

AFTERWORD

SEVERAL years ago, while browsing in a used bookstore, I came across a copy of *The Outward Room* by Millen Brand. In addition to its intriguing title and oddly named author, what prompted me to pick up the book was its unusual type-only jacket cover,* which prominently displayed, in three bands across the bottom third of the book, quotations from Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, and Fannie Hurst, each heralding the book in extraordinary terms. Lewis called it a “great love story—a real love story. I don’t know that I have ever seen a more exciting first novel.” Hurst wrote, “*The Outward Room* is original and fascinating...The book roams into the most intricate and obscure recesses of human experiences; does it brilliantly and emerges into the sunlight.” And Dreiser: “A fine book. It is one of those firmly painted, exquisite miniatures of life, rare among modern books, that contrive to be unsparing and honest, and at the same time refreshing and lovely.”

The language of prepublication adulation has become so predictably and narrowly codified, but the words in those blurbs—great, exciting, original, fascinating, brilliant, fine, exquisite, unsparing, honest, refreshing, and lovely—still meant something in 1937, especially when one considers that they described a first book by an unknown writer. (About the author, Lewis wrote “to Millen Brand, of whom I know nothing whatsoever, I present my most earnest greetings.”)

*The simultaneous edition had a conventional illustrated jacket.

I wondered how it was that I had never heard of this book and its extraordinarily promising young author. I asked around, but no one seemed to know or remember Millen Brand, or his books. It's somewhat frightening to learn that good books—even books heralded in their time—can disappear so quickly and completely. We like to think that things of enduring quality and worth are separated from the dross and permanently enshrined, but we know that this is not true. Beautiful things are more likely to disappear than to endure. *The Outward Room* is such a beautiful thing. And like so many literary treasures, much of its beauty is a result of its singularity, its ability to be both so unlike other books and yet so true to itself.

Millen Brand was born in New Jersey, in 1906, the son of a Jersey City fisherman, and graduated from the Columbia School of Journalism. Throughout most of the 1930s, he worked as an advertising copywriter for the telephone company. He arrived at the office at seven o'clock every morning, and wrote for the two hours before the start of the workday. In 1934 a story of his published in the magazine *Trend* was read by Clifton Fadiman, then an editor at Simon and Schuster. Fadiman wrote the author an encouraging and inquiring note; Brand replied that he was working on a novel; Fadiman asked to see it when it was finished. Two years later, Brand personally delivered his manuscript of *The Outward Room* to the Simon and Schuster office.

What happened next, according to an article written by H. Allen Smith and published in the *New York World-Telegram* on Tuesday, May 4, 1937, a few days after the publication of *The Outward Room*, was this:

At the publishing house a dozen members of the staff read it. The staff almost demanded that this book be sent to the presses. The Messrs. Simon & Schuster read it and agreed. They handed an advance copy to Sinclair Lewis. Back came

an enthusiastic letter from the Nobel Prize winner. Other writers read the advance copies, joined the chorus of cheering... By mid-February advance orders for "The Outward Room" had reached 10,000. That is somewhat more than remarkable for a first book. In March the people who run the Book-of-the-Month Club sent word that they had selected Mr. Brand's novel for distribution to their members in May... The book club selection meant an additional printing of something over 80,000 copies, all in one great fine batch. And still the regular orders flowed in. As the first of May approached the publishers announced that the first printing of "The Outward Room" would be 140,000 copies.

These remarkable circumstances prompted Simon and Schuster to include this unusual announcement on the jacket of the first edition:

A NOTE ABOUT THE PRICE OF *THE OUTWARD ROOM*

Please note that this novel is priced at \$1.25 instead of \$2.00. You may be interested in the reasons for this change:

Most novels are printed in editions of 3,000 copies or less. Because of advance interest in *The Outward Room* on the part of critics, fellow authors and booksellers, the first printing is 140,000.

This huge edition has made it possible for the publishers to reduce costs greatly by large purchases of cloth, paper, and other basic materials... Thus, in the case of such books as *The Outward Room*, a lower price makes it possible for tens of thousands of readers to keep a book which they wish to read and own, rather than borrow or rent it.

The book was published on May 1, 1937, the same day as William Maxwell's second novel, *They Came Like Swallows*, and the

two books were featured as dual main selections of the Book-of-the-Month Club. Although Maxwell's book is set two decades earlier than Brand's, both books are written with the same empathetic tenderness, and because of this similarity, and the fact of their coincidental publishing and notice by the Book-of-the-Month Club, the books were frequently reviewed together, and compared. Ralph Thompson, in *The New York Times*, preferred Maxwell's book because it dealt with a "normal" family: "He [Maxwell] has taken an ordinary dramatic situation—one that he himself must have experienced—and developed it without pretension or affectation." Brand, on the other hand, "has chosen a theme of immense scope and implication: that of a woman's mental and moral regeneration. He cannot handle it convincingly, courageous though his attempt is." The real problem with the book, according to Thompson, is Harriet herself: "Mr. Brand's description of Harriet's unbalanced mind is hardly one that the average reader can check against his own experience... Only in the concluding pages of the novel, after months of washing John's clothes, cooking his meals and sleeping in his bed, does she assume some of the qualities of a living woman." In other words, to find Harriet sympathetic, one must be mad oneself, and her "regeneration" results from a combination of domestic servitude and sexual activity.

Although most of the reviews for both books were positive, *The Outward Room* far outsold *They Came Like Swallows*. More than half a million copies were sold, and encouraged by this commercial success, Brand quit his job at the telephone company and rented an office of his own. He set out to write a Proustian series of eight novels, of which *The Outward Room* was the first, "each of which will be an integral whole, yet dovetailing into a carefully wrought pattern of human experience." Over the following forty years, Brand did write four other novels, and published three collections of poems. Some of this work—particularly the novels *The Heroes* (1939) and *Savage Sleep* (1968), both of which refract themes and concerns of *The Outward Room*—was well reviewed, but

none of his subsequent books ever received the same critical and commercial success as his first book. Reviewers were always quick to compare his later books to *The Outward Room*, and despite any merits they might possess, dismiss them. Gilbert Millstein's review of Brand's last published novel, *Some Love, Some Hunger*, concludes with a fine example of this begrudging praise: "On the whole, however, *Some Love, Some Hunger*, while worthy and honest, while devoted and true, is not the best of Millen Brand's work. It suffers from the very virtues that gave significance to *The Outward Room* . . . This is not a bad novel; it is not second-rate. It is simply not excellent." And so, except for a series of sensationally packaged pulp paperback editions of *The Outward Room* released in the 1950s ("*Does an insane woman have the right to love?*" "*She fled the torment of a vile place—to find savage and sudden desire in The Outward Room*"), none of his work remained in print or has been reprinted.

The Outward Room did, however, have a brief second life on the stage. *The World We Make*, a theatrical adaptation written and directed by Sidney Kingsley and starring the actress known only as "Margo," ran for eighty performances on Broadway in the fall of 1939. Brooks Atkinson championed the play with two reviews in *The New York Times*, characterizing the book as "the haunting story of a mentally unbalanced girl who escaped from an institution and healed herself by living a normal life with normal people," and concluding that the play "is brave, original, and fervent in conviction, and an ornament to our theatre." Two screen versions of the play were subsequently announced by MGM, but neither was made. The first was to star Norma Shearer and George Raft; the second ("*Strangers in the Dark*") was to feature Susan Peters and Gene Kelly.

Brand is perhaps best remembered, if he is remembered at all, for co-writing the Academy Award–nominated screenplay for *The Snake Pit*, a less subtle story of an institutionalized woman. Unfortunately his screenwriting career was cut short when, in 1953, because of his close association with members of the Hollywood

Ten,* he testified uncooperatively (and with Pirandellian absurdity) before the House Un-American Activities Committee. His books were subsequently removed from United States Information Service libraries in many foreign countries. Without being able to sustain his commercial success as a writer, Brand returned to office employment and for the following decades worked as an editor at Crown Publishers. Toward the end of his life, he published two books (one with photographs by George Tice and the other a collection of poems) about the insular religious communities of Pennsylvania. His final book, a poetic account of his participation in the Peace March between Nagasaki and Hiroshima in 1977, was published six months after his death in 1980.

The origins of *The Outward Room* can be traced to Brand's courtship of his first wife, the poet and novelist Pauline Leader. (His second marriage, to Helen Mendelssohn, also ended in divorce.) According to H. Allen Smith, in 1931 Brand read an autobiographical novel called *And No Birds Sang*.

It was written by Pauline Leader and it told of the cruel and brutal fashion in which life had used her. When she was 12 an illness deprived her of her hearing, and she has been deaf ever since. But she was a poet, with the soul and sensitivity of a poet. She came to New York from Vermont when she was 17, and lived in a windowless, three-dollar-a-week room in Greenwich Village. She slaved in sweatshops and washed dishes in restaurants, and she wrote poetry—good poetry. Pauline Leader's story of her life made such a deep impres-

*According to Brand's *New York Times* obituary (written by Eric Pace), "Adrian Scott the writer-producer, and Edward Dmytryk, the director, both of whom had been dismissed by RKO for refusing to tell a Congressional panel whether they were members of the Communist Party, formed a corporation in 1948 to film Mr. Brand's story of a black family moving into a white neighborhood in Jersey City [*Albert Sears*]. Members of the Hollywood Ten, Mr. Scott and Mr. Dmytryk went to prison for their refusal to cooperate with the committee."

sion on Millen Brand that he wrote a letter to her. They corresponded, they met and ultimately they were married.

The Outward Room is an elegantly composed novel in three distinct parts, and in each part the main character inhabits a different room and assumes a different name. The book is set in the mid-1930s; the initially unnamed heroine suffers an incapacitating depression while the country around her suffers a depression of its own. She languishes in a mental hospital, “in a wing of a building given over to the hopelessly insane.” A combination of ingenuity and bravery allow her to escape from the deadening asylum and find her way to New York City, where she sets about creating a life for herself out of absolutely nothing. Like a trapped animal that chews off a limb to set itself free, the now-named Harriet pawns her only possession, her beloved dead brother’s ring: “She twisted and pulled, hurting the flesh . . . Suddenly it came off, and like a part of herself, she saw it lying in her palm.” With the five dollars she receives for the ring, she finds shelter, food, and work, and eventually is befriended by, and falls in love with, an almost ominously decent and thoughtful man. The original flap copy melodramatically states “together they face the supreme crisis of their lives.”

But there is no crisis, supreme or otherwise. What Harriet and John face is life itself, the struggle and dangers and pathos and joy of the everyday, and it is Brand’s disinclination to push these characters toward a more dramatically conclusive occurrence that gives *The Outward Room* its beguiling authenticity and refreshing quiet. Brand (like William Maxwell) has that rare empathetic ability to love all his characters, even those who behave meanly or badly, for he understands them too well to judge or condemn them: he looks up through them rather than down at them. And so the reader comes to feel, and fear, for the characters in a way that is almost unbearably tender. An odd glow of love permeates every aspect of this book.

Ostensibly, *The Outward Room* is a novel of recovery. It charts

the (now) familiar movement from sickness to health, from darkness to light. Harriet recovers because she unneurotically takes what she is given and asks for what she wants (“I’d like a pocket-book”). Yet there is nothing formulaic or expected about this book: Brand’s world is too quiveringly alive, and his writing too idiosyncratically gorgeous, to ever be predictable. The anarchic punctuation, the jangled syntax, the invented vocabulary, combined with the startlingly original way of observing the world, give Brand’s sentences a startling energy and beauty. His descriptions of Depression-era New York City (the rooming houses, the elevated and subway trains, the all-night cafeterias, the sweatshops) have a stark Hopper-esque intensity and resonance. The first chapter of Part Two, which consists of a single four-page paragraph in which the homeless heroine spends the night riding the subway, is an incandescent dream of brilliant writing.

All of Brand’s work is modest and sincere, two qualities that are undervalued, if not dismissed, in modern fiction. “While sensationalism flourishes around us it is hard to account for the power in literature based on ordinary things and daily life,” William Stafford observed in his review of *Local Lives*, Brand’s collection of poems about the Amish, Mennonite, and Quaker communities. Despite the titillating claims of the paperback reprints, there is nothing sensational about *The Outward Room*. Its power comes from its tenderness and quiet. As Brand himself observes, near the end of the book, “the evidences of winter were small, only to be seen, like the signs of spring, by the heart that feels small changes.”

—PETER CAMERON