

Creating the Rogue Hero:
Literary Devices in the Picaresque Novels of Martin Amis,
Richard Russo, Michael Chabon, Jonathan Safran Foer, and
Steve Tesich

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What is it about *The Catcher in the Rye* that makes me wish I had written it? Perhaps I should start with the fact that Holden Caulfield is as charming as anyone I've ever met—on or off the page. Why is it that whenever I reread *Catcher*, I never want it to end? I find myself slowing down and savoring the lines. I find myself laughing in all the same places, and, yes, crying in all the same places too. I find myself saying “goddam” this, “goddam” that. Suddenly everything’s “lousy.” Lousy—like that woman on the train whose hand was “lousy with rocks.” I just want to hole up with Holden in that creepy hotel and gang up on Maurice, the bellhop-pimp. I want to head down to the Village with him and get drunk at a jazz bar. I want to go home with him to his parents’ apartment on Park Avenue and watch his little sister Phoebe sleep. I want to know exactly what that red hunting hat looks like anyway. Maybe even try it on. I almost find myself worrying about the ducks—where they’re going to go in the winter when the ponds freeze over. It is novels like *Catcher* that make me want to be a writer—that make me want to try to create a little world that no one will ever want to leave. There are other novels that I never want to leave either—*The Great Gatsby* for one—but the ones I find myself gravitating toward more than any others are the picaresques such as *Catcher in the Rye*—particularly the ones that do a good job of balancing the humor and pathos of the rogue.

It’s not just because picaresque heroes are more fun than other characters that I love them. It’s not just the dissolute behavior that I find so appealing. And it’s not just the dubious company they keep or the adventures they embark upon that I find so satisfying. All of these things make for a pretty good story. But what makes them really worthwhile is the romantic sense of sadness and futility that haunts them all—their honest recognition of their own shortcomings that gives them emotional weight and makes them resonate. Disappointingly, like young Hal in *Henry IV, Part I*, who eventually deserts Falstaff, all rogue heroes must grow up and assume a certain amount of responsibility. Often they settle down, give up their aimless wandering, and find a home. Unfortunately, settling down can mean letting go of “the impossible dream.” We wish their peregrinations would never end, and so by nature the picaresque novel, whose trappings are ribald excess, is also fraught with a deep sense of loss and sorrow. We must not forget, however, that what makes the picaresque so much fun are the comic

possibilities of an errant hero in pursuit of something impossible. He is at once noble and pathetic, a delight to spend time with and to laugh at, and heroic in his blindness to the humbling reality that confronts him wherever he goes.

The picaresque novel predates the English novel by more than a hundred years. Of course, the best-known picaresque novel, Spanish or otherwise, is Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. While the rise of the Bildungsroman and realistic novel may have led to its decline, the picaresque is still very much alive. In my opinion, there is only so much stark realism readers care to consume. Part of the reason Dickens's Romantic novels outsell those of his contemporaries and always will is that they are populated by so many unforgettable picaresque characters. Another reason is quite simply that people want to laugh. We prefer *things as they should be* to the way *things really are*. Dickens, of course, blends both the picaresque with the narrative romance, while Eliot and Thackeray give them strong doses of reality. Because satire comprises a major part of the picaresque writer's landscape, he must balance the humor with sadness; otherwise, his work will either prove too frivolous or too hard-nosed—either way lacking the power to move us. While the picaresque is best known for its episodic nature and the corrupt society that makes the rogue more appealing than those he opposes, what really interests me are the ways in which writers are able to convey both the humor and pathos of the rogue—that is, the literary devices writers employ to maintain that sense of poignancy and humor. This balance, I believe, is what makes picaresques not only more fun than other types of literature, but also, in many cases, just as powerful and transcendent as any work out there. In this essay, I will try to expose the devices Martin Amis, Richard Russo, Michael Chabon, Jonathan Safran Foer, and Steve Tesich employ to achieve this balance between the comic and the sad in their works.

In *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, Mark Twain observes that "The secret source of humor itself is sorrow." Twain, of course, had a much keener understanding of humor than almost anyone, and as the author of two of the greatest American picaresque novels—*Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*—he not only understood comedy well, but also the nature of the rogue hero. Twain, like all good comic writers, knew the importance of the interplay of humor and sorrow. One of the more common devices that recent writers of picaresque novels use to maintain that balance between the comic and the sad is self-deprecating humor, a type of humor deeply rooted in sorrow. Self-deprecatory remarks always reveal the speaker's own sense of shortcoming, which, while amusing, also has its sad side. For example, in Michael Chabon's *Wonder Boys*,¹ Grady Tripp, the perfect post-modern picaresque hero who is haunted by a "secret sharer" that constantly "trips" him up, is at once delightfully comic and poignantly sad. His self-deprecating humor always entertains: "I happened to catch a glimpse, in the smoky mirrored wall of the Hi-Hat, of an overweight, hobbled, bespectacled, aging,

¹ Michael Chabon, *Wonder Boys* (New York: Picador, 1995).

lank-haired, stoop-shouldered Sasquatch, his furry eye sockets dim, his gait unsteady, his arms enfolded so tightly around the bones of a helpless young angel that it was impossible to say if she was holding him up or if, on the contrary, he was dragging her down" (110). Not a pretty picture, but an amusing one. Chabon's switch to the third person here works well for a number of reasons: first, he is surprised in his haze of drugs and booze to see his own monstrous reflection; and second, the point of view allows for greater distancing, which when coupled with the shock he receives upon recognizing himself becomes more comic; and third, the change in point of view sets up the possibility for dramatic irony better. Chabon's pacing is perfect: the long choppy sentence hobbled by commas complements the narrator's battered state. It limps along just as painfully as Tripp does, who, earlier on in the night, has been bitten by the chancellor's dog.

At one point in the novel Grady even extends his "native genius for externalizing self-hatred," as he calls it, by building upon an old Groucho Marx line: "Not only would I never want to belong to any club that would have me for a member—if elected I would wear street shoes onto the squash court and set fire to the ballroom curtains" (128). He is a rogue and he knows it. That is what makes him both pitiable and endearing. Both proud and ashamed, he is fully aware of his faults, yet seemingly helpless to do anything about them.

Likewise, Steve Tesich's titular character in *Karoo*,² a man filled with self-loathing, makes numerous self-deprecating remarks. As someone who would rather pick up a stranger at a cocktail party than face his estranged son alone, he fits the description of a picaresque scoundrel quite well: "As a hunter of women I was long past my prime, like some aging predator. A successful hunt was now not so much a function of my masculinity as of the chance encounter with a lame or sickly prey, which the rest of the healthy herd would want culled from their ranks. I sidled up to the group and took in the chatter. The chatter was about Gorbachev" (21). Like most modern picaresques, Tesich obviously employs a first-person narrator here. Karoo's description of choosing a woman to take home is hilarious. The tone is controlled and objective. There is no passion involved, no romance. The "hunt" is performed without malice and done only for survival. The "love scene" is altogether absurd and parodies the tone of nature documentaries and, as such, it is both cruel and comic, a mixture of *mockumentary* and mock romance. Ironically, the "prey" is not the most beautiful girl at the party, but one that is "lame or sickly," one that "the rest of the healthy herd would want culled from its ranks." The hunter is not a young Lothario but an "aging predator." The conversation is not the charming and witty talk of love but of "Gorbachev."

² Steve Tesich, *Karoo* (New York: Open City Books, 1998).

While the scene is certainly meant to be funny, what lends this passage balance is the narrator's obvious self-loathing: Karoo sees himself as "long past his prime," as an "aging predator." His self-deprecation anchors the parodic tone to something emotionally weightier to keep it from becoming too frivolous. While the tone is light and comic, bubbling just below the surface is a dark and disturbing subtext of deep self-hatred and existential emptiness. As we read on, we find that Saul Karoo has become so hollowed out by life that he has lost all sense of self. At one point he admits, "no matter how I tried to discover some biographical intimacy with all those Sauls I had been or tried to be in my past, I couldn't.... It wasn't that my connections to my past were severed or impaired in any way, but rather that those connections conveyed nothing" (274). So, while his self-deprecating humor may be hilarious, it also has a sad and disturbing subtext to it—Saul's spiritual emptiness.

Likewise, in his picaresque satire on the greed of the early 1980s, Martin Amis's aptly named *Money*³ also draws on self-deprecating humor to achieve balance. In thirty-five-year-old John Self's envious description of his father's sumptuous head of hair, his own self-hatred is evident: "He's got a good rug, my dad, silvery and plentiful. I wouldn't mind looking like that when I'm his age. Actually, I wouldn't have minded looking like that now. I wouldn't have minded looking like that five years ago, come to think of it, or even ten" (139). Amis sets up the humor well here. He starts off with a fairly innocent projection into the future: "I wouldn't mind looking like that when I'm his age," but then he starts backtracking: "Actually, I wouldn't have minded looking like that now." The word "actually" is the tip-off that he isn't so secure about his appearance. We see the self-hatred creeping in and then suddenly, it's "five years ago ... or even ten," making Self twenty-four, before he stops backtracking. The way he so easily jumps backward from a projection into the future to ten years in the past shows just how low Self's self-esteem is. Just as with Chabon, the sentence structure complements the narrator's beat up self-image; in this case short, tentative-looking sentences.

John Self's self-hatred certainly explains his chronic self-abuse, which again is both humorous and sad. At the start of the novel he imparts the following information: "'Yeah,' I said, and started smoking another cigarette. Unless I specifically inform you otherwise, I'm always smoking another cigarette" (13). His constant need to address the reader is amusing and is, of course, another indication of his insecurity. His admission is disturbing. Here, the source of the appeal of Self's depravity may be traced to another comic device—*Schadenfreude*. Like some DDT roach or Keith Richards, Self is a toxic wonder of survival. He casually mentions at one point, "Leaving my lobby I marched straight off the House of the Big One, where I ate seven Fastfurters. They were so delicious that tears filled my eyes as I bolted them down. Next I bought a joint, a popper, a phial of

³ Martin Amis, *Money* (New York: Penguin Books, 1984).

cocaine and a plug of opium from a fat spade in Times Square and snuffed it all up in a gogo bar toilet" (48). His improbable resilience, compounded by his deplorable racism, elicits a nervous kind of laughter from the reader who thinks, "That's so awful it's funny," but wonders, "Should I really be laughing?"

Likewise, in *Karoo*, the narrator's self-abuse is equally amusing and appalling: "I was now drinking red wine again, which I drank when I first came to the party. In between, I had drunk every form of alcoholic beverage available on the premises. White wine. Bourbon. Scotch. Three different kinds of vodka. Two different kinds of brandy. Champagne. Various liqueurs. Grappa. Rakija. Two bottles of Mexican beer and several goblets full of rum-spiked eggnog. All of this on an empty stomach and yet, alas, I was stone-cold sober" (4). The sheer volume of alcohol measured out in deliberate fragments, each type of liquor its own short sentence, its own little container. One after another, Tesich sets the liquors apart, each period making us pause so that the staggering amount is not lost on us. The effect is overwhelming. But then Tesich blindsides us when we get to the last sentence—"and yet, alas, I was stone-cold sober." We don't expect such a thing. "How could this be?" we ask. The last line makes us uneasy. We are concerned—there is obviously something wrong with this man. We suspect hyperbole, we read on, and we are right. Karoo's drinking problem is a highly exaggerated comic device, a metaphor for his disconnection of self. The sad part is that Karoo is miserable. He is in obvious despair over what he calls his "drunk disease": "and yet, alas, I was stone-cold sober." Tesich, surrounds the "yet" with commas, slowing down the pacing to make Karoo's misery stand out even more.

Tesich continues to establish a comic mood of despair for the next few paragraphs until eventually Saul fears becoming an outcast because of his drunk disease: "It was a fear of becoming a pariah in public should my disease become known that made me pretend to act drunk. I also couldn't bear to disappoint those who knew me" (5). Ironically, in his mind, it is not the drunk who becomes an outcast, but rather the sober man. And since he has lost all connection to himself, he judges himself according to what he thinks others think of him. He is truly an empty, lost, and pitiable soul.

It is, of course, Tesich's ability to get into the warped mind of the drunk that makes Karoo such a frustrating and vulnerably endearing character. Tesich understands that in order to pull off something so unbelievable as a drunk disease, his narrator must be in dead earnest. The reader may laugh at Saul Karoo's misfortune, but Saul must be distraught for it to come off poignantly. So, in effect, Saul's despair anchors the hyperbole and keeps it from becoming too frivolously comic. Tesich, like Amis, is making ample use of Schadenfreude.

Schadenfreude, or the delight we take in the misfortune of others, perhaps more than any word describes the pleasure we take in reading *The Information*,⁴ a second picaresque by Martin Amis. Misfortune, so long as it is not happening to us, can be quite fun. Consider Amis's antihero, Richard Tull, whose life is rife with misfortune. At his book signing in Boston only four people attend: "His audience might not have been large. But it was varied. One was female, one was black, one was Native American, and one was fat. And that was that" (276). Not only does Amis use rhyme and lyric to illustrate Richard's downtrodden point of view, but he also employs a singsongy, childlike meter to voice his juvenile self-mockery: "One was female, one was black, one was Native American, and one was fat." Below the brilliant sheen of this parodic scene that is the highlight of Richard's failed book tour, however, lurks the ugly face of failure. Next door Tull's arch rival, Gywn Barry, is reading to a crowd of 750 people. Poor Richard yearns for a time when he can laugh at his rival's misfortune, but of course it never really comes; and so we are left to laugh at Richard instead. Amis achieves poignancy through the comic device of Schadenfreude.

Amis and Tesich are not the only picaresque writers to use Schadenfreude. In Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated*,⁵ a novel with a picaresque narrator, there is one priceless scene that makes excellent use of Schadenfreude. Alex, the Ukrainian narrator here, is witnessing his grandfather's seeing-eye dog, Sammy Davis, Junior, Junior, have his way with the hero of the story, Jonathan Safran Foer, who has come from America in search of his family's pre-Holocaust past. Jonathan hates dogs, but as luck would have it, is stuck in the back seat with one—a comic situation that can't lose: "'Are you donning cologne?' I asked. 'What?' 'Are you donning cologne?' He rotated his body so that his face was in the seat, away from Sammy Davis, Junior, Junior. 'Maybe a little,' he said, defending the back of his head with his hands. 'Because she loves cologne. It makes her sexually stimulated.' 'Jesus.' 'She is trying to make sex to you. This is a good sign. It signifies that she will not bite.' 'Help!' he said as Sammy Davis, Junior, Junior rotated to do a sixty-nine" (56).

While the situation in the car is comic in itself, Foer heightens the comic effect by omitting paragraph breaks between speakers. The result is that it speeds everything up and makes everything more urgent and powerful—like the rape of the writer that is in effect taking place both on a physical and narrative level. With Alex as narrator, Jonathan becomes the source of comedy; his loss of the narrative to Alex, a kind of comic coup d'état and an ironic reversal. Alex's idiomatic blunder, "she is trying to make sex to you," adds to the comic situation, and the "sixty-nine" is a humorous running gag that appears throughout the novel. The irony and enthusiasm of the straight man, Alex, further adds to the comedy: "This is a good sign." Then having a dog rotate "to do a sixty-nine" is

⁴ Martin Amis, *The Information* (New York: Vintage International, 1995).

⁵ Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything Is Illuminated* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002).

the icing on the cake. The situation, when read with the rest of the scene, is farcical, but what keeps it from becoming too improbable is the narrator's earnestness. As with Saul Karoo, Alex is completely serious when he delivers the ironic line: "This is a good sign." While the situation is ironic, the tone is not. Alex is completely naive and that lends the scene balance.

A good example of the naiveté of Alex, as well as the use of the running gag, occurs early on in the novel when, while trying to educate his younger brother about sex, Alex reveals just how uneducated he himself is: "'This is the sixty-nine,' I told him, presenting the magazine in front of him. I put my fingers—two of them—on the action, so that he would not overlook it. 'Why is it dubbed sixty-nine?' he asked, because he is a person hot on fire with curiosity. 'It was invented in 1969. My friend Gregory knows a friend of the nephew of the inventor'" (3). Foer's use of words like "action" is amusing. It is always funny to hear nonnative speakers use American slang, but while Foer does not attempt to capture the Russian accent through sound or phonetic spelling, he does so through idiom and connotation. "Action" has the wrong connotation in this context. A native speaker would never phrase it that way. The verbal misfires thus contribute to making an already comic situation more amusing. Alex's gullibility is also apparent in his explanation of why the "sixty-nine" is "dubbed" as such. Alex's archaic and overly formal language, his misuse of modern American slang, his idiomatic blunders, the comic situation, and his naiveté are all a great source of humor, but once again, it is Alex's seriousness throughout it all that makes the scene not only more amusing, but also more poignant.

There is no indication that Alex knows either scene is funny or that he is funny. Like most young men Alex thinks that he has something to prove and desperately wants to be taken seriously. That is why he tells us from the beginning, "Many girls want to be carnal with me..." (2). Of course, it always helps a picaresque novel to balance out all the comic scenes with serious ones, and Foer knows just when to hold back on the humor, while still keeping the voice consistently awkward. When Jonathan, Alex, and Alex's grandfather are standing in front of the monument commemorating the "1204 Trachimborderers killed at the hands of German Fascism on March 18, 1942" (189), Foer appropriately scales back the misuses of language, but does not do away with them entirely: "I stood with the hero in front of this monument for many minutes while Augustine and Grandfather walked off into the darkness. We did not speak. It would have been a common indecency to speak. I looked at him once while he was writing the monument's information in his diary, and I could perceive that he looked at me once while I was viewing it. He roosted in the grass, and I roosted next to him" (190). It takes real talent to make a passage not only poignant, but also comic at the same time. The "roosted in the grass" at the end is funny—once again the wrong connotation given the context—and the "common indecency" is a funny malapropism too. But the next few lines become beautiful without departing from Alex's imperfect and limited use of language: "We roosted for several mo-

ments in the grass, and then we both laid on our backs, and the grass was like a bed. Because it was so dark, we could see many of the stars. It was as if we were under a large umbrella, or under a dress" (190). Despite using the wrong past tense of *lay* and the comic choice of "roost," the images of the umbrella and the dress are still powerful and, like most great writing, so simple. As always, balance makes both the comic and the sorrowful more powerful—even beautiful.

Like Jonathan Safran Foer in *Everything Is Illuminated*, author Richard Russo in *Straight Man*,⁶ a novel about an interim English department head in the middle of a midlife crisis, also can't resist the use of malapropism. Charles Purty happens to be the Mary Malaprop of *Straight Man*. The bumbling Mr. Purty, who courts the narrator's mother to no avail, is a sympathetic character we feel badly for when he talks of his flashy new truck with its "antibrakes" (antilock brakes) and "tark" (tarp) (181). But of course this type of humor has its sad side too. Purty will never get his words right any more than he will win over Mrs. Devereaux, despite winning over her son's affection. And just like Alex, Mr. Purty wants to be taken seriously too.

Richard Russo does not use much self-deprecating humor or Schadenfreude in *Straight Man*. Self-deprecation would not be appropriate with a narrator best known for his arrogant wit. Hank Devereaux Jr. admits in the prologue, "Truth be told, I'm not an easy man" (xi), and indeed he is not. Far more than malapropism, Russo makes use of physical comedy to balance out the arrogance of a romantic narrator who refuses to see himself for what he is: a solipsistic forty-nine-year-old college professor with a blocked ureter and an inexplicable need to stir up trouble. In a passage in which he gives us a physical description of himself, Hank says: "The bearded, shaggy-haired author who stares down the camera so piercingly from the jacket of *Off the Road* no longer greatly resembles the clean-shaven, thinning haired, proboscis-punctured full professor who reflected back at me earlier from my kitchen window" (27). The "thinning haired" narrator concedes he may have lost some youth and confidence along the way—no longer able to "stare down the camera so piercingly"—and he is a bit battle scarred with his nose recently punctured by a colleague's spiral notebook; but there is definitely still a sense of playfulness to the voice and diction that tells us this is quite a different narrator from Steve Tesich's Saul Karoo. The alliteration of "proboscis-punctured full professor" is comic—almost defiant, almost proud of the battle scars—whereas Karoo sounds more resigned and accepting of his loss of youth when he describes himself as "long past my prime."

In conjunction with physical comedy, one of the more humorous comic devices that Russo employs is the running gag—the most memorable being Hank's blocked ureter: "The sensation I had a few minutes earlier, of being powerfully backed up, of risking an explosion, is now belied by what might best be de-

⁶ Richard Russo, *Straight Man* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997).

scribed as a slow faucet drip" (42). Hank's comparison between his failure to urinate properly and a "slow faucet drip" is both comic and sad. An obvious symbol of the impotence he feels at the midlife juncture he has come to, his inability to pee, has both comic and sad dimensions. At one point he says, "I'd dearly like to take a piss on someone's grave, and I don't really care whose. My groin is throbbing with pent-up desire" (193). The gag resurfaces over and over again: "Now that I'm out of women to be in love with, I visit the men's room, where, standing before the long trough, limp dick in hand, my dribbling is hot and painful" (120), "Already I have to pee again" (121), "To celebrate, I make another trip to the men's room" (123), "I go around the corner and drip on his hydrangeas" (128). The scatological humor, by which the picaresque narrator is plagued, is a kind of "just desserts." Devereaux, an especially arrogant rogue whose midlife crisis has made him feel so emotionally numb that he must goad others to feel alive, deserves all the payback he gets, but the physical comedy he endures certainly has a very real and potentially deadly subtext. Again, the seriousness of the running gag helps to root the comedy to weightier issues of fear, aging, impotence, and death that keep it from becoming too frivolous.

In the climax of the novel, Russo, like Tesich, makes use of hyperbole for comic effect. Hank, a writer who has been blocked both figuratively and physically, unleashes a torrent of urine before passing out: "But the fact is that no fifteen-year-old boy standing barefoot on an icy tile floor after awakening from a ten-hour sleep in a cold bedroom has ever hit porcelain with a more powerful, confident, thankful stream than mine. It is heaven, 'Dear God,' somebody moans. Probably me. It's the last thing I remember" (363). The sensual hyperbolic comparison to a "fifteen-year-old boy standing barefoot on an icy tile floor" while peeing after a ten hour sleep is amusing, but also present is the issue of a serious medical condition. The length of the sentences helps to convey not only Hank's perspective, but also his physical condition. The first sentence, the longest, conveys both how long and "thankful" his relief is. The next sentence, "It is heaven, 'Dear God,' somebody moans," shows him stepping outside the action and into third person. The utterance, "Probably me," which follows shows the point at which he passes out. The last sentence confirms this loss of consciousness: "It's the last thing I remember." So ends the chapter and the running gag about the blocked ureter. While amusing, the scene has a serious side—Hank passes out while relieving himself. Russo needs a serious dimension here—it is his climax after all, and the climax needs some emotional weight to prevent it from being just an ironic "climax" joke.

Likewise, in Martin Amis's *The Information* there is scatological humor. However, Amis chooses to blend it with parody. On the flight from Boston to Provincetown during the book tour with Gwyn, Richard Tull notices that things are not boding well: "It was when the patch of shit appeared on the pilot's cream rump that Richard knew for certain that all was not well" (284). Earlier on, perhaps because Richard is in New England, the former whaling capital of the U.S.,

Amis parodies Melville's chapter on the whiteness of the whale: "It was easy, somehow, to lose yourself in the expanse of his cream rump..." (281). The serious side of this scene is that the pilot is so scared the plane may go down that he loses control of his bowels. The pilot's fear of death adds balance to the parody of *Moby Dick*.

Physical humor, not just scatological humor, is the source of much of the comically sad moments in *The Information*, just as it is in both *Money* and Russo's *Straight Man*. Amis describes Richard Tull's physical appearance with his usual satirical flair: "Richard himself, by the way, was going bald too, but anarchically. No steady shrinkage, with the flesh stealing crownwards like rising water; with him hair loss happened in spasms, in hanks and handfuls" (11). Amis's casual and offhand way of introducing Tull's hair loss is very sly, for it sets up the expectation that this phenomenon is ordinary or matter of course, which hair loss usually is. However, in Wildean or Twainian fashion, the end of the sentence, "but anarchically," completely undercuts the earlier sentiment. This undercutting makes the moment all the more humorous, for we don't see the humor coming until it is already upon us. Naturally, the description becomes a metaphor for what is at the root—pardon the pun—of his troubled life: Richard Tull's unhealthy obsession with his best friend, for whom everything, in Richard's view, is going far better: "Gywn's hair was (only a rumor, for now) of male-pattern recession" (11). The way in which Amis parenthetically contains the rumor illustrates beautifully Richard's point of view that nothing bad ever seems to touch Gywn. By contrast, Gywn's description of hair loss is ordered and contained—one might even say shielded both from the view of others and from the rest of the sentence, while Richard's baldness is anarchic and spasmodic.

Hair is not the only comic physical description Amis offers of his antihero, and it is not the only time that we are blindsided by humor either. Richard, we are first told, has "a large and lucent lump on the back of his neck" (31). Then we are told that "This he treated himself, by the following means: he kept his hair long to keep it hidden" (31). With the news of this lump, we are concerned; then we are happy to read that Richard is treating it. That is, we are hopeful that he is taking care of himself. However, the bad news is again saved for last—after the colon: "he kept his hair long to keep it hidden." Yet again, another surprise attack. After a few of these verbal ambushes, we begin to suspect others. We begin to look for clues that things may not be as good as we once thought. The tip-off here is the fact that Richard is treating himself. These comic surprise attacks, of course, have the same effect that self-deprecation, physical humor, and Schadenfreude have—they suggest some serious medical condition. It is only Richard's method for dealing with his condition that is funny. While hair loss is not necessarily any indication of sickness, a "large and lucent lump on the back of his neck" certainly could be. Such comic devices create narrative tension in the text, an ever-present struggle for balance.

In addition to delaying the humor until the end of the sentence, the picaresque writers discussed here maintain balance in their work by establishing an endless babble of inner monologue. Often the picaresque hero is blind to his own faults and mistakes, a fact that can be a plentiful source of humor and sorrow. In addition to showing vulnerability that is truly pathetic, John Self in Martin Amis's *Money* certainly has trouble facing reality: "I can't go on sleeping alone—that's certain. I need a human touch. Soon I'll just have to go out and buy one. I wake up at dawn and there's nothing. And when I wake up at night, in minus time ... better not to ask—better not to say" (61). The short sentences, dashes, and ellipsis create a choppiness that, in turn, approximates the neurotic, desperate, insecure flow of thoughts ricocheting around in his narrator's head. To the outsider, it is certainly amusing to hear him say, "I need human touch. Soon I'll just have to go out and buy one," but his desperation is clear. Self has his demons and he isn't strong enough to face them. He lives in constant denial. He says comically of truth, "Ay, keep it away! Don't let it touch me. I can't give it headroom" (52). We all avoid basic truths, and John Self is a humorous reminder; but his voice becomes more real and, therefore, more powerful when complemented by short, choppy sentences, dashes, exclamation points, and imperatives, which serve to reinforce his disjointed, neurotic narrative.

A few pages later Amis demonstrates this neurotic inner dialogue again: "I think I know the truth. The memory is there somewhere, it has its being—but it is loathsome to the touch. Ay! don't let it touch me! Keep it *away*.... So I lock the suit in again, back in the slammer with its partners in crime, shut up safe for the night, far from my touch" (66). Amis's repetition of the imperative you—"Don't let it touch me!"—lets us know this is not just inner monologue. What makes John Self even more pitiable as a narrator is his need to address the reader. He is desperate and lonely, and Amis's use of dashes, ellipses, and exclamation points to approximate the flow of his neurotic inner voice are devices that make his narrator, once again, more amusing and pitiable.

In a manner similar to how Amis garners sympathy for his desperate narrator through a neurotic inner dialogue, Michael Chabon lends his rogue hero vulnerability in *Wonder Boys* by making him a chronic drug user suffering from paranoia. In speaking earlier of his wife who left him that morning, he confides in Miss Sloviak, a drag queen, "I was sort of thinking maybe I'd just imagined it all, I said. As a lifelong habitué of marijuana I was used to having even the most dreadful phenomena prove, on further inspection, to be only the figments of my paranoid fancy..." (29). Indeed, Grady has trouble distinguishing fantasy from reality. The situation is both sad—his wife left him, he can't distinguish between what happened and what didn't—and comic—he is confiding in a drag queen whom he just met.

In another scene, when Grady is attempting to bury his girlfriend's husband's blind dog, Dr. Dee, who was shot by his suicidal, larcenous student,

Chabon captures the paranoia of extended and excessive drug use: "When the shovel hit the dirt, because I was stoned and frightened I thought I heard angry voices coming from inside my own ears or from every corner of the farm. Each black ingot of dirt rang out against the shovel, and I was sure that any minute now somebody would come out and ask me what the hell I was doing, and I would have to tell them that I was laying another dead dog into their lawn" (236). Chabon's description of Grady's paranoia allows the reader to see the world from the pot smoker's perspective: "angry voices coming from inside my ears or from every corner of the farm" would be disturbing, and the situation is a bit frightening too—getting caught digging a grave for a dead dog in the middle of the night that was killed at the scene of a crime to which he was an accessory.

Later, in the meeting with Walter Gaskell, Grady is high once again and Chabon captures the impaired and paranoid point of view: "Walter Gaskell unfolded himself from his chair and hurried toward us. For a moment I thought that he had aimed himself at my head, and I took a step backward, but he didn't even look at me" (331). Here, Grady mistakes Gaskell's simple act of getting up from a chair for an act of aggression. His perception is so warped by marijuana that he takes a step backward when he is in no danger. Chabon must have inhaled to be able to describe the paranoia of pot-smokers so well.

A more scholarly approach to balancing the serious and the humorous in the picaresque is to mock the early romances just as Cervantes set out to do. The romance tradition is ripe for parody as are those who pursue "the impossible dream." In Russo's *Straight Man*, Hank has a not-so-subtle Cervantes-esque dream: "In my dream I am the star of the donkey basketball game. I have never been more light and graceful, never less encumbered by gravity or age. My shots, every one of them, leave my fingertips with perfect backspin and arc toward the hoop with a precision that is pure poetry, its refrain the sweet ripping of twine. And remember: I'm doing all this on a donkey" (364). Metaphorically shooting from his ass, Devereaux is weightless, ageless. The image is steeped in the mock heroic, an English professor as warrior is comic enough in itself—a man like the man of La Mancha riding a donkey while competing in a sports event is wonderfully absurd. At the same time, the dream is sadly romantic in the same sense that Don Quixote is a sadly romantic man—a man who sees the world as he chooses, not as it is. Only in dreams do we find perfection, only in dreams do we achieve the heroic, transcendent qualities in life we all strive for. How Russo can achieve all this is admirable: the alliteration of "precision that is pure poetry," the comic reminder: "And remember: I'm doing all this on a donkey." The irony and contradiction of saying he has never felt "more light and graceful, never less encumbered by gravity or age" while riding on a donkey and playing basketball is delightful.

Likewise, Michael Chabon makes use of "mock romance" in *Wonder Boys*. What makes Chabon's narrator Grady Tripp an endearing character, despite all

of his faults, is his foolish pursuit of the romantic dream. At one point he even says, "All male relationships are essentially quixotic: they last only so long as each man is willing to polish the shaving-bowl helmet, climb on his donkey, and ride off after the other in pursuit of illusive glory and questionable adventure" (326). Certainly his relationship with his editor Terry Crabtree is romantic in a Cervantes-esque way. How else does one explain the climactic scene of the novel when the two take on "Pea Walker," the ex-flyweight boxer with his nine millimeter, and Booger, the bald sidekick? "Walker looked over at the Renault, and while his head was turned I raised the heavy staff of Grossman's body over my head—like Aaron, the silver tongued shadow of Moses—hurled it at him. It struck him squarely in the face, with a loud crack, and he fell backward. The nine flew out of his hand and went clattering like an old roller skate across the parking lot. I ran down the alley, kicking through drifting strands of debris, swinging my tuba out ahead of me..." (319–20). Grossman, of course, refers to a deceased eleven foot long snake. The scene is mock-heroic, and the mythical allusion infuses it with humor. It is an absurd situation, a forty-one-year-old pot-addled English professor swinging part of a dead snake (the rest of Grossman is still missing from when he was run over earlier) in one hand and a tuba in the other, and an ex-flyweight named "Pea" toting a nine millimeter handgun. The fight is ridiculous—a man with a semi-automatic weapon versus one with a dead snake and a tuba—but Chabon makes the scene even more hilarious by elevating the language. This is burlesque at its best. Making the trivial epic: "the heavy staff," "like Aaron—the silver tongued shadow of Moses."

But Chabon knows when enough is enough and he never strays far from the sad or pathetic because he knows that parody needs to be balanced with something emotionally heavier. Shortly after the showdown with Pea Walker, in which Grady loses his novel of seven years, he breaks down and cries. To lend the scene more gravity, Grady thinks of Dr. Dee, Dr. Gaskell's dead dog, whose odd habit for arranging sticks was not unlike Grady's futile attempts to finish his novel: "The image of Dr. Dee lying dead and zippered in a nylon bag struck me at that moment as incredibly poignant. I suddenly recalled his penchant for arranging sticks into almost intelligible hieroglyphic patterns in the grass of the Gaskells' backyard. He had spent his entire life feverishly trying to communicate some important message that no one had understood and that had now died with him, undelivered" (333). The last part about wasting his life in feverish effort "to communicate some important message that no one had understood and now died with him, undelivered" is especially sad. The comma just before "undelivered" forces the reader to pause. The effect is that the two sad images—that of the dead dog and the failed artist—have more time to sink in and be more powerful.

So, in my quest to discover what devices recent picaresque writers employ to strike that balance between comedy and pathos that imbues certain novels with lasting power, I found not only a good deal of overlap, but also a fair share

of individual deviation. Steve Tesich counterpoises Karoo's self-deprecation, self-hatred, and vulnerability with hyperbole and parody to create a picaresque landscape that is at once comic and sorrowful. Martin Amis in both *The Information* and *Money* blends the comic elements of Schadenfreude, scatological humor, and parody with drug use, self-abuse, and flashes of neurotic inner dialogue to create vulnerability and sympathy for his itinerant rogues. Richard Russo draws on parody, running gags, malapropism, physical comedy, and scatological humor, all of which have their roots in the sad, serious, and all-too-real issues his narrator tries so hard to avoid. Jonathan Safran Foer fuses moments of earnestness with farce, naive characterization with irony, and the verbal beauty with verbal misfires of his insecure rogue hero. Michael Chabon, who, next to Russo, creates the purest form of the picaresque in the lot, relies largely upon the physical comedy associated with protracted drug use—and the paranoia and vulnerability that go with it—to balance out the more farcical elements of parody that he draws upon (i.e., romance, burlesque, and the mock heroic) that would otherwise be too over-the-top to bear. Each makes us laugh in its own way, each makes us feel, and each departs from pure satire by making us love their rogues, despite all their terrible faults. By the last page, we want to help, redirect, and take care of these lost souls—just as we do with Holden Caulfield with all his bipolar anxiety over those *goddam* ducks.