

Go Somewhere, Anywhere, Everywhere!

— AN ESSAY BY —

BROCK CLARKE

Novels come from other novels. Writers and readers might think they come from other things—life, for instance—and of course that’s also true (one couldn’t entirely keep one’s life out of a novel even if one wanted to, and there are plenty of reasons why one might want to), but life cannot teach you how to write a novel, and life cannot remind you why you wanted to write a novel in the first place. You want to write a novel because you want to feel, and want your readers to feel, the way you felt when you first read the novels you’ve loved. Which is why so many novels fail, and get abandoned: because they can’t come close to living up to the standards of the novels that made you want to write a novel in the first place.

Who Are You, Calvin Bledsoe? came from two other novels. The first was one of mine. At one point it was called *The Missing Father*; at another point, *The Radical*. It was narrated by a man very much like myself (middle-class, middle-aged, white) who lived in the same city as I do (Portland, Maine), and had many of the same thoughts and feelings as I do, and had a job and a family unit that were pretty much identical to my own. I was not dumb to this. It was intentional. I wanted to write a novel about How We Live Now. But really it was a novel about How I Live Now. And as anyone who has written a novel about How I Live Now knows, you eventually grow to hate the novel, and you also grow to hate how you live now.

I worked on this book for two years, and then I abandoned it. This did not make me sad; it did not fill me with despair. The novel was slick, and easy, and I was glad to finally give up on it. But once I’d given up on it, I didn’t know what to do with myself. And so I decided to reread one of my favorite

books—Graham Greene’s *Travels with My Aunt*—which is the other novel that helped give birth to *Who Are You, Calvin Bledsoe?*

Travels with My Aunt is many things. It is a love story, an unconventional love story about the love between a middle-aged man and his elderly aunt. It’s also a breakup story, a story about how the middle-aged man is coerced by the aunt into leaving a drab, moderately comfortable, enervatingly dull life in post–World War II England. And finally, it is a travel novel, a story about the places the aunt takes her nephew to make him realize how terrible the Way He Lives Now really is, and how he should go somewhere, anywhere, everywhere, to see if life there might be better, even if, in being better, it also might be considerably more dangerous.

I love *Travels with My Aunt* for its gentle but pointed sense of humor, for the antagonism and affection between its protagonists, for its sense of adventure, for the way it depicts the struggle—internal and otherwise—between staying and leaving, for the way it makes its large points in small moments. But as I read it in the wake of my failed novel, it reminded me what I had not done in that failed novel, and why it had failed: in it, I had stayed put. And I didn’t want to stay put anymore: I wanted to go somewhere, anywhere, everywhere. It won’t surprise you to hear that this was around the time when Donald Trump became our president, and as you’ll see, he occasionally creeps (that perfect verb!) into *Who Are You, Calvin Bledsoe?* the way he’s crept into everything else. Yes, Trump made me want to go somewhere else, in my life; and Greene’s novel made me want to go somewhere else, in my novel.

Which didn’t exist yet, of course. But then two fortunate things happened to me, which helped set *Who Are You, Calvin Bledsoe?* into motion. First, I overheard a man in an airport rhapsodize loudly, and at length, about his pellet stove. Second, I kept hearing the writer Marilynne Robinson rhapsodize loudly, and at length, about the Protestant theologian John Calvin. And I thought, God, I’d love to put these two people in a room together, or if not in a room, at least in a book. And so, using Greene’s book as a model, I did that: I made my narrator a blogger for the pellet stove industry, and his minister mother the author of a world-famous book about John Calvin. And then at the narrator’s mother’s funeral, I introduced to the book, and to the narrator, his aunt, who ends up being a criminal mastermind and who

leads my narrator on a series of international misadventures. Already, then, I'd gone somewhere else—I know nothing about pellet stoves, or blogging, or John Calvin, or criminal masterminds, or international misadventures—and oddly enough only then, by not staying put, did I end up doing what I'd set out to do in my first, failed novel. I ended up writing a novel about *How We Live Now*: about how awash we Americans are in religion, in technology, in nationalism, in violence and fear—fear of others and fear of ourselves. A novel in which characters try to escape, but also one in which characters are followed and haunted by those people, places, and things they want to leave behind. A novel that is, at its heart, a love story—a love story between the narrator and his aunt, who he very much wishes were his mother—but also a love story in which love is dependent on getting as far away as possible from the things one hates. My question in the novel—and I suppose in life, too—is: *can* we get far enough away from the things we hate, and do we deserve the opportunity for that kind of escape in the first place? I have my doubts. But I also have my hopes. *Who Are You, Calvin Bledsoe?* is my most hopeful novel, just as *Travels with My Aunt* was Greene's. I hope you feel about my book the way I feel about his.