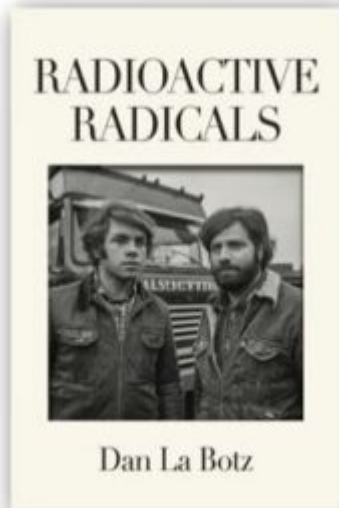


The Veracity of Fiction

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Dan La Botz, *Radioactive Radicals*, BookLocker, 2024

... people nowadays prefer to judge rather than to understand, to answer rather than to ask, so that the voice of the novel can hardly be heard over the foolishness of human certainties. – Milan Kundera

With *Radioactive Radicals*, Dan La Botz has written a bold and unique novel that is ultimately a novel of questions and uncertainties. It is a novel that defies conventional literary genres: neither a *roman à clef*, an historical or political novel, or an autobiographical novel. It is at once a novel that takes the reader through the turbulent decades from the 1960's through the early 2020's, and a novel of a generation, of friendship, of buddies, of organizational history and of labor history. And while it can be read as encompassing all these genres, it is not merely *any* of them. It will be compared to novels like Harvey Swados' *Standing Fast*, or Simone de Beauvoir's, *The Mandarins*, but is unlike either. It is a novel of questions that need to be asked, not answers. The book is about consciousness and how it changes over time, and it is about the pain of transformation from certainty to uncertainty.

Radioactive Radicals is a novel of vision. We are given a clue with the narrator-protagonist's name, Dirk Leeuwenhoek-Leeuwenhoek being the 17th century inventor of the microscope. La Botz, with the insight of his narrator, looks through the lens of his literary microscope at what lies beneath the surface of particular histories, of the 60's radicalism, of the 70's and 80's labor union struggles (Teamsters), and of a Marxist, anti-Stalinist but not quite Trotskyist, organization devoted to the slogan, "no democracy without socialism and no socialism without democracy," and "socialism from below", the Independent Socialists (1) and of friendships and intimate relationships along the way. Through Dirk's own senses, over the course of 50 years, he probes some uncomfortable truths about the meaning of radical history. He casts a unique and provocative light on this history, a history in which many readers will have participated. He does this with the additional use of interesting literary techniques and a touch of magical realism.

The book is first about a generation, that of the “Baby Boomers”, born between 1942 and 1952, beneath the mushroom cloud of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Dirk Leeuwenhoek and his friend Wes Kinsman are born under the shadow of that cloud, Wes on August 6, 1945, and Dirk on August 9, 1945. They, and the generation of which they are a part, are infused with the pervasive radioactive soot from the bombs, with radiocaesium, formed by the nuclear fission of Uranium 235 and Plutonium 239. Radiocaesium, or cesium 137, is a real product, and has well documented effects on soil, plant life, and human bodies, including an association with pancreatic cancer. However, in my own reading of the novel, La Botz uses radiocaesium as magical realism, a metaphor which draws all aspects of the novel together and over time. Dirk’s radiocaesium leads to a fantastical aura affecting all of us born under the nuclear cloud and causes a special glow, an altruism, a desire for justice and importantly, a pheromonic romanticism with strong erotic impulses. Affected by this radioactive aura, Dirk tells us “...mere glances and the slightest touches produced orgasms and sometimes preposterous pledges of love forever...I came to believe that there was the right person out there, somewhere, the other half of the dyad. One searched for that person, found that person, fell in love and married, and then was happy ever after.” Both Dirk and Wes live through decades of radiocaesium induced romantic relationships and marriages which fail.

Friendship and kindred souls

Wes and Dirk are richly drawn characters, drawn so well, with glimpses into their psyches, that we feel we really *know* them—which is not to say they don’t surprise us. They are born only days apart and become comrades who love each other and share confidences about their insecurities, their love relationships, and their politics. Yet Wes and Dirk are very different. Wes comes from the fields of Iowa, and Dirk from the urban life of Chicago. Wes is the passionate, down to earth, folksy, often emotional one (he cries easily) who is instinctively able to connect with people. His commitment to working class organizing is unimpeachable. He also has some significant medical and mental problems. Dirk is both a poet and an intellectual, with a keen mind that observes and analyzes. He writes poetry, articles and books for and about union organizing. Both Wes and Dirk are politicized in the 60’s and initially subscribe to the I.S.’s turn from students and the middle class to the American working class. They both became involved in union organizing, and in the Teamsters for Democracy movement formed within the Teamsters’ union. (2) But Dirk’s poetic vision allows him to see the human toll of a down turning economy. He sees beyond political positions and factional debates; he sees not only a class, but suffering human beings:

People weren’t buying new cars, they weren’t repairing old cars, they weren’t getting their cars washed...If you paid attention, you also noticed that working peoples’ clothes didn’t look so good, the material was worn thin, the clothes were patched and mended...On the streets in working class neighborhoods one noticed that children’s clothes, too, looked poorly...a lot of people looked grim...This was all visible to the naked eye after 1975, if the eye was open.

It is Wes, however, who internalizes his working-class involvement, in part due to his inherent humility. Even at the beginning of the “turn to the working class”, he is skeptical of the comrades who thought they were ready, after a short time on the job and in a union, to form a revolutionary party that would lead the working class to the overthrow of U.S. capitalism.

...you and your comrades, just three or four of you, have been in the mills and plants for less than six months, maybe...You have no real first-hand experience with working class

life. You have to learn the job, get to know the other workers, find out what the issues are and see who is prepared to organize and fight.

Here Wes is expressing the importance of *real* connections with workers, not just as workers, but as real people working together, similar to what Stan Weir called 'informal work groups'. (3) Wes becomes a skilled organizer because he is willing to *listen and learn*. He is constantly questioning how socialism can connect with working class life.

The evolution of consciousness

It is Dirk's voice that propels this novel, the voice of one who observes at the same time he is making his own history. What he observes over time is, essentially, the negation of what he has believed for decades. He watches the erosion of democracy from both the theory and practice of his 'heroes' and his organization.

He follows Cesar Chavez into the agricultural fields of California and watches Chavez transform from a passionate organizer of farmworkers into an authoritarian leader who does not tolerate dissent. Wanting to help and support Chavez and the farmworkers, Dirk is heartbroken when he is expelled, along with other leftists, from Chavez's group. (4) He watches Fred Getz, founder of (fictional) Teamsters for Democracy, and respected I.S. member, transform from a skilled organizer into another authoritarian leader intolerant of dissent, who relates to people only in terms of their use to him and who viciously denigrates all who dare question him. He closes debates and crushes anyone who differs with his views. When Wes questions a particular strategy, Getz replies, "You know nothing about the Teamsters' union. No one knows as much as I do."

As Dirk watches these leaders turn into their opposites, he sees changes in his organization as well. First, he begins to realize that the I.S. leadership does not have its eyes open to what is happening to the working class in terms of how workers actually live their lives. Second, he sees anti-democratic tendencies and elitism in the certainty and arrogance with which I.S. leaders address issues. This approach is personified by Lowenthal, the brilliant and articulate strategist/theorist, always seeing the next *crisis* as the opportunity for a revolutionary party to lead the working class to make a socialist revolution. Lowenthal pushes to form a vanguard organization with militant cadres, ready to take up arms. The cadre demands a single focus on politics/union organizing above all else in its members lives. Dirk watches the leadership modeling itself after the leaders of the Russian Revolution. The character Glen Wolfe, a British leftist who becomes a significant leader in the group, pushes for this "Bolshevization", and wears clothes— leather jacket, harness boots, "modeled on the old Bolshevik Party leaders garb at the time of the Russian Revolution." Dirk perceives how the Russian Revolution and the soviets:

became the inspiration for generations of leftists...Bolshevism became a part of rules and standards that regulated a not very democratic and usually quite authoritarian centralism...a vanguard party that was seldom in the van, a revolutionary party that...could not make a revolution, so that the whole idea weighed like the dead hand of the past in the minds of young radicals. (5)

In his personal life, Dirk's politics interfere with his relationships. As yet another relationship falls apart, he realizes that "Here we were, idealists, socialists, she a feminist, and yet we failed to even be decent people." (6)

This is what Dirk witnesses: no attention to working class self-activity, no socialism from the below,

no humility, and a lot of hubris. There is no *vision* of how socialism might look and what might happen the day *after* the revolution. The leadership of the organization sees itself, with undiluted certainty, as the builder of rank-and-file groups transforming them into class struggle organizations. The working class becomes more a thing, an object to be transformed by the more elite, sophisticated and educated vanguard.

As Dirk continues to witness what is happening in the lives of working men and women during the hard times of the 70's and 80's, he realizes how out of touch this political posturing is. He finally recognizes the connection between the romantic view of love which told him there was only *one* true love, and the equally romantic political view that there is *one crisis* that will lead the working class to make a socialist revolution. Both views are unrealistic, idealistic and objectifying of either a sexual partner or the working class. These observations shake him to his core. And here Dirk breaks the Fourth Wall of the novel, speaking directly to the readers with soul searching interludes and asides, musing about what makes this book a novel and what it might be about.

Breaking The Fourth Wall

The concept of the Fourth Wall began as a theatrical technique. It described actors breaking through the invisible wall which separated the performers from the audience. In literature the Fourth Wall has been called "metafiction," or self-conscious fiction, or "metalepsis", the transgression of narrative levels. The literary technique makes the relationship between a character and the reader more intimate. La Botz the author, and Dirk Leeuwenhoek, the fictitious author, break the literary Fourth Wall and use interludes and asides to talk directly to the readers. He wants us to grapple with the question of how much we, and the novel's characters, are determined by the material conditions in which we find ourselves—the effects of radiocaesium and the Atomic Age, corporate America, and labor bureaucracy—versus how much we can listen to our own consciousness of inner questions and uncertainties to make significant changes in determining our conditions, our politics and our visions for the future. The hope is as sentient human beings, as thinking and feeling men and women, we will maintain our agency, listen to our internal and fermenting questions about politics, and in turn *change* ourselves and the conditions in which we operate. This can only happen, Dirk says, if people can clearly see and understand the conditions around them by asking questions and challenging the certainty of the vanguard strategy. In the First Interlude he says:

I want to grasp for myself what happened and then share with you the pattern into which everything fits. That is why I am writing a novel, because though truth may be stranger than fiction, fiction always has more veracity than mere facts...this is the method of fiction, where we recombine real events into new stories.

Later, in the Second Interlude he says

I had an opportunity to rethink who we were—the American people and my generation—where we had come from, what we believed and did, and what it all meant...I pondered why our leftists' movements had not been more successful.

La Botz is doing for us what Victor Serge saw as the essence of literary creation, that is "to liberate the confused forces one feels fermenting within..." (7) For me this rang true as I remember my own confused feelings and unsettling skepticism as a very young member of I.S., too intimidated by the leadership even to think of expressing those feelings. Readers will decide for themselves whether they resonate with feelings of uncertainty, and skepticism. There will be readers who may *not* have

questions and misgivings about their political history, or who feel that this book does a disservice to that history. However, I mention Victor Serge once again. In articulating the observations and confused thoughts and skepticism of Dirk and Wes, La Botz, the author, is fulfilling what Serge called the writer's "double duty." Serge wrote that

If literature wishes to accomplish its entire mission...it cannot close its eyes to the revolution's internal problems...(the revolution) therefore must be defended at one and the same time against its external and its internal enemies...the seeds of destruction it bears within itself. (8)

The Richness of the novel

An entire essay could be written about the novel's depiction of women. This is primarily a novel about men. Women are not major characters and are mostly described by their physical attributes before their intellectual and/or political thinking. But this is, in truth, how it often was on the left, and maybe still is.

The sixties and seventies were confusing times for everyone. The women's movement was happening, and here Dirk's encounter with Shulamith Firestone is fascinating. He, and many male leftists supported the women's movement and began calling themselves feminists—which they were not, as they did not grasp the depth of what the women's movement was about and as they continued the objectification of women, and rarely challenged conventional women's roles. There were exceptions, of course.

Women were caught between their desire for independence and their socialization as women in a patriarchal society. They were reflecting on their relationships with men, in bed, at work and in politics. While one might remain critical of this reality, La Botz, through Dirk and Wes, does give us some unique insights into what men were actually feeling during those times. Men, too, operated in a patriarchal and macho culture, but like the novel's characters, hidden in their psychic caves they felt vulnerable, and their egos depended not only on male approval, but also on female desire for them. They idealized women at the same time they objectified them.

The Subjunctive Mood

La Botz, through his narrator, again subverts the traditional role of author in commenting on how the tone of the novel might have been different. In another "aside" Dirk muses on how his story could have been different had he written the novel in the subjunctive mood, looking at the "what ifs" and the "maybes". He tells us, "The subjunctive mood deals with matters of uncertainty and doubt, questions of fear and judgment, issues of necessity and obligation, opposition and possibility." Would the left, and his own organization, have been more successful had it acknowledged uncertainty, curiosity and questions about strategy, rather than putting forth strategies with absolute certainty. Would uncertainty have allowed I.S. members and union organizers more creative space to develop real human, rather than instrumental, connections with other organization members and with members of the working class. La Botz, through the subjective lens of his narrator Dirk, is asking whether socialism could benefit from a little less hubris and a little more humility.

Radioactive Radicals raises questions that are so important today, given the current state of chaos, hysteria and fear that define the world we live in. Trying to replicate the methods of the Russian Revolution seems not to have helped us work through the political miasma surrounding us. Can our mistakes help a new generation of idealistic young leftists as they confront a world of increasing

authoritarianism, the threat of a Trump presidency, and the existential effects of environmental climate change? Can we help them recognize that reality is constantly changing, and political responses and political leadership must also change accordingly? Can we help young radicals express their concerns, their questions and their uncertainties. Can our mistakes help them gain the strength to break free of old strategies, so they are free to create a new vision of how to transform themselves and the world? Can we help them treat each other with respect and realize that how we behave *now* has implications for the kind of socialism we want?

There is so much more to this novel that could be discussed. I imagine and hope that readers will be discussing and arguing about it for some time.

Notes

1. Independent Socialists in the book, but surely International Socialists, I.S.
2. Many of La Botz's lengthy and detailed descriptions of the union movement, the labor bureaucracy and the influence of the Mafia, bring to mind the long and detailed descriptions of the whaling industry in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. Both authors aim to immerse their readers in the meaning and importance of their subjects, giving more immediacy and context for the other parts of the narrative and the struggles of the characters
3. Weir, Stan, personal letter 3/19/73, and "Working Class Cultures" in *SingleJack Solidarity*, U of Minnesota Press, 2004.
4. It is interesting to contrast La Botz's novelistic depiction of Chavez with Frank Bardacke's historical account—they deal with the same subject and with the same perspective but in radically different ways. See, Bardacke, Frank, *Trampling Out the Vintage: Cesar Chavez and the Two Souls of the United Farm Workers*, Verso Press, 2012.
5. Almost mirroring Marx's statement, "The traditions of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living." "The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte", in *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, Selected Works*, Vol 1, (Foreign Lang Publishing House, Moscow 1962, p 247)
6. Weir, Stan, "Anytime the organization demands loyalty without taking into account the need to maintain other, more primary loyalties, it is setting up a form of suicide." Personal letter 3/22/1972.
7. Serge, Victor, *Notebooks*, NYRB, 2012, p. 398. Most readers will know Victor Serge as a revolutionary oppositionist writer during and after the Russian Revolution.
8. Serge, Victor, *Notebooks*, 124.