

## ARTS &amp; LETTERS

# Writing on the Brain

**THE SOURCE:** "The Rise of the Neuro-novel" by Marco Roth, in *n+1*, Fall 2009.

THE OBSESSION WITH DESCRIBING human personalities in the cold language of neuroscience has reached beyond the pages of the popular press and such influential books as Daniel Dennett's *Consciousness Explained* (1991). It's now the stuff of fiction, writes Marco Roth, a founding editor of *n+1*. Behold, the neuronovel.

This literary breed was memorably inaugurated by Ian McEwan's 1997 novel *Enduring Love*, in which a science journalist is stalked by a man with de Clérambault's syndrome, a condition in which the sufferer believes that another person is secretly in love with him. Other examples include Jonathan Lethem's *Motherless Brooklyn* (1999), in which the protagonist has Tourette's syndrome; Mark Haddon's *Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003), narrated by an autistic teenager; and Rivka Galchen's *Atmospheric Disturbances* (2008), about a man who suffers from Capgras syndrome and stops recognizing his wife.

By the early 1990s, Roth writes, psychoanalysis was regarded as "bankrupt"—and Prozac was in. A "new reductionism . . . explained proximate causes of mental function in terms of neurochemistry, and

ultimate causes in terms of evolution and heredity." A comprehensive explanation of consciousness has yet to emerge, but even so, novelists, whose stock in trade has been the same as Freud's—"introspection of the self and observation of others"—are struggling for traction.

Neuronovelists are engaged in a perilous exercise, Roth suggests. In many neuronovels, the author indulges in "fancy language or rare perceptions, and then hastens to explain why, on medical grounds, this is allowed." This, Roth observes, is the opposite of the modernist project, which proposed stylistic novelty and profound interiority as new ways of describing everyone. But if "modernism is just the language of the crazy, then real men must speak like [thriller writer] Lee Child." Furthermore, the "pathological premise" of most neuronovels forecloses the necessary "interpretative leap" that fiction readers make as they discern metaphors for the universal human condition: "Mere biological contingency has a way of repelling meaning."

Why have novelists taken this wrong turn? One reason, Roth speculates, is that in the neurological anomalies they describe, they see a reflection of their own circumstances. In this "new medical-materialist world," novelists are special cases who suffer from an

"inexplicable compulsion" to write, need their own special institutions (MFA programs), and require families that accommodate their strange habits.

Even when 20th-century writers could no longer take society or religion for granted as novelistic frameworks, Roth says, they could still fall back on the subject matter of the self. Now even the self is "an object whose intricacies can only be described by future science." The rise of the neuronovel "appears as another sign of the novel's diminishing purview."

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## Boogie On!

**THE SOURCE:** "When I Say Get It: A Brief History of the Boogie" by Burgin Mathews, in *Southern Cultures*, Fall 2009.

THE BOOGIE IS EVERYWHERE. We say "Let's boogie" to mean "Let's get going." Madonna sings its praises. Country's Johnny Cash, rock 'n' roll's Chuck Berry, the blues' John Lee Hooker, and countless others rode its distinctive propulsive rhythm. Though the word once referred to a very particular musical style, diffusion throughout American culture means that it has come to represent much more than a kind of music. It's all about a certain feeling—and that feeling's a good one, says Burgin Mathews, a writer living in Birmingham, Alabama.

The boogie emerged at the turn of the 20th century and for a time went by a variety of names—barrelhouse, walking the basses, the sixteen, the fives, western rolling

blues, and many others. The term didn't appear in print until 1928, when a recording by pianist Clarence "Pine Top" Smith was released with the title "Pine Top's Boogie Woogie." The music may have had many names, but its original sound was distinct—piano music featuring right-hand improvisations over a heavy left-hand bass pattern, known as a "rolling bass." Often the style is explained as an attempt to translate the sounds of a guitar or banjo to a piano, but Mathews suspects it sprang from another source: the sound of a train. One student of the genre wrote that it represented "the haunting sound of whistles, expresses romping along on a full head of steam, wheels clattering over points and, of course, the insistent rhythm of the driving wheels."

Boogie spread from the rural South westward into Texas, Arkansas, and Oklahoma, and north to the Midwest by way of the turpentine and lumber camps where many African Americans labored in the early 20th century. On weekend nights, the hearts of these camps were their rowdy social halls, called barrelhouses, where traveling musicians would play the boogie and people would dance and drink the night away. In the 1930s, as many African Americans migrated to the urban centers of Birmingham, New Orleans, New York, Kansas City, St. Louis, Pittsburgh, and, above all, Chicago, they brought the boogie with them.

By the end of the 1930s the sound had crossed over into white American culture, a transition per-

haps best captured by an acclaimed performance of a Chicago-based boogie piano trio at the "Spirituals to Swing" concert in 1938 at Carnegie Hall, the temple of white American music.

In the decades that followed, the boogie lost ground as a distinctive genre, but its influence only grew as the sound was diluted. It laid the groundwork for rock 'n' roll. Disco dancers, gangsta rappers, and country musicians all owe it their due. "Boogie [became] broad and flexible enough to encompass any type of music, provided that music contained some element of high energy and upbeat dance," Mathews says. The barrelhouse dance halls and rumbling bass lines may be things of the past, "but the boogie-as-idea persist[s]."



Boogie music spread across the South and Midwest via the barrelhouses of lumber and turpentine camps such as this one in Minglewood, Tennessee, in 1920.