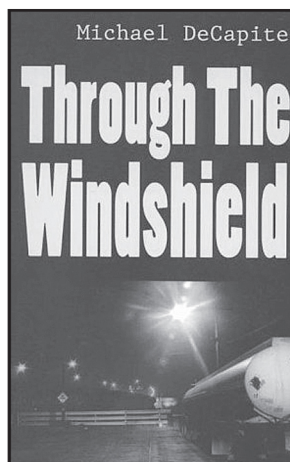


THROUGH THE WINDSHIELD
Michael DeCapite
 Sparkle Street Books (\$14.95)



Since Michael DeCapite's *Through The Windshield* appeared in 1998, thousands of novels have been published. Some garnered attention, a few enjoyed fleeting popularity, and a tiny fraction have a chance at being remembered by posterity. Lost amongst the torrent of words is a novel that deserves to be remembered more than most, but like many creative endeavors of quality *Through The Windshield* never even got noticed. A prose song to the American post-industrial heartland, its unfashionable and heartfelt charms probably never had a chance against the last decade's flood of clever and insubstantial showboating. A novel of undeniable and unusual merit, DeCapite's achievement is so extraordinary that a belated appreciation must be penned in the hope it will cause at least one other person to pick up this book.

In a sense, this book is a 457-page epic ballad. It has a kind-hearted toughness that harkens to an earlier age and celebrates America's people and places in a way that isn't cool anymore, and by doing so captures a vestigial industrial milieu now fading into an irretrievable past. Narrated by that almost extinct species formerly known as the working class self-taught artist, it honestly describes a blue-collar white ethnic world that has almost passed out of existence. In contrast to the legions of overly-trained writers who know all the tricks but have nothing to say, DeCapite is possessed of a style all his own based on the truth of experience. That said, this book is not worthy because of what it is not, but simply because it's beautifully written.

Every time I hit that bridge I felt serious—exultant—committed!—like I wouldn't leave Cleveland till I could grasp that view—possess it—articulate how it hit me: the lights—below and abreast and abroad—the smoke in columns—in billows and plumes and trails and trains and that lone leap of fire: a crown a lick a tower a crest an arm a spire of—goddamnit, missed again...

That much-maligned mid-American metropolis of former glory—the industrial backbone of the country that is now being turned into another Starbucks-ridden wasteland—is a character front and center in *Through The Windshield*. DeCapite succeeds at damning that callous erasure while celebrating what has been lost without devolving into maudlin nostalgia. He's from Cleveland and of Cleveland, driving by "side streets of big old houses built for nobody-remembers-whom" and trenchantly capturing Cleveland's faded, obsolete glamour. There are Sunday mornings on the railroad bridge, blades of grass growing from a crack, and "a slant of sunlight across old wallpaper reminds me of my grandmother. . ." Cleveland is where America was built,

and DeCapite pulls off an updated Whitmanesque hymn to the city and its legacy. Driving with an old friend, not talking, they look at the stars and he thinks it's "the only place there was."

Driving a taxi is what DeCapite's protagonist Danny does for money, a job alternately entertaining and soul deadening. Being a cab driver is the kind of job you never hear about anymore, though that doesn't mean it shouldn't be the basis of a down-at-the-heels, absorbing masterpiece. This is one of those rare books of girth and gravitas that under the right circumstances can be read in two days straight, a journey into someone's mind that engages the reader so completely it lives up to the cliché of the "page-turner."—not because it's mindless, but because it demands a close reading that brings on a thoroughly enjoyable takeover of

the thoughts and senses.

While driving his cab, Danny encounters all stripes of humanity, chauffeuring both businessmen and societal cast-offs all over Cleveland. Some days driving is wonderful and he's "playing the city like a piano"; other days it's a bane. There's "the jittery confused language of promise the night was whispering" and its attendant downside. In his ruminations behind the wheel, Danny's generosity of spirit goes a long way towards making for a believable and sympathetic main character. When he drives a sightless older gentleman out to nowhere to check up on a non-existent housing development the man invested in, there's a profound melancholy in that empty field. Helping a drunk put on his pants, refereeing an altercation between a raving transvestite from the projects and another rude fare in the car at the same time, and idly cruising are all part of his repertoire.

Then there are the bars, low-down watering holes that are now hard to find outside of Cleveland, Pittsburgh, and Detroit (and even in those cities they are increasingly falling prey to young dandies bent on ironic takeover). The smell of stale beer on the floor is viscerally palpable at The Smoky Pig, The Suave Buzzard, and The Empire—"an old free-standing brick building like a tooth waiting to be pulled." The life and death of American cities, the moribund state of disused steel towns like Cleveland, are vivified through these smoky dens where it "always feels like last call, no matter when you come." DeCapite, in short, sings an unapologetic ode to alcohol and its numbing pleasures; drink is a primal force, a constant through the seasons, whiskey in particular. "Whiskey in the evening was the perfect answer to all the questions that bother you during the day." There's being drunk and then there's the momentary flashes of grace that alcohol provides, the kind of drunkenness that leads to "want[ing] to get everyone into a room. . . and maybe hold a seance."

Along with driving a taxi Danny does "spot labor" work, one-night gigs that are a phantasmagoria of overnight shifts so crushingly boring and absurd they could make one long for Dante's circles of hell. "Feed the machine," at the bingo card factory, the coffin handle factory, and the coffee pot factory, where a dwarfish cleaning woman hits Danny with her broom, and he senses this happening over and over to other unfortunates before him. The Nicaraguan at one job tells him the "machine doesn't stop," and what ensues is farcical nightmare reminiscent of Lucille Ball's face-stuffing meltdown on the assembly line at the chocolate factory. Pushing a broom at one godforsaken trucking company he checks the clock every two minutes, tossing things on the floor just to have something to sweep; later he reports, "Peeling an orange at 2:13—Hiding gets to be harder than work." It's abstract

and pointless, and in the break room he and the other losers sit apart, unable to face each other. It's a step up when after taking a lie detector test Danny gets hired at a porn store.

Cleveland is a city of Poles and Slovenes, Lithuanians and Ukrainians, the descendents of the former white ethnic heart of the American working class that have been mostly subsumed, assimilated, and dismissed as separate ethnicities by the general populace. In Ohio those racial distinctions are still salient and not just the butt of white trash jokes or a cause of sappy sentimentality. The St. Theodosius Russian Orthodox Church is a reminder of that European past, as are the poker games at the Greek coffee shop, run by people who are still strongly Hellenic. The racial differences aren't necessarily divisive but they play an important role in the characters' worldview, and how their Old World backgrounds determine their interactions and psychology is vividly brought to life.

Then there's the weirdness, the usually benign insanity of the people surrounding Danny. Not ironic "weirdness" and not trying-to-be-odd-on-purpose weirdness, like the fabricated strangeness invented by people who have dutifully studied David Lynch's films—this is genuine nuttiness. Uncle John is a prime example: a 40-year-old basket case that lives with his mother and is obsessed with gambling. That's normal, but he also has a plastic toy that he calls his kid, thinks it can kill mosquitoes, and for whom he throws a one-man birthday party. One day Danny's friend answers the phone with "just sitting around. . . listening to Frank Sinatra. . . and reading *Mein Kampf*" and again the reader gets the unalloyed eldritch reality of the heartland. An iguana eats donuts, watches *Bonanza*, and smokes cigarettes; during Vegas Night at St. Ignatius a DJ plays a Bruce Springsteen song at full volume to a room full of retarded adults "having fun, dancing to music that doesn't take them into account."

What connects all this behavior and makes it acceptable instead of grounds for social banishment is everybody's shared addiction to gambling. The adrenaline rush of the roll of the dice rules over their lives. Good or bad, gambling provides an alternative to sitting at home listening to the hiss of the radiator; it's a feverish compulsion that never goes away or at least rarely leaves these characters' minds for more than a few minutes. Stefan Zweig's explanation in *Casanova: A Study of Self-Portraiture* is illuminating on the subject of inveterate gamblers, whether they're from 18th-century Venice or 20th-century Cleveland: "At the gaming table he can find an abbreviated recapitulation of the tension of life, artificial dangers and artificial rescues. The gaming table is the asylum of all men of the fleeting hour, the perpetual solace of the idle." Card games are a way of life, a method of killing time, and as Danny says, it's good "to sit with men who weren't thinking about women." The intricacies of track and baseball betting are all elucidated in their Byzantine complexity—five team bets, splitting a couple of doubles, getting beaten by a 16-1 shot, and the dream that you could "build a fucking empire on a ten-dollar bill." There's also watching the Lotto on TV and Danny's next-door neighbor Ed listening to four different baseball games on four different radios at the same time. At one point Ed gets on a roll and sums up the high winning temporarily provides with "I can feel a halo around my head!" You can bet it doesn't last, and in the end it's like being addicted to heroin. As Ed says, "This playing cards six days a fucking week is *killing me*."

If it's not gambling, it's broken-down women of the night. Danny and Ed sit in the car listening to the game on the radio while desultorily trolling for hookers, combining both pursuits. Prostitution, betting, and alcohol are their three primary fixa-

tions, and though certainly grim and occasionally overbearing, the book is saved from being a litany of whiskey-soaked accounts by Danny's eloquence on what transpires out the window, activities that have nothing to do with the aforementioned trio of vices. The three Puerto Rican girls walking by like "accordion music under the trees," for example. This is exceptional prose fused to sociological observation, like watching the hillbillies at the gas station, "revving exhaust into the yard, barking in the sun and smashing bottles," or how in the unremitting summer heat the corner gets hectic with people punching each other as Ed watches over it all on his porch with his gun, ready for action.

Ed is earthy, profane, full of life and outlandish behavior, Rabelaisian to the extreme, and a perfect foil to the quieter, more reflective Danny. His outrageous exploits balance out Danny's introspective seeking, and his unforgettable presence also provides the narrative with a chaste male-to-male love affair of the Odd Couple variety. Ed is a font of crackpot schemes and stories, a teller of tall tales that just might contain a grain of truth, all offered in a cadence so present that readers might find his inimitable motor mouth mode taking over their consciousness. "I went to bed early—lost a fucking two-teamer I had with the Celtics, got beat in the last thirty seconds, after being ahead the whole game. . . . 10:30 the phone rings, its fucking Ichabod, says he talked to the Villain and Jones—possible emergency game at the Finn tonight. I told him I'm broke but the asshole won't let up. . ." Drying his cigarettes on the radiator when they get wet, sitting around stripped to his shorts reading the sports section in classic slovenly male fashion, he then tells the story of the hillbilly woman who picked him up in West Virginia after his engine died during a snowstorm. She is huge, has disgustingly smelly feet, and when he gets on top of her and they try to make it, the bed is like "a sea vessel *creaking* at the *moors*." He blames his father for everything, and when he recounts "shopping" trips that consisted of his father leaving young Ed in the car for eight hours while dad got drunk at the bar and started fights, you can't help but sympathize. The anecdotes about serving in Korea during the Vietnam War are high comedy because they are the opposite of heroic; instead of combat, his war exploits involved sleeping with a lot of Korean prostitutes, a touching and genuine affection for a sweetheart named Miss Kwan, and starting a near-riot when blind drunk he woke up all the soldiers in the red light district one night and marched them back to base. On the less humorous side, "Ballistic Meteor Crewman" Ed blew up weather balloons and the 80-pound Koreans that held onto the rope for too long got carried away, never to be heard from again.

Ed's slapstick employment adventures range from working for the Federal Reserve Bank and unwittingly signing away millions of Cleveland's city funds to getting robbed while driving a Coca-Cola truck. His observation that "it's a good reference to steal when you're a Teamster" rings true, and on top of all its other attributes *Through the Windshield* happens to be an inadvertent and telling history of the disappointments of the American labor movement. There's also the tortured story of Ed's former girlfriend, a drunk who worked as a bartender and would fool around with whoever would buy her a drink. Finally her liver gives out, and they're still arguing in the hospital right before she dies—paths precariously close to bathos, but a genuine report on psychic pain. In a more comical and perverted vein, Ed calls up random women from the white pages in the fake voice of "Lisa" to try and lure them into salacious encounters, though by not going out with a nice secretary because she's "too classy" for his kind, he exhibits a self-awareness about protecting others from

his chaos. Outrageously funny in a dangerous American jackass kind of way, setting off fireworks at the racetrack to cause a scene that he later recounts with relish, Ed is close to crazy, or at least addicted to causing mayhem. A prankster, his stories are both endlessly entertaining and poignant because underneath the bluster he's a semi-tragic victim of circumstances. Straited horizons are his lot, and it isn't hackneyed when he rues his fate with the often-heard plaint that he could have been somebody.

Ed is smitten with an unhinged hooker named Angie who repeatedly proves the folk wisdom adage that "any woman under five feet tall and under a hundred pounds is crazy." She uncomprehendingly endures a painful try-out at a strip club where her pathetic, literally offbeat dancing gets her politely turned away. When they take her to the movies she sits bolt upright "like a test-monkey strapped to a chair," and after seeing a clock at a yard sale demands to stop and wants to go back home because, "We forgot to nail the windows closed." She's mean and insensitive to Ed, incapable of appreciating his attentions that border on love. Later after Angie disappears for a while, Ed sees her one morning surrounded by her possessions at McDonalds, and it's depressing beyond belief. "And—I was—I's gonna talk to her, see if she needs anything, but. . . Aah! didn't even go in there man, I. . ." There are plenty of others, like one woman Danny sees "shooting coke into a purple scar in her throat. . . another lonely form of entertainment." It's an inventory of discarded, disappointed, fucked-up people of both sexes, straining the reportage of despair to the breaking point.

This is a book of multiple ellipses, and always falls on just the right side of overdoing that particular stylistic flourish. Deployed extensively in the straightforward, novelistic sections, they are also a prominent element in the short prose poem pages that occur with regularity and stand out both on their own and as indispensable links in the longer narrative. The obvious reference is Céline, a writer with whom DeCapite shares an affinity for ellipses, although Danny's path is related in an infinitely less acidic and bilious tone than the misanthropic French doctor's. Charles Bukowski, Hubert Selby, Jr., and John Fante also invariably come to mind—good old-fashioned, no-bullshit writing that plumbs the lower depths and celebrates the prosaic, the moment-to-moment pleasures, and the finding of contentment in "riding in cars, protective of a coffee between your legs." These one- or two-paragraph pages of "shadow barge and manhole steam" are stream-of-consciousness prose poetry that succeed because they accurately echo Danny "hearing only the buzzing in my head" and his articulation of that inchoate noise.

DeCapite beautifully illuminates the tenuous fragility of grown-up male friendship, having Danny ruminate, "I wonder where Ed's at. I wish he'd call me to come help him change a tire." He gets to the heart of the murky longing and unspo-

ken understandings and misunderstandings between men, the fraught tensions of male non-sexual friendship. It's also about being young and looking for a mentor or guide, the malaise of not knowing. "I hadn't found what I was looking for, or even what it was I was looking for." For some inexplicable reason he wants an old guy named Cleetus to like him, and when Ed's not home the loneliness and desire for interaction is oppressive, balanced out by contentment later when they are "sitting on Ed's porch with a six of Schaefer's watching the world go by." Danny is an observer, somehow part of life but also at a remove. There's ennui, plenty of it, the "feeling bored not only with what was happening but with anything that possibly could happen" coupled with the humble realization that sometimes "I'd had my day, and certain nights are just someone else's."

Through the Windshield overflows with the true vernacular voice of the American working class sitting in the backroom, idling away time on union wages. Someone says, "Christ, we got more lawyers in this country than hamburgers." When Danny comments, "I was listening as though to hear the bright language behind a code," it's an incredibly powerful and succinct elucidation of the disconnection between the solitary individual and everybody else. We are all trying to get through the code, to deal with that feeling of being left out of the party, when "something is going on and you wish it were you." Class, that swept-under-the-rug topic in the United States, is an ever-present theme, especially between Ed and Danny. Though Danny works he's not doomed like Ed, and though Ed entertains and indulges Danny he is also very aware of the gulf between them. "Someday you'll be a millionaire, you'll have a broad on each arm, you'll go to the Opera," he proclaims, and though it's probably not going to happen it does speak to the divide between Danny and Ed's future prospects. Ed obviously has a fondness for Danny, telling him "You're either gonna be a total success in life or you're gonna be a total bum." He's an uneducated but literary kid hanging out, soaking it all in, and luckily that kid wrote this novel.

The experience must be had, recorded, and turned into literature. The present must turn into the past: "the soft october skies high above the bus station. . . i know I'm leaving, it doesn't matter now exactly when." A young man on a quest, Danny will go to New York and try and make it. Ed complains, "You're abandoning me," but in the end he'll have the last word with one more story, a masterpiece about trying to pick up a hooker while reciting the rosary. And that's the book—Ed's stories, Danny's stories, Cleveland's stories; growing up, saying goodbye to all that, going forward. *Through The Windshield* triumphs by being about watching, listening, capturing for posterity, eulogizing life and "leaving the headlights off, so as not to disturb that shadow." Then he and a friend go on one last drive with two cigarettes left before Danny leaves town. ♦