

Short Story 189*: Rattler

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Marc Aramini — 22 Apr 2015, 14:11

RATTLER

“Rattler” was first published in **Realms of Fantasy** in 2004, co-authored with Brian Hopkins, and is reprinted in *Starwater Strains*.

SUMMARY:

The story is framed as a tale overheard in a truck stop in Oklahoma. Two men in a nearby booth speak of training dogs, one claiming that a trained dog would also aid in training a new bird dog through direct instruction. This leads to the other man telling his long story, refuting this statement with the idea that dogs learn through imitation and expectation. “It just sees what the other's doin' and sees you like it. That's all. That pup wants to please, so it does like the other dog.” He tells of his coonhound Bud, whom he believes was the smartest dog ever. Bud would sleep in the bed of his truck so that the speaker could not leave without him, and would use the speaker's coonskins as bedding. The dog could also, according to the speaker, climb up a ladder or a tree to get at a coon or coonskin.

One day he hears Bud growl at a boy loitering near the truck, but then he realizes that Bud had died the week before. He thinks that the ghost of the dog is lingering near the truck, but when he starts up the engine, he hears the same sound. Soon the truck starts behaving as Bud did, even leaving little puddles in the road when he has parked near trees. At first, the speaker believes the truck is possessed, but it does not respond to being called Bud. When he refers to it as an old rattler, it reacts positively, and he realizes that it identifies with the name Rattler. Just as Bud did, it loves chasing after raccoons.

When the other man is skeptical of the speaker's story, the speaker brings up his “dumb fat brother-in-law”, Junior. At first, Junior doesn't believe in the truck's self-volition, then he declares, “whatever a dog could do he could do.” He starts to “teach” himself using a big green truck. The speaker asks if he has taught the truck to fetch, and Junior inquires how. The teller makes Rattler fetch a cattle. Junior continues to damage his truck in his attempts to emulate the abilities of Rattler. His brother in-law-says, “the fact is you don't know nothin'. You get a good truck, and it's instinct. — All you got to do is get a good'un to start and bring the instinct out. I never seen a good coonhound that would point birds, and neither have you.” He allows Rattler to scent out a raccoon at this point in their conversation, eventually driving up the tree, allowing the speaker to shoot it.

Soon, Junior's wife begs the narrator to do something about the damage Junior has been doing to his truck, as it is driving them to poverty. He invites Junior to dinner to speak some sense into him. Getting him alone, he asks Junior about his attempts to educate his own truck. Alas, Junior replies “the only thing I've learned it is to roll over”. Here, the speaker asserts that at times the teacher learns just as much as the intended student (and that, of course, a truck with automatic transmission isn't stupid, for it knows which gear it is in and when to shift). By Thanksgiving,

Junior is excited about an upcoming cattle auction and buying and selling at it when he becomes increasingly thoughtful, saying “the auctions a long grade and a steep'un, and sometimes a feller needs to shift down.”

The narrative shifts out of dialect to Gene and Brian as they watch the speaker and his companion leave. Gene quotes Robert Blake's *Auguries of Innocence*: “To see a world in a grain of sand, and a heaven in a wild flower”. They observe the speaker call Rattler over and get in the truck as it opens its own door for him. The speaker says to his friend, “you'll have to open your own door — He ain't learned that yet.” They watch the truck disappear, the driver seeming to still fumble for his keys.

COMMENTARY:

Rattler is written in Southern Oklahoma dialect, though whether there is any difference between Texan and Oklahoman speech patterns I will leave to more experienced linguists. Clearly the birthplace of Brian Hopkins and Wolfe's childhood home colored the stylistic choices they made in composing this collaboration. The tall tale is included in a volume of science fiction as a staple of Southern storytelling, and despite its treatment of a truck as a dog, we see that “*Rattler*” is really about the methods different people have to acquire new skills and learn. The truck imitates the dog which sleeps in its bed every day, acquiring its habits. Junior seeks to imitate the feats the speaker accomplishes with *Rattler* with his own car, but succeeds only in rolling it over and over. He finally realizes that his approach to life requires a different strategy, and verbalizes that buying and selling for profit sometimes requires “down shifting” and taking it more gradually — thinking smaller. (Education through imitation and even through associating unrelated things is of course the method we see in the instructional parables and stories of Jesus as well as many other moralistic fables.)

The idea that the truck is inhabited by the dog's spirit is of course discredited by the unique name to which the truck responds, “*Rattler*”. Beneath the light tone of the tale rests the theme that often presuppositions about what is possible are not actually true, and that people we think of as stupid or slow are occasionally capable of transcending that limitation with insight, often culled in a unique fashion. The idea of instinct and drawing something out of someone by unconventional means is a light theme, but perhaps an important one.

The quotation of Robert Blake's *Auguries of Innocence* comes from a poem in which small things are exalted and filled with importance, a warning to those who would do ill to small creatures and ignore them or mistreat them, for justice will be served, even in the form of damnation. The end of the poem becomes explicitly Christian in its mention of God-become-man. Of course, in this tale it merely highlights the abilities of the rural people to see such significance and value in terms sophisticated people might not deem important.

CONNECTION WITH OTHER WORKS:

One of Wolfe's few collaborations, *Rattler* is definitely in the vein of the dialect employed in “*The Dog of the Drops*” and in some of his longer novels such as sections of **The Wizard Knight** and *Pig from *Book of the Short Sun.** There is a close correlation between this short story and his other brief dog vignettes, such as “*Calamity Warps*”. The stories in **Starwater Strains** are not strictly science fictional, and many are fantastic or, as is the case here, a tall tale. The metafiction of Hopkins and Wolfe talking at the end of the story show the frame story mostly from a 3rd person perspective, though a 1st person plural is also employed. Of “*Rattler*”, Wolfe said:

Rattler is a collaboration with Brian Hopkins. Brian wrote **El Dio de los Muertos** and edited

13 Horrors, and has written and edited a lot of other things. He is from Oklahoma, though. I like him, and I don't mind that Oklahoma people are smarter than Texas people like me; but they don't have to keep talking and talking about it the way they do. That was why I started listening hard when he said he was going to get himself a new truck with a manual transmission, because he couldn't abide a pickup that was smarter than he was. We got to talking about trainability, guide trucks for the visually impaired, and so forth. It went on from there.

Wolfe also wrote the introduction of Hopkins' short story collection

Phoenix, in which he retells the story of his long dead aunt, also related in Wolfe's essay "Kid Sister", with a narrative veneer that seems more "fictionalized" and polished.