

And the Canon Rap Got Played

by Alex Kudera

Back in the sixties, I chanced upon a list of books. That's right. Sifting through a black garbage bin, I found the long lost canon. Seizing the moment, I snatched the list, and cradled it in my palms. I felt proud and patriotic for saving such a noble list from the jaws of an evil compactor. That was twenty-five years back, and now it's time to tell all.

It was Philly and stinking hot, 1969 and the sidewalk was singeing eggs and even soles. I was hanging out, loitering, begging for nickels by the Liberty Bell.

Yeah, I was a bum.

I had had this great joint venture going on up in Poughkeepsie, New York—home and auto sales and hell, everyone and his kid-cousin cemetery salesman was buying land and wheels up there. But one day I awoke, fell from my loft bed, and refused to kiss dick for dollars. For the first time in my life, I ditched the buckmobile and determined to fix my life up with meaning. Like my innards—you know, soul, shit, intestines, who knows?—I left home and auto and all I could think of was liberty and freedom and how I wanted to live by the Bell.

So I fucked the money thing and drove down to Philly. I pitched camp on Independence Mall and began performing my patriotic duty of reminding rich Americans of what it was like living back in the day. Hey, I was living it! Down in Philly, I had no electric, heat or hot water. Come winter, I was chewing bootstraps like any honest frozen soldier.

I earned my bread on the speeches. Beside the bell, I was chief tourist cop. I gave grand tours and tall tales for honest change and slight smiles. I stared my info into their eyes. In my gaze, the

masses were transfixed with my messages—take pride in our past and strive for good freedoms. Until then, I never knew my gaze could move the masses—to move their right hand into their left pocket and pitch a dime my way. At last, my life felt rooted in a meaningful exchange.

But in this deep existence, sex was the one thing lacking. Believe me, those Midwestern husbands drove many a fine daughter into my daily routine. Oh how I resisted gently palming their cheek bones and petting their pretty blonde locks. But I could not! I was no uppity moralist, but I knew such caresses where evil power plays—of course they fell madly in love with the rambling wretch of a tour guide. That goes without saying. I was dirty and dirt poor, down on my luck and in need of a bath—all that young females feel loving pity for. But such advances were at least illegal if not unnatural and so I stood my ground. I may have fucked the money thing, but I still had my principles! No, they weren't gonna get my balls in a sling for the pretty crimes of lust by the Bell.

So instead of sex, I used to expunge my drives, in off-peak hours, by sifting through public garbage, searching for lucky finds. I sifted long and hard, sorted through the most malodorous trash. I dove for stained news and old food and ancient troubles fallen from family wagons, traveled near a million miles to get dumped by my Bell.

“Daddy do we have to throw away my lobsters?”

“Son, those lobsters have stunk up our car since the shores of Alaska!”

“But Daddy, those lobsters are my favorite toy.”

“They're a stinkin' souvenir! Memories don't last forever.”

“They're more than memories, Dad! They're pets!”

Such conversations were classics about my garbage sifting. And that was how, avoiding the sex thing, I wound up in literature. For one stinking July noon, the canon came under my wing. It was not nearly go grand and imposing as you might think. Just the usual scrap of newspaper pasted in a can, what looked to be common discard, a bum's lunch and waste humbly stuck to the bag's

bottom. But when I scraped out the sheet, I spied pennings upon newsprint. There were a few hundred titles inscribed over ball scores. Yep, it was Philly, but the canon was scribbled on *The New York Times*.

I examined it for sellables and saw little of material worth. Newspaper scraps, even in Russia, were far more than a dime per dozen. The books on the list were long and dull. I thought back to the traumas of Catholic school. I failed to finish a third of Dickens, flunked an exam on New Testament Law, and flamed my copy of St. Thomas Aquinas. So at first, in the list, I saw little use. I deemed it clearly unprofitable.

But in spite of the can's dull patina, I knew some shiny wealth still wept within. I do not know how or why I knew, only that I knew, and though I knew little of the books on the list, I knew I ought to know more and this is why—no, no, don't worry, I didn't start reading—but I vowed to track down the authorities and show them my most obscure find. To tack the list upon the proper lap or wall or toilet seat or tavern door—the trick was to find the right spot!

So I gathered all my small changes together and shoved off in my '59 Ford. I must confess, though no longer working, I had kept the car.

000

I looked all over for those damn authorities, but they were difficult to find. In a world where everyone appears all knowing about everything, I never knew authority could be so tough to pin down.

Last folks first, so I visited the Philly police.

"You said you found a what?"

"The canon."

"What's that?"

"You know, the list of great books."

"Was it missin'?"

"People weren't sure who was on the list."

"Just tell me this one thing buddy. Who's on this list for sure?"

"Melville and Tolstoy and Milton, but that's debatable."

And I smiled when I saw I knew more than this man. This was but a measly copper, a thug from the streets. I may not be up on my Dante, but I could not be dumb as this ox.

"Yo Ed! Gimme a sheet on Melville and Tolstoy. Check out Milton but don't expect much. I wanna find out what these crooks are all about."

"They're not criminals."

"Let us be the judge of that."

"But they're not even alive."

"Don't think we ain't got records on the dead. Their influence is as dangerous as 'em lively ones, son."

"But these men weren't criminals. They were important writers. Authors."

"Look, son. In this business you either pack a piece or sleep in peace. At the desk, your pussy time, you can do whatever the hell you please. But having a holster is what holds the pants up around here. Ain't nothin' special about writin' and all that desk crap. Any guilty coward with pen and paper can do that."

This cop was smarter than he looked. Thinking as fast as I could, I shouted, "But these men felt the pen was mightier than the sword!"

"Leave the guns versus knives debate alone. Let us control public violence. Leave it to us to determine what's writer and what's crook. Don't go messin' with our jobs. It's a proven fact that many of these authors had criminal minds."

"Minor thieving in genre markets maybe—but criminal minds?"

"Criminal minds, criminal pens. Criminal morals, criminal meanings. Leave it to us to arrest men for crimes. Now gimme that list."

When he was done lecturing, he stabbed out with his paw, tried to swipe the list from my hand. But I wanted no canon in this man's hands! I wasn't going to let this ignorant copper judge my authors and condemn them to the courts. He thought in terms of who criminals and who *ain't*, and I feared he would arrest my canon and silence it forever. How could I ever read the books if this man locked up the list? In this matter, the police were useless. They would surely see the conflictive concepts in the list as a certain criminal sign. They were so overwhelmed with druggies and crooks, they knew no other way of considering books.

So I dashed out of his office and stole away from the precinct. Panting against a wall, I felt dejected and worn. I slipped into a coffee shop to figure out my next move. Catching my breath over cake and iced coffee, I determined to find loftier hands in the land. I wanted to bring my list to the public! I had read they were gathering for rock and roll up North. So I left life in Philly and sped fast to Woodstock.

When I got to the concert, I saw the crowd. They were headed for a dope stand, joking and being good folk. Ah yes, these were the peaceful commoners I craved—the people who would respect great art and hold me in highest esteem.

I ran to these men, madly waving the list in my hand. “I’ve found it! I’ve got it!”

From a distance, they cried, “What’s that, dude?”

“I’ve got the Canon! The list of great books.”

“Dude, like let me see that.” And a tall, long-haired fellow snatched my scrap. He stared at it and contemplated its worth. And pronounced:

“Dude, this ain’t nothin’ ‘cept all the classical books. This shit’s all that old patriarchal bull. Dude, this shit keeps the common man down. ‘Bout all this shit’s good for is rollin’ up some reefer. Yo, Spliffy, lay some green on a brother. I wanna test this paper’s mettle.”

And to my horror, this leader's minions applauded his speech. These hippies were as bad as the cops. They wanted to burn my great list books in seedy dooper flame!

Thinking fast, I caught the man's elbow as he turned from me. He tried to resist with words and then blows. But I was no soft stoner, and so I quickly grappled him down, grabbed my Canon, and scrambled away. I was out before his men could stop me. As I ran away, I heard their jeers.

"Dude, like you better chill."

"Dude, like relax. We weren't really going to burn your list."

"Dude, like you need a double-stuffed bong hit."

"Dude, can we offer you some doobage?"

"Dude, we're just hippies, but you're a fighter. Maybe you should go see your senator." And behind my back, they were laughing at me!

But my senator was off shooting moose across the border, so I took my matter to the President instead. Tricky Dick was or was not a reader, but I was sure he would have at least some sympathy for my list.

Inside his oval office, I met the man. In person, his pleasant grin was even wider than on TV. At once, I spilled my whole beans on how the cops and the hippy commoners were no help at all.

"I found the canon and I want to hand it over," I cried.

"The canon? You mean the list of great books?"

"Exactly, sir. I knew you'd understand."

"But what would I do with the canon?"

"You're the President. Don't you want to present it to the public and pronounce its worth?"

"Don't be silly."

"Do you denounce the great books?"

"Of course not, son. The canon is plenty fine for nursing through the night those irregular academy types. It calms an unstable part of my population. But as President, my job is to act upon the interests of the public. The public stays consumed with

work and kids and movies and music. The public has no time for the convoluted babbling found in your books. It sounds like you found that out yourself."

"But can't you preach the value of books?"

"They tell me what I should preach. They got me into this office. It's not the other way around."

"But don't you believe in books?"

"I don't believe in anything. How else could I climb this political peak save by constant compromise?"

"But what about the canon's great political theories?"

"It doesn't really matter what their theories were. Such claptrap hardly appeals to the masses. The masses want stuff which pleases the senses. Real fishy organs, not abstract ideas. They work in home and auto sales, not chasing after transient and obscure truths."

"Mr. President, what should I do with this canon?"

"Take it to the academics. Let them judge its worth. Those folks are keen and smart and they like to believe they influence the world. Meaningful types, not at all like the good citizens I send to war. The academics will gladly take it off your hands."

"Where do I find the most prestigious intellectuals?"

"Some say Boston, but I insist upon Ithaca. I hear great minds are churning up there."

"Then Cornell it is. I leave at once." I thanked my President, swiped my list, and swiftly made for the door.

Back North, to Cornell, I met a man called Bloom. He was a bitter, thin brew, a bit nasty and broodish, garbed in starched black, bookish and short. He stood by the window of his paling tower, looking down at the masses parading below.

"Mr. Bloom, a pleasure to meet you."

"Call me Sir Allan, *a la* the Shakespeare. But what manner of scrap do you hold in your hand?"

"Why, sir, it's the canon. I submit it to you to judge its worth."

"The canon? You hold the canon? Let me see that!"

He snatched the paper out of my hand and sternly stared it down. After a few minutes, "Where'd you find this boy?"

"A trash bin by the Liberty Bell."

"In Philadelphian filth?" But with a quick nod to the window, "In this sad and sorry age, I should have known as much."

"Well, what do you think?"

"It seems pretty fair and well rounded. It mentions Milton, but that's debatable. I have a small quibble with the final names on the list. Faulkner maybe, but Hemingway? And God only knows about Gertrude Stein."

"Do you want the list?"

"Did you come to steal my wages? I am a thinker, not a money making man. What feeble dollars I earn for my toil, I pay for rent and food, not serving the excesses of some canon-crazed bum."

"You mean you offer no recompense for it?"

"The canon is no commodity. That is only how the upstarts think of it. If you want to sell your list, take it to the up-and-coming, lit-crit crowd, all those publish-or-perish complainers. They'll buy off your list and tear it to pieces."

Just then from the window, we heard a loud smush. Together we turned to find a green squash pasted upon his pane.

"The horror," Bloom grumbled. "The horror." But before he could denounce the nature of man, his window was stabbed by a stone that landed at his feet. A perfect hole had formed, and

I expected Bloom to grab his gun and shoot back at the rammy masses below. But his tactics were purely defensive.

"Quick, boy, give me that scrap. I need to cover up that hole at once!" And he swiped my canon and found his long lost glue and began to paste it over the hole in his window, as if my tattered list could protect him from further flying squash and stones.

But there was no way I would allow my great gem to die glued to a window, at least not the glass of this dour man. So I threw myself at Bloom and wrestled him down and stole away from his stingy fingers the sole obsession in my life. And I realized right then, Bloom was a lonely and bitter man, and perhaps his arch enemies

would make better sense of my books. If this truth miser were so envious of those academy-come-latelies, it was worth finding out what those folks were about.

I wound through the hallowed humanities labyrinth until I stumbled upon the interdisciplinary upstarts. Were they sedulously studying classics? Far from it! They were amiably munching on doughnuts while comparing Marx and Malcolm to the masses below.

I ran into their room and jumped upon the large round table, held the list up in my arms, and yelped from my heart, "I've got it! This will settle things down below. I've got the canon! Once you post the list, the rebels will know where they stand!"

I handed the list to the first feminist to my left and she paused to peruse my finding. "Of course! Melville, Freud, and Joyce, with no mention of Arendt or Kristeva."

She passed it on to a bow-tied sociologist. "The usual. Each one of these texts mirrors the society from which it spawned."

And the radical economist, "Of course, these authors were of the privileged classes."

And the intellectual historian, "Yum. These writers like crime."

And American Studies, "Sure, some of these people said something new, but it's not as if their writing can compare to today's film. If only Melville had taken a screenwriting course."

"Feh," I thought to myself. These snobs acted as if they were better than my books—as if they could have actually written such texts. I ran with my list out of their room and vowed never to trust in these upstarts again. And then I knew at last, my only hope was to take the list to a real author, not some wannabe academy coward.

I dashed to a phone booth and thrust open the yellow pages. From the cover to Air Conditioners was torn away, and soon after that, I found my topic missing. "This cannot be!" But it was. Not one damn Author in the book.

Now I was no Jack Reader, but I thought I could track a writer so I made my way to the local book superstore and sure

enough the author was reading. I made eight in her audience of seven, and she smiled at me as she read her last lines. Oh, what touching notes they were. And afterward, she spoke of her childhood, born in a small, dusty dead town, between hill and meadow, one negress of many, the youngest of seven sisters whose mother taught right and sent all to school and then college. And as I approached her, I wondered what a wondrous talent of hers would think of my list. I handed it to her, and she smiled at me, and she stared at the list, and returned it to me, and said cute bookmark, and curtly inquired, if my signing would be for hardcover or tradepaper?

"Tradepaper, please," I meekly replied, realizing right then that her business was in selling her own rather than reading lost others. Survival was the name of the living writer's game.

And I took my list and returned to the streets and determined to bring my names to the masses. Not those young rock-concert, grass-smoking hipsters, but the real working men and women who keep this world turning.

On the street corner, one at a time, I caught the good folk's attention. But alas, their replies were all of the same kind.

"Not today."

"No thanks."

"Don't want any."

Some would casually toss me a nickel, but nary a one would consider my canon.

I carried an old granny's milk and eggs and afterwards asked her what she thought of my list. "That's nice," she replied and left me a dime.

"Hands off, Bud."

"Books my ass."

"Ain't got time for leisure."

"Readin'? That's woman's work ain't it?"

Alas, the working man cared little for this list of great books. The working man had no interest in literature. He was even worse than the hippie. Not one working man gave even the

measliest damn. But all my inquiries earned me many dimes and nickels, enough money for housing, so my lonely list and I checked into a sleazy motel.

In my one-star hotel room, I sipped my warm forty, and overheard the groans of faked for-profit orgasms. I felt to myself that this list of great books was worth not half a fuck to the world. The cops, academics, the author, the guy on the street—none had time for my list. Sure these books said wonderful things, at least the couple I vaguely remembered reading. But were these things anything to today's man—busy fighting off the enemy hordes within and without, with the sole purpose in life of clinging to his job? His concern was in immediate productivity, not the pretensions of genius writers. “Not half a fuck,” out loud I cried.

And to prove my point, I dashed into the hall, and I busted through the next door catching a man in the middle, and I threw him off and begged the whore from my heart, “Can't you sell me half a fuck for my canon!?” And she didn't even regard my list for a second, but screamed at me and beat me with belts and pillows, yelling that I had ruined it all for her best client, and now he'd never come back and her savings were low and steady clients were gentle and forgiving, unlike frat boys, businessmen, drug dealers, and me!

So I proposed marriage on the spot, claimed I was committed, told her like my great books I was true. But she threw my canon back at me and slammed the door in my face!

I shrank back to my room and thought to myself of all the last resorts I could take. I could send the list to *gai* Paris—where in dark sidestreets lurk brash upstart intellectuals and thieves? Or perhaps to NYC, SF or LA—God knows what they're inventing there, but it's too damn complex to explain? Or in some dilapidated squat house reeking of bong hits and other secondary sources, where the best and the brightest were blowing their minds up in flames? Would young stoner folk know what to do with my list?

Bah. No one had any interest in the canon, at least no sane Americans. Could I expect anything more from dissident youth and Frenchies? Nope.

So I folded up hope and folded up my scrap and returned to the world of sold home and auto. At first, my old boss resented me for living, for leaving, I mean. Aye, he outwardly evinced loathing for my courage in quitting. But he took me back, they always do, at least after begging and wedding his obese only child.

0 0 0

Now it's twenty-five years later and his daughter is a loving wife and the kids are in school and reading psych and soc and no doubt cruelly analyzing an old man obsessed with great books.

I was here and there and back again, and I still carry the dumb list in my wallet though I tossed the can in the Carter era. But spiralin' back to the whole story, I suddenly see my one failing. I barked up into all the wrong trees.

If you aim to give a canon away, you gotta find a group that'll give you some respect. Well, if I couldn't sell the list, maybe I could at least loan it to a rightful charity. I check through the phone book for my favorite local charities. Just the usual shit for sick kids and cripples. Nothin' really catches my eye. But at the end of the list, I see something new and strange under Y. Youth League for White Rappers.

I drive to their clubhouse and find them hanging out. They talk trash, rap bull, and chew slices of corned beef and cheese. Most look pale as my own tanless tush. But a few are in true-blue black face. I take these to be the leaders and march right up to the most masked man.

"Hey guys, look what I got."

"What up, honkey man?"

"What down wit the bad self?"

These kids do better bad Ebonics than I expected.

"I brought the canon, you know the list of great books. I thought it might inspire your muse." And I hand the chief rapper my newspaper scrap.

He swipes it and reads and says with a smile, "Man, this shit go down def wit vanilla rap. We could like list the names 'n shit, with fresh beats in between. Just like one of 'em pop forty songs 'n shit."

He hands it to his second lieutenant, who carefully studies the list. And proclaims, "What it is, homey! This shit could be the shit 'n shit. Like we could rhyme shit out and pay homage to the genius poets who came before us."

"Much money could be made on the backs of these bad-ass books."

"Man, great-book rappin' could be a means to the ends of many bitches."

"Bitties be lovin' sensitive guys, you know, readers 'n shit."

"Nice guys they can get much money from. Homeboys down wit literature the one day, law school the next."

"And we'll have the money for much shorty."

"Word up!"

But then the leader pauses. He stares straight into my eyes. "Say, holmes, how much you expect us to pay for the rights?"

"Uh, well, frankly—"

"Man, stay cool, holmes," second in command interrupts. "Chill. We got lawyers who can write up the contract. Homey look like he want only a fair cut, you know, spendin' cash and spandex trap."

"Yeah, let's drink to holmes. Say homey, you down for a forty?"

"Uh, sure."

Littleman Lennie runs out for nine forties and returns with them separately bagged. And we each grab a bagged bottle, unscrew the top, and prepare to suck down when our leader announces, "Let's get down witta toast 'n shit!"

"Word up! Toast away!"

"To the canon!"

"To the canon!" we cry. And clinking our bottles we suck down brew for the list of great books. And after drinking, we write

out this wonderful rapping song. I share with you the prologue, no reason to waste time with the list in itself.

0 0 0

Who down widda bad books,
you know it's me,
books been banned each century.
And like you, I hate readin'
'cause it be real tough,
but I done read these books
'cause they got the stuff
that built society
as it stands today.
Books caused the progress
that gets us all paid
and played
for the minimum wage.
Gets us grubbin' Micky Dees
and cubed out on TV.
So everybody say "Ho"
for the canonical list,
and as I rap shit out
all in the house bust this!

0 0 0

And when my rap comes out, it screams up the charts. In less than a week, it rises to number two. And there, it wavers in the chilly winds just below the summit! For two days, it sways under the omnipotent Madonna. But soon Madonna collapses from her perch, and my rap is number one. The boyz of the Youth League and I nearly cry! Forget all those elite academics and politicos, working folks and lazy hipsters, even the living author. The Youth League for White Rappers know what my list is worth!

On Sunday, I stroll down Main Street in Poughkeepsie, and I hear folks young and old humming my canonical song. In the mall, the luggage stores blast my rap. I hear it in CD-Den, SportsZone, and even in the hair salon. I journey to the Bookmart where they sell all the finest covers. In the background, instead of Chopin or Mozart, my bookish rap is played. And at the front of the store, I see a bum-like fellow rapping it out loud and clear. At the register he causes a ruckus as he raps my lustful tune. As each good citizen buys their books, he judges and condemns their purchases. He forbids a woman, by blocking her path, from purchasing Danielle Steele! I think to myself, "My what a good-man idealist we have here!"

Security comes and drags him away, but he keeps right on rapping my list. And far from the Bookmart, they drag my man, and at once I applaud his valor and condemn his indecency! I even pity and identify with him. They shove my man into the squad van as he screams his last words to the crowd.

"Look, I may be the crazy dude, who ain't workin' and be drinkin' all day. But I gots to make this defly clear before I is to go. I best possibly ain't the cleanest cut fellow and you know I ain't payin' no tax. But I chose to avoid yo' worldly possessions 'cause of what I read in them books. I may not own no visa cards, but I god-damn done knows my Thoreau!"

Jeez. Was he on the list?

