

# David Myers

## REVIEW

Thomas Pynchon, *Vineland*, Little, Brown and Company, Boston, Toronto, London, 1990.

*Vineland* is an act of homage to the American hippies of the 60s. Thomas Pynchon gives a crazy, new vitality to the established myths of flower-power. The novel is populated with acid-trippers, potheads, peaceniks, tubefreaks, whole-earth fruitarians and mantra-chanters at the "Bodhi Dharma Pizza" hut. These characters are by and large convinced that the FBI is conducting total warfare against all longhairs, dropouts, drugheads and Thanatoids.

*Vineland* is stuffed so full of American popular culture that if it weren't so brilliantly written, it would provoke indigestion even in the most hardened junkfood-addict. The novel is certain to provide at least a semester of curriculum material for all those poststructuralist, literary sociologists at universities who make a living by teaching undergraduates about the hidden meanings in comic books, cartoon films and advertising styles.

Aborigines pointing the bone and singing enemies to death by telepathy have an almost classic constraint to them when compared with the supernatural war-activities of some of the main characters in *Vineland*. Take Darryl Louise, for example. DL, as she is called, is an overcharged bisexual revolutionary and a freckled ninjette with powers of instantaneous hypnotism and invisibility in combat. She has been educated by the Japanese mystic, Inoshiro Sensei, in the martial arts and she has attended finishing school at "the Sisterhood of Kunoichi Attentives" in California. She is now in heavy training to do "the Vibrating Palm or Ninja Death Touch" on FBI fascist Brock Vond while at the same time working as a white slave in a high class Japanese brothel. Phew!

But bear in mind that DL provides only one of the minor spoof-plots in this novel. There is also a sci fi monster from the black lagoon who squashes the Chipco Multinational Hi Tech complex into a 10 storey deep hole in the ground under one gargantuan, clawed paw. What happens when special agent Takeshi-san discovers that only two days earlier this same

Chipco had taken out special marine insurance against all damage by unknown animals. Leaping Jehoshaphat! This is serious stuff. Batman, are you reading me? Are you on my Pancutron Ninjette Meridian Mind Vibes?

Pynchon creates a new environment for his characters. The inspiring landscape of the novels of European romanticism has been entirely replaced by depressing cityscapes and godless highway systems. Today's restless human movement is shown to be dictated by commercial greed, political oppression or mindless escapism. Take this passage as an example of Pynchon's view of our environment:

“So the bad Ninjamobile swept along on the great Ventura, among Olympic visitors from everywhere who teemed all over the freeway system in midday densities till far into the night, shined up, screaming black motorcades that could have carried any of several office seekers, cruisers heading for treed and more gently roaring boulevards, huge double and triple trailer rigs that loved to find Volkswagens laboring up grades and go sashaying around them gracefully and at gnat's-ass tolerances, plus flirterers, deserters, wimps and pimps, speeding like bullets, grinning like chimps, above the heads of TV watchers, lovers under the overpasses, movies at malls letting out, bright gas-station oases in pure fluorescent spill, canopied beneath the palm trees, soon wrapped, down the corridors of the surface streets, in nocturnal smog, the adobe air, the smell of distant fireworks, the spilled, the broken world.”  
(267)

This is the world in which Pynchon's characters move so restlessly on the ground. In the air things are just as grotesque. Characters become nomads “in the sky's desert, continuing to depart in kerosene fumes to seek another connection in another Pacific port” (143) *Vineland* features a sci fi midair hijack and there always seem to be squadrons of FBI Huey Cobras polluting the skyscape.

The plot movement of *Vineland* is determined by two factors. The first factor is Thomas Pynchon's political paranoia about the power of the FBI. The second factor is that structurally the novel is a spoofy jigsaw puzzle

comprising most of the genres of pop culture. It would seem that Pynchon means his political paranoia seriously. He divides the world up into the goodies and the baddies. The goodies are often persecuted left-wingers dating from the 1930s depression. There is also a new generation of goodies who are the progeny of ageing hippy-survivors of the revolutionary sixties. The baddies are right-wingers ranging from the prosecutors in the House of Unamerican Activities through to secret armies of FBI agents employed by the authoritarian regimes of Nixon and Reagan.

*Vineland* is really a visionary account of total warfare between left-wingers and right-wingers. This warfare is shown in flashbacks to the revolution of the sixties and also in drugbust campaigns in the eighties. Pynchon's hatred of middle class "nice" America for attempting to ignore this moral war shines through the novel's filter of narrative voices. There are varying degrees of heroism, treachery, menace, infiltration and failure in this warfare, but there is no opting out. In fact Pynchon seems very happy to opt in. He seems to enjoy the excitement of the conflict and the violence, whether of the yakuza and the white-slave kidnapers of Japan or the more pedestrian FBI in the USA.

Bridging this dichotomy of goodies and baddies, Pynchon spreads the epic quest of an innocent daughter, Prairie, searching for her sexually and politically compromised Mummy. This is an unconvincing and boring quest, always in danger of sentimentality. It ends in anticlimactic boredom and wishy-washyness at the novel's conclusion with an embarrassed family reunion that isn't a reunion at all. Prairie has no more depth of character than the dog Desmond and it is fitting that she and the dog are united at the end.

To these ingredients Pynchon adds some porno-fantasies about women who can't control their lust for fascist controller-men and who run around the novel rutting in almost constant heat. He then throws in some warrior-mysticism of the seven samurai or in this case the two ninjettes, a bit of sci fi horror sequence here and there, enormous expertise on TV soapies, an addiction to customised motor cars and considerable nostalgia for the mythologised freedom of the hippies.

One needs to keep in mind that this is postmodernist writing. The characters are meant as cardboard cutouts or pastiches or surreal or preposterous and the atmosphere ranges from the spoofy to the frantic in the manner of a comic book cartoon. The art of this kind of novel lies in its linguistic inventiveness and its crazy point of view. Perhaps the nearest

relatives for Thomas Pynchon are Ken Kesey, Kurt Vonnegut Jr. and Tom Wolfe.

The conclusion of *Vineland* is disappointing. It ends not so much with a bang as a sexually ambiguous whimper. The comic book villain, Brock Vond, for whose definitive appearance we have waited for two thirds of the novel, is admittedly taken from his fascist Cobra in the skies and handed over to the Thanatoids to be de-boned. In the concluding party for families that aren't families, however, there is a lack of fireworks and Pynchon seems to hover indecisively between hints of inappropriate realism and hints of equally inapposite sentimentality.

*Vineland* is a novel that lives or dies according to the vibrancy of its language. In the most successful parts of the novel it is Thomas Pynchon's magical ability to create mythopoesis out of Californian faddishness for which he will be remembered. As he tells it, in spite of the FBI, in spite of the government drug busters, in spite of the mealy-mouthed, middle-class respectability of the USA in the eighties, in spite of the authoritarian regimes of Nixon and Reagan, the crazy hippy-heroes of American sub-culture struggle to survive. But alas, they survive only in compromised, tattered remnants. Ichabod, Ichabod, for the glory hath departed. The ageing flower-power-refugees from the psychedelic sixties are as threatened as the forest which lies devastated on the front cover of *Vineland*. This is a fantasy novel about paranoia and we the readers must ask ourselves the question: is it socio-politically justified paranoia or only artistically successful paranoia?