

Widening the Road

Fred Bonnie

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In the foreword of this book, Bonnie poses a question: What veteran writer wouldn't jump at the chance to issue a new-and-improved version of his early works? For him, the answer came easily when the editorial director of Livingston Press proposed reprinting Bonnie's first two collections of short stories, *Squatter's Rights* (1979) and *Displaced Persons* (1983). "I have come to distrust anything I wrote more than five days ago, let alone 20 years," the author explains. So instead of simply giving the books another whirl, he selected fifteen pieces from them and reworked each—"radically so in one or two cases." *Widening the Road*, then, serves to introduce first-time readers to Bonnie while enabling those familiar with his writings to judge how his craft has matured over two decades.

A caveat for newcomers, however: If one's taste in fiction runs toward tales of the rich and famous, the well educated and culturally refined, don't bother with Bonnie. This native New Englander and adopted Southerner is strictly blue-collar, and no doubt proud of it. These are stories of farmers and laborers, old folks and kids, confronting problems every bit as unspectacular as the lives of the characters themselves.

What characters! Bonnie's great strength is his creation of these funny, endearingly stubborn mediocrities. There's Lloyd, the elderly recluse of *Squatter's Rights*, whose sheer doggedness foils his son-in-law's plan to sell Lloyd's car. A hilarious test of wills between Thelma and Blanche, lifelong friends and rivals, forms the plot of "Piano Skirmish," which, if ever brought to the screen, might well be dubbed "Grumpy Old Women." In the title story, a chicken farmer stands alone against townspeople who want to widen the road that runs past his house: ordinary folks, everyday challenges, yet eminently believable. The reader is drawn to these fictional individuals, sympathizes with them, and recognizes in their foibles and quirks a real-life relative or friend—or perhaps oneself.

Bonnie also excels at plot development. His tales seldom exceed a dozen pages, yet can absorb the reader as thoroughly as a novel. It takes but a few paragraphs to drop hints of an illicit relationship between shipping clerk Mack and the wife of his clueless subordinate, Maynard, in "All You Can Eat Night," the tension growing with each page—Are they or aren't they?—until the suspense is broken and the story rapidly concludes with a final touch of ambiguity as the question of how the scorned husband will respond goes unanswered.

Finely crafted dialogue and rich, colorful descriptiveness further enhances the luster of these literary gems. Do they shine brighter than the originals? Let the reader judge. (July

JOHN FLESHER (July / August 2000)

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