



You Bright and Risen Angels

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In the jungles of South America, on the ice fields of Alaska, the plains of the Midwest, and the streets of San Francisco, a fearsome battle rages. The insects are vying for world domination; the inventors of electricity stand in evil opposition. Bug , a young man, rebels against his own kind and joins forces with the insects. Wayne, a thug, allies himself with the malevolent forces of electricity and vows to assassinate the preying mantis who tends bar in Oregon. A brusque La Pasionara with the sprightly name of Millie leads an intrepid band of revolutionaries. **You Bright and Risen Angels** is the work of an extraordinary imagination. In this free-wheeling novel of epic proportions, **William T. Vollmann** has crafted a biting, hilarious satire of history, technology, politics, and misguided love.

You Bright and Risen Angels Details

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From Reader Review *You Bright and Risen Angels* for online ebook

David says

The world's a crazy place. And if it were a utopia, *You Bright and Risen Angels* would've been impossible to make, let alone conceive. So thank God there's at least ten different wars going on right now.

Accordingly, Vollmann starts his debut novel with a quote from one of the most hated world leaders ever. "If I can send the flower of the German nation into the hell of war without the smallest pity for the shedding of precious German blood, then surely I have the right to remove millions of an inferior race that breeds like vermin." That'd be Adolf Hitler for you.

Like most Post-Modern works, it's extremely redundant to state that what follows can't be explained in 140 characters or less. But it's true. And even more so *You Bright and Risen Angels* than any other book in history (only *Gravity's Rainbow* or the works of William S. Burroughs trumps this in sheer lunacy). The simplest synopsis: Bugs vs. electricity, revolutionaries vs. reactionaries, and don't you ever forget, Vollmann is at liberty to do whatever the hell he wants to at any time.

This is a fevered passion piece comprised of dreams and nightmares, put together in increments and sudden explosions by a writer who is as awed by the universe as a child is. *Don Quixote*-esque in its delusions; we, the reader, are it's dumbfounded Sancho. Essentially, one idiom is true for Vollmann and his complete mastery of the run-on sentence (this is a good thing) and that is if the writing's good, the readers will come. This is creative genius put to pen without restraint. Normally, under such circumstances, the creator might just be batshit insane, but here, Vollmann let's his imagination loose. This is not to say that Vollmann's prose is as unreadable as many Post-Modern works, but only that the ideas and structure are. Run-on sentences are run-on, but fluid, and completely legible; each sentence absolutely necessary.

You Bright and Risen Angels treats the world like a playground--like almost every good Post-Modern work does. And it's brimming with hilarity. The highs are incredible, and happen so often one may have to take a breather before continuing on. Take for instance the city of lost children between the subway tracks one of our heroes recalls (the kind of absurd fear that only a child can imagine). Or K.U.N.T. (Kuzbu Union for a National Turnaround), which is used as the title for a organization open for donation when one of our characters goes door-to-door; humorous for obvious reasons, but also because of the situational comedy that happens when the character spreading this propaganda isn't well liked and constantly a nervous wreck and the doors he knocks on are home to unruly people that just want to have their dinner in peace and quiet, and quite literally, he is scared or chased back into the street, when the name of the organization is, after all, KUNT; one chapter is called, *THE SPREAD OF KUZBUISM*; this is followed by four lines that make up a quote, and then this: *Meanwhile, Kuzbuism spread*. End of chapter. After the revolutionaries (those on the side of the bugs, the closest to this book's protagonists, *Their faces were blackened into swollen masks of desiccated purpose. (Of course, as long as their hearts were whole and entire, the Devil would be afforded lodgment.) They were cariously unclean, like today's supercharged worker. In their sleep they sucked their own breasts.*, led by the one known as Bug, opposite the reactionaries and the power of electricity) are involved in a one-sided highway battle with a car full of children and a wife and husband (they kill them mercilessly because they're rich), they gather what money they can find from their corpses: *...and Milly shot the man twice, and he fell forward against the steering wheel, careening the Buick against Bug's car, but Milly and Susan pushed it off with a pole and it flipped over off the highway. - "Two hundred forty-two dollars Canadian," said Milly, going through the wallet. - "Sixty-three dollars," said Susan, counting the haul from the purse. - "Excellent," said Bug. - He drove smoothly to the nearest rest area, and they had a*

picnic lunch. After several pages of horror there is no brief intermission, but suddenly comedic relief. Another favorite, although more subtle, is when we follow Newt's apprenticeship under the malevolent Mr. White (Newt, for a long time, was Mr. White's kindred spirit, and the one that had the mathematical prowess to move his empire forward). In the chapter's doom-laden climax, Vollmann incorporates a sketch of the students, including Newt, in Mr. White's class. This is a "still" before an exam; the kids look mischievous and excited and have on their mind that they're going to cheat as soon as Mr. White exits the premises. All fun and games until . . . Mr. White returns unexpectedly and catches the children running amok and cheating, and in a skirmish Newt kills (as ordered by the blue globes) the girl he has a crush on, incinerating her to ashes, and then we think back to the picture only a few pages prior, which seemed completely unnecessary at the time, and what does Mr. White say, father of the girl Newt just killed in cold blood, but "*Newt, you've got quite a whipping coming to you.*", which is a clever and absurd way of saying that Mr. White's profits and attempts at world domination come first. Vollmann's world is as absurd as Burgess's in *A Clockwork Orange*, but this time around we feel that just about anything can happen. And soon, we begin to realize that it will.

One may gather from reading the previous that Vollmann doesn't know how to weave a page-turning story with actual plot and character development. But that's far from the truth. The reason why this book succeeds on almost an incomprehensible level is because he's able to weave the absurd and the heart-touching so effortlessly.

There is the vignette of Parker as a child coming home from school and finding a caterpillar on his driveway. He rescues it, takes it inside, feeds it, and happily awaits its transformation into a butterfly. And then: *A week later as he came home the snow was melting. It was getting warm. He saw the hornets stirring out of their nest under the eaves. He went into his room. Inside the jar were brown bits of something and an open cocoon. A butterfly or moth had beaten itself to pieces trying to get out of the jar.* What is more vulnerable to the triumphant roar of civilization? A child or a bug? Vollmann wishes to state that both are, for many different reasons. There are echoes of Vollmann's real life insecurity, the watery depth his characters literally and figuratively plunge into, and his sister who drowned to death in a swimming pool when he himself was a kid and her sole protector, and then the world opened up bright with a new kind of pain and absurdity. We are insects too, against progress, because not all progress helps the betterment of humanity. Progress, by definition, means that something of nature must be overcome, and what more than the nation of bugs? Until we're left to feed on each other, that is. *...and from then on, if all he had for a weapon was goodness and rightness, he felt a strong sense of fear and powerlessness. Everything he learned was making him more like an insect.* Halfway through the book we learn of the horrors of the bugs at the hand of the humans. One particular chapter details grotesquely the execution of several beetles, a nightmarish prison holocaust where limbs are ripped from meaty chitin hides, which instigates the revolt against the oppressors. *While we have life, we have hope. While we have hope, we have courage. While we have courage, we have ingenuity. While we have ingenuity, we have flame-throwers. A state of war now exists between us and the bugs.*

A novel so pressed with purpose every paragraph bubbles and every sentence resonates on some level, if not the level intended. There are allusions to this work in David Foster Wallace's first novel, *The Broom of the System* (not to mention his short stories and *Infinite Jest*, which, at times, doesn't seem to have the vested interest of the reader at heart), but nowhere does it bridge the gap between maniacal obsessive Post-Modernism and humanity itself (it appears that *The Pale King* was going to be his first novel-length crack at it, but that's another story). But this euphoric first novel does all of that and more. *You Bright and Risen Angels* is not only sorely underrated, but a marvel in prose, a work from a maximalist who's not afraid of actually trying to make you *feel* something. A rarity, indeed.

Curtainthief says

I wanted to give this 5 stars but there were TOO many parts that were TOO absurd for TOO long, and honestly TOO much insanity tends to dull the senses so that my attention becomes TOO lackadaisical to latch onto such a narrative. This was my first Vollmann. It won't be my last. I'm very much looking forward to his non-cartoon works...

Dmitry says

Even more necessary now than when it was first published, this hate fuck of capitalist fascism which in no way exculpates the author is the wellspring in whose waters Vollman washed the feet of his idols and found inspiration for everything he wrote up to, but not including, his second, and even greater masterpiece "Europe Central."

Oriana says

This book is so totally weird. On likability, I'd probably only give it three stars, but Vollmann gets another star for sheer balls-out madness.

It's kind of this story where bugs are taking over the world? And our hero is kind of turning into a bug? With time spent in sewers and in the maybe arctic tundra? Plus it's kind of a love story. Plus it's really digressive and hard to read. And it takes place in pretty much real-world San Francisco in the eighties, and it's crazy freaking *Vollmann*, so it's not really sci-fi or anything. Just nuts.

(And plus, for the rest of the nerd-lovers, his author pic on the back is kind of unbearably cute.)

Jimmy says

At the tail end of William T. Vollmann's sprawling epic about revolutions both metaphorical and historical, the reader is informed - in a footnote at the bottom of the page - that, "This is a bookish novel because I, the author, know little of life, and I, Big George, will reveal no secrets." In the beginning of the novel, this selfsame "author" (clearly Vollmann himself; utilizing a characteristic self-insertion that would become a trademark stylistic choice in a majority of both his fiction and non-fiction) lets the reader know that he is the one calling the shots as far as the plot is concerned. Of course, the important status of Big George is not to be overlooked, as he wields considerable power and influence over the author. Together, the two tell the story of the technological dawn of electricity, and how it was manipulated by wealthy landowners at the turn of the 20th century. What follows is a tale of power: the power of money, class, science, and war, and the resistance that power is met with when abused; in this case, by a marginal insect population.

If the aforementioned plot summary sounds oblique or starkly confusing, then it should. The narrative encompasses the stories and sub-stories of over thirty characters. There are five sections to the book: two abstractly poetic codas, and three dense sections squeezed in between. It's told in voices that shift from second to third person perspective on a dime, and it's seldom clear exactly who is narrating at any given

moment. No discernable chronology arises, rather one is simply alluded to. Some characters are prevalent throughout the entire story, while others show up for a minor vignette, never to appear again.

Geographically, the primary setting is the Bay Area, but characters end up in the Arctic, as well as Afghanistan and parts of New York and Colorado. In other words, *You Bright and Risen Angels*, Vollmann's debut novel is a structural and stylistic mess.

The good thing is that it's a mess in the tradition of transgressive fiction such as *Naked Lunch*. In fact, the science-fiction and dreamlike elements of the storytelling techniques used, resemble that particular novel in the same way that Vollmann's *Whores for Gloria* resembled that of a Hubert Selby Jr. story, albeit there is something ostensibly political about the value of this particular narrative. The intention seems to be to utilize exaggerated repulsiveness in order to make points about class alienation, but class alienation that is biological in some ways, e.g., the fact that the insects comprise the revolutionary faction in the book.

Thomas Pynchon would be another easy influence (primarily in the historical fiction sense because the two share a similarly quirky sensibility when it comes to retelling stories of the past, especially those based on actual events) to peg on Vollmann, especially *V.* which shares the status of being an audaciously confident debut novel, even though he dismisses Pynchon's influence in the same incredulous manner that William Gaddis had dismissed the influence of James Joyce when questioned by critics about similarities between the authors' respective books.

The importance and necessity of citing influences before discussing the actual plot summary is that, at this point in his career, Vollmann was creating a fictional world based purely on his own imagination, rather than one motivated by his experiences as a traveler and journalist. Always a writer willing to address the importance of the influence of his literary and historical forefathers (a quote is listed at the beginning of every chapter, and there are many), Vollmann worked with what he had in his head at the time, creating an overwhelming byproduct of his insane imagination; a culmination of the reading that informed his political perception of what revolution and power were all about.

The division of ideology, as represented through the characters in the story, is basically dualistic in that there are two competing factions, the human (presumably caucasian and militaristic) reactionaries and the insect revolutionaries. In the first section of the book entitled "The History of Electricity", the story begins with the entrepreneurial rise of Mr. White. Mr. White, a financier, modeled after - who one can only assume would be that famous pioneer consumer of electricity - J. Pierpont Morgan, takes advantage of the technological phenomenon, using it to create a vast empire of wealth. Vollmann has his fictional characterization of greed compete with Edison, or at least briefly interact with him, which is a confusing aspect of the story. It's more like Edison is simply mentioned alongside White in order to elucidate the importance of electricity in the construction of White's fortune. It's worth noting that it's with historical fiction interludes such as these that the underlying logic of the plot falls into complications. The Society of Daniel is a school for electrical engineers designed in order to assist White in his competitive race for power, which, even early on in the story, already seems somewhat finalized, aims to suggest that Mr. White is the most powerful man in the universe (the universe of the story; again, one would assume that either the author or Big George are the most powerful).

As Vollmann forces the narrative along - at a dense and confounding pace - more characters are introduced. For the most part these are unsympathetic sketches. The reactionaries all work for Mr. White, with the help of his aid, Dr. Dodger, running the Society of Daniel. Again, as the chronology of the story moves rapidly back and forth - the gap being something between 1879 and the early 1980's - the reader is able to grasp the basic gist of when and where a character is and what side of the class war they are on through cultural and technological allusions. Bug, the leader of the revolutionaries, is introduced through descriptions of a student union organization referred to as the "Kuzbuites", a fictional revolutionary party that seems to suggest

something Russian-sounding and revolutionary, such as Bolshevism. Bug is an insect (obviously), which is a detail metaphorically emphasized to suggest that he is a marginal figure, and something along the lines of Darwinian racism is illustrated in a childhood filled with acts of hatred and violence directed toward him simply because he is a bug. As he grows up, he becomes immersed in Kuzbuism, eventually outgrowing it intellectually. Subsequently after this, Bug forms a more sophisticated group of revolutionaries fighting against Mr. White and his imperialistic push for world domination.

There are so many loose ends, plot holes, unexplained character connections, and arbitrary storylines, that it's difficult to settle on what aspect of this densely satirical novel to criticize Vollmann for. A majority of the novel truly reads like a bunch of disparate short stories and vignettes. While some of these are relevant to the plot, others function like silly jokes, punctuating this confusing story. His first attempt at the novel is not without its merits though. Vollmann writes with a sympathy that displays a moral concern for the socially oppressed; suggesting via the insect metaphor (which has a fair share of Kafkaesque connotations outside of the obvious bug thing) that most revolutionaries are condemned to a social existence in which they struggle their entire lives to no avail, discovering that their two most appealing options in life would be either suicide or treachery. While the actual characters themselves come off as shallow and two-dimensional, what's being suggested by their placement in the story is importantly conveyed to the reader in a humanistic and thoughtful manner. It's a book not without successful attempts at black humor as well. Vollmann insightfully criticizes the absurdity and occasional uselessness of ideology and intellectualism. In the end, the suggestion is that the bugs remain oppressed, but through the complexity and dense experimentation of the story, their struggle is told with a vested interest in the depravity of war.

George says

I, Big George, was blown away, *BOOM*, by this cartoon; it was full of bugs and blue globes(balls); they consumed my mind for the past few months. Who would win? Who would lose? Was there even a war going on?! I, the reader, could not get enough of the struggles that the bugs(a praying mantis bartender and a Noh dancing caterpillar), electric balls and other inhabitants of this book fought through; it jumped to the past, to the present, all through time, Where am I, where are you? What is next? BUG, HELP! All of Vollmann begins here, my bright and risen angels, this is the start of a beautiful journey into a brilliant mind. READ IT SOON! When you look at a light does it turn blue?

Kendal says

If you can't read this then you shouldn't.

Sentimental Surrealist says

Vollmann is, it must be said ahead of all other things, a resolutely odd dude. Odd in his personality; the man has cultivated enough myths around his extreme novels to be something of a meme in the literary world (and let us all pat ourselves on the back for not creating Chuck Norris-style "Vollman facts"). But also, and more pertinent to my project right here, odd from a stylistic point of view. And I don't mean the fact that this novel concerns the war between the insects and the forces of electricity, with giant beetles and transcontinental

railroads and sexual shenanigans in the observatory where the master of the forces of electricity worked and a near-Unabomber perspective on good old modern electricity. Yes, this is an eccentric plot point, but [i]too[/i] weird? Dude's a postmodern novelist, so these sorts of hijinks are par for the course.

No, what's odd about Vollmann is how he writes these novels that have the outward appearance of meticulous organization and yet are, when you actually sit down and [i]read[/i] 'em, haphazard as all get-out. In terms of his stylistic preferences and themes and so forth, he sits well in the Gaddis/Pynchon/McElroy school (& let me be the first to acknowledge that yes maybe we're all sick of saber-rattling about Important White Guy Authors so I'll drop this thread pretty soon), but unlike those authors, who seem to organize their apparent chaos quite meticulously, Vollmann seems to just sort of slop a ton of ideas together. I mean sure, these novels have elaborate chapter-subchapter headings and repeated motifs and Strategically Placed Illustrations and all of this other stuff, but I mean for fuck's sake so much of this book is just [i>sloppy[/i] in its construction.

The general idea I got from reading this is Vollmann had no idea how to structure a mega-tome yet, and judging by his later work he never got better at organizing or developing his myriad ideas; he just sort of plastered on more, more, more. Even the brief Whores for Gloria suffers from this; it doesn't so much have a plot that develops as a psychological state that swelters and fractures until it breaks down on the streets of the Tenderloin. Or remember, if you happen to have read it, the pages upon pages of Europe Central that more or less amount to "boom, here's another execution carried out in East Germany, boom, here's another execution carried out in East Germany, boom, here's Shostakovich having weird sex, boom, here's Shostakovich having more weird sex." The dude is the master of tacking on [i]more[/i]. Want a concrete example? Oh, I've got it. The "narrator-Big George" conflict. I think the idea here was the produce a metafictional device about how history becomes repurposed based on the tellers, but it doesn't seem much more substantial or well-rounded than an extended acknowledgment of the fact, which means it doesn't really serve much purpose except to be there, especially not since Vollman doesn't really do much to distinguish their voices. Want another example? The pages upon pages of post-adolescent poetry about a girlfriend that abandoned the narrator. He comes off as a real creep, first off, passive-aggressive and wallowing, and what's more is it doesn't add a fucking thing to the narrative, and my question is just "why is it here, why is every chapter interrupted with this?"

Yet reader! I cannot tell a lie! It was a horde of raging cannibals who were also aliens who chopped down your beloved cherry tree erm I mean this book is goddamn entertaining when it isn't indulging in the painful lost-love story (I mean for fuck's sake what is this doing here), because well there's just no way I won't be entertained by the rambling story of a group of insects waging war against the forces of electricity, and also because when he isn't wallowing in his misery - if anyone can oversell a point, it's Vollmann - our man in California can cook up some mean sentences. I realize all the criticism might point to a lower star rating, but goddammit Vollmann is really good at the stuff he's good at and it's also quick and easy to explain the stuff he's good at, entertaining premises and beautiful sentences.

There are some truly immersive scenes here, too - a revolutionary attack on a computer-programming center, some really wrenching memories of the protagonist's experiences at summer camp, a bizarre and not-fully-realized but still weirdly fulfilling description of an expedition in the Amazon, the Revolutionaries' nightmare trek into the arctic - and if you've read my reviews, you know that kind of stuff gets my literary hackles up. Plus I also love the sense he gives that this war is a part of something bigger, that the book doesn't end when you close it. Vollmann, for all his flaws, for this book's desperate need of an editor, can really fucking tell a story, and the fact that he can pull that off despite the dozens of pages that go absolutely nowhere either speaks volumes about Vollmann's talent or about my own tastes. Either way, the dull moments are substantially outweighed by passages I couldn't put down. In honesty there's a lot I dislike

about Vollmann, and I don't imagine I'll ever give one of his books the full five stars, but when he gets it all together you can't stop him.

Edward says

A Social Gazette of the Personalities Interviewed for this Book

--You Bright and Risen Angels: a cartoon

Author's Note

Donna says

I enjoyed the digressions more than the story. In fact, I enjoyed them a lot. The history of the rise of electricity in the first part of the book was a merciless synopsis of the westward ho! of frontier history. Things fall apart near the end. Or maybe the piss was knocked out of me by the shift from 10% action, 90% digression to 90% action, 10% digression. Vollmann is a wonderful digresser. So unlike 'War and Peace', I tended to skim the battle scenes in this book.

I will now NOT get raptured for reading this book.

Vit Babenco says

Enigmatic and mysterious wars are known since the ancient times – take, for example, *Batrachomyomachia* also known as the Battle of the Frogs and Mice. Time flies, ages change, progress is unstoppable so now we are witnessing the clandestine and merciless battle of Electricity and Bugs.

“The truth is that Mr. White feels behind the eight-ball. Never before has such a throng of degenerates, gooks, bums, coeds, niggers, punks, do-nothing amateurs, squaws, lezzies, weevils, pill-bugs, dung-beetles, Ivy League larvae, sodomy-ants, Jew-hornets, commissar-grubs, filibusterers, imps, and crashing Indian bores made such a concerted assault upon one of his projects.”

Those are dark revolutionary forces bugs stand for...

“These men, upon whom the destiny of our young Republic so depended, were reactionaries in no devil-may-care sense. It was their sincere and unvarnished aim to make us over. With sacks of flour and lead shot lashed to their burros, they subdivided the land into zones of investigation, each zone being comprised of thirteen sectors, and each sector being administered and burnished with all zeal, as was the right of its owner, for property-polishing goes hand in hand with the natural affections of the superior mind.”

Those are dark reactionary forces electricity stands for...

You Bright and Risen Angels is a grotesquely askew and sinister revolutionary chronicle. And it is unbelievably rich in absurdity. The history of the class warfare and the everlasting war of idealism and capitalism, the face-off of dissenters with the establishment never before were depicted in such bizarre and lustrous colours.

There is a bug in every system...

Geoff says

Standing in line at one of Yellowstone National Park's General Stores™ (always presented in plurality) the beefy pink man wearing a JETER t-shirt **YANKEES** jersey (.2.) preceding me in the queue was attempting purchase of a Smucker's® Uncrustables® sandwich product; he hurriedly and ineloquently made the attempt; his face seemed molten, as if the sun had beaten and melted him all day and the steam off the geysers had collected about his brow and cheeks and now shimmered like semen or surplus OFF!® (despite which numerous mosquito bites shone on his neck like tiny thermal anomalies). The pale young girl at the register might have been attractive but for her paper uniform which seemed to be cutting into her scalp and squeezing her forehead into her thick black eyebrows- she bore a look of impatience and the beginnings of sweat and possibly menstrual discomfort. The Smucker's® Uncrustables® was requested by the SPIRIT-OF-JETER (it always strikes me as odd that adult heterosexual men wear sports jerseys emblazoned with another, usually more virile and successful, man's name, as if attempting subterfuge, to crawl into that other man's skin, to show alliance and affinity with this man, whom they will never meet; it is a very sexual gesture; if the same men were to be discovered rifling through Derek Jeter's dresser and donning his briefs they would hardly be met with the same public acceptance); and there was a quick moment of exchange-tension; as JETER-beguiler rifled the change in his pockets the pale register attendee shuffled uncomfortably, consulted an empty bin in the smudged display case beside her, adjusted her paper cap, knitted her suffering brow, and confessed "we're out". I thought for a moment of DEREK JETER number .2. of the **NEW YORK YANKEES** being picked off first base by a quick throw from the ready stance of some nimble AL East lefty and the glee that would resound like church bells amongst us UNDERDOGS; "Yer OUT!"; (okay, here's as good a place as any to explain the basics of what a Smucker's® Uncrustables® exactly is- it is a pre-made peanut butter and jelly sandwich product, and its "hook" is that it comes with the crust *ALREADY CUT OFF(!)*- therefore, labor of consumer is reduced to a bare minimum [at most straining at a vacuum-sealed package with clenched fingers and then the effort of lifting sandwich to mouth, and I suppose whatever calories are expended in chewing, swallowing, and eventual defecation]- but I'll let Smucker's® do the talking: "*Smucker's® has discovered a new way to seal homemade goodness into a peanut butter and jelly sandwich... without the crust! Uncrustables® are the perfect "grab-and-go" sandwich for families on the move. Simply keep them in the freezer, then pack them in your lunch in the morning. By lunchtime, Uncrustables® are thawed and ready to eat.*"- You can imagine the convenience, especially for the beleaguered and hounded father on vacation, herding about his clattering, bucktoothed brood and sexless wife from sight to sight, waiting for geysers to spew with mockery [for when was the last time plump wifey made *him* gush like that?], watching the bison migrate *avec les infants* over a desolate plain with a dim glimmer of doomed recognition, perhaps unconsciously wishing for the saving grace of a grizzly bear's jaws that might rip and rent him free from these worldly bonds, only wanting for the respite and ease of a crustless, ready-to-devour peanut butter and jelly sandwich [like Mom used to make, she also used to cut off the crusts- Smucker's® marketing team would have been mightily proud had they come to know, through whatever strange circumlocutions or persistent surveillance, that JETER-avatar had come to associate Uncrustables® with a primeval Mother-Figure], and perhaps a Coca-Cola® to slide down his gullet [the sun really *beats down* at these altitudes!] and a moment, just a moment, of precious *silence* as he gawks and chews and waits on an oak bench surrounded by Cowboy Culture for Ol' Faithful to orgasm and the inevitable post-coital drowsiness of the crowds of tourists wandering off nonplussed and vexed and bit moistened from spray [the girls untouse their hair with a blush], back into the womb of their tourist buses, not sure where their money went...) Jeter-impostor reels on his heels for but a second. The queue babbles like a noisy little mountain brook. The cheeseburgers audibly steam. Someone in the recesses guffaws. I smell ointment. "Well... *hell!*..." murmurs Derek Jeter's real-world counterpart. And a few meters beneath my feet I feel the slight thermal dynamic tremor of this populace earth falling into a symbolic, latent, pre-reproductive anticipation.

And so but what I find really interesting about *You Bright And Risen Angels* is that I think this, Vollmann's first novel- a big fucking messy ball of electric prose, shooting out arcs like a Tesla coil charged with imaginative pulsing WORDS, rampaging all over the place from Mars to the Arctic to the Amazon jungle to San Francisco to a boy's summer camp within a single blown-the-fuck-out sentence- that this is the book that has definitely convinced me of Vollmann's genius; that is, from a very young age this man was charged with a peerless intellect and imagination (it was published when he was 27). In its eclectic, schizo-ball of twining ideas, vaults of imagination, fuck-all sci-fi bizarreness, insect-amphetamine-buzz, one can find *in utero* the seeds of what were to become Vollmann's preoccupations par excellence- the phenomena of power structures, especially those enacting violence and oppression on weaker subjects; the many-headed Hydra of societal violence; the darkest sides of colonialism and decadent capitalism/imperialism; the attempt at resurrecting the dignity and value of the cast-offs and cast-outs and pariahs of humanity (...hell, we could just say Civilization and Its Discontents); how economics shapes the world; the idea of revolution through literature; the intensely impressionistic sentences, flowing from a mind both taut to the extreme *and* hallucinatorily vibrating and discursive. The *essences* of Vollmann are here, present, fully birthed if a bit raw and unrefined- a prophecy of things to come- a harbinger of very good news. And I haven't even mentioned how FUN and what a piece of ENTERTAINMENT this is! Oh my. Vollmann's glorious, chaotic, undeniably funny and darkly intense first foray into the vibrating and humming beehive of LETTERS! Huzzah.

Louis-Jean Levasseur says

You Bright and Risen Angels (1987) is, among many things, a science fiction novel. Not postmodern sci-fi à la Vonnegut or the kind that exploit SF imagery as a material, but a cartoonesque, surrealist, unbound science fiction novel, *stricto sensu*.

I wouldn't have said that prior to read Pynchon's *Against the Day* (2006), a novel about, among many more things, the dreams the early 20th century made of his potential futures; something like the science fiction of the past (Mason & Dixon is not so far either).

Obviously, science have always preoccupied american literature from Poe's ratiocination to Burroughs mutant bio-technology, but it seems to me now that contemporary fiction which has scientific discourses as an object (Neal Stephenson's Baroque cycle for example) tends to revisit the past, to reach back to the primitive and delirious vision that underlies the world as we know it.

And this is the case here. From the outset, the book opens with an epic «history of electricity», going back at a time when political and electrical power overlap. He extends it to a dystopic world which merges antique atomism with ideological repression and control. Polarity reversals between the revolutionary and reactionary forces are caused by agents provocateurs, unstable electrons, insects (the underdog) and the blue globes, those evil entities of electrical current similar to the interstellar ones engendered by electricity according to the ariosophy of Lanz-Leibniz in nazi mysticism, and maybe the ancestors of Skip, the anthropomorphized lightning ball in *Against the Day*...

I made some generic considerations but a formal analysis of this book can only be exhaustive (metamediatized narration: cartoon, computer games, programming language, war chronicles, charge activation process rather than coming of age stories, etc.). I can understand David Foster Wallace claiming *You Bright and Risen Angels* to be «too Pynchonian» out of rivalry [T.D. Max, *Every Love Story Is A Ghost Story*, p. 316] just as you could have found it too burroughsian when it first came out, but I think that it may be easier to appreciate its own merits now that Vollmann's subsequent efforts has proved to be the result of a

singular voice apart from his literary models.

Ian "Marvin" Graye says

Left-Wing Opportunism: An Infantile Disorder

Much commentary (there's so little real criticism) about this novel attempts to excuse its manifold flaws on the basis that it was the product of an inexperienced 27 year old writer.

This is the tenth book by Vollmann that I've read. Ironically, I didn't find it much worse (or better) than any of his subsequent works. There's definitely no need to justify it as juvenilia, even if it is infantile. Most of the flaws are deliberate stylistic choices (whether adventurous or not), almost all of which are repeated in his later works.

Instinctive Data, Research and Reportage

One of the stylistic tics that pays less and less dividends the more you're exposed to it is the excessive reliance on research and reportage to ground the fiction. Too often, there just isn't enough imagination or fiction to lift the work out of the quagmire of the mundane or pedestrian prose. He just deluges us with barely relevant or interesting detail. This criticism probably applies more to Vollmann's later works. Here, he was supposedly inspired by the Russian Revolution, so we're served up analogies with the careers of both Lenin and Trotsky. Vollmann has implied that he lacked the courage and skill to confront these figures head-on, so he disguised them in the form of fictional analogues. As a result, he couldn't be criticised for not getting his portraits right. Instead, he just doesn't paint these portraits convincingly enough. The characters have neither real nor fictional merits. Most of them are flimsy and transparent. Did I mention unconvincing?

Revolution and Reaction

At the most basic level, the novel concerns the relationship between revolution and reaction or resistance.

The status quo is represented by the White Power and Light Company, which generates electricity. The reactionary forces are associated with power or the state. Their supporters are largely business people, petty bourgeois salesmen and Republican politicians and supporters who benefit financially and personally from the status quo.

The revolutionaries are a coalition of people and other beings and forces. In a nod to science fiction, one of the major forces is the entire world population of insects and bugs. Rarely does Vollmann give us any indication of the size of the bugs, so it's difficult to appreciate the physical threat of the bugs to their human enemies. Also, few of the bugs have a speaking role, so you can't form an affinity with any individual bug (even their leader, the Great Beetle). They are just a swarming, amorphous mass of bugs.

Young Solitary Idealist Bug

Perhaps this is why the most prominent revolutionary (the Lenin analogue? or is it Trotsky?) is a human male called (our hero) Bug. Again, we don't learn much about what makes him tick, he doesn't talk much, we're just told bits and pieces about his back story or personality from time to time. What we do learn isn't particularly encouraging or inspiring. Like "*I, the author*", he's a nonconformist and a loner, and has trouble

forming and maintaining relationships with the opposite sex (he needs to get out more - from between the covers [of books] or from in front of his screen):

"...at the time of which we are speaking he was still just a young solitary Bug taking observations and gathering instinctive data without much to guide him save a certain steely reflexiveness which would prove itself within a fistful of pages."

"All of his young life, as we know, Bug had been infected by a spasmodic political deviation from his peers..."

"Bug was generally considered to be nothing but a trouble-maker...and they let him spend hours and hours at the library."

The Glory of Triumphant Beetles

It's mutually beneficial that the bugs recruit Bug:

"The essentials of the offer were that Bug would be expected to work for the insect cause and obey instructions, in return for which he would be treated as a star operative, his enemies would be undermined gratis, and he would someday share in the glory of triumphant beetles, moths, millipedes and waxworms. Obviously, Bug, who remained to the end of his life a solitary idealist, held a secret part of himself aside..."

"So he [Bug] sat there, once passive, now passive-aggressive, eventually to become aggressive wholly as he killed and thereby became one with the rest of the world."

There's no explanation of the bond between Bug and the bugs. Vollmann refers to Bug's ideology a few times, but we never learn exactly what it is. By analogy with the other revolutionaries, we have to assume that he is left-wing, radical and working class (as opposed to liberal, conformist and middle class).

Killing Fields

Whatever the difference is, it's supposed to be worth targeting and murdering large numbers of both adults and children (in other words, whole families) for.

Susan, equally oblivious to Bug's ideology, follows, almost blindly, in Bug's footsteps:

"Susan, not knowing his motives, surrendered herself to his ideology and decided to kill people."

Many readers highlight Vollmann's empathy for non-conformist characters (i.e., who are, after all, just figments of his imagination or research). However, rarely do they recognise the flipside that he shows no understanding of or empathy with the liberal left or hard-working middle (or working) class people (and their families).

So, we readers are supposed to sympathise with this unexplained, and potentially unjustified, revolutionary violence, as if it's enough to bond over the same Che Guevara t-shirt.

This revolution is no uprising or rising up. It's just killing for the sake of killing or fiction/entertainment/stimulation.

Cancelled Out By Equivocation

This dilemma is reflected in (and perpetrated by) the structure of the narrative itself. Vollmann utilises at least two different narrators: one, described as “*I, the author*” himself (the good guy) and the other, Big George (the bad guy): “*This is a bookish novel because I, the author, know little of life, and I, Big George, will reveal no secrets.*” The author has created the framework of the novel in a computer program at work, while Big George (the ghost in the machine) undermines it as the author sleeps at night, by challenging and changing the fate of the protagonists. Eventually, he intends to kill off Bug and his fellow travellers and revolutionaries. We have to assume that Big George prevails.

What we read is only one-half of the abstract conception of the novel. The contents pages reveal details of the chapters that were either written but not published, or were not written at all. Big George tells us in the body of the novel that he will kill off Bug in the second volume (which we never see). We are just left with the foreshadowed knowledge or suspicion that the revolution inevitably fails (as if all revolutions must necessarily fail [e.g., because they’re betrayed, in and by the embrace of power]):

“...it was beautiful but also horribly sad because the book was only half over and you knew that bad things were going to happen.”

This made me suspect that Vollmann and his revolutionary protagonists were really pretty equivocal about the need for revolutions (they’re like a hipster version of F. A. Hayek’s anti-revolutionary diagnosis in “The Road to Serfdom”), and that the entire novel is just a passivist ruse, an opportunity for the deskbound reader/writer to hang out with the other side (a bunch of transgressives) and share their pain. It occasionally threatens to become an early attempt to create or investigate a moral calculus of revolutionary violence before his 3,300 page non-fiction project, “*Rising Up and Rising Down*”. However, what is totally lacking is any evidence or argument for a just cause. Surely there is more to the revolution than exhilaration:

“He loved riding in open vehicles with the wind in his face.”

Serious Young Insects

Even the empathy is bogus (apart, perhaps, for the anomalous appearance of Ken and Brandi doll in the last pages):

“The Secret Ambassador of the Bugs...made our hero feel sorry for it, in the easy way that we all have of pitying vulnerability when that pity costs us nothing.”

“O college days!...even though he didn't know what they were doing it for he couldn't help but love and admire them.”

In a nod to the origin of Stalin’s nickname, Vollmann says of Bug:

“He had now become completely steeled. Thanks to all that he had suffered at summer camp, he was incapable of the softer human feelings without considerable effort...And yet this is not to say that he did not love. For it is possible to love an insect if you want to badly enough and it is also serious about you.”

To be honest, there is far greater insight into radicalism and revolutionary violence in the novels of China Mieville.

Bah Humbug!

No wonder Vollmann described this fiction as a “*cartoon*” - it’s little more than a vehicle for bookish nerds to identify with illusory superheroes of the pseudo-radical kind. The bright and risen angels end up (like they started), after all is said and done, dull and fallen (they’re “*made to kill each other, and fall and die.*”). As one of the protagonists says:

“I think you're all a bunch of sick puppies.”

The reader is left puzzled, disappointed, nay, bewildered by the wasted effort and an overwhelming sense of lost opportunity. To paraphrase Bob Dylan:

*“It ain't no use to wonder why, Bug
If'n you don't know by now,
It ain't no use in turning on your light, Bug -
The light I never knowed
I'm on the dark side of the road
Why'd you hafta empty your load
You're the reason I'm travellin' on
You just kinda wasted my precious time.”*

Aaron says

Back in 1985, you may not remember, humanity was shackled with an oppressive system of capitalism (and even worse, this system particularly hurt certain people based on social/historical groupings, such as the economic hardships of blacks in the US). Now, I realize you may have forgotten all of this because William Vollmann borrowed heavily from Burroughs and unleashed a stream of logorrhea that freed us all with his revolutionary prose.

First, Vollmann managed to destroy the economic super-structure by flailing to find the voice of the author for 90 pages, finally honing it so the book gets fun for 40 pages and then **boldly** abandoning that tone for something much more leaden for the remaining 500 pages.

Next Vollmann righteously punished all the CEOs of big, bad corporations by constantly pointing out that nobody in the world is as clever as Billy Vollmann. Could a CEO include epigrams by sources as diverse as Lenin and a Unix manual? Maybe. But no way they'd be outside-the-box enough to create their very own pictographic alphabet to use for their epilogue. Billy Vollmann was, and so his little drawings made the Fortune 500 dissolve all their wealth and spread it to the masses.

And then lastly, realizing his work was not quite done, Vollmann dropped a bunch on n-bombs to let the reader know that race was tied into this economics stuff somehow.

So that pretty much explains how we're at where we are today. And those gigantic gold-plated statues of Comandante Vollmann. Freedom!

Aiden Heavilin says

When I was about twelve years old, I built "The Conglomeraship" out of LEGO blocks. The Conglomeraship was intended to look as if it had been assembled from the, salvaged, derelict scraps of other ships. It was purposefully ugly, bulky, and crude.

And ever since then, I've had a passion for things that are not so much flawed but *constructed out of flaws*. Flaws are only bad in something that aspires to perfection. The *Millennium Falcon* is a "hunk of junk", but c'mon, that's the point!

William T. Vollmann's first novel is

- Immature
- Pretentious
- Gratuitous
- Self-indulgent
- Ridiculous
- Poorly paced
- Out of control

it happens to also be

- Wildly entertaining
- Heart-breaking
- Hilarious
- Genius

Put simply, "You Bright and Risen Angels" is about growing up in small town America. It's a coming of age novel. It's probably the only coming of age novel to feature an insect war, but it's also written by William Vollmann, so nothing is certain here. Vollmann's genius is to anchor the battle between insects and electricity in events at summer camps, schools, colleges, first jobs, break ups and make ups, bullying, hitchhiking, and all the other staples of growing up in the suburbs of America. Vollmann manages to explore the lives of kids in high-school through the lens of spies, troop-movements, and battles. It's a hilarious take on the heroic task of becoming (or failing to become), an adult in the weird world of America.

But that's only one layer of the twisted puzzle of "You Bright and Risen Angels". The book has two narrators: I, the author, and I, Big George. Both battle for the fate of the characters. Warring narrators were reprised by Vollmann in his later masterpiece, "Europe Central". Set next to the artful maturity of "Europe Central", this book seems even more raw and abrasive, constantly over the top, an explosion of prose and possibility, as more layers begin to pile up.

Are the bugs and electricity just metaphorical representations of a computer game? Is the narrator imagining the whole story to deal with the loss of his girlfriend? Is Big George his boss? Is Bug an actual Bug, or just slowly turning into one? What exactly do the Blue Globes want? And so "You Bright and Risen Angels" roars and rages and like a wild guitar solo, ridiculous, dissonant, absurd, and sometimes going so far over the top it doubles back over itself.

The book is packed with ideas and conflicting philosophies. The villains: Dr. Dodger and Mr. White, are cartoonish stereotypes of ruthless industrialists, horrific, bumbling, irredeemably bad. The revolutionaries who oppose them initially seem like clear cut good guys, but when Bug and his gang starts murdering kids for fun, we can't trust that they are entirely admirable either. The confrontation between leftist extremists and right-wing extremists has no winner (and the moral equivalence between Nazism and Stalinism was again revisited by Vollmann in "Europe Central"). It's a dimension of subtlety in what might seem like a violent video game of a book.

Vollmann throws in plenty of references to Hitler, quotations by Marx and Hegel and Rand, there's allusions to economics and politics, yet this is in no way a "philosophical" book or a serious work of political ideas. The intellectual layer exists to be parodied and mocked, not explored through subtle nuances. This is a book about doing drugs and getting into gunfights and fighting insects and scheming against your tyrannical boss; the pure wish-fulfillment fantasy jars against the philosophical references, and it's this tension that Vollmann exploits for so much energy. You can never tell what the next chapter might bring: a weird descent into hallucinatory political philosophy, or a prison break out. Both are presented with the same verve.

I read "You Bright and Risen Angels" in a little more than two weeks. It's a long book, and if one attempted to read it slowly, I think the sarcastic tone, unrelenting violence, and general abrasiveness would grow dull. Consumed in a quick burst, however, this explosion of ten-page paragraphs and ridiculous movements will be a whole lot of fun; it sure was for me.

"You Bright and Risen Angels" is a flawed book, but in a way that's the point. It's a personal fantasy, a daydream, and as such none of the flaws really hurt my enjoyment. It's a salvaged wreck of a vehicle, patched and mended and covered in dirt, but it sure made the Kessel run in 12 parsecs!

Natalie says

I'm pretty sure that this book burned entirely new neural pathways in my brain. It's complete insanity and exactly what I'd expect to happen when Vollmann attempts sci-fi. It's also a love story and a sort of alt-history about the rise of capitalism and technocracy and the revolutionaries who fight it - the fighters in this instance being the world's insects and their human allies.

Then it gets all metafiction on our asses. Wonderful stuff!!

Cody says

A Portrait of the Anarchist as a Young Man

(Note: The first thing I do before starting a new book is look up to see if it has been Oprah-endorsed. The second thing I do is take my pill because I obviously forgot to for several days.)

First of all: wow. That Vollmann wrote this at so precocious an age is a testament to his innate and incomparable talent. You can't fake this level of writing behind flash. It's almost criminal to be able to reel off prose this good in your mid-20s. Depending on your edition, the photo you see of WTV either has him with a gun to his head or smiling cocksure against a wall. Regardless, you notice immediately (in either

photo) how amazingly young he is.

This youth shows up in the writing in spades. No one would accuse *You Bright and Risen Angels* of being the work of a mature artist OR a mature human being; it's the product of kid getting off on the momentum of his own, self-created mythology. Whether it's shooting cops, shooting out the eyeballs of kids, or shooting smack, Vollmann practically taunts his reader: 'am I shocking you?' No, but you are entertaining the living hell out of me. It's the literary equivalent of 'up against the wall, motherfucker' and were one the right age, I suppose, it could seem inspiring (it certainly doesn't feel lived-in). The Author's Note is enough to scare off Christians and semaphorists alone... But hell, it's all so much fun that sitting here trying to analyze it drains out some of its not-insignificant life's blood. Just read the thing and be glad you did and remember how bad adolescence/early adulthood sucked for you. I mean, we are on goodreads, right? That's endorsement enough for your reading this book.

Some of his other work may be more venerated but none inspire such giddy, reckless euphoria. *You Bright and Risen Angels* is a sustained, 635-page guitar solo wankfest and I, Big George, have my lighter in the air.

Nick Craske says

William T. Vollmann's 1987 debut *You Bright And Risen Angels* is a sprawling disorderly book. Strained to breaking point, it contracts and collapses in on its own raw energy, with exuberant force. It's a beautiful mess, a cacophony of digressions, and a picaresque allegorical *Heart of Darkness*.

I've always had a perversion for peculiar oddities and productions, such as the shambolic genius of Syd Barrett's solo debut, the *Madcap Laughs*. I'm drawn to the imperfect artefacts which acquire a rare artistry and originality through their flaws. These originals reframe their counterparts, their genres and their mediums.

For this book is such a thing'um. A dense, compulsively elaborate, silly, obscene, funny, tragic, philosophical, poetic, inspired, horrific and comedic cartoon blast of post-modern tale-telling. Was it programmed this way? There are bugs in the system...

You Bright And Risen Angels is narrated by 'the author' a programmer, creating a system and writing the story into being. The electrical current surges into the characters: our hero, Bug, the omnipotent Mr. White and his dubious assistant Dr. Dodger; the narcissistic Wayne and the plant like Parker, double agent Frank and scary Big George... The Caterpillar Heart, The Electric Gang and many more who are brought brightly into existence in our imaginations: 'I press the resurrection button and you will be larger than life'.

This magnificent electrified-insectifide necropolis is inhabited with warring factions. A smorgasbord of weird humans and rebellious insects led by The Great Beetle, leader of Bugdom and, last but not least the Blue Globes of Electricity. Spectral-electrical sphere manifestations which will give thee the heebie-jeebies. I promise thee.

There is a plot. There is. This beastly tome is plotted and the energy and gusto of the writing propel one through it. Vollmann's compulsive elaboration takes the writing through plots and counterplots and symbols that twist and convulse with electricity.

It's a teetering structure of Post Modern stylings. It's more confusing than my review. It's gloriously comic

and absurdly moving. The Insect genocide broke my heart.

I was surprised to discover WTV hadn't read Gravity's Rainbow prior to writing this book. You Bright And Risen Angels is less esthetic and narcissistic than Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow but as a black comedy, rife with digressions and a sprawling cast of madcap laughing oddities, it's extremely similar.

I held off writing a review before experiencing the first of WTV's Seven Dream Series, The Ice Shirt, so I could gain a sense of how WTV writing has evolved. For this debut thing'um is exciting in its potential; in pointing to something great. I believe this is for Vollmann completists. An early demo; bootlegs, raw data and program prototypes of a bigger more sophisticated and elegant system.

Paul Bryant says

This big thing was on my shelf for so long I often mistook it for an ugly minimalist sculpture. How many baleful glares were traded between myself and itself before I gave it the statutory 100 pages. And before I did that I noticed that even the publisher's blurb on the cover apologised for it! They knew it was bad! Anyway I thought it was unreadable and it made me very cross. But that was then. Reading 100 pages of bad books never puts me in a grumpy mood these days because I know how much fun I'll have with them on Goodreads later.

Mr Vollman has been described as "the maximalist's maximalist".
