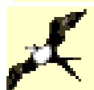 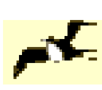 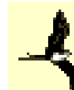

# Heart Beats on the Left: Radical Strategies for the Novel

First in a Series of Articles

**The People From Heaven**
*by John Sanford*
Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996 (originally published 1943)
Paper, 272 pp., $14.95

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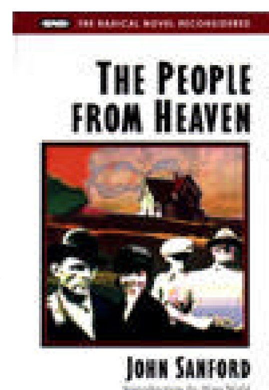
## Eric Darton




***Cover Illustration by Jack Davis***

What is radical about the radical novel? This was a question I had nibbled around the edges of at various times and over many years without recognizing it in so many words. But it crystallized early on in my first reading of John Sanford's *The People From Heaven* , when I recognized the presence of a narrative strategy pushing beyond all expected boundaries and bent on nothing less than a full-scale undermining of narrative convention itself. What the formal bravura of *People* communicated to me was that radicalism operates most powerfully in literature when political content arises out of, and exists coextensively with the author's language strategy as a whole. For the reader, such conditions can be both liberating and terrifying, since they serve to implicate us more deeply in the construction of the narrative — thus embedding us more firmly in history — then we are generally used to or comfortable with.

If in literature, radical politics are inextricably bound up with radical language, then what strategies have writers with political energies as disparate as Kate Chopin, Zora Neal Hurston, Richard Wright, Elio Vittorini, James Baldwin, Reinaldo Arenas, Eduardo Galeano, Andre Brink, Toni Cade Bambara, Carolyn Forché and Bruce Benderson brought to bear — either consciously or not — in their idiosyncratic, subversive interweavings of language and literary form? Might it prove worthwhile to examine particular works, including Sanford's *People* ..., Tillie Olsen's *Yonnondio* , Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* , and Chester Himes's *Tomorrow Will Make You Cry* as literary assaults on political systems of power relations — and in the same moment challenges to an idealized order of narrative?

Well sure, why not?

Mention the name John Sanford — née Julian Shapiro — and most readers, even readers of considerable depth and breadth, will draw a blank. Yet since the early thirties, Sanford's literary output has been prodigious, encompassing nearly a score of books: novels and short fiction, American history and the epic multi-volume autobiography *Scenes from the Life of an American Jew* . In 1943 he published an authentically great novel, *The People From Heaven* . Though warmly praised by influential contemporaries, among them Carl Sandburg, William Carlos Williams and Orson Welles, *People* sank like a stone. America — the U.S. at any rate — remained locked in the embrace of a Really Big War, and though race riots erupted in several northern cities that year, it was hardly the most propitious moment for readers to plumb the Stygian heart of the fictional Adirondack hamlet of Warrensburg — population 41.

If *People* initially met with popular indifference, its wildcat militancy succeeded in evoking an actively hostile response from Sanford's ostensible comrades in the Los Angeles Communist Party. Hewing to the then-prevailing Popular Front line, the committee that read his draft denounced the work as "ultra-Left" and "ultra-Black Nationalist." They were right. *People* was and is uncompromisingly both. But far from being "antisocial" — as one Party cultural leader branded it — the convulsions of Sanford's Warrensburg affirm the uncomfortable truth that no just and dignified social existence can rest on a foundation of historical denial. And though cultural currents have shifted to the point where it is nearly impossible to empathize with the ideological urgencies of the 1940s, *People* remains revolutionary in form — so risky an adventure in language that it would doubtless be too "difficult" for a commercial editor to publish today, though the arguments against would have shifted from content *per se* to the explosive, hyper-literary poetics of its narrative momentum.

But published *People* was, only to vanish for five decades into the capacious Bermuda Triangle of American letters, until 1995 when it resurfaced as the flagship of The Radical Novel Reconsidered, a series edited for the University of Illinois Press by Alan Wald. Fortunately, *People* and Sanford himself — now 96 and living in Santa Barbara — have survived the intervening years in robust working order.

*The People From Heaven* is all about hate and love. The former flows freely. The latter, as they say, comes in spurts. Sanford's opening follows an almost algorithmically uncompromising plotline wherein the actions and temporality play out within well-circumscribed boundaries. The place is Warrensburg and the time is "today" — circa 1943. But

we don't have long to wait before the linear trajectory gets jolted out of whack by a leap backward to the epoch-making *encuentro* of 1492 rendered in the appropriated voice of the Genoese navigator himself. The next time-lapse myth fragment to disrupt the flow of the Warrensburg narrative jumps back — or is it forward? — to 1607 and repeats, mantra-like, the colonist John Smith's trope "...Bid Pokahontas bring two little Baskets, and I wil give her beads to make her a chaine." The final link in this "chaine" is delivered in the voice of a black former slave about to risk life and freedom by spying for the Union behind rebel lines in 1863. Here, in protean form, is the strategy of Galeano's *Memories of Fire* forty years *avant la lettre* .

In his meticulous treatment of Warrenburg's racial and sexual pathogens — roiled up by the sudden appearance of a defiant young black woman — Sanford is just as unremitting as Wright in *Native Son* . He won't throw a sop to the white folks who don't mind a massacre as long as the survivors join hands in a circle at the end and make a joyful noise. In a town under the thrall of a bigot as terrifyingly virile as Eli Bishop, any sort of ameliorative, well-intended gesture remains utterly ineffectual. In any lesser narrative the decent, humanistic Doc Slocum would embody the moral center — or at very least head up the joint stock company of readers invested in Bishop's overthrow. But no sir, no m'am. When push comes to shove, Warrensburg's preacher, Dan Hunter — another sympathetically drawn character — proves just as paralyzed as Slocum. In the denouement, it is left for the sojourner the town has come to call America Smith--since she refuses to divulge her name — to pick up the gun in her own self-defense. There is nothing cathartic or redemptive in the bloodletting. For Sanford, it is a given that racism is not a historical burr to be smoothed away by rubbing gently with the oil of good will. It is the root, trunk, branch and flower of the nation.

Making a page-turner out of the failure of liberal paternalism is no mean feat of fiction. But by the time *People* runs its course, Sanford has disarticulated sentiment from political awareness, and the contradictions just howl.

Sounds brutal, yes? But the language of *People* is so seductive that one reads with equal measures of gut disturbance and heady exhilaration. This disconnect between belly and brain works to such effect precisely because Sanford unerringly uses the "wrong" voice for what his content means to say. Columbus and the other ghost-voices of America past are funked up with a carnival mix of dialects, and rendered in verse no less, while the "real-time" contemporary plotline is peppered with extreme, vivacious lyricism. But now it is time to sample the pudding for proof. Here is what happens at the top as the whole town of Warrensburg gathers for Sunday morning service the day before it "discovers" America Smith:

> Turning to the pulpit, Hunter's eyes took with them a last panoramic swivel of images: a long shed filled with wagons and muddied motor cars; the night-washed lawn of the parsonage; a wedge of cemetery between the two buildings; and the damp spikes of the cemetery fence, each burning like a black candle kindled by the sun....All faces were aimed at the pulpit, but as if the intervening bone and the pink flesh and the balanced bowls of paper fruit did not exist, Slocum saw them from behind, scooped out and in reverse, each the concave of a dangling mask.

While Hunter preaches, Slocum, in capsule dialogues that read like living epitaphs, indexes each of Warrensburg's 41 citizens. Here is a sampling:

ELI BISHOP
b. 1907-

> I said, "Eli, how is it you never get sick?"
> "I'm like a bear-steak," he said. "The more you chew me, the bigger I get."
>
> "I haven't made a quarter off you since the day you were born."
>
> "You won't make nothing the day I die. I'll go out fighting and faunching."
>
> "And fornicating."
>
> "If I'm lucky--fornicating."
>
> "Luck, hell! You're as randy a cock as ever rode a pullet."
>
> He ran four fingers of each hand up the underside of my lapels. "Always figured they'd have to bury me face-down, Doc," he said....

LELAND POLK
b. 1894-

I said, "I thought I told you to wear that truss."

He said, "I give it to my dog."

"If you keep on with that heavy lifting, your guts are going to fall in your lap."

"Hell, Doc," he said, "I got this hernia from raising prices, and don't ever think I didn't."

DOLLY PIPER
b. 1902-

"I said, "How do you feel, Dolly?"

"Fine, Doc," she said, "Why?"

"You want to stay that way?"

"Sure I do."

"Then go up to Riparius and board with your sister for a couple of weeks."

"Has he got it again, Doc?"

"Make it a month. Just to be on the safe side."

SLOCUM QUINN
b. 1931-

"I think I have a pretty name," she said.

JOHN LITTLEJOHN
b. 1841-

"Daddy, I said, "you're the cutest old man in the State of New York."

"Wipe your nose and run along, bub," he said, "or I'll tell you what I had for breakfast one day at a place called Antietam."

"I'm crazy about you, Daddy, so you can tell me all over again."

"You really like me boy?"

"Yes, Daddy, I do."

"Then make me live to be a hundred years old!" he said. "I ain't afraid to die — I get nearer to that every day I live — but when I was a kid I asked my Ma how old people grow to be, and she said a hundred, and every year I use to figure how far I had to run, and I sort of kept on doing that all my life, and I was an old man before I realized that numbers that started out big as fish was getting to be small as fry--seven more to go, six, five, four, three....I'm so near a hundred now, Doc! I'm so near it'd be a shame if that little fool dream didn't come true. Keep me going, Doc — promise you'll keep me going!"

"Daddy, I said, "you'll see a hundred if I have to go up in person and talk God into it!"

I've quoted at length here, because Slocum's catalog of memories serves as a critical mapping of the social and

narrative terrain. Taken together, these "headstones" function as a glossary to which the reader returns repeatedly for interpretive leverage as the action unfolds. This is a very physical, concrete process, one of literally leafing back to re-endow what we already know with additional layers of meaning before moving forward again. As a strategy, it implicates the reader very fully indeed in the process of making history from fiction.

And then America washes up on the shores of Warrensburg USA:

> When the door was opened, the wind came in and with the wind the cold spring rain. The smoke in the air, disturbed, was baled like hay, and from wall to wall the shadow of a hanging lamp seesawed in syncopation. And then the door was closed and the wet wind shut out, and as the smoke expanded, slowly the lamp ran down and hung still. Drops of water descended from the woman's coat, clung for an instant to the fibres of the hem, glistening, and fell to the floor.
>
> "You want anything, nigger?" Behind one of the counters, Leland Polk was jacked up on his elbows between two tin-can pyramids.
>
> "Is this your store?" the woman said.
>
> "The name is Polk."
>
> "I just walked up from Lake George," the woman said.
>
> Near Polk's head, a spiral of fly-paper drilled the smoke-marbled air.
>
> "It's raining," the woman said.
>
> "The name is Polk, nigger."
>
> "Do you mind if I dry off a little."
>
> "The name is Polk!"
>
> "I only want to sit by the stove," the woman said.
>
> "Mister Polk!"
>
> In the pause, a clock went into the convulsion of labor; a litter of eight strokes was born.
>
> "You can keep right on walking," Polk said.
>
> "Let her stay, Leland," Bishop said. The words were spoken from the mezzanine of darkness outside the light-cone.Crossed at the ankles, a pair of disembodied legs swung gently below the counter opposite Polk."Let her stay."

It takes a full page before:

> The clock clenched for an after-birth of a single stroke.

A hideous prank of Bishop's sets the woman off on a wild goose chase that culminates with her collapse from exhaustion upon reaching the parsonage.Dan Hunter sends for Slocum and the chapter ends. But in the succeeding pages, we find that there is as yet no Warrensburg. We have to "discover" it first.

> THURSDAY, 6TH OF SEPTEMBER [1492]
>
> The ebb drained us out of the Gomera roads
> as if a bung had been started in the ocean,
> and between us and gold lay an arc of water,
> but the wind was a sigh from a tired old man,
> and all day we heard laughter on the beach.
> Damn God for pooping out when we needed Him!
> What's He think we're doing here — fishing?

When next we make landfall, our *terra incognita* becomes Warrensburg again. Thus the cycles of Sanford's entwined, yet incommensurable narratives lurch on in tandem until the hamlet's restless natives play out the only game their history has fitted them for. At book's end, a gunshot annihilates Warrensburg's manifest Hitler, but the Hitlers embedded in Warrensburg's soul live on. And here the implications of Sanford's opening epigraph spring into high relief, distilling in historically authentic language the brutal yet lyrical prospect he sees for his and our America:

> And the others went running from house to house

and to the neighboring villages, with loud cries of
"Come! come to see the people from Heaven!
— Christopher Columbus to Luis Santangel

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In the next issue of *Frigate* , Eric Darton will write on Tillie Olsen's *Yonnondio* . Subsequent issues will contain essays by Darton on Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* , Chester Himes's *Yesterday Will Make You Cry* , and Elio Vittorini's *Conversations in Sicily* .

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ALSO DRAWN ON IN THIS ESSAY

Eduardo Galeano, *Memories of Fire* . New York: W.W. Norton, 1998 (three volumes).

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