

On Poe Ballantine  
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Two days ago, I was browsing Amazon looking for a film to watch. I came upon a new (2015) documentary with an over-the-top title that grabbed my attention, “Love and Terror on the Howling Plains of Nowhere.” The blurb intrigued me: “In an isolated, high-plains town, a brilliant math professor vanishes. Three months later his body is found tied to a tree and burned beyond recognition. Author Poe Ballantine searches for clues while reflecting on his life of wanderlust.” I’d never heard of this documentary or Poe Ballantine, but it came free with my Amazon Prime, so I figured why not give it a try, nothing to lose.

It turned out I had a great deal to gain from this film. I found it well made and very engaging and thought provoking. There was the story about the mysterious death of the math professor (I won’t reveal how it turned out), which was interesting as who-done-its are, but what most caught me up was Poe Ballantine himself and what was going on with him and his young Mexican wife and their nine year old son, as well as all the local characters in the little town of Chadron, Nebraska I met as talking heads sharing their opinions on the professor’s death. The film has a soap opera quality, but soap operas can be very good indeed, and I concluded that this documentary was very good indeed, even though this documentary obviously hasn’t gone over all that big, being free on Amazon, and Netflix doesn’t have it at all.

A couple of things hit me especially over the course of the almost-two-hours documentary. Contrary to the title unless it was meant ironically (“ . . . Plains of Nowhere”), no place is nowhere, if you follow those negatives. Stated better, everyplace is somewhere. Chadron, Nebraska,

population 5,600, is, yes, somewhere. It's as much somewhere as Chicago or Atlanta or the Hamptons. We've never heard of Chadron. It doesn't host the Academy Awards every year. But that doesn't make it nowhere. What you and I have heard about, or what somebody writes and talks about or shows, is not the measure of whether someplace or another is somewhere. Everyplace that exists on this planet is someplace. Chadron, Nebraska is someplace. Important things are happening there, they really are.

And going on from that, nobody is nobody. Everybody is somebody. It turns out that Poe Ballantine (a pen name; his real name is Ed Hughes) isn't winning National Book Awards or reeling in the cash from his writings, and he makes his actual living cleaning the floors of a Safeway before the doors open for business in the morning. But he's still somebody. Those people in the documentary--the young bartender with the knit hat pulled down to eye level with the expletive-spiced observations, and the recently fired criminology professor nobody likes and Poe thinks is putting moves on his wife, and the heavily made up stay-at-home mom on the anti-depressants, and all the others--they are somebodies, with drama and meaning to their lives.

The world isn't made up of somebodies--celebrities, headline makers, big shots, movers and shakers, successes by conventional standards--and nobodies. It's made up of no-exceptions somebodies, and that very much includes me, a consensus nobody if there ever was one, and it includes you, who I assume are not a Kennedy Center Honors recipient or anything close to that. Every one of us somebodies has a life that is significant and what we do with it, including what we have for dinner tonight--I'm serious--counts big time. It isn't just the Clintons and Kardashians on the one hand and the rest of us on the other.

Watching the documentary reminded me of the year I lived in Morris, Minnesota, a small town about the size of Chadron on the western edge of the state, next to South Dakota. This was way back in 1973. I had just gotten my Ph.D in education from the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, and the only job I could find was as a visiting professor of education at the Morris branch of the University of Minnesota. I saw the Morris job as temporary, a year and out; I wasn't staying in that, well, nowhere place. And, as it turned out, I didn't stay there: the next year I was hired as a professor at the University of Vermont in the cool, hip city of Burlington bordering on beautiful Lake Champlain, and I've been here ever since.

But now that I think about it, I wasn't at all as anxious to spring from Morris after the year was up as I had assumed I'd be. I wasn't as articulate about it back then as I am now, but what came through to me during my year at Morris in a total, organic, physically felt way even if I didn't have words for it was that, yes indeed, Morris, Minnesota is someplace, and yes indeed, those people I encountered in Morris, every last one of them, was somebody. Their life stories mattered as much as anyone's, and there was as much of at stake in how their stories turned out as how anybody else's story turned out, even, a big actor at the time, Marlon Brando's.

These musings have relevance to me now because I'm retiring in a few days (June 1, 2015) and for a lot of reasons I won't go into here, I intend to move from Vermont by the fall. The question is, where do I go? I'm not sure at this point, but encouraged by the documentary and the thoughts that came to me following it, I realize that it doesn't have to somewhere like Portland, Oregon, a consensus "somewhere" place. If everyplace is somewhere, if no place is a priori nowhere, then the real question becomes where is *my* place? (And for you, where is *your* place?)

Poe Ballantine/Ed Hughes, now in his fifties, makes the point in the documentary that after an adult life of roaming from place to place, little Chadron, Nebraska is his place. Burlington, Vermont, with all of its fine attributes, just isn't my place, I know it, I feel it. My job in these next months is to find my place. While I presume the documentary didn't set out to do so, it gave me direction in that search. It opened up the possibility of returning to Morris, Minnesota. I wonder if Jerry Koosman's Bar is still there (Koosman was a pitcher for the New York Mets). I just now checked Google and it was actually called The Mets Lounge back then--or so Google says, but I remember Jerry Koosman's Bar--and yes, whatever it was called back then, it is still in operation.

In the documentary, Poe Ballantine came off to me as exceedingly bright, engaging, perceptive, and candid about himself, including his failings and a good time spent wanting to end his life. His descriptions of his struggles as a writer and his fruitless attempts to find meaning in his life (until recent years anyway); his honesty and openness about his limitations, struggles, and failures both professional and personal; his frank reports of his dealings his disenchanted-with-both-America-and-him and Viagra-prompting young wife; his touching accounts of his relationship with his supposedly autistic son (is he really autistic?), and his fresh and insightful take on our lives left me wanting more contact with him.

So I purchased a Kindle from Amazon of his book that inspired the documentary, with the same title--*Love and Terror on the Howling Plains of Nowhere* (Hawthorne Books, 2013). I wasn't disappointed; I engulfed it in one sitting yesterday. The book brought to mind the last writings of Jack Kerouac that I like so much, a prime example, *Satori in Paris* (Grove Press, 1966): Ballantine, as Kerouac in his declining years did, has a predilection for honest, unpretentious, but still beautifully crafted, prose and

let-it-fly self-revelation. Kerouac, I'm guessing, sensed it was very near the end for him, and that there was no need anymore to dazzle critics or fake readers out with showy syntax and grand themes or self-puffery, or try to pile up literary prizes. It was past the time for that, or was it the realization that there never was a time for that? My hunch is that Ballantine has come to the same place in his writing.

It was, for Kerouac and, I sense, for Poe Ballantine/Ed Hughes, the time, to be naked as it were, to tell the truth about his life, no holds barred, to level about his experience of the small part of the vast world that he has encountered and what he has made of it—not *the* truth, he's not so presumptuous as to assume he is in touch with that, but rather *his* truth—and let publishers and readers do with it as they will. I can relate to that, because, not to put myself in Kerouac's and Ballantine's league, it is that time of life for me. What have I got to lose at this point in my life? What can they do to me now?

Virtually every page of the *Love and Terror* . . . book brought a chuckle of recognition. But one example:

It occurred to me that most people are wrong. They invest in the wrong stock, bet the wrong football team, make the wrong career choice, move to the wrong city, pick the wrong suspect in the police lineup, vote for the wrong president. They are afraid to take a chance; they prefer the straightforwardness of ignorance, the smoothness and the reliable landmarks of the road most traveled, the ease of conformity; they rely on experts (who you can make a living betting against); they imagine the past as an orderly event; they possess the will to believe what should be true. (p. 55.)

All to say, depending on who you are and where you are in your life and what's going on for you, it might be worth your time to look into "Love and Terror on the Howling Plains of Nowhere," both the documentary (if you don't have Prime, Amazon sells the DVD for \$11.60) and the book. I'm going to check Amazon for Poe Ballantine's other writings. And I'm going to think more about where I go when I move from Vermont. Yes Morris, Minnesota is a possibility, and Ellensburg, Washington, and . . .