

BATKI, John

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Awards", New York, 1972, Doubleday, p. 1-15)

A szerkesztő előszavából:

The theme and the tendency are exemplified and most fully realised in the very beautiful story by John Batki, "Strange-Dreaming Charlie, Cow-Eyed Charlie," to which I have awarded First Prize. Since reading this story at the time of its publication in The New Yorker, I have read it numberless times, always with pleasure, and at each reading discovering further rewards, further subtleties. In the circumstances, I am reluctant to shrink it down to make a point, or to attach a label to it, and do so only tentatively and with the certainty that whoever reads and rereads this story will find in it more than I begin to suggest. Mr. Batki himself alludes to Fitzgerald, and the story reflects not so much Fitzgerald's influence (as would have been the case, say, twenty years ago) as his having been assimilated into the literary tradition—the tradition that Mr. Batki, with this story, promises to join. But Jay (surely the echo of Jay Gatsby is intentional?), the hero of this story of the 1970s, is pursuing a different dream than those that excited Fitzgerald and his characters: simply to "dream," to

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be free to dream, in opposition to the "daily rounds of scientific worship" in the great hospital whose corridors "hide a secret enemy, the omniscient White Sheep." There is a memorable encounter when "Jay, from the corner of his eye, catches a glimpse of the furtive villain he has been after. It is none other than the White Sheep, the wise old White Sheep, oppressor of dreams . . . 'Give me your dreams, my son,' says the White Sheep, who is expressionless and radiating doom." And earlier there has been his encounter with the sensible spokesman of the anti-dream real world:

'Jay,' said the Dean, 'we have been rather puzzled by your failure to live up to your potential. Is it a lack of interest or could it perhaps be some special problem with which we could help you?'

Jay understood. But asking for psychiatric help seemed absurd; he knew that Abnormal Psychology defined the norm as 'maximal personal and social adjustment in keeping with long-term social welfare.' He already had more than enough of that. Now was the time to paint your hair blue and drive a yellow wagon all the way to L.A. This was quite impossible to explain to the Dean . . .

Jay's allegiance is with the gypsies—"A gypsy woman nursed him, that is why he has wings"—and in a world of triumphant hussars, there is a conscious choice to be made. When, at the story's end, Jay spreads his wings and makes his marvelous dream-flight over Central Park, it is a gesture of escape, not escapism: he knows what he is giving up. And when he comes down to earth, it is not to pay heed to the rhetoric of the opinion-makers and politicians ("As we move into a generation of peace, as we blaze the trail toward the new prosperity, I say to every American . . ."), but the morning song of the sparrows. There is something cleansing and reassuring in those bird-syllables: "Chirple. Cheep. Christle. Creep. Pip. Chip. Wheep."

—WILLIAM ABRAHAMS

