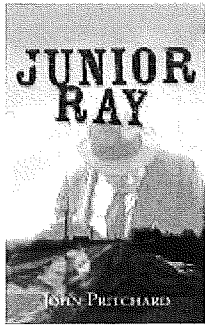


Junior Ray by John Pritchard

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Review by Allen Mendenhall

Reading John Pritchard's *Junior Ray* is like sitting in a rocking chair, on the front porch, a beer in your hand, listening to some trash-talking, sheep-screwing redneck—Mr. Junior Ray Loveblood—ramble on about, well, whatever comes to mind. Junior Ray is the racist, rascally protagonist of this explosive little novel, which, with its roots in oral tradition, recalls Joel Chandler Harris's *The Complete Tales of Uncle Remus*, Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, or, more recently, Gayle Jones's *Eva's Man*. But caveat emptor: it's far more profane than any of these books.

Junior Ray isn't for the squeamish or prudish; it's loaded with expletives and the three naughty "f"s—farting, fighting, and, ahem, you know. Junior Ray, the ex-deputy sheriff from whom the book takes its title, is unfailingly vulgar and thus virtually unquotable among polite company; nevertheless, he is, despite himself, captivating, if not outright endearing, an over-the-top, in-your-face portrait of white-trash cracker-culture. You might say he's the type of scoundrel that educated, ambassadorial Southerners have been trying to disclaim for decades.

The novel's structure and style are unusual. Pritchard has organized the piece to read like nonfiction—like an interview, to be precise—giving readers the impression that one Owen G. Brainsong II has recorded, down to every last detail, Junior Ray's convoluted version of how he came to possess the notebooks of Leland Shaw, a WWII veteran who mistakes Ray and his ludicrous sidekick, Voyd Mudd, for Nazi soldiers. If Brainsong is as prudent as his name suggests, we can, so to speak, "accept" his narrative, despite the fact that the narrative is Pritchard's telling of Brainsong's story of Ray's story of Shaw. We can accept the narrative because surely Brainsong has kept in mind Ray's bullying threat: "Just be sure you put all this down like I told it. You hear? 'Cause I dont want to have to add your ass to my list."

Despite its anachronistic, mosaic technique—an interweaving of Ray's sick ramblings and Shaw's almost eloquent journal entries, which include quasi-philosophical poems—the book maintains a surprising coherence. Ray, who's nothing if not diversionary, has a knack for tying things together with clipped, redirecting statements: "back to Leland Shaw," "another thing I forgot to mention," "anyhow, get'n back to what I was tellin you," "let me get back to them footprints," and so on and so forth.

For all its strengths—in particular its right-on rendering of Mississippi Delta dialect, its creativity (most of its characters, like Dickens's, are apronymic in that their names signify their personalities), and its voyeuristic impulse—the novel risks alienating readers who prefer conventional plot, detailed exposition, refined society, or who simply don't like hearing crass directives ("Move, I got to spit"). If you can get beyond these peculiarities and devote an afternoon or two to this fine, original piece, you will, I think, be better off for it.

Now move—I got to spit.