MISDIRECTION

The Manipulation of Form and Genre in Evan S. Connell’s *Points for a Compass Rose*

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Does form matter? Does genre matter? Can either one be absolutely pinned down? What if they can’t, does that matter? Evan S. Connell’s Points for a Compass Rose forces the reader to ask these questions, and offers answers that are far more complex and subtle than they might at first seem.

I first found the book on the fiction shelf at my local bookstore. When I had initially flipped through the pages I guessed it to be a mistakenly-shelved volume of poetry, but Connell’s book, according to various sellers and references, is frequently classified as General Fiction. Undeterred, it was nominated for the 1974 National Book Award in Poetry shortly after its publication. Connell himself maintains that the book is fiction, refusing the “poet” label altogether. The mystery for me is this: what kind of book can generate this much conflicting classification and interpretation? Then, what are the rules of classification, anyway? How much does an author’s intention have to do with what section of the bookstore their work ends up in, and does its eventual shelf space alter the way the work is read? But most important, what is it?

Connell is no stranger to bending the reader’s idea of form. His most famous books, Mrs. Bridge and its companion piece Mr. Bridge, are written as a chronological progression of short-shorts, some as long as a page and a half, some as short as a few sentences. Taken separately, they are dioramas of tiny domestic moments, nothing especially out of the ordinary, but as a whole the books are breathtaking in their creation of surprisingly complete, three-dimensional characters. The Bridge books have always struck me as a kind of documentary fiction—not “documentary” in the sense of the
epistolary novel, but in the sense that Connell’s total command of his universe, his 
authenticity, creates an experience that is at times almost voyeuristic, and infinitely, 
uncomfortably familiar. Combined with Connell’s nearly patented linguistic detachment, 
this authority seems at times to transcend fiction. While there is never any question that 
Mr. and Mrs. Bridge are creations of the author, there is irrefutable plausibility to them 
which works to blur the line of fiction and biography; knowing that the characters and 
their lives were based on Connell’s own affluent Midwestern upbringing blurs that line 
even more. The mutability of genre and form is present in the Bridge books, which are 
novels written entirely in short-shorts. Connell uses aspects of both the novel and short 
story—the epic narrative and uniformity of tone, language, character and setting familiar 
to novels, and the shape and condensed impact of a short-short—more than 260 of them 
across both books.

Connell is clearly no stranger to the manipulation of text. Is the question of 
*Points for a Compass Rose*’s genre even valid, then? Does Connell’s track record of 
subverting traditional genre forms exempt him from analysis with an eye to 
classification? The answer is, unsurprisingly, more complex than it seems. The process 
of classifying by genre is personal to an extent, but there are some generally accepted 
guidelines that can direct a reader when they first pick up a book: fiction is *usually* a 
made-up story, written in prose form, and unless it’s a collection of short stories or a 
novella, it *usually* tops the 150-page mark. Poetry is *usually* written in a poetic form 
(with deliberate line breaks, sometimes stanzas, and often an elevated or otherwise 
specialized language that would be overwhelming in a longer work). Nonfiction is, well, 
real. *Usually*. Of course, all of these brief definitions are totally inadequate when held
up against the expanse of each genre, but for purposes of general consumption, I would argue that they are adequate to describe conventionally accepted styles of work, at least so far as these are the things that I personally think of when I approach a book as a voluntary reader (as opposed to reading for academic purposes). Connell’s knack for formal manipulation incorporates elements of each of these genres in ways that are both quite obvious and incredibly subtle.

The question of the book’s form is being asked on every level, and “how is this classified?” begs the question “why does it matter?” What does the form a piece is written in have to do with the piece itself, other than providing a framework for the text? Does the genre determine the content? Does it guide the work’s progression? Does it influence the reader’s experience? As to the last question, I must draw upon my own personal experience as a reader, and I would say absolutely yes, the form of a piece impacts my reading of it. Whether it’s the broader poetry v. fiction v. nonfiction or a narrower definition of genre—sestina v. sonnet, short story v. novel—form is essential to my understanding of perhaps not the actual content of the work, but how to interpret it.

Connell obviously knows this— in a 2001 interview with Bookforum, he opines: “Form depends on the subject matter. A visceral sense of organic growth and deliberate, conscious analysis both contribute to the result” (Bottoms). This statement makes the form of *Points for a Compass Rose* even more intriguing. With it, he is confirming that at least for himself as a writer (interviews and profiles have painted him as a man who does not care to speak for others), the form he uses is an integral, consciously established part of the piece. For Connell, the content informs the genre and structure of the piece, and with this relationship firmly in place, it is impossible to declare that Connell’s choice
of stanzas and line breaks was incidental. Not that one is suggesting this, but it reinforces the idea that the form, and to an extent, the classification of the piece, matters. The classification is important: since form and genre can impact a reader’s experience, how it is classified can be viewed as a first step in forming expectations of the material. In the case of *Points for a Compass Rose*, the jumbled classification benefited the work. It immediately challenged my expectations by literally confusing the genres on the price tag, leaving me with fewer preconceived ideas of how to read the book (for example, were it simply classified as “poetry” I would have most likely read it with a sense more dutiful than curious).

On the surface, the book is clearly written in poetic form with stanzas and deliberate line-breaks throughout. Is this enough to call it poetry? If there were no line-breaks, would the resulting snippets of text be prose poems, or short-shorts? If there were no stanzas or line-breaks, would the book hold up, or would it buckle under the weight of its subject (the rather heavy pursuit of laying out the atrocities mankind has perpetuated upon itself throughout history)? Granted, these are purely hypothetical questions as the book is written in stanza form, it does have deliberate line breaks, and it’s not written in a traditional fiction style. So why is there confusion about this book, which most anyone would take one look at and call “poetry” without a second thought? What does it have that caused it to end up on the Fiction shelf, and why does Connell himself deny that the book is poetry (I received a letter from Mr. Connell in which he says he finds it “a bit presumptuous” when he hears of the book being classified thus)?

One possible answer could be in the text of the piece. It is largely an accumulation of historical data, apocrypha, and legend, from prehistory through the
Vietnam War. Each stanza is a complete thought about a particular subject, but not necessarily related to the ones before and after. They are united in their theme, with the information in the stanzas drawn from all manner of source material, including administrative journals, diaries, court documents, and reports from the front lines. While the label “poetry” does not preclude using such material, it is highly unusual, at least in my experience, to see a work of poetry comprised largely of factual data. And while it’s not exactly fair to disavow a label based on what something usually isn’t, in this case it serves to shed even more light on the confusion around the categorization of the book, which makes the question of what it is even more interesting.

This is not the only Connell work to draw extensively from history; he has written multiple essay collections on various subjects, often having to do with pre-Columbian history or medieval Europe and Asia, as well as two expressly historical novels. Connell’s fascination with history is apparent in much of his work, though *Compass Rose* sets itself apart. It is a book comprised largely of such bits of information, one stanza at a time—poems that serve, in themselves, almost as bullet points for some of the most macabre, grotesque, and unsettling snapshots of history imaginable, some of them (many of them) pushing beyond what is, at least for me, conceivable at all: “Kentucky frontiersmen who found the body of Tecumseh / sliced off strips of his skin to use as razor strops” (Connell 93). These nuggets of information come at an unvarying pace: the book is a tsunami of horror and folly made even more horrifying not just because it is often so simply put (no embellishment about those Kentucky frontiersmen), but because these things actually happened.
How, then, can the book be considered anything other than nonfiction? As far as I am aware, Connell has not invented his information. Sparse interviews and articles have shown him to be a man who researches thoroughly and has a lifetime of obscure academic knowledge to draw from; in the same Bookforum interview, he asserts, “I've never combined history with fiction,” which is quite a statement from an author with numerous historical books that have ended up shelved as General Fiction (Bottoms). Connell of course means that he has not had General Custer flying a propeller plane over the Atlantic, but the idea goes deeper than that. The case can be made that poetry is often closer to nonfiction than it is to fiction, but in this case this comparison is taken to its farthest extreme, and brings up another question: is poetry only poetry because of its formal structure? What about concrete poetry? Prose poetry? Surely there are other factors, like language, tone, and subject.

In many places, Connell’s language is as spare as it is in the Bridge books, unadorned to the point of total detachment. This linguistic detachment serves his subject well—there is a remove from the enormity and extremity of the horrors Connell is presenting which, after the first few stanzas, becomes an obvious necessity. It also serves to undermine the impact of the events described in a way that turns on the reader in several ways—a complex use of voice and narrative perspective that feels so dense one almost has to qualify it as poetic, despite its often-academic tone. These complexities serve, on one level, to relieve the pressure on the reader by distancing through time.

Most of the incidents described happened centuries, if not millennia, ago. Thus readers are able to divorce themselves from the active shame of shared history by placing it firmly in the past tense. Additionally, the presentation of information itself—the form it
is presented in—allows for a decreased sense of personal responsibility. How often have you felt truly guilty when you heard some grotesque little fact about the atrocities in Bosnia or the Sudan? How often have you repeated your nugget of horror to the general squeamishness of your listening audience? Then, how often have you felt an actual, motivating response to the knowledge that 20% of Rwanda’s population was murdered over only 100 days in 1994?

Connell plays on humanity’s perverse interest in macabre details by providing an overwhelming selection of them, and then begins to manipulate that interest into something akin to culpability. Both the form he has chosen—is it poetry, or is it trivia?—combined with the deflection of any sort of elaborately prosaic emotional manipulation, work to create tension. The reader (at least this reader) is fascinated by the apocrypha, and at the same time becomes gradually unsettled by how plainly the facts are presented. I don’t mean to imply Connell doesn’t craft his stanzas carefully or skillfully; part of the reason this book is so powerful is his clear mastery of language and ear for poetic rhythms. He has no need for adornment but maintains a heightened aesthetic sense by engineering a very subtle conflict between the reader, the text, and any assumptions the reader might be making about the form and content. By combining the visual, and occasionally metric, attributes of poetry with instances of nonfiction, Connell is inverting a reader’s expectation of both genres. The poetic form is used as a vehicle for non-fictional content, perhaps elevating the actual significance of the content through the implicit significance of lines and stanzas, and the compression of information and emotion that come with these elements. This is not to say that Connell is especially manipulative or innovative with his choice of breaks; indeed one of the more effective
uses of poetic form as a method of conveying information is how intuitively the line breaks happen, how attenuated Connell is to organic rhythms, and how much this intuition aids in balancing the amount of attention the reader pays to form and content—basically, there is no time spent fighting to make sense of obscure stops, and the stanzas read very easily and fluently.

Long before the reader understands that they are being subtly manipulated by Connell’s mastery of form, language, and subject, s/he is presented with an element of the book that conspires to shatter the solidity of any argument for one particular form or genre over another: the whole thing is narrated in the first person. The first line in the book is “Let me begin my story like all true myths,” and throughout Connell uses this unnamed narrator (though often nearly given the name and characteristics of various figures of antiquity—“Eras-” etc.) to generate and clarify the dominant thematic thread of the book, which could be described thus: the picture painted by the ostensible representatives of humanity—kings, religious leaders, warriors, scientists—is one of ugliness, violence, and cruelty (3). There are certainly complexities which embroider more detail around the idea, but at no point is there a respite or word of encouragement. The narrator is always present to question these facts and events, forcing the reader to participate in the dialogue and, by extension, assume some responsibility. While many of the gory details happened hundreds, if not thousands, of years ago, Connell is saying, the impulse hasn’t been erased by time, and you, dear reader, could be next. More than once he references the French phrase *plus ce change, plus c'est le meme chose*: the more things change, the more they stay the same. Never are there more than a few stanzas
between Connell’s historical reportage and his direct addresses; the reader is not permitted to take more than a few breaths.

*Points for a Compass Rose* has been characterized (rightly) as Connell’s most aggressively political and polemical work, a notion he addresses within the text:

> I realize that I say things which an uncharitable reader might find fault with as personal, but you should understand that we’re not attending to formal business or listening to a symphony with contrasting movements, nor to an operatic work with an overture, arias, recitatives and a finale. (62)

With this statement the narrator (and by extension, Connell) has done a very delicate bit of balancing: anticipating some possible reactions of the reader and at the same time laying down a subtle challenge. By making direct addresses, Connell’s narrator is offering to enter into a pact with the reader, and with this statement the expectation is that the reader will do at least as much work as the narrator. It’s *not* personal, it’s got nothing to do with you, it’s just the facts. However, by making direct addresses Connell is also making the text very much about the reader. This affects the reader’s classification of the book’s genre: there’s a non-specific, yet still consistent, narrator who at times is ruminating directly on the historical information, at other times making broad philosophical statements, and asking direct questions about both. Is this the sort of thing one finds in poetry? In fiction? Occasionally yes, in both genres. But rarely is an unnamed first-person narrator used in a work of nonfiction. Unless the work is autobiography, memoir, or personal essay (which are some genres, at least, that *Compass Rose* is definitively *not*) the “I” without a face or name is by default a fictional character, especially when the “I” has a consistent perspective, intention, and voice, and when the
author goes out of his way (perhaps) to tease the reader with clues as to the narrator’s identity—indicating that the narrator does in fact have an identity.

Surely there exists the possibility that the opinions and ruminations expressed by Connell’s narrator are simply the opinions of Connell himself, but the use of the “I” makes this charge a hard one to stick, at least from a literary standpoint. The “I” is an omniscient, Godlike figure, present throughout the span of history Connell references, often taking credit (or responsibility, as the case may be) for various statements, incidents, or actions. The narrator may be expressing views that align closely to Connell’s—he’s been accused of being a “liberal crank,” and this book in particular has been labeled “too angry” and “filled with bile” (all by Greg Bottoms, who funnily enough conducted the Bookforum interview referenced earlier; another example of Connell’s genius for contradiction?)—but the narrator is, for the literary purposes of the book, not Connell. That said, the book’s genre is even more questionable with the addition of this element that is generally found in fiction. Structured as poetry, filled with non-fictional information, and tied together by a fictional character: no wonder the bookstore didn’t know how to classify it.

Continuing to pull from his bag of neat tricks, Connell also creates conflict between fiction and nonfiction much in the same way he creates conflict between nonfiction and poetry: by taking some of their most fundamental aspects and using them—well, not against each other, but in opposition to create uncertainty and fascinating tension. Much of what Connell describes is drawn from ancient sources, or copies of copies of copies of long-gone documents, or personal diaries and journals—all manner of corruptible human record. It would seem impossible to verify every claim
Connell makes in the book, shrouded as many of his anecdotes are in the darkness of antiquity. However, there are also undeniable, easily cross-referenced pieces of data—from Vietnam, from WWII, and other comparatively recent historical events. The juxtaposition of a bit of trivia about the behavior of the Church with regards to the Albigensian heretics in the 12th century with casualty reports contemporary to Connell’s writing of the book make for an extremely blurry line between hard fact and historical hearsay. Again, while I have no reason to believe Connell has invented his information, there’s nothing to prove his sources were entirely accurate, or if they were only based on a true story. Connell exploits the half-truth of apocrypha and the credulity of the average person (especially when old-timey gore is involved) to straddle the line between fiction and nonfiction.

Because of its subject and sources, there exists the possibility of adding another subgenre to the long list of forms and genres already at work in the book. I don’t think it would be unreasonable to include Points for a Compass Rose under the heading of “war literature,” even though it does not fall into a traditional mold. Of course, this book doesn’t fall into any traditional mold, so it is easy to see how there could be both acceptance and skepticism on this point. Let us assume for the time being that Compass Rose fits into this subgenre based on its subject matter and apparent moral and ethical standpoint. This aspect of the book then serves, in addition to furthering its agenda and philosophical intent, to act as another method of cross-genre reader manipulation.

Kenneth Burke, in his Philosophy of Literary Form, writes about a disagreement between Malcolm Cowley and Archibald MacLeish over the purpose and responsibility of both war literature and the author who writes it. Burke illustrates two somewhat
contradictory aims: to exploit the reader’s attitude about the subject, or to form the reader’s attitude about the subject. Part of the contradiction here, beyond the surface differences, is that a book is not necessarily working toward one goal at the exclusion of the other, rather, it is difficult to exploit an attitude that has not yet been formed, and there is a degree of contradiction in what the author’s intention is on this subject. He posits MacLeish and Cowley’s controversy in these terms (as well as a corollary disagreement over perspective). Connell’s book, even more contradictorily, falls between these two positions. Burke’s illumination of the differences between exploitation of attitudes and formation of attitudes, and how an author utilizes their chosen perspective to affect a reader, is extremely useful in establishing a framework in which to examine this aspect of Compass Rose. Burke states: “A work picturing the ‘atrocities’ of the enemy would exploit our attitude toward such atrocities. It would arouse our resentment by depicting the kind of incidents which we already hated prior to this specific work of art” (235). Likewise, the “formation” reaction would occur when a book sets a specific individual, group, or event up as the instigator of these atrocities, contributing to the formation of a reader’s opinion.

Connell utilizes both tools to shape the reader’s experience, but perversely, he does not single out a particular individual, group, or event: he wants them all. Certainly, the Vietnam War is the primary event referenced, but as I’ve already discussed, there is no shortage of atrocity within the work. However, instead of overtly exploiting the reader’s attitudes or attempting to form new ones, Connell twists Burke’s fairly straightforward psychological phenomenon into something much more in line with the overall tone of the book. The reliable Burke comes in handy again here, when he says:
“A book wholly constructed of the repellent may partially close the mind to the repellent. It may call forth, as its response, a psychological callus, a protective crust of insensitiveness” (241).

This “crust of insensitiveness” is certainly present in Points for a Compass Rose, and it may be argued somewhat successfully that there are times when the callus works contrary to the aims of the text. But it is my belief that Connell has deliberately set out to inure the reader to horror, and that because of the sheer volume of grotesquerie, and the way Connell has already unsteadied his reader’s expectations, this tactic actually ends up being in the service of the book. This seems counterintuitive; the assumption would be that the author would try to avoid dulling his reader’s emotional response. However, by making this gambit, Connell has once again thrust responsibility onto the reader’s shoulders. There is a manipulation of moral response in play, which is a risk, but I feel that instead of eradicating the identification of and response to horror, Connell’s technique allows, or forces, the response mechanism to go one step farther. Instead of merely stopping the emotional response through acclimation, Connell’s expectation is that the reader will recognize their disconnection and then perhaps identify themselves as culpable as a human being, passive in the face of unthinkable atrocity. It would be easy to assume that in the privacy of one’s own home, in the inherent privacy that comes from reading a book, that the reader would simply be able to shrug off the guilt that Connell so keenly wants to foist upon them. But Connell has no intention of letting the reader off the hook.

The reader would not be entirely in the wrong to expect an elaborate, breathless depiction of Connell’s antique barbarisms but is instead presented with something much
more unnerving. Connell is subverting the practice of displaying violence for macabre entertainment by displaying it without fanfare, and after a while the reader realizes perhaps it’s not that entertaining after all. The subtle manipulation of the reader’s expectation of form and content is a deft trick; our desire for lurid trivia is continually trumped by Connell’s relatively unvarnished presentation. This is not to say that Connell is writing in rough-hewn parables; instead there is a sense of narrative detachment from the work. This was deeply discomfiting to me as a reader. When reading compendia of facts I expect to align myself with a certain narrative distance, assigning myself the role of narrator. I am able to interpret what I choose in the ways I choose, and to abstain from responsibility. I, as the reader, am given license to develop a personal history, one that is colored by my own experience, since I, the reader, am the highest moral authority for the particular text I am reading. For example, in the innumerable volumes of battle histories there are often books detailing day-by-day activities entailing a lot of coordinates, troop numbers, actions, and other factual data. There is no editorializing: these books are presented as pure information. I am able to string together my own understanding of the chronology, isolating moments I feel to be more important or interesting, and, crucially, not feel guilty about imposing my superior historical hindsight upon the events.

This absolution from guilt is the key difference between a traditional compendium of apocrypha and Connell’s compendium of apocrypha: Connell has figured out how to thoroughly manipulate the reader into feeling guilty, feeling somehow culpable, by assigning the role of narrator to someone who isn’t the reader. Suddenly we’re no longer in control of the information. The facts and anecdotes and parables are turning on us and it is almost impossible to discern how. It is here that Connell’s use of the I as a character
is at its most important and multifaceted. The *I* is different here than it is in traditional fiction, or personal essay. There is a similar distance in straight nonfiction in which the implied narrator is the reader, and in fiction when the direct narrator is a clear character. This distance is what determines the reader’s level of involvement. It doesn’t necessarily influence the reader’s *investment* in the piece, but when the bulk of the important work is being done by someone other than the reader (as in fiction) or very clearly assigned to the reader (as in straight nonfiction) the distance, and therefore, the inverse sense of responsibility, is roughly the same. Paradoxically, total control and no control bring about an equal culpability, or lack thereof: in one case the reader is free to interpret and construct meaning that excuses themselves by virtue of their hindsight or superior knowledge, while in the other the interpretation has already been done by the character designated as narrator, and little or no responsibility falls to the reader for generating anything to complement or synthesize the text. There are certain counterexamples, especially in fiction, but the equivalent fictional mode would be the third-person objective, therefore discounting the *I* (first-person objective, as far as I am aware, is not an actual narrative mode).

The shifting of culpability—from almost none to an equal share—is detectable only after being subjected to pages and pages of recounting of things so cartoonishly awful they are almost impossible to believe:

When the Huguenot town of Orange fell to the Catholics its citizens were hacked to pieces and roasted. Naked women were hung in windows as targets for devout musketeers, leaves from their Geneva Bibles pasted over the *mons veneris*. (91)
Further accusations of blatant manipulation wouldn’t be unwarranted; Connell makes no secret of his desire to impact the reader and what he desires to impact them with, and what his desired end result is. He maintains the theme of mankind’s extreme inhumanity well beyond the point at which the reader “gets it,” choosing to take to the extreme his own examination. That Connell manages to evoke such visceral response—positive or negative—without altering much of the tone or rhythm of his stanzas for nearly two hundred and fifty pages (a length that in lesser hands would certainly have become monotonous very quickly) points to Connell’s willingness to express a clear position with both passion and ability on his side, and also his tremendous skill at weaving the more attractive aspects of a traditional fictional style very subtly in throughout the work: Connell is arguing a point while at the same time building the kind of suspense that can only come through artful plotting. Essentially, he is crafting an arc that pulls the reader along, hooks them and causes them to keep reading. I myself quickly grow weary of repetitive structure and a strident perspective, but in addition to admiring and enjoying Connell’s language and content (I’m a sucker for hideous trivia), I wanted to know what happened at the end. There is a sense of forward motion, even though the stanzas themselves are presented with wildly varying degrees of linear narrative agreement. In other words, there’s a story. Fragmented, often submerged, but undeniable.

The book has, in addition to its narrative arc, something very nearly approaching a coherent, progressive character development. Though the reader does not know any more biographical information at the end of the book than they did at the beginning, there
is a sense of growth, of uniformity of attitude and perspective that evolves gradually. Throughout, the narrator stops to reflect upon himself (when assigning biographical elements to the narrator, Connell generally references a male figure; while some exist there aren’t that many specific female figures associated with historical barbarism) often as a way of distancing himself from a rapidly-approaching outburst of pure polemicism. These incidences of restraint become quite self-referential, the narrator chides himself in moments of wry self-awareness. There are also moments in which the narrator is reaching out of the world of the book and speaking directly to the reader:

Let me warn you: Don’t lapse into the vulgar practice of decrying what you don’t comprehend. Look, It is not by submission of the mind to diverse possibilities that you earn the privilege of choice? And without choice, my friend, what are you? (62)

These direct addresses have been mentioned before, but there is something intensely disconcerting about them, the intensity of their directness. It’s that genre manipulation again: readers accept direct addresses from first-person fictional narratives—asides to the audience, frequently, and there’s a level of self-awareness there that requires a concurrent suspension of disbelief: I, the reader, am being addressed by a fictional character with information related specifically to a fictional story. The narrator in these situations is a guide, allowing me to plunge more fully into a fictional universe. In nonfiction (again, not auto/biography, memoir, or personal essay), the direct address is generally used to impart fact or hypothesis based on given data. So what of books like Points for a Compass Rose (if there are books like it)? Connell’s fictional “I” is directly addressing the reader with non-fictional information, using poetic form, and doing it in a way that plays upon the inherent voyeurism of reading. The reader feels caught out by it.
How many times while reading a book of poetry or nonfiction (or even fiction) has the narrator jumped out of the text, addressed you as “my friend,” and chastised you for something you are very probably doing related to the reading of the text itself? How many times has the narrator anticipated your response, and made a correction to your thinking without missing a beat? When it happens, don’t you feel guilty? I do; guilty and a little piqued and a little bewildered. This feeling of guilt goes beyond the previously discussed moral and ethical manipulation. It is tied closely to Connell’s formal manipulation.

The element of fiction is most present in the presentation of the book’s subtle narrative arc. The one subject Connell returns to again and again is the Vietnam War. While the circumstances and events of a book are in themselves significant to the reader’s experience (as previously discussed) it is the fact of this arc that adds the strongest indication of *Compass Rose*’s classification as fiction. Throughout the book Connell strategically places data about Vietnam: casualty numbers, military trivia, etc:

United States aircrewmen wear this message on their flight jackets. Listen:

*I am an American and do not speak your language.*
*I need food, shelter, assistance.*
*I will not harm you.*
*I bear no malice toward your people.*
*If you help me, you will be rewarded.*

What do you think, how much is true?
How much is false? (77)

There is of course a viewpoint here: the narrator is very clearly opposed to the United States’ involvement in Vietnam. This in itself is not remarkable. At the time of its publication there were innumerable works of protest art: songs, poetry, books, visual
art, film, etc., and artists have rarely hesitated to throw up opposition to war. What is remarkable is how Connell manages to make this book very clearly about Vietnam without ever explicitly stating that it’s what the book is about. Certainly it’s fairly easy to follow that that thematic thread, but the method by which Connell presents his opinion of Vietnam is an immense, grand narrative: *human history has been leading up to this.* *Here’s proof.* Possibly one of the most powerfully significant (and depressing) elements of the book is that it could easily be updated by substituting information from the world’s most current conflict and the effect would be the same.

There is temporal confusion in the presentation of information, a very post-modern approach to a novel. The narrator’s stanzas occasionally hearken back to the archaic trivia that has come before, but more often they are used to jolt the reader back to awareness of the book’s function as a breathtakingly contemporary work; at the time of its publication the US was fully entrenched in Vietnam and would be for two more years. While *Points for a Compass Rose* is certainly not the only book about an event to come out in the midst of that or any hugely significant event, there is something especially powerful about an author being so connected to his time and the world around him that he is able to seize upon it in that moment; for Connell to do this in such a complex way enhances the book’s impact (it’s a shame it has been read by such a limited audience; I am the only person I know of who has read it, which wouldn’t necessarily be shocking save for how many friends and acquaintances I have in the world of writing and literature). The ability to reach to the heart of a specific era and do it in such an all-encompassing way is astonishing; the fact of this book is almost as notable as the effect it has.
Connell adds a final touch to his use of narrative: a very small, subtle framing device. Throughout the book there are references to chess moves (and while I haven’t personally played the game Connell plays throughout the text, I have no doubt that it is a legitimate one). Fairly early on in the book, the narrator breaks in:

By the way, have I told you my name?
Have I shown you my credentials?
Do you suspect me of being an impostor?
I’ll disclose everything all in good time.

[...]

No, wait. Listen. I’ve thought it over
And I’ve decided to tell you the truth.
I’ve challenged Death to a game of chess because He abducted Elizabeth, my wife, and I am Death’s indestructible opponent. (61)

Throughout folklore and legend there exists the idea of playing games with Death, and chess has long been a popular choice. By incorporating this idea into the remainder of the text (periodic stanzas consisting of variations on “N-Q2/P-QB4”) Connell is reinforcing the mythological aspect of his book, evoking the grand tragic machinations of ancient drama. Since the book is the story of the dark side of humanity, what but the most epic of narratives would suffice?

These references add to the idea that the span of humanity Connell is dealing with—i.e., all of it—is essentially a game itself; that we (the non-powerful masses) are at the mercy of the elite few who are ultimately responsible for the horror and misery Connell is presenting. Or are we so passive? Does Connell intend for the moves to be indicative of the game being played by the narrator against Death, or the Devil, or the evil that men do, who could now be labeled either “God” or “Erasmus” or “Darwin” or any
other name? How does this change or enhance the argument for the book being fiction? Two extended metaphors are working in tandem to create a literary context for the book—chess-as-metaphor and narrator-as-metaphor. But what kind of character is the narrator? Does Connell view this godlike presence as purely fictional? Does the god-narrator occupy that nebulous quasi-fictional space shared by the dominant omniscient figure common to all basic cultural legend? He (Connell or the narrator) begins by labeling outright the story we’re about to read as myth. What a can of worms! Too bad asking Joseph Campbell for his opinion is out of the question.

Now that we can break down the book and examine its composite parts, the last question remains: what is the psychological mechanism that must occur to generate such confusion about the book’s classification? Essentially, why is it so confused? Perhaps it’s simply easier to classify a work such as this as fiction, if only to lift the burden that the text is so insistent about placing upon the reader’s shoulders. With poetry there seems to be a license to delve into the dark night of the soul. Nonfiction would also allow for an unvarnished examination of madness and atrocity. With both of these genres there is breathing room, but the synthesis Connell effects seems to utilize the most potent aspects of each. Poetry has a knack for imparting the deeply personal, as well as a reader’s acceptance of the genre’s tendency to manipulate through elevated language, specific visual cues through the shape of a poem itself, and a deliberate arrangement of words, ideas, and images. Nonfiction, at its most factual, presents a reader with the irrefutable, and by utilizing a base (frequently incorrect) assumption that “nonfiction” equals “objective” or “universally true,” writers of nonfiction can manipulate response through juxtaposition of information (which is one of Connell’s strongest and most potent
abilities). The conflation of these genres, taking their most effective elements and applying them to the material at hand, makes for a long, hard journey. Who would want to read a book written in poetic stanzas that essentially berates humanity for 240 pages and provides strong supporting evidence that we’re all doomed to destroy ourselves?

But what if it’s fiction? That certainly makes it more palatable. It’s also not purely poetry. It’s not purely nonfiction. Amusingly (in a way that I’m sure very few people would actually find amusing,) the classification of “fiction” is probably the hardest to justify: its form is poetic, its content is largely non-fictional, and the elements of fiction, while present, are buried fairly deeply in the text and subtext. It strikes me as a cop-out to call it fiction—as though fiction is the default classification for an unclassifiable book. Though perhaps, as a wise man once suggested to me, the book is in fact a redefinition of fiction, a shift in convention made even more radical through its unique mix of both subtle and apparent contradictions.

Perhaps I shouldn’t judge too harshly the confused book-shelvers of the world. *Points for a Compass Rose* is admittedly a tough nut to crack. There was a time when Connell’s manipulation of form and genre would’ve been highly atypical, experimental, unclassifiable, but as the world of writing progresses and evolves, it becomes more and more apparent to me that the book is an unknown touchstone of postmodern literature, drawing upon many of the elements found in the literature of the peak of that movement: intertextuality, temporal distortion, the liltingly-named poioumena, metafiction, and a subversion of the traditional approach to writing about an event. Unfortunately the book isn’t maligned, or even ignored: it’s simply unknown. Connell seems to exist apart as an author; some of his books are widely acknowledged as masterpieces, while many others
have barely been read. *Points for a Compass Rose* is wholly postmodern; Connell has redefined for himself the role of form and genre, and has used his own definitions to create a work that is stunning in its manipulation of the reader’s response. Guilt, anger, admiration, fascination: Connell crafts room for them all. In the end, it doesn’t especially matter what shelf the book comes from; Connell has synthesized so many forms and genres that the book stands in opposition to clear classification. It’s interesting to think about my initial assumption that the book was fiction, and what that meant for my initial interpretation. Alas, I cannot have that first reading experience again with a different mindset—I’ll never know what my opinion would’ve been had I gone in thinking “poetry” or “nonfiction.” I must admit I’m a little surprised by how significant this classification issue has been, but I suppose when a book is as complex and subtle as this, I like to have any concrete touchstone I can get.
Works Cited


