of glass, each shard reflecting on us with our own faces. Like continents we drift and dislodge, and Banks's novel made me grieve for his characters, which are but images of many contemporary lives to whom no one will ever give a platform to voice their woes before they wither away into eternity. With this novel Banks lets them be heard, and they speak loudly and clearly.

Stacey says

I decided to read this book because it was mentioned in "The end of your life book club" as one of the most depressing reads ever, and I really love a good depressing read. Unfortunately, I realized that I prefer depressing books where the characters are resilient in the face of their struggles. The American family annoyed me - mostly the dad, Bob Dubois. He felt like a complainer who would be forever unsatisfied with his life. The Haitian characters were a bit more interesting but the female also seemed to have no hope. My favorite character was the haitian boy who was the only one to try and solve his troubles.

Sharon Styer says

With this book I became a complete fan of Russell Banks' writing. It's not the pleasant family households he writes about. But, he writes a true description of how we are.

I remember a line from Mike Nichols, the playwright. He said something like this: How are we really? How do people really react in situations. That's been my tapline towards reading ever since.

Russell Banks writes down to the bone of our truths. How the hell does he know how so many types of people do react.

His subjects drive me crazy though. The main character is a bored married man in his thirties. He dreams of a bigger life but he does nothing to create one. He's married with three kids to a woman that in his small way he does love. He has affairs. His family and he are getting by.

He has an enormous temper tantrum - a frightening one actually. And his loving wife suggests a move.

He's so daft though that he gets played- by relatives, by best friends.

He corners himself in the end, of course.

Not an admirable character in the bunch. But, it's Bank's writing that got me. His writing rings true to me.

Mythili says

When I saw Russell Banks speak at the Brooklyn Book Festival a few years ago, he read a couple of passages from *Continental Drift*. He prefaced his reading with the comment that while it might seem strange that he was revisiting a book he'd written in the 80s, its themes had been on his mind lately. I can see why. Set in a recession, *Continental Drift* is interested in things like the cost of pursuing the American dream, the definition of contemporary manhood, and the relationship between the fate of an individual and the fate of a civilization. The passages that Banks read at the book fest outlined the book's elegant "big idea" -- that the currents that push people to pick up their families and homes and look for a better living are a kind of force of nature. These ambitious, meditative passages are some of the book's finest. They're what made me seek this book out, what pulled me into this story and what made parallel protagonists Bob Dubois and Vanise Dorsinville's travails so gripping in the first place. Unfortunately, my enthusiasm for this book waned a bit as things unfolded and I spent a little more time with Banks' main characters. Bob (leaving a factory job in New England) and Vanise (leaving hurricane-stricken Haiti) have much to deal with in their quest for a new, better life in Florida, and neither is quite up to the task. Bob ruminates and flounders; Vanise submits and endures. Both are sympathetic characters in their way, but the story progresses (and their fates meet), Bob and Vanise serve the plot a little too well. As a result both are too-readily martyred for Banks' larger message. *Continental Drift* is a powerful novel about powerlessness, masterfully rendered, one might say. There are diverting subplots, raw scenes of abuse and human weakness, and shifting perspectives but the novel holds steady to its larger concerns through it all. It's a good thing and a bad thing. For all its strengths, in the end this book suffers from being a novel-y novel -- the kind of book that never lets you forget that it's carrying the weight of the world.

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

I picked this book to read because it was one of the few I could find set in the Bahamas, and I was headed there on vacation. It is the story of a man unhappy in his dead-end life in New Hampshire, who relocates his family to Florida to work for his brother. There is also a more mystical story of a woman leaving Haiti who is bound to intertwine with Bob at some point, but the how was less expected.

After finishing the book, which I took breaks from because it wasn't really grabbing me, I read more about the author and I think this has some major elements from his own life.

His capture of Florida and the Bahamas is pretty spot-on (Nassau in particular), as well as unhappy people and the decisions they make. I would not call this an uplifting novel!

This little bit made me stop and think:

"'I want... I want...' Men do that to women, use them to remake themselves, just as women do it to men. Men and women seek the love of the Other so that the old, cracked and shabby self can be left behind, like a sloughed-off snakeskin, and a new self brought forward, clean, shining, glistening wetly with promise and talents the old self never owned. When you seek to acquire the love of someone who resembles you, in gender, temperament, culture or physical type, you do so for love of those aspects of yourself, gender, temperament, culture, etc; but when you seek the love of someone different from you, you do it to be rid of yourself."

Roxy says

How does a good man decline? What decisions made along the way affect him? How does a life turn on a dime, a whim, and how do these turns affect the future of any us. This is an amazing book that I know will stick with me for a long time.

Mark says

Given that Russell Banks has written so many books and had several of them turned into well-known movies, I am amazed that I hadn't read anything by him before now. I am going to have to make up for lost time! What an amazing wordsmith. In the span of a single paragraph, his prose describes a character in such a way that the reader feels like he not only knows who the character is, but what makes him tick, his dreams and aspirations and his failures. I was constantly struck by the sheer beauty of the words on the page. The story was actually kind of bleak, yet the feeling I had as I read it was one of exhilaration. A powerful tale of sin and atonement and redemption and a great introduction to this American Master.

Clif says

I was just reading a report in the NY Times about a man suffering from delusions, of how he made it through a rough period in his life and is now doing well with the help of his wife and drugs.

Every one of us is on a chemical continuum from off-the-wall crazy to comatose. This is a good reason for compassion since we play the game of life with the equipment we have, lacking the "right" amount of one chemical and having too much of another. While some may say we determine the course of our lives through rational decision making, I think the decision making is secondary to the physical conditions within our bodies that either drive us or inhibit us. The best we can do is realize our situation, understand our behavior and act with the help of others to live decent lives.

Continental Drift is the story of an average guy with a very active imagination that dreams of a better life and tries to make it happen. His dreams are not wild but they are scary because they are shallow and heavy on the imagery that one can get from watching TV commercials. In other words he has the same dreams of materialism that so many Americans do.

He has no moral center to constrain him, so impulse wins almost every time. Is there a man alive who doesn't fantasize sex with most if not all of the women he sees? But the great majority have more sense than to act on these fantasies that are based on physical drive and have nothing to do with the actual person who is the sexual object of the day.

In contrast to the drift of the main character, Bob Dubois, the women in his life show common sense and his wife has so much of it that I can't help but wonder if the author didn't create her character simply to showcase Bob's actions-for-the-moment.

Bob is so mixed up that his knowledge of the right thing and his desire for the conventional idea of success break to the surface of his consciousness at random. His inability to discover who he is leaves him

contemptuous of himself, likely adding to his desire to have intercourse with every woman he meets for self-affirmation. As the author says, Bob's decisions are made only on the basis of circumstances and taboo. If the woman is available, attractive and isn't his sister, he goes for it.

Lying comes easily. He does it at the drop of a hat for even the slightest advantage. His one rule for self-restraint is never to hit his wife or kids and he gets through the story without violating that rule, though in the destruction of their home, he comes very close to doing so.

His wife and kids are incidentals. Though he alternates between thinking he loves his wife and thinking he doesn't, it really depends on whether he needs to think he does according to the situation he finds himself in. There is scarcely a scene in which he interacts meaningfully with his children.

So he is, if we are to believe that each of us is a free will determining the course of our life, contemptible. But seen as a small boat tossed on a large and stormy sea, he is more to be pitied.

The plot of the story, with Bob and family moving south to Florida in search of "success" at the same time Vanise, a poor Haitian woman, is risking her life and that of her baby to flee north to the same state in order to live at all, is brilliant. Bob moves with no moral compass over a landscape where he accepts the common wisdom. Vanise cannot afford to use a moral compass as she strives to move north at any cost.

Bob's brother, Eddie, and Bob's friend, Av Boone, are a bit too flat for my liking. They provide characters to show how easily swayed Bob is and how shallow success can be. They exist to set Bob up for our examination.

Never boring, quite believable and for the most part realistic, Continental Drift is a well crafted novel.

Don says

Excellent book about how an unemployed New England man and a woman from Haiti lives intersect in tragic ways.

AC says

This fine book deserves more than the one-line comment I originally gave it. And probably an extra half-star. For it has lingered.

Bob Dubois is a white working class stiff, with more intelligence than articulation (and more unarticulated intelligence than the people around him), living in the cold ragged little cities of New Hampshire, fixing oil burners. His life is falling apart. And so, like a bird seeking warmth from the sun of life, he drifts south, with his family...to a promised land.... (Florida).

Vanise and Claude live in Haiti, in a dirt poor village. Their lives are such that they were born into the undeveloped ruins of the backside of the world... and so, their lives cannot fall apart. For they have never cohered in the first place. And so, they not only drift, but go to all human ends to flee north..., to the land of milk and honey... (Florida -- crass and commercial and a 'nation' of trailer parks...).

These two stories, which alternate for most of the book, ultimately collide, like continents drifting and

colliding and that huge mountain ranges as they do... human time and geological time thus somehow telescoped..., not in the narrative (which is focused on the here and now), but in the metaphoric background that helps to shape, subtly and 'behind the scenes', the motif of this fine novel.

A fine achievement. Banks is a fine writer. Recommended.

Paul Gaya Ochieng Simeon Juma says

I read this book while in the middle of Rabbit Run and I. Could not help but notice the similarities. In fact this review may as well apply to Rabbit Run.

It's a terrible thing to go from being something to being nothing! A terrible thing for a man to endure, to be nothing after having been something. Life is grudging in what it gives, so take whatever it gives as if that's all you're ever going to get.

This is a hard pill to swallow, especially to Bob Dubois, who loses everything that's close to his heart: his wife, his daughters, his job and his brother. That is what he had to endure in this life. Life never handed him any choice, it didn't ask him what to take or to leave.

A very depressing novel. You can bet that I was afraid for myself and my life.

SoManyBooks SoLittleTime (Aven Shore) says

I did not love this; obvs that has nothing to do with relative quality and passion of the writing and whether other people might.

I did not love it because it seemed to me the book revolved around a self-absorbed, stereotypical man in "take" mode, where the standing mystery is why so many women (flat, implausible and unmemorable characters) have sex with him. It's like a protracted fantasy from within the male gaze of entitlement and power, however, this guy's fantasy is sad, empty, defeated, depressed, ignorant, self-defeating, self-sabotaging, doomed...so, not many bright spots.

The islanders and their fates are well-written and interesting, but even their characters seem to exist not to live their own stories, but only to serve our undeserving white male protagonist's. Which, perhaps, is the point of the novel, if the broken white guy is meant to represent broken white dominant culture, and women and disadvantaged nations meant to represent, well, women and disadvantaged nations, being disposable servants to be churned up for no worthy reason. If so, well done! Good portrait of reality. But, we know this is what is, we don't need the picture drawn in symbols, and it's not enjoyable to read; we hope for better, and progress, and growth.

Nicole says

Even most of the people who didn't like this book keep saying it is well-written in their comments. For me, this is the biggest problem. I could stomach more of Bob Dubois in my life if the writing were no so unbelievably turgid.

I also am finding that Bob's solidness as a character -- he is, for me at least, fully realized and present for the reader -- makes it all the more... what, frustrating? I'm kind of wanting to say offensive, actually ... that the Haitian characters are so clearly Haitian first and people second. It'd be one thing if ALL the characters were stereotypical, but when only the non-white ones are, it's hard to get through.

Finally, Bob's sex life, which is everywhere in evidence and fully detailed, again always and only from his perspective. I have a hard time understanding why all these women sleep with him; perhaps digging into that psychology could have made for a more interesting read. As it is, I just feel that as a female reader I'm already excluded from the narrative, so thanks anyway, but that'd be a no on the multiple sex scenes for me.

All in all, I'm not sure it's going to be worth my while to finish this book, not while I have such a big stack of things to read that I have a chance of actually liking. How many pages do I need to give it before I tell it that's enough?

Kate Walker says

Continental Drift charts the downward mobility of a handful of unfortunate souls in the early 1980's, amid the shrieking death-cries of late capitalism.

Bob Dubois is a blue-collar radiator repairman. He works his dull job and supports his wife and kids. To take the edge off the day he visits a bar near his work and enjoys the warm affections of another woman. Life is relatively stable, if a bit dreary. Anyway, one night he snaps. It's a combination of a few factors. Mostly he is feeling guilty about sleeping with his girlfriend when he should have been buying ice skates for his daughter. He's upset that the skates are so expensive and he's mad that the store is closing and that he'll be coming home empty-handed without so much as an alibi. So he throws a fit, and starts punching the windshield of his car until he smashes it in an over-the-top meltdown. It was hard for me to work up much sympathy for the man. I wanted to grab him by the shirt and say, "Why are you acting like such an immature little brat? Get a grip!"

He comes home, on the verge of a nervous breakdown, and somehow convinces his wife that what they need to do is make a fresh start in a new state. Bob remembers a summer he spent working on a boat, on the Florida coast and he feels that if he could just get back there, he'd find himself and the happiness that eludes him. Dreams of wealth and leisure glitter temptingly on the horizon.

The ease with which Bob and his wife sell their house and quit their jobs revealed a bit of datedness to the book, I thought. Selling a home in today's treacherous real estate market would be drama enough to fill these pages. It garners barely a mention here. Walking away from a steady job of 20 years, with two children to support, comes across as far more reckless than courageous. Job security like that doesn't exist anymore, so tossing it away seems unforgivably wasteful. You get the sense of people heading straight off a cliff, whether they know it or not.

But off they go. Of course, the moment the family arrives in their new home, it becomes apparent that their fantasies of the easy life have little bearing on reality. Bob's brother has given him a job managing one of the liquor stores he owns, but it pays barely enough to pay for their shabby trailer home. The brother is a boorish character upon whom the entire family is now dependent. He's a quintessential 1980's man, ruled by a crude, materialistic ethos. There is an unbearable scene in which his wife describes buying a boat, on a lark, as a surprise birthday present for her husband. The couple is dripping with money and it is obvious to everyone but Bob that the man is involved in a serious drug running operation. His ever-expanding business empire looks more and more like a money-laundering scheme as time goes on. Beneath the shiny surfaces of

“success” lies a dank world of corruption, greed and doom.

A dislocating culture shock unsettles Bob when his brother forces him to keep a gun behind the register. He wants nothing to do with the thing, but it isn't long before he finds occasion to fire it, in an unthinkable break with his former self. Claustrophobia, paranoia and fear hang about the characters like a sickening, choking fog, yielding predictably terrible results. Adrenaline is always high, and the characters are always on the cusp or in the throes of catastrophe.

A major theme throughout the book is the fraught, ambivalent relationship between whites and blacks in this southern state. Bob is terrified of the black people that come in and out of the store. He pulls up to work one day and sees a car with two black passengers parked outside and this triggers a frenzied fight of flight response. He breaks out in a sweat, fumbling for the gun before recognizing one of the passengers as the shop's elderly custodian. This disorienting experience, both for Bob and the reader, further emphasizes the ways in which fear distorts perception and quick second decisions mean the difference between life and death.

The custodian introduces Bob to his daughter, a nurse with whom Bob feels an instant infatuation. There is an element of exoticism about Bob's attraction to her. Racial differences are highlighted rather than glossed over as they would be in a safer, more politically correct book. Sex is portrayed in hyper-erotic detail, and at the same time, with great humanity and compassion. There is failed sex in this story, but not "bad sex" in the sense of poorly written sex. As bad as it gets, it is never embarrassing for the reader as it is when it is handled with less skill and honesty.

Horror in its many guises is a frequent presence in this novel. Bob's wife goes into unexpected labor while he is getting stoned with his girlfriend in a hotel room. This is the pre-cell phone era, and his wife has no way of reaching him. She has to ask a neighbor to take her to the hospital, leaving her kids at home in the care of a beer-guzzling acquaintance from the trailer park where they live.

When Bob finally arrives back at the house, in a post-coital, inebriated stupor, he is shattered to discover that his wife has had the baby while he was away. He rushes to the hospital to find his wife, dressed in white, baby in arms, saintly and pure, representing all that is good in the world. (The author laid it on a bit thick here, but why begrudge the man's life-changing epiphany?) He decides immediately to cut off his affair and dedicate himself to caring for his wife and family.

Sadly, this moment of clarity and grace is short-lived. His family seems self-contained, uninterested in him, even against him. He begins to feel like an outsider in his own home. (When he starts breaking furniture against the walls, you can see why.) He has a falling out with his brother and quits his job out of spite at the precise moment he needs his job most. He ends up working on a fishing boat owned by an old friend, a man with whom he has a complicated history. Unspoken betrayals linger in the air between them.

The fishing gig deepens his downward trajectory. Bob finds himself desperate for money, willing to consider dangerous new avenues for profit, such as ferrying refugees from the Bahamas to Florida. It is here that Bob's story intersects with a young Haitian mother, her child and an orphaned teenage boy whose hellish journey we've witnessed in the novel's parallel narrative.

This second story line has the effect of dwarfing the significance of Bob's and his family's more abstract, existential drama. The horrors of human trafficking make all other concerns seem slight in comparison. Though their circumstances are wildly divergent, the characters are identical in their longing to fulfill their self-constructed fantasy of the American Dream.

There is a scene, which brought to mind the extreme shock and terror of the indelibly traumatic moments in *Sophie's Choice* when the mother, with a gun to her head, sends her child to its death. In a chaotic scene of

stark horror, the Haitian passengers are ordered to throw themselves and their children overboard, where they are instantly swept away. And there are many other atrocities leading up to these final, shattering moments.

There are so many layers of moral failing in this novel that the narrative finally collapses under its own weight, like a black hole. There is no redemption for any of the characters. I'm not sure if I completely agree with the book's lofty post-script, but it provides an intriguing meditation on life and literature.

"Good cheer and mournfulness over lives other than our own, even invented lives- no, especially wholly invented lives- deprive the world as it is of some of the greed it needs to continue to be itself. Sabotage and subversion, then, are this book's objectives. Go, my book, and help destroy the world as it is."

Thirty years after its publication, Continental Drift remains chillingly relevant. Human failing and economic disaster feed off one another in an unholy alliance, then and now. This is not to say it couldn't be another way. Perhaps, it is in confronting the ugliness of our human condition that we gain the clarity and will necessary to transform it.

Frabe says

Due storie, intrecciate nel finale: quella di un americano insoddisfatto che cerca qua e là nel suo paese una vita migliore per sé e per la sua famiglia, e quella di un'haitiana disperata che lascia la sua isola e viaggia, bimbo in braccio, verso quello stesso paese, pure lei alla ricerca di una vita migliore per sé e per il suo piccolo. L'America però promette molto... ma non sempre dà, e se dà vuole molto in cambio: "*nulla è gratis nella terra della libertà*".

Le due storie, dolenti e pesanti, sono raccontate con cura, ma anche con una certa freddezza, quali esemplificazioni romanzate di analisi antropologiche e sociologiche: quella sui fenomeni migratori, soprattutto, che vede gli uomini spostarsi sulla terra come fanno, di solito più impercettibilmente, le placche continentali, gli uni come le altre spesso alla deriva, e a cozzare contro dure realtà.

Marc says

This novel did nothing for me. I never cared a whit about any of the characters, including (and especially) Bob the main one. Why would I? He just drifted through life, making one dumb mistake after another and bringing nothing but unhappiness to himself, his poor wife and innocent young children--not to mention just about everyone else he came in contact with.

The Haitian characters never came alive for me. In fact, they only took away from the narrative for me. It was obvious the two plots would interconnect. In fact, much of what happened was quite obvious.

I believe Banks is a good writer. This book just left me cold.

Gemma says

When I finished this book I literally felt as if I had been punched in the stomach. I've only had that happen from literature a few times in my life, and it is truly stunning. It's a stunning novel, in scope, in prose, in

personal-is-political, political-is-personal thought.

Jim Fonseca says

Let's start with the unusual epilogue: "Knowledge of the facts of Bob's life and death changes nothing in the world. Our celebrating his life and grieving over his death, however, will. Good cheer and mournfulness over lives other than our own, even wholly invented lives – no, especially wholly invented lives – deprive the world as it is of some of the greed it needs to continue to be itself. Sabotage and subversion, then, are this book's objectives. Go, my book, and help destroy the world as it is."

Bob, our main character, is a young man (late 20's) growing up in New Hampshire, who, although he doesn't know it yet, is surrounded by examples to avoid – his father, his older brother, his best friend. He repairs oil burners in a dying town in the dead cold of New Hampshire's winters. He has a wife, two daughters, a crappy car, a crappy house, but a nice boat, (almost paid off) and a woman on the side.

But Bob has a white guy problem: it's just not enough. His older brother appears to be living the good life in Florida. Both Bob and his money-obsessed older brother seem overly or unrealistically influenced by ads on TV for tropical vacations and Mercedes.

Thus begins the two threads of the story: two families seeking better lives in Florida – one family in New Hampshire and one in Haiti. We know from the beginning they will meet in tragedy of almost unimaginable proportion. As hard as it is to believe, we are told that Bob, in his late 20's, has previously had "no interaction with black people" even though he's been in the service.

Fast-forward to Florida. Bob works for his brother and lives in a one-bedroom dilapidated trailer. Later he runs sport fishing boats for his best friend and, unlike his best friend, he won't smuggle drugs on the side but he thinks he's helping people out by smuggling in illegal Haitian immigrants. A big and tragic mistake.

The novel becomes almost a catalog of the financial holes the unsuspecting pursuers of the American Dream can fall into. And the way we get sucked into stereotypes of how the grass is greener over the state line. Just two weeks ago I read an article about a small community of 100 people in Florida who have unsafe water and whose average annual income is \$10,000 – try living on that in sunny Florida!

Some quotes I liked:

"When you seek to acquire the love of someone who resembles you, in gender, temperament, culture or physical type, you do so for love of those aspects of yourself, gender, temperament, culture, etc.; but when you seek the love of someone different from you, you do so to be rid of yourself."

After a white guy shows up waving a gun in the home of a black family, threatening the father and daughter who live there: "She and her father never speak of the event again, not to each other and not to anyone else. There's nothing to say about it to each other that is not already fully understood, so they remain silent about it, almost as if it never happened."

Bob reflects on the role of luck in life: "And luck can't last a lifetime, unless you die young."

When this book was published in 1985, James Atlas, a writer and editor for the Atlantic, called it "The most convincing portrait I know of contemporary America." Maybe it was then.

This is my first Russell Banks. I found it a very good read but bit overdone with some of the characters bordering on stereotypes. Bob's ignorance of black people seems extreme; his callousness and nonchalance about his extra-marital affairs seems overdone; his brother's ties with Mafia-type guys and his profanity seem melodramatic as does the way the poverty and the docility of the Haitian immigrants are portrayed. I don't know exactly what it was but it was almost a DNF for me about a third of the way through. Yet I stuck with it and in the end I was glad I did and I gave it a 4.

Image of trailer park in Thermal, CA from bbci.co.uk/news

Picture of Haitian boat people posted on Kan'an 48 WordPress.com

Chris Gager says

Starting tonight? Rescued from the transfer station of course.

Getting further in not too excited so far. The cosmic digressions are sort of interesting but Bob is not. We're back in loser-ville a la Richard Russo, Denis Johnson, Raymond Carver and Tobias Wolff. So far I like all of them better...

- Is this dirty realism?

- I guess this will be a story about American culture,. We'll see how well he gets it.

- Why no college for Bob? The explanation's a bit lame. He NEEDS to have not gone to college. It happens... Like Updike's Rabbit.

- A downtown Sears? Where?

- Bob's early on rant(after banging a barfly and spacing out in Sears) is pretty good.

Moving on and alternating with sympathy and disgust for clueless Bob. I get it! He stands for all the clueless people in our society. The ones who wear their Ray Rice jerseys to football games and the ones who think it's OK to whip a 4-year old with a switch and leave marks. No doubt we'll be seeing AP jerseys in the Patriots game tomorrow. Anyway... it's tough to not be disgusted with the whole of humanity. I suppose the author's point will be that the problem is embedded in our culture - and he's right - but individuals are responsible for their choices and Bob keeps making bad ones.

- Again with the stretching of credulity. Getting paid in cash? Had Bob not heard of the IRS and prison???

- Big brother Eddie - now there's another archetype(racist, gun-loving), the go-get-um hustler. Any doubt that Bob will be brought down by his "trust" in his older brother???

Moving along into the middle now and Bob has switched mentors. What's the big difference between Eddie and Ave? Both are obviously untrustworthy and unworthy of Bob's attention. Again... the plot requires that Bob be endlessly unresourceful and f'ed up.

- so many breast references - is the author a Playboy fanboy?
- reminds me of Franzen in its arbitrary incompleteness.
- enuf sex scenes and sex talk already. It's important - we get it!
- on the other hand, he does get that sex can provide a temporary feeling of peace and completeness.
- Bob chasing the maybe-Cornrow? Really? Bob is the author's puppet!
- everyone seems a bit young for all the serious doings. maybe they should all be about five years older - in the Bob story at least.
- a message/theme here: a brutal life breeds brutal people. Culture is the foundation for all the weirdness here. Does human nature breed culture or is it vice versa?
- I'm beginning to "get" that this is a very ambitious novel. It's going pretty well so far but the Vanise story is still more compelling. I assume the two threads will be coming together on the ocean somewewhere.
- The writing is kind of affectless, like Woolf and Carver, but effective - detached.
- reminds me a bit of "Fiskadoro".
- The emergence of Claude, Charles and Vanise from the hold so close to the bright life of Nassau is a great scene!
- The raping reminds me of "Lonesome Dove" - brutal culture=brutal men.

And so I'm finished after skimming the last 50 or so pages. I just ran out of both goodwill and patience for the book and the writer. Once again... TOO MANY WORDS! See... Cavalier and Clay, Tree of Smoke, The Stand, Already Dead, Gilead, Home, Them etc. Too much authorial exposition... At the end there's a bit about how RB wanted to take the role of storyteller with his arm around the reader's shoulder and be an explainer of everything. He's enlightening us I guess. Blah-blah-blah... At the end I had to bring my rating down to 2*(rounding down from 2.5*). I was doing fine about halfway through but as Bob continued on his author-induced endless quest to be the most clueless human on the planet I had to give up hope. There's so much I could write about how over-rated this book is(see East of Eden) and all else wrong with it. How about some notes...

- Ted and Yaz on the same team together? NO!(maybe in spring training - that's all)
- Bob's a sex addict I think...
- This book is all about MEN. The female characters are "important" but cardboard. Well... for that matter Eddie, Tyrone, Ave and Bob are all pretty cardboard as well.
- Why all the untranslated Creole? Why all the mumbo-jumbo voodoo stuff?
- Uh-Oh - "his conscious understanding of his own sexuality" ICK! This is a NOVEL dude! Stop telling us stuff - a good writer brings it out by showing us.
- Too much time is spent inside Bob's unlikely 31-year-old thoughts. This is a literary presumption/conceit.

- MUST everything Bob does turn to shit? I guess so if that's what the author requires.
- And so to the ending - straight out of "Lord Jim"...

Was out walking when it occurred to me that Mr. Banks may have ripped off John Updike. Bob DuBois seems to be suspiciously similar to Updike's Rabbit Angstrom. Both are white, lower middle/blue collar Northeast losers who make an endless series of stupid decisions. Both are afflicted with sexual compulsiveness and both ultimately pay for their untreated low self-esteem and lack of self-respect(although it takes a lot longer for Rabbit's dopiness to catch up with him). Updike's writing ability puts him in a different and higher universe than Banks.

Tim says

On my second reading of this book there was no letdown, no thought of how could I have ever regarded this so highly. I can safely say that this is more than a fine piece of writing, a superb novel that looks into the heart and soul of America, a novel with thoroughly believable, lovingly delineated characters that describes its world with photographic clarity. It is all of that, but also more. This is a book that I truly love, a book that from time to time makes me stop what I am doing and consider its points, its charms, its awesome skill. This along with my other Banks favorite, "Affliction", are the only two books I can think of that I have purchased extra copies of to give to people.

In this second reading, I was more aware of the tragic everyman character of Bob Dubois and how Banks portrays him. Bob is many things, the complex reality that underlies the TV-land construction of the average blue collar Joe. He is basically decent, but flawed - he is willing to commit adultery, break the law, and even kill (but only in self-defense). He is an average man in most ways, and the struggles he experiences go on everywhere. I marvel at the book's seemingly effortless realism, a textbook-worthy example of effective use of details. Simply presenting believable detail is never enough, however. The detail must seem to grow organically out of a good story and interesting characters (and valuable ideas, in the best fiction); those are always the starting point, the *raison d'être* for the detail. Not to mention the quality of the writing and the presentation of a unique voice. This book has all of these.

Another thing that came thru for me was the underlying passion. Despite the fact that Bob is in many ways a bumbling blank slate, a man capable of actions that others would find terrible, the author succeeds in making us care about him. It is inescapable that Bob, and his brother and best buddy are all deluded, all attempting to live out an American dream that is fed by a poisonous stream of lust, lies, and greed. Surely this accounts partially for Bob's blankness, his knack for being led into trouble - Banks wanted to show us that he was simply a typical guy who wanted the masculine American dream in all of its contradictory confusion. He wanted unshackled sex and a happy marriage, freedom and stability, attention and solitude, a little respect, but assessed with the only measuring tools he can comprehend. I can think of no other book that succeeds to this degree in which the protagonist is so slow-witted and undistinguished. And yet it is magnificent.

Another key issue is race. Bob and Eddie buy in to that classic brand of racism, still practiced by many, in which the barely comprehended other is demonized and feared. Racism is presented frankly, yet with a humorous undertone. A sophisticated reader cannot help but laugh at Eddie's blanket assessments of Afro-Americans, or at Bob's insecure fantasies concerning the sexual endowments of black men. Bob is not really a racist however, the only racism in him is born of ignorance. To a great extent he is able to go beyond his white bread past by falling for a black woman. In many ways this can be read as a loss of innocence story, as the naive Bob is brought into contact with different races, violence, crime, hatred, and greed.

This is no ponderous, political novel, tho. The book is full of dry New England wit, slightly caustic but still affectionate. Banks's depiction of the character of Honduras is one of the more amusing things I have read. The story moves along nicely, veering smoothly from workaday boredom to moments of romance and lust to events filled with horror and pain, all of it building rhythmically in a downward spiral. Yet none of it comes across as depressing, for the reader is caught up in suspense, superb prose, fascinating descriptions, and finely-milled humor. Reading a book like this reminds me of why I got involved in literature in the first place. It reminds me of all the good things that literature can do, the ways in which it can reveal our lives and worlds thru fictional creations; the way in which the judicious use of 26 symbols on a page can make us think, feel, laugh, dream, and cry, and to feel as if we are improving ourselves by doing so.
