

## Spin and Bullshit

*Conversations with William T. Vollmann*, ed. Daniel Lukes (228pp, University press of Mississippi)

I first became aware of William T. Vollmann's work several decades ago, when I received a review copy of the paperback edition of his debut novel *You Bright and Risen Angels*. It was unreadable despite favourable (and far-fetched) comparisons to Thomas Pynchon, but later non-fiction books proved to be intriguing and I regularly use excerpts with my first year students to discuss how the authorial self might be present in a book, the ethics of research and writing, and also on my Creative Non-Fiction option.

The line between Vollmann's fiction and non-fiction is blurred. He researches using immersive techniques, travelling and talking with people, listening and taking notes, then writes voluminous, unfocussed books that encompass his themes in magnificent, obsessive, offbeat prose that juxtaposes, changes tack and is open to all points of view. He lets murderers, prostitutes, terrorists, junkies and the homeless speak for themselves. He is an original, uneasy presence in the book world, managing to persuade editors and publishers that his over-stuffed volumes are worth the cost of producing for their small yet engaged readership.

Part of Vollmann's appeal has been the way he self-mythologises himself. He is reputed to sleep with the prostitutes he writes about, take drugs with junkies, and he certainly lived a hobo life for a while when researching train-jumping. And his trips to Afghanistan, Bosnia and the Arctic are well-documented, with his two travelling companions being killed in the car they were travelling in during that Bosnian trip. He likes guns, lives and works in downtown Sacramento, avoids the internet and mobile phones and isn't scared to speak about anything.

But this book might be the undoing of him. The self-mythologising quickly becomes repetitive and dull here: halfway through the book I was screaming at him to *not* repeat several stories, particularly the story about his sister drowning whilst in his care, and several others too. Of course the person I should have been screaming at is the editor, who has allowed these repetitive interviews to be gathered up, including – it has to be said – a few real duds. Of course newspaper and magazine interviews are, as it were, site-specific, but it is clear that Vollmann has a stock of stories he tells every time (or did), and it doesn't add to his authorial allure.

Thankfully, on page 86 Dennis Cooper arrives with one of the standout interviews in this collection, and from then on the interviews get better, with a widening number of themes (and of course publications) to discuss. Interviewers start to talk about the books instead of the author, about research, style, content and format, as well as all the bullshit Vollmann has previously been defined by. But it remains Vollmann who, in the end, is his own undoing. He simply can't stop making pronouncements that confuse the exploitation of women with free trade, feminism and sexism with being

'nice' (i.e. condescending) to women, doesn't seem to understand gender politics (especially in relation to cross-dressing), and ultimately seems politically naive; he also refuses to make the connection between the right to bear arms and the number of shootings that occur in the USA.

This book has actually put me off reading Vollman. Because his books are so much about the author as well as their subject one can't separate them in the normal way. And whilst it's intriguing to note that Vollmann aspires to beautiful sentences his real problem as a writer seems to be that he simply cannot edit and shape his work into coherent books. By offering everyone and anyone a voice and refusing to offer moral or ethical, indeed authorial, judgement Vollmann actually ends up as a collater of information: far too much information, information that cries out to be worked with and on, summarised, shaped and *used*. Vollmann of course, says he doesn't care what anyone else thinks. So far he has pretty much managed to publish what he wants in the form he has written it in. So what do I know? Well, I do know that this collection of interviews does Vollman and Lukes no favours; they and the majority of interviewers here remain complicit in authorial spin and bullshit.

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