

Some notes on A GATHERING OF OLD MEN

This ranges from superb to so-so. The beginning is beautiful-- your own peculiar flavor. *watch* the title, A GATHERING OF OLD MEN. The old men gather to stand up to the people who have humiliated and hurt them all their lives. It's their last chance to do this. Follow this through to the end.<sup>2</sup> Candy: what's her role? She's the last of her line. She's an old-fashioned type of slaveowner, although she thinks she's very modern and liberal. She finds out these men have minds of their own and doesn't like it. They really are men. Have been wanting to prove it all their lives. But this could be still more understated in the latter part. (Too much talk about "I'm a man," "he's a man," etc.)

This is not a play. It has an unusual form. It is both ~~a~~ who-done-it and a sort of tragi-comedy-folk opera sort of thing combined. Quite unique. Keep it that way all the way through. Never mind if it's different from all other books you've ever seen. *or done* This is yours. Don't change the character of the book two thirds through.

Having multiple first person narratives works better mainly for the black people. That's because it's a very small community. They all know each other, have a common past and when one stops another can take up. (Like in your early version of MISS JANE.) It doesn't work for most of the other people because with each new narrator you're introducing a whole new complexity of: Culture, background, personality, etc. Suggest that you alternate "omniscient" narrative passages with the black narrators and perhaps one or two whites--such as Miss Merle and Lou or even Mapes. You could even use a device such as you used in PITTMAN--with an introduction by a narrator--where the narrator tells some of the story and uses the narrations of some of the characters verbatim. Just a thought. (You could even use the same teacher.) The important thing is to provide more tension

where the book is now too relaxed at times and there is some repetition and overlap. (I thought the minister section was just one too many at that particular point.)

When Aunt Bea tells about herself and Jack Marshall betting about whether Mathu will go to jail, that part is fine and funny, though someone else whom you had already used before, such as Janie or, better, Miss Merle, could probably tell it better and funnier. But when she starts talking about Candy and Mathu and the album it no longer works because she ~~one~~ doesn't have the right personality to go with such a story (as developed earlier in the book). Much better to have your own narrator tell this (as he pieces it together from narratives of others) supplemented by other people's narrations here and there.. This could be running throughout the book instead of being all in one piece. It might be rather difficult to do but would give the book more depth, I think. Everyone should be aware almost from the start that there's something between Candy and Mathu other than just Candy's protective and proprietary feeling. Then reader can gradually find out that Candy lost both her parents and grew up somewhat wild. Just the story you tell, but not all in one piece. This would also make Candy <sup>still</sup> more appealing.

The relationship between Fix and the old men (and women) and also, I guess, between the whites and these black people is beautifully brought out by the narrations of the blacks and also of Mapes. But what Mapes tells can also be told in part at least by the omnisc. narrator (though Mapes actually makes a first-rate narrator). But if you keep him on, he should probably be given still more to narrate and that might interfere with his functioning in the role he has and break the tension. It would be best distributed over the book instead of all in one piece, of course.

What is wrong with the ending is in part that this whole thing that has been building up against Fix sort of fizzles when Fix turns out to be a nice guy and family man, no longer the villain. After his confrontation with Gil, two thirds

through the book, he disappears entirely. Something is wrong here. Beau was killed. We know nothing about him except that he didn't treat Charley nicely. But that doesn't make him particularly villainous. Mathu was right to kill him (he did it to defend Charley). But the men standing up with their guns are really cheated out of their confrontation when Fix doesn't **Show**. So is the reader after all that build-up. This is something you have to work out. Luke Will is the wrong generation. He and his men are just thugs--one is even a stranger to the country. Even if the old men don't harm Fix (it is fitting they don't--he has lost his son and that is enough) perhaps he ought to be present or at least know what the gathering is all about. He should know how they feel about him. Perhaps the loss of his son will help him understand what he has done to these people. And what others have done to them. In any case, it seems to me wrong to take Fix out of the action on p. 212.

After Gil leaves Fix's house, the story sort of weakens and very nearly falls apart, though you have some very strong and good writing in there. (Actually the Lou Dimes section, preceding the scenes with Fix, where Miss Merle brings the sandwiches, is already too mild and relaxed. Things should be speeding up and rushing on by now.) The barroom scene is very good, though it would probably be better to have an omn. narrator (see above) here. Also Marshall seems to be a different character from the one he was before. He has now got an almost sinister quality where before he was mean but somewhat comic and probably harmless. Though this section has some of your very good writing and is ~~big~~ built up beautifully, I'm not sure it engenders the kind of tension it is supposed to, and which is needed.

Then Possum's narration again tends to kill tension. This section gets too talky and stagey. The beginning with the old men going to and from the outhouse to load up their guns with ammo.

is very good. But then that meeting goes on a bit too long. No, much too long, and is really boring, or at least too talky. When Charley turns up, which is very exciting and good, it is a bit like a scene from a play, but that's ok. However some of this "I am a man" stuff could certainly be cut. (It would work fine in a play but here it just gets repetitious.)

Snookum's section is first rate too. But he's not really capable of telling this whole shootout (because of his limited vocabulary and because he doesn't get close enough) so that again you might be better off if you could have this supplemented by an omnisc. narrator. *scene*

The last part with the judge, the court ~~scene~~, etc. is very good. Though I'd like a bit more detail about how the people in the quarters and at Marshall's house reacted (and did Miss B. follow up on her winning the bet?). The scene ~~was~~ where Mapes reconstructs the crime (something like in MISS JANE, where Guidry does a similar thing) I don't care for. This is not an appropriate ending. Mapes is made too lovable. Marriage is not what this book is all about--though now that Candy and Mathu are free of each other it is natural that ~~they~~ *she + Lou* will get married. (Perhaps this should be left to Candy and Lou.) I think you need a windup of the old people talking perhaps. A slow, relaxed windup--they've done what they've done. Something has changed and everyone feels good about it. So that should be shown, No?

Some more thoughts: Why should Mapes be the one to solve it all. Perhaps it wasn't at all like that. Perhaps it was really Charley. And perhaps Mathu is the only one who really knows. Perhaps the reader should be kept guessing. I would love it to have been Charley. How can he rest in peace if his memory is based on a lie? Perhaps it was really him. I don't like the way it was his mother that made him come back (so Mapes says): justifying Senator ~~My~~ Moynihan and all those others who say that the black family is dominated by women. But that's up to you. It's a nice touch. But I don't like it.

Luke Will. Where does he fit in? Was he really a close friend of Beau? Give his last <sup>name</sup> ~~na~~ so we know it's a Cajun name at least? Perhaps make him a closer friend? Or perhaps the point is that he isn't at all close and just wants an excuse for some hot action. It is right that he should die. (But it is not enough. See above.)

TV as narrator is not so hot because he tends to flatten the narrative. His voice is not distinctive. The beginning at the LSU ~~camp~~ campus could be cut some.\* The drive to Fix's house and the description of the country is very good. But we don't need TV for this. The omn. narrator could do it, perhaps. The scene at Fix's house (see above) is fine but you might perhaps work in still more info. about the family-- which you could do better via a different narrator. Who were the guys in Fix's gang that had done so much harm to the people in the quarters? Was Beau running with them? Had Beau done any harm to them? Were those two old men with Fix part of the gang? What did the sons get in trouble and go to jail for? Which sons? The scene here could stand still a bit more deepening and rounding. Showing the grief, the anger. But understated the way you know how to do it. Make all this count still more. This man is the villain ~~f~~ of the book. But here he is a grieving father and has our sympathy. But all this needs still more work. It is a very crucial scene. Just having a confrontation with Gil is not quite enough. Or rather, their just debating whether or not to have a lynching. I don't know whether I have put this very well, E. I hope you understand the gist. Gil comes out a bit too nicey-nicey. This all reads still much like a draft.

Perhaps Gil's visit to the quarters before going home could be separate and ~~come~~ much earlier in the book. Soon after the coroner gets there, perhaps. This could be a tense, moving snort chapter telling us something about Gil and Beau and their family before we ever get to meet Fix later.

\* though I liked it a lot

Structure: I've said something about alternating narrations to keep or heighten tensions. Additional ~~the~~ thoughts on structure: ~~Perhaps~~ ~~ps~~ ~~Gill's~~ ~~visit~~ ~~to~~ ~~the~~ ~~xxx~~ Some of the pieces might be shuffled around: for instance Mathu and Candy. Perhaps you don't even need the album, though it's a nice touch. But this whole story could sort of weave through the book. It is really a love story and therefore we have sort of a triangle. This is sort of a counterpoint to the "hate" story. That is the story of the hatred and meanness shown the blacks by Fix's crowd, etc. Another element, Charley, could also perhaps be ~~well~~ worked in earlier instead of all at once so late.

You don't have to make this a family chronicle, or a plantation chronicle. But I do think it needs to be a bit fuller and thicker and even longer. Also, I'm afraid it can't be done quickly. It is so lovely, it deserves great care. You need to let it grow a bit more until you have it exactly or almost exactly the way you want it.