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quence has been a major downward trend in terms of material, social, and human progress. At best, stagnation has set in society. At worst, backwardness, barbarism, and savagery have overpowered society itself. □

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Books

The Chaneyville Incident

By David Bradley
Harper & Row, New York
432 pp., \$12.95

Reviewed by Gregory S. Kearse

Any Black writer who reminds me of a younger James Baldwin deserves attention. What I find compelling about David Bradley, the author of *The Chaneyville Incident*, (and, therefore Baldwin) is that the characters in his book are sufficiently interesting to draw you into their world, insist upon their own logic and on their own terms, and whether you agree with them or not, make you understand and accept their history, respond to their story.

In chess games, at the grandmaster level, there is a certain beauty and logic created, the power of which allows the pieces to play the game *sans* master. Bradley's characters must have had impish delight in surprising their astute creator in their actions and attitudes; in their whims and rebellions; in their screams and laughter. For it is not until the penultimate page that the reader actually gets to know that there is ironic distance between author and protagonist. Hence, they are real characters—people—because they have history . . . a past, a present and a future.

I am now sorry that I did not read Bradley's first novel, *South Street*, which he wrote while an undergraduate at the University of Pennsylvania. Yes, he was

bright and articulate. And yes, he was out of synch with the rest of the Black student population. While the other students (in 1968) deluded themselves (if that were possible in 1968 in Pennsylvania) into believing that they had "Black Power," Bradley recognized the myths and lies we told ourselves as newly "liberated" souls.

As it turns out, Bradley was closer to the light. He had visited a bar on South Street in Philadelphia and had talked with the local people there. He had witnessed the poverty and the powerlessness, and they had confirmed his own perspectives of the true Black condition. "It was a liberating experience for me. I'd tell them what the college people thought and they'd say 'Bunk, here's the way it is.' I fell in love with those people and with the street." And *South Street*, the novel, was born.

Despite some rather minor flaws, *The Chaneyville Incident* is a novel of power, history and passion. It is a charming and witty second effort, and Bradley has nothing to apologize for. His writing ability and style are marvelous. Witness this lyrical gem: "Sometimes you can hear the wire, hear it reaching out across the miles; whining with its own weight, crying from the cold, panting at the distance, humming with the phantom sounds of someone else's conversation. You cannot always hear it—only sometimes; when the night is deep and the room is dark and the sound of the phone's ringing has come slicing through the uneasy sleep."

That is the way the book opens, and it is difficult to ignore its power and magnetism.

David Bradley, I am happy to say, will be difficult to ignore, much in the same marvelous way that we could not ignore James Alan McPherson's debut with *Hue and Cry* (and subsequently the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Elbow Room*).

The Chaneyville Incident is an actual historical event, paradoxically obscured

by history. The event involved the escape and recapture of 13 slaves during the heyday of the Underground Railroad. Rather than be returned to their plantations and owners, the 13 slaves, so the legend goes, preferred to be killed. They were shot and placed in 13 unmarked graves. It is this paradox of history as fact that is one of the central themes of the novel.

Bradley has managed well a somewhat complex plot surrounding the legend of the 13 runaway slaves. The narrator, John Washington, is a young, Black college history professor who is summoned by a disreputable but colorful old raconteur named Jack Crawley. Jack is dying, and like many derelicts in urban areas, knows a lot more than his disposition and station suggest. Old Jack, as he is called, was the best friend of the narrator's father (Moses Washington) and can somehow unravel his mysterious death.

But the solution to Moses Washington's demise depends upon the solution of the far older *Chaneyville Incident*. And this is where Bradley is at his best and at his worst in the denouement. In places, the plotting is somewhat contrived to carry the reader along: a hunt, the exposure of a crooked lawyer and the ridiculous death of John Washington's brother.

The flaw is a trivial matter, however. Even the occasional self-conscious intrusions of the author ("Judith said something highly unprintable") are forgivable, for Bradley judiciously uses several rhetorical devices which neatly circumvent several difficult novelistic traps. The shortcomings are eclipsed by the novel's other great strengths.

And one of the great strengths of the novel is the dialogue. When Old Jack is telling his stories, the speech is in an intriguing dialect: "Mose wasn't 'xactly human when it come to coverin' ground in a hurry . . . that night was like the Goddamn trottin' races at the county fair. . . . I won't say the trees went flyin' 1

30 by, but there sure wasn't time for carvin' your name into the bark."

Bradley's eye for detail, in both his narrative and dialogue sequences, reminds one of Chaucer.

At first, John Washington, the narrator, is almost clinically devoted to facts and pure history. It might be telling, for example, that Judith, his lover, is a white woman psychiatrist. It is before Judith that John Washington assumes the role of storyteller. At first, as she observes, he tends to talk in little lectures. They even incorporate verbal footnotes.

Yet, as the story progresses, John Washington's manner in telling the stories changes. And the central theme emerges again. It is this view that David Bradley is asking us to consider as history; that is to suggest history is not necessarily determined by facts. What really happened, as Old Jack demonstrates, can only be learned by *creating from those facts a story that satisfies them all*.

Ultimately, then, John Washington no longer relies on history, but the narrative imagination to learn what really happened to his father and in Chaneyville.

Certainly, this is not a new point of view. As Alex Haley demonstrated and popularized with the "griots" in *Roots*, it is understandably difficult for the educated Western man to appreciate, much less accept history as told by the "griot" rather than the trained historian. This novel, though, is a refreshing reminder of what is known but forgotten about history.

David Bradley has teased us a little. I can't speak for his first novel, but certainly *The Chaneyville Incident* challenges our curiosity about the ways in which we not only view history but ourselves. I suspect that his next work will go even further. Perhaps it will challenge us in the way that Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* did.

Any thirty-one year old writer who can write like Bradley does is destined for literary stardom. □

The reviewer is an editor with the Howard University Press.