

## vineland: hippies last stand

by Ira Nayman

*Vineland*  
by Thomas Pynchon  
Little, Brown and Company

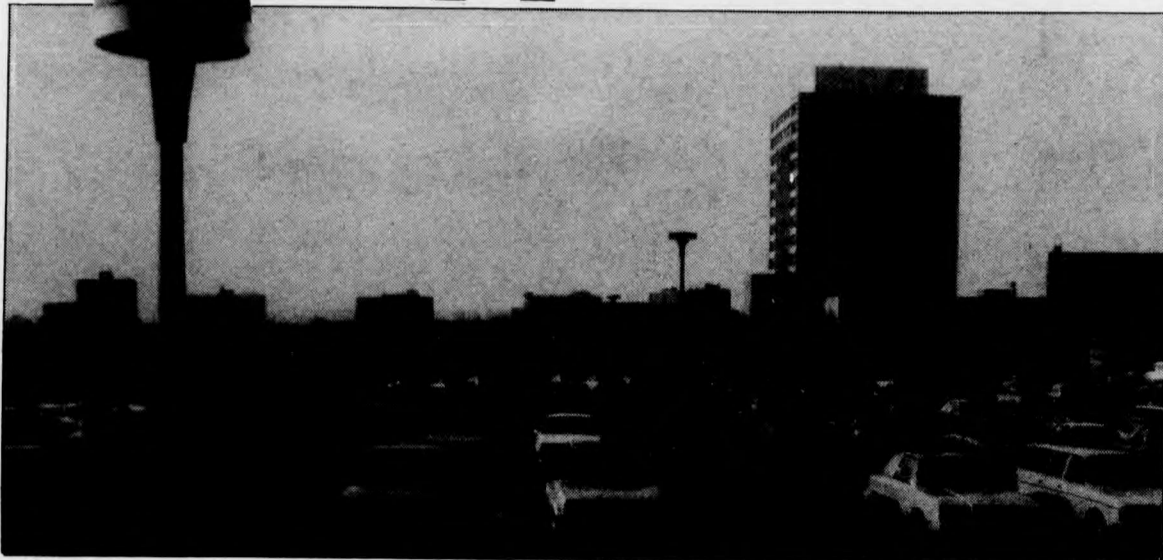
Well, OK, so what would you do if a William Faulkner First Novel Award Winning writer published his first novel in 17 years? This is a man, mind you, who had influenced a whole generation of writers including Kurt Vonnegut (*Slaughterhouse Five*, *Breakfast of Champions*), John Irving (*The World According to Garp*, *The Hotel New Hampshire*) and John Nichols (*The Milagro Beanfield War*).

So, what if next to nothing was known about him? The back cover of his novel, a space usually reserved for a photograph of the author, is blank. The dust jacket contains no biographical data; the writer does not give interviews. So, what do you do?

You write about how there is nothing to write about, of course. But, the hype surrounding *Vineland*, Thomas Pynchon's fourth novel since *V.* was published in 1963, reached ridiculous proportions. Reviewers went on, sometimes at length, about the absence of information, as if celebrity was so important to them they had to write about it even when there was literally nothing to say. *Vineland* is not an easy read. Unfortunately, the hype about Pynchon has somewhat obscured the fact his latest novel is highly rewarding.

The story begins with Zoyd Wheeler, a '60s hippie lost in '80s America, having to perform his annual act of insanity in order to qualify for government disability. The media expects him to throw himself through somebody's front window like usual, but Zoyd has other ideas: he dresses in drag, borrows a pink chainsaw and heads out for what he believes is a badass logger bar. What happens next, like what happens in most of the novel, is as delightful as it is unexpected.

*Vineland* expands to include, among other things: the disintegration of the protest movements of the '60s; a Japanese "Karmic Adjuster" and his white female



*This is what Thomas Pynchon would look like if he were a parking lot.*

ninja sidekick; Thanatoids (zombies who may or may not be dead already) who, while waiting for death to overtake them, hold roasts for each other; Billy Barf and the Vomitones (a punk rock band) playing at a Mafia wedding; a fascist federal prosecutor with bad dreams; and the destruction of a Japanese building by something which may be related to Godzilla. If nothing else, Pynchon's scope is breathtaking.

The difficulties some people may have reading *Vineland* come from Pynchon's tendency to use post-modernist writing techniques. The structure of the story is complex, moving through different time periods and locations in a way not always easy to follow. (I prefer this to *V.*, however, with its alternating chapters in different time periods. *V.* may be clearer, but it doesn't seem as cohesive a whole.)

Furthermore, although primarily comic, there are passages in *Vineland* of straight prose, doggerel and lyricism that is difficult to categorize. These shifts in mood can be disconcerting. At just under 385 pages, the book may be too long for some (although it's less than half as long as Pynchon's most famous work, *Gravity's Rainbow*). And, the ending, a cross between *thirtysomething* and *The Tibetan Book of*

*the Dead*, doesn't really resolve anything.

But, man, is *Vineland* funny! Pynchon eschews the use of one-liners that pass for humour in our culture to get a deeper, more meaningful comedy, one which arises out of characters and their actions. His humour is firmly anchored in the absurdity of human behaviour.

Moreover, Pynchon uses language with a joy that has appeared all too frequently since James Joyce. Although he doesn't pun as often or outrageously as Joyce, Pynchon's use of the English language is just as precise; colloquialisms, slang, songs, bizarre metaphors and other devices create a dense prose which frequently catches the reader by surprise. One example at random:

*"Under the influence of, by then, quarts of a house specially known as Battista's Revenge, Hector went off mooning about his ex-wife, Debbi, who during the divorce proceedings, on the advice of some drug-taking longhair crank attorney, had named the television set, a 19-inch French Provincial floor model, as correspondent, arguing that the tube was a member of the household, enjoying its own space, fed out of the*

*house budget with all the electricity it needed, addressed and indeed chatted with at length by other family members, certainly as able to steal affection as any cheap floozy Hector might have met on the job. As long as she'd happened, moreover, to've destroyed this particular set with a frozen pot roast right in the middle of a 'Green Acres' rerun Hector had especially looked forward to viewing, possibly thereby rendering moot her suit, he decided in the heat of his own emotions to make a citizen's arrest, charging Debbi with Tubal homicide, since she'd already admitted it was human . . ."*

Pynchon's lightness of approach should not be mistaken, however, for a lack of seriousness. *Vineland* is about people betraying their beliefs, not to mention each other, the abuse of political power and the ultimate inability of action to eliminate human suffering. Weighty, worthy themes all.

By setting his story in different time periods, Pynchon creates parallels between specific historical events: the idealism of the Wobblies of the 1920s is contrasted with that of the counter-culture of the 1960s; the Com-

unist paranoia of the 1950s is compared to the drug paranoia of the 1980s. It's as if human behaviour runs in cycles that no amount of effort can change. In the end, the question a federal narcotics agent asks Zoyd seems to apply to all of us. "Who was saved?"

The parallels also contain an interesting stylistic difference. Although the present is treated mostly as comedy, events taking place before 1960 are written and spoken about in more serious tones. Pynchon appears to be portraying the present as a vast cartoon, while the past seems more dignified, people's lives seem less ridiculous.

Once again, Pynchon has captured the spirit of the age. *V.* was an evocation of the 1950s; *Gravity's Rainbow* focused on World War II and, by extension, war in general. *Vineland* is about the 1980s. New age mysticism. Conservative politics. Failed idealism. Television. (Especially television: all of the characters seem to define themselves, relate to each other and react to the world through the medium.) Few writers have been so consistently successful at combining the disparate strands of human behaviour to create a compelling portrait of a time and place.

Not that everything in *Vineland* is meant to be taken literally. Part of the reason for setting it in 1984 (aside from the mythic connotations of that year) is that we have a good idea that some of the excesses detailed in the book clearly did not happen. References to television shows which do not exist (ie—"John Ritter in The Bryant Gumbel Story.") reinforce this. It's as if Pynchon is challenging readers to decide for themselves what is plausible and what is not, to take an active part in determining what, if anything, the novel ultimately means.

Reading anything by Pynchon is like running a marathon; it takes a large amount of effort and can leave you exhausted. Nonetheless, *Vineland* is required reading. After all, books this good only come along once every 17 years.

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