

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Jeff Sharlet and the Capacity to Reveal

Sweet Heaven When I Die: Faith, Faithlessness, and the Country in Between
by Jeff Sharlet. New York: W.W. Norton, 2011. Paperback, 264 pp., \$15.95

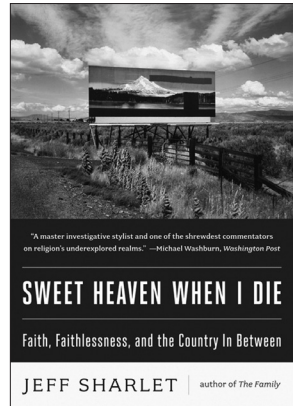
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Jeff Sharlet has earned a name for himself over the last decade or so working the faith-in-America beat. A contributing editor to *Rolling Stone* and *Harper's* and cofounder of the online magazine of religion, politics, and culture, killingthebuddha.com, Sharlet is the author of a number of books, including *The Family*, his bestselling 2008 account of a little-known cabal of Christian fundamentalist politicians and military men committed to influencing the course of American policy and history in the name of laissez-faire capitalism and a God who they believe has explicitly chosen them to fulfill that mission. He followed that book in 2010 with *C Street*, a remarkable look inside the Family's Washington, D.C., Fellowship residence through the high-profile indiscretions of three of its members.

It's a rich, weird beat, sometimes otherworldly yet always human-all-too-human, populated by the lowest, the least, and the lost, but also the elite, the powerful, and the influential, not to mention a full clip of kooks, demagogues, haters, charlatans, senators, and congressmen. "I'd seen some strange things," Sharlet recalled in *C Street*, describing his research for a cross-country report on religion in America he wrote with novelist Peter Manseau:

a Pentecostal exorcism in North Carolina; a massive outdoor Pagan dance party in honor of "the Horned One" in rural Kansas; a "cowboy church" in Texas featuring a cross made of horseshoes and, in lieu of a picture of Jesus, a lovely portrait of a seriously horned Texas Longhorn steer. (7)

It would be easy for a writer to treat this stuff with a sneer, to see it as a sort of mythopoeic freak show pitched somewhere on the dusky outskirts of the American imaginary. But in Sharlet's work, faith, along with its no-less-compelling sibling, faithlessness, are main-street phenomena exerting in their



various guises a mighty influence on the political, economic, and cultural life of America, both red and blue. An exacting reporter and a daring, talented writer, Sharlet approaches this material with the restlessly doubting sensibility of Ecclesiastes's Preacher, probing beyond the empirical facts of his subject's stories to sound the existential conditions to which their faith or faithlessness is a response. It is through this skeptical stance, combined with a scholar's knowledge of religions, an activist's passion for social justice, and a literary artist's appetite for the complex and the unresolved, along with what can only be described as a writer's faith that words *can* make a difference, that Sharlet's work earns its wings as literary journalism.

In his most recent book, *Sweet Heaven When I Die: Faith, Faithlessness, and the Country In Between*, Sharlet explores the question of faith through a variety of subjects, some more likely than others, and by way of a number of genres, including personal essays, profiles, and reports. There are thirteen pieces in all, most written, he notes in his acknowledgments, while he was working on *The Family* and *C Street*. Among these are some top-notch examples of long-form narrative journalism, any one of which would work well in a classroom. In "Quebrado," for example, Sharlet tells the story of American anarchist and indie media journalist Brad Will, who died in 2006 while covering a popular Mexican uprising ignored by the US media. "The Rapture" focuses on the dazzling ease with which New Age mysticism overcame any qualms about capitalism that might have lingered from the 1960s to embrace the neoliberal dawning of the age of avariciousness and the great yields it returned. Sharlet also offers a dispiriting report on the media giant Clear Channel, whose omnipresence in the American radio and entertainment industry is such that it "need not exercise its control in order to wield it" (228): with resonances both Orwellian and divine, Clear Channel's slogan, "Wherever you go, we're there" (220), says it all. A different sort of corrosive influence is evident in Sharlet's story about an evangelical church in Berlin where, in the chants of its young congregants to "Close the gate! Close the gate to Berlin!"—against sin, homosexuals, the faithless, and "esoteric religions" (158)—he hears an echo of calls for purification uncomfortably similar to those that rang through the same streets sixty years before. Such intolerance finds its American counterpart (and then some) in Sharlet's unsettling report on Ron Luce's BattleCry youth crusade. Through arena-style rock shows featuring heavy metal flailings and on-stage theatrics Alice Cooper would admire, Luce has introduced his brutally aggressive Christian message to millions of American adolescents. At a Cleveland show, Luce shouts, "I want an attacking church!" to a young crowd inspired by a message, the nuances of which, Sharlet shows, they never quite grasp. But whatever: through this campaign and his "Honor Academy,"

a sort of extreme evangelical finishing school with an annual enrollment of 800, Luce, Sharlet reports, is radicalizing a generation of Christian kids and “growing a new hard core for American fundamentalism” (163).

Less dismaying are the subjects of the various personal essays and profiles Sharlet includes in the volume. “Sweet Fuck All, Colorado” combines memoir, reportage, and travel narrative with reflections on geography, spirit, and our habit of projecting meaning onto the world, to tell the story of the transformation of his former girlfriend, Molly Knott Chilson, from the liberal idealist he knew in a Massachusetts college to the gun-friendly Christian Republican district attorney she would eventually become once returned to her native Colorado and a God as obdurate and unforgiving as her state’s rugged terrain. In another essay, Sharlet recalls his uncle, the Vietnam veteran and activist, also Jeff Sharlet, who founded and edited *Vietnam GI*, an important antiwar newspaper produced and distributed to US troops until Sharlet’s death at twenty-seven in 1969.

Two profiles in the volume are standouts. The subject of one, Chava Rosenfarb, was a Holocaust survivor and, at the time of Sharlet’s writing, “the last living great Yiddish novelist” (125). (She died in January 2011.) Her three-volume novel *The Tree of Life*, based on her experiences in the Lodz Ghetto, “stands,” Sharlet writes, “as perhaps the most completely detailed literary depiction of life in the Nazi ghettos” (126).

It is, however, in Sharlet’s profile of the American philosopher Cornel West that *Sweet Heaven When I Die* finds its own spiritual center. It is from West, for example, that Sharlet hears the phrase “the ability to contradict what is” (261) and in it a description of the quality that attracted him to many of the subjects of his book. Such contradiction to “what is,” is evident, for example, in the resolve with which Chava Rosenfarb observed, remembered, and then recreated in fiction the world of the Lodz Ghetto. It’s there too in Brad Will’s earnest compulsion to video scenes of injustice and “screen them in squats and at anarchist infoshops” (95) in order “to show American activists how to join the fight wherever they could find it, or start it” (106). It’s there in the antiwar newspaper Sharlet’s uncle edited for soldiers, a publication described by J. Edgar Hoover as “seditious” but regarded by GIs as “the truth paper” (46). And it’s there in the constant challenge Cornel West has posed in his life and career to the social, political, and academic status quo.

There’s a sense in Sharlet’s book, however, that “the powers that be” and the “what is” (262) his subjects confront and contradict is not always simply political. It’s also existential, experienced in the questions and doubts that afflict us, the most dramatic provocation to which is to be found in death. West “begins with the dead, with darkness,” his protégé, Princeton professor Eddie

Glaude Jr. tells Sharlet. “All too often people want to move quickly beyond that” (63). There’s no end of incentive to do so, and Sharlet’s sharpest criticism is reserved for those who use their power to encourage in others a simplistic disregard of the sheer complexity of human being. In *C Street*, for example, he lamented a news media that reduces the infinitely nuanced matters of human desire to the crude moral shorthand of gotcha headlines. The sort of existential relief such reductions offer is exemplified in *Sweet Heaven* in Lacey Mosely, a singer in Ron Luce’s Battle Cry crusade, who tells Sharlet that the faith in which she has found refuge is one that promises “not answers but an end to questions” (185).

But as Graham Greene said, “When we are not sure, we are alive.” What mental lockdowns like Mosely’s obviate is the experience of those moments of intense uncertainty West calls “the death shudder” (54) and the unease we must face when we become aware of a world in which the meanings to which we are habituated can flip in an instant into nonmeaning. Under the spell of the Rocky Mountain sublime, Sharlet writes, “you could see as true everything we tell ourselves about ‘nature’ and ‘beauty’ and wilderness serene; blink, and it was white again, emptied of such stories” (20). Life is lived in the space of such a blink, and what is true of meaning here is no less so for matters of personal identity. We’re all hybrids, Sharlet suggests, none clearly this or that, but always something in between. His book is filled with individuals occupying different, sometimes contradictory, worlds. The anarchist Brad Will, who “thought of himself as half warrior, half poet” (94), moved without awkwardness or a sense of disjunction between the bourgeois home of his “buttoned-down Republican” family (104) and the tear-gas clouds and barricades of his revolutionary life. Cornel West’s work, Sharlet tells us, continues W.E.B Du Bois’s investigation of “double consciousness,” the African American experience of an identity caught between a sense of self and of that self as it is regarded by white eyes. No less divided is Chava Rosenfarb, whom Sharlet describes as living at once in the doomed world of the Lodz Ghetto and Auschwitz and in the postwar domestic space where she wrote about that terrible experience. (It was her ability, Sharlet notes, “to exist in two worlds that for decades allowed her to live at all” [141].) Then there’s Bryan Dilworth, a Clear Channel “talent buyer” whose relationship with “the whale that swallowed rock, pop, and radio whole” (223) is never clear, at least, it seems, in his own mind. “At various times, Dilworth told me he worked for Clear Channel, or didn’t work for Clear Channel, or Clear Channel simply didn’t matter” (223), but in the end, this man who “looked like a joyous idiot savant of rock, a true-heart, whammy-bar metal monster” (223) slumps and tells Sharlet “It’s all payola, dude” (225). And finally, there’s Sharlet himself:

his mother “a hillbilly from Tennessee by way of Indiana” (80), his father “a Jew from Schenectady” (80), Sharlet was “split” between them when he was two and they divorced. “Thereafter,” he writes, “I was a Jew on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and every other weekend, and my mother’s the rest of the week” (80).

But in his book, such spaces between identities, between certainties, although deeply unsettling and conducive to doubt, have also the capacity to reveal. When the New Age healer Sondra Shaye tells Sharlet that he is not a “seeker” but a “doubter” (212), Sharlet tells us she pretty much got it right. “Doubt, she said, is a calling. It is not unbelief, it is in between. . . . ‘Doubt,’ she said, ‘is your revelation’” (212).

Deployed from a position of doubt, Sharlet’s stories offer a powerful challenge to those true believers who would use a weaponized language not to reveal but to conceal. As Vera prays in her Berlin church for a cleansing from the impurities she perceives around her, Sharlet offers a powerful counter-prayer: “Forgive us, I prayed, for that language we do share. The language that whittles God down to a sharp point with which to spread a gospel . . . and uses the language swirling around them to hide their meanings” (160). Sharlet’s words do something else. In beginning with death, proceeding by way of doubt, and in focusing on the spaces between apparent certainties, his essays attempt to unravel those certainties, offering in their place not answers so much as possibilities. In the acknowledgements to *C Street*, he writes, “I’ve always thought the line drawn between journalism and activism was fuzzy” (291), and he praises those with the ability to “cross back and forth” between the two “with ease” (291). It’s no accident, then, that many of the subjects of his stories here—Chava Rosenfarb, Brad Will, Cornel West, Jeff Sharlet, the uncle—are writers and reporters with a commitment to social change and justice.

In his previous books *The Family* and *C Street*, Sharlet demonstrated a similar activist stance, showing that he could work his way through thickets of data and documents to tease out lines of power concealed for decades from the public eye. He’s a great reporter, and his most recent book builds on those strengths. It also, however, confirms a truth about literary journalism, and that is that any beat, reported with honesty, imagination, an open, doubting, inquiring mind, and with soul, can lead beyond trite certainties and into the human heart.
