

**David Bradley C’72’s  
*The Chaneyville Incident*  
was published in 1981.**

The following year it won the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction and has been compared to Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* and Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. The novel is narrated by John Washington—who shares several biographical details with Bradley, the subject of some author/character confusions at his readings over the years. Both are “black Americans” in Bradley’s preferred formulation, of roughly the same age (at time of publication), who grew up in the same area, and are college teachers in Philadelphia, though Washington is a history professor while Bradley was a literature professor. Very basically, the novel describes how John Washington returns to his birthplace in Western Pennsylvania to aid a dying friend and mentor and embarks on a research project/quest to comprehend the life and death of his father, Moses Washington, and then to retrace *his* investigation of the “incident” that gives the book its title.

Though the novel’s story stretches across multiple generations, it is set very specifically over a week in March 1979—chapter headings set out the chronology according to a system devised by the narrator, “as a string of numbers, year, month (in two digits), date (in two digits) and time of day (in a twenty-four-hour military-style expression).”

To mark the 40th anniversary of *The Chaneyville Incident* in 2021, the publisher, Harper Collins, has issued a new edition, featuring a foreword written by David Bradley—reprinted here with his permission.

—Ed.

# “Things Look Different in Lamplight”

On the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the publication of *The Chaneyville Incident*, David Bradley (aka “The Author Of”) reflects on his acclaimed novel’s genesis and composition—and how the passage of time has made a historical fiction out of a work set in the present looking at the past.

By David Bradley

Dear Reader,

Thank you for taking up a book published 40 years ago. In fact, the first words were written 50 years ago, by a woman who was researching the history of black Americans in Bedford County, Pennsylvania. A waggish local once described the County’s location as “two hundred miles west of the fleshpots of Philadelphia, a hundred east of Pittsburgh’s smog... and thirty from the nearest Democrat.” He failed to mention that its southern border is the Mason–Dixon Line. Near that Line, the researcher heard a legend and found corroborating physical evidence. She wrote up her discovery in a paragraph which she shared with her son.



This son, then an undergraduate at the University of Pennsylvania, was a wannabe, with an Individualized Major in Creative Writing. He turned his mother's paragraph into a story he titled "The Graves" and submitted to his Fiction Workshop.

As is the custom in such workshops, he said nothing during the discussion, even when his Literary Realism was taken for Alternate History—when one student did not believe there were *really* all these black people out there between Philly and Pittsburgh, when another insisted the slaves would have been free once they crossed the Mason-Dixon Line or even when another interpreted references to the Underground Railroad as allusions to Count Basie's "Take the 'A' Train" and hummed a few bars. Custom did permit him to respond after the discussion. But this was not his first workshop; he just went to Smokey Joe's, got drunk. When he submitted his creative thesis, he did not include "The Graves."

After graduation he drafted a comic novel, acquired an agent, signed a contract, and so did become a Writer. He also did time in graduate school and held a real job. But he never forgot "The Graves." Eventually he expanded it into a novel. But its radix remained the paragraph written by his mother:

On the Lester Imes farm below Chaneyville one can still find the markers for twelve or thirteen graves of runaway slaves. Mr. Imes relates that when the slaves realized their pursuers were closing in on them, they begged to be killed rather than go back to the Southland and more servitude. Someone obliged.

To all this I can attest because I was the Writer.

Once a novel is published its writer is re-designated "The Author Of." According to some literary critics this means he, she, or they is dead. To less donnish readers it may suggest interpretive authority. As I see it, publication of a novel transfers all rights to interpret its meaning—indeed, to decide if it has any—to anyone who reads it carefully. I hope this means you, dear Reader. It does not mean me. The Author Of never read *The Chaneyville Incident*.

I did, however, read *from* it, as in "A Public Reading by the Author Of ..." I always began with "The Wire" which I thought an evocative opening. I often read "The Poker Game" as it was a self-contained origin story. At universities, I read "Three Modes of Public Transportation" so survivors of Composition 1 would know I'd felt their pain. Once, under the auspices of a venerable black sorority, I read ... never mind. I learned my lesson.

That being: an Author Of who gives audible voice and physical presence to a first-person narrator should gird his, her, or their loins. During post-presentation Question-and-Answer sessions audience members sometimes declared, on occasion intemperately, that they were offended by attitudes or opinions expressed during the reading and demanded I apologize.

Most were mollified by the disclaimer that the narrative "I" was not me In Real Life. Some were only satisfied if I cited artistic precedents, like *Moby-Dick*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and *All the King's Men*. Some remained dissatisfied unless I added *Invisible Man*. Once, I added *Black Beauty* and was threatened by an equestrian. But I'd planned to get out of Dodge before sundown anyway.

At first I was offended when identified with the narrator, who was, after all, an historian. Then I realized I was invited to read most often—and for the highest fees—during Black History Month. This was only fair; Black History Month was originally "Negro History and Literature Week," observed in April under the auspices of a venerable Negro fraternity. But in 1926 one brother, empowered by his Harvard PhD in history, rebranded the celebration "Negro History Week," rescheduled it for February and promoted it tirelessly. This "Father of Negro History" died in 1950. Negro History Week lived on until 1976, when the President of the United States sent a Message urging his fellow citizens to "review with admiration the impressive contributions of black Americans to our national life and culture" and "join me in tribute to Black History Month."

Many black Americans applauded. The Writer (as I was then) applauded the use of "black American" but noted the President's alpha and omega were "In the Bicentennial year of our Independence" and "the ideals envisioned by our Founding Fathers." Also that, previously, these impressive contributions had been reviewed for less than a year *in toto*, mostly by other black Americans.

The Writer was in New York then, living on the Lower East Side, working in publishing and enjoying transient celebrity as the Author Of that comic novel, published the previous fall. The President's Message prompted him to revisit "The Graves."

He'd last done so in London, at the Institute for United States Studies, while trying to write a scholarly thesis. As his undergraduate transcript indicated he had taken no history courses, he'd been assigned a tutor who disdained disciplines and instead considered American culture from the perspective of paradigms. The Writer was familiar with the term as applied to science—he *had* taken Physics for Poets. But applying it to culture seemed inane.

His Tutor explained impatiently that all disciplines were defined by subject, methodology, and "accepted" theories—paradigms. The subject of science was recurring events. Its methodology required objective observation and that any theories, no matter how charming, be confirmed or else discarded.

The subject of history was singular events which could only be observed through the agency of relics—usually written documents, preserved in archives or by printing. But as the very act of writing made observation subjective, historical methodology tended to privilege the viewpoints of the literate, the ar-

ticulate, the published, and the financially endowed. Theories were accepted for their charm, and though often questioned, were not easily disproved. They sometimes went out of fashion, but historical paradigms prospered like treason.

The Tutor offered an example: the “Dunning School,” named for the Columbia University professor who argued Southern Reconstruction was “undone” by the enfranchisement of intellectually inferior Negroes. This notion attracted white Southern students who, once credentialed by Columbia PhDs, went forth to evangelize in lectures, monographs, and textbooks.

The Writer recalled how the chapter on Reconstruction in his sixth-grade history book had made him feel like a motherless child ... and why he’d never taken a history course in college. He had, however, taken literature courses, and reasoned that, if scientific paradigms were expressed in equations, historical paradigms would be expressed in textual memes—quotes, titles, slogans ... language he could comprehend. He set off to stalk paradigms as if they were Big Game.

On his way to the British Museum he passed a bust of John F. Kennedy and was reminded of the 1960 campaign slogan, “A New Frontier.” In the Reading Room he found the origin in 1893, in “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” which presented American development as a consequence of “the advance of American settlement westward.”

Further research revealed that, in 1958, Kennedy produced a pamphlet, *A Nation of Immigrants*. The Writer backtracked that meme through *The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migrations That Made the American People*, which won the Pulitzer in history in 1952, to a 1908 drama, *The Melting Pot*, in which a Russian Jewish immigrant predicts “human freight” arriving in New York Harbor would “unite to build the Republic of Man.” The Writer ran that meme to ground in *Letters from an American Farmer*, published 1782, where a Frenchman masquerading as a frontiersman proclaimed America the place where “individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men.”

The Writer realized he’d not needed melting; he’d been immersed in American culture from natural birth, especially through TV. At five, he’d been so absorbed by Disney’s “King of the Wild Frontier” that his mother nicknamed him “Crockett” and his father bought him a coonskin cap. Inspired, he began to outline a thesis: “Paradigms in Prime Time—American Identity in Mid-Century Popular Culture.”

He’d introduce the thesis with the novel, *The Virginian: A Horseman of the Plains*, published in 1902, the basis of four films and, in the New Frontier era, a television series. But even

before it was “brought to you in Living Color on NBC” its eponymous hero—whiskey-drinking, poker-playing, two-fisted, gun-toting but peaceable, unless you got him riled—appeared in black-and-white archetype from *Tombstone Territory* to *Cheyenne*. Though rough enough to titillate a schoolmarm, if widowed, he could be a supportive single parent, like *The Rifleman* or “Pa” Cartwright on *Bonanza*, who raised a whole herd of Virginian-type sons.

Immigration-themed TV shows came less readily to the Writer’s mind, although he did remember *Mama*. Also, *I Love Lucy*, *Green Acres*, and the episode of *The Real McCoys* where the Mexican who slept in the barn applied for citizenship. But he could still anchor the argument in a novel: *The Jungle*, published in 1906 and also filmed, though only twice. It was usually associated with socialism and the stockyards, but the characters were immigrants, herded into cattle-car conditions

“back of the yards” and exploited politically and financially. One reviewer called it “the *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* of wage slavery ...” Suddenly the Writer realized: in the purview of these paradigms, black Americans were not ready for Prime Time.

The Author Of *Letters from an American Farmer* said: “the American, this new man ... is either an European, or the descendant of an European ...”

The Author Of *The Uprooted* said: “I thought to write a history of the immigrants in America. Then I discovered that the immigrants *were* American history.”

The Author Of *A Nation of Immigrants* said: “every American who ever lived, with

the exception of one group, was either an immigrant himself or a descendant of immigrants.” That exception was the Cherokee.

The Author Of “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” said: “In Pennsylvania the town of Bedford indicates the line of settlement” but also said: “the slavery question is an incident.”

Beneath the hive-like dome of the British Museum Reading Room, the Writer realized he’d made an awfully naive mistake. He’d thought “The Graves” told a story even bankers’ daughters could read and weep over, but every mother’s son in that workshop had prepared for the Ivy League by learning paradigms. They had not prepped to weep.

Then, in London, he’d torn up his outline. Now, in New York, he heard those paradigms amplified in patriotic rhetoric and thanked God for his cultural advantages. He too had prepared for college, but he’d also been trained up at Mt. Pisgah AME Zion church. He’d known black people were out there between Philly and Pittsburgh because that denomination, like other American institutions, followed the advance of American

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settlement westward, and also because AME Zion ministers made it their mission to aid escaping slaves. “The Graves” hadn’t failed; *he’d* failed to consider his audience. Caught up in delighting, he’d neglected to instruct.

This was weighing on his mind on the Fourth of July, when he went with co-workers down to the Harbor to watch the Grand Parade of Sailing Ships. *The New York Times* assured it would “fittingly recall the spirit and the values that gave birth to a nation,” but to make sure they’d imbibed some spirits of their own. In the loom of the Statue of Liberty, somebody raised a song.

They all knew it; it was in the repertoire of every high school chorus. Some swelled the melody, others added harmony. Passers-by joined the sing-along.

The Writer did not sing along. He knew the lyrics. Hell, he knew the whole damn poem. But he also knew that, in original design, the Statue held aloft a broken chain to symbolize the abolition of slavery. But she’d been sold to pay for her own pedestal, pimped out for the immigration head tax, forced to welcome wretched European refuse while hiding her chain beneath her robes.

As his companions oohed and aahed at Tall Ships gliding toward the Hudson, the Writer thought of other ships, laden with human freight, tacking toward the East River and the market on Wall Street. He knew now that the story of the runaways could not be fairly told in anything less than a novel, but he wondered, how could he sing a song of slaves to this nation of cowboys and immigrants?

He got some ideas in September, in the form of ... well, reviewers weren’t sure. One spoke for many when describing it as “a mixture of fact, fiction and myth.” Its author called it “faction” and “a birthday offering to my country.” The Writer thought it was more like a Mother’s Day bouquet delivered to a nunnery. But by October it was on the non-fiction Best-Seller List and *The New York Times* attested that *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* was “not the novel that it appears to be, but actual history.”

It was still on the List when Black History Month arrived, with a million copies available in bookstores, drugstores, supermarkets liquor stores, on busses, subways, and street corners. By then ABC had aired an eight-part mini-series; reportedly, 130 million Americans watched at least one episode and 80 million tuned in for the finale.

The Writer was not among them. He was too busy mixing fact, fiction, and maybe myth to watch TV. He’d quit his day job and was living on tuna fish and adjunct teaching at a state-related university in Philadelphia. His agent suggested he put together a proposal; a publisher might offer a decent advance. *Roots*, she said, had made a difference.

## How could he sing a song of slaves to this nation of cowboys and immigrants?

He knew the mini-series had made *some* difference. One of his second-generation immigrant Eastside neighbors had told him her heart broke, seeing black huddled masses yearning to breathe free in a slave ship’s hold. Some actors familiar as Western heroes had been cast as Southern villains, and his bartender told him it felt weird watching Pa Cartwright at an auction bidding on people instead of cattle, when meanwhile, back at the ranch, the Rifleman was raping that girl who sang along with Mitch. A New York cabbie was quoted saying, “I’m against the nigger, but after watching ‘Roots’ I can understand why he got that way”—which, *pace* the epithet, the Writer considered one small step for mankind.

But he wasn’t sure who was reading the book. And though he knew it would be a boffo handle at a publisher’s sales conference, he wasn’t writing “the next *Roots*.” His story did not end with documents discovered in the Library of Congress. His characters were all Constitutionally qualified to be President. His structure was like *The Divine Comedy* in the boonies.

But one night, while taking the A train downtown to a Greenwich Village tavern, he saw a black woman in a white uniform, seated across the aisle from a white man in a white shirt, blue suit, red tie. Both were reading *Roots*. The Writer took this as a sign, went home and back to work.

In March, for the first time in a long time, the Writer went to the Lester Imes farm below Chaneyville to visit the graves.

The very first time had been in late summer—Western Pennsylvania’s fairest season. He’d finished college but escaped involuntary enlistment and was no longer contemplating his own flight to Canada. He’d been accompanied by a woman of a different race. He’d thought he was in love.

This time he came alone.

March is Western Pennsylvania’s cruelest month. Spring is a chimera; weather changes at the whim of distant ocean currents, groundhogs, and shadows. This day was sunlit, but frigid. That morning he’d spoken to his agent. She’d heard from the publishers who’d looked at his two-chapters-and-an-outline. All agreed with him: he was not writing the next *Roots*. Now he stood near the graves and remembered a day like this, when he was 9 or 10 and lost in the woods.

He hadn’t been afraid; Western Pennsylvania has no lions, tigers, or mamba snakes and the b’ars are small. What he had been was confused. He was raised in the woods, so he knew every tree, only now the trees seemed alien. He’d gotten angry at the trees and at himself for not knowing which way to go. He remembered, now, how anger became fury, how he’d punched his palm, again, again, and again.

One February, near the end of the 20th Century, I read from *The Chaneyville Incident* at a university where the History Month, the novel, and the Author Of were advertised as “African American.” It was their celebration, but applying that term to my novel was inappropriate, and as I identified as black American I had been hyphenated without consent. But the money was good, and given my now bald pate and my gray beard, at least I wouldn’t be conflated with the novel’s narrator.

I began, as always, with “The Wire,” but in response to current events, I followed with “The Fire Sermon” and used “Key-stone Klan Lynching” as a finale. The reading seemed to go over well and the Q&A was merry until a woman— tall, dark, comely; probably a graduate student—questioned my use of “black” instead of “African American.” Her tone suggested battle cry.

I explained that the novel concluded in 1979. While Dr. Ramona Edelin may have used “African American” in scholarly writing in the 1980s, she did not inform Jesse Jackson until 1988. The narrator could hardly have been aware.

“But, now you are aware,” the graduate student responded. “Don’t you think you should go back and correct your language?”

The room grew quiet. But this was not my first reading. I turned to the end of chapter 197903062300 and let the narrator answer:

Things look different in lamplight. That is a small fact, the kind of datum that escapes the notice of the average historian. He notes the sweeping changes in the American way of life that began when Thomas Alva Edison managed to make first bamboo, then tungsten, glow; probably describing the whole thing in terms of economics, or perhaps, if he is slightly above average, in terms of religion. But he misses the obvious—and therefore the significant—simply because he has never himself had to try and puzzle out the meaning of a text by the light of burning kerosene. And so he talks of longer man-hours or perhaps even an increased rate of information dissemination through reading, or perhaps even the effect of electric light on a religious matrix that had always revered fire and the sun. But he would forget the simple fact that things look different under lamplight. Edges are softer. The beginnings and ending of things seem to merge. Lines of print or handwriting on a sheet of paper are not stark black on white, but brown on gold. And the light flickers, so that anything seen is seen not only dimly, but elusively; inconstantly. And it is possible—for almost anything is possible, and the difference between logical cause and effect and magic is only a matter of which premises are chosen—that thoughts are different, too, in the soft light of a lamp. Not better, or nobler; just different.

In conclusion I would like to thank the following for their inspirations: T. S. Kuhn, E. N. W. Mottram, Henry Ossawa Tanner, Randy Newman, Michael Cimino, Daniel J. Boorstin, Hal Holbrook, and Francis Poulenc. I would also like to beg your pardon, dear Reader, for emergent obsolescences.

“The Wire” may no longer be evocative as it refers to an endangered technology some predict will be extinct by 2025. Dealer’s Choice may now be neither draw nor stud but Texas Hold ’Em. The connotations of moonshine have been preempted by other substances, though some do begin with “M.” And, of course, the chapters are dated.

Providentially, the dates explain why the characters refuse to text, Tweet, or use Instagram. But even before Al Gore invented the internet, they had a purpose: to embed the characters in the convulsions of the world in which they lived, moved, and had their being. That being was fictional. That world was not.

In 1958, on July 11, at 2:00 AM, a Virginia sheriff dragged Judith and Richard Loving from their bed and arrested them, not for unlawful carnal knowledge but for unlawful holy matrimony. The narrator and his lover would have been children at that time. But in 1967, when the Supreme Court declared “the freedom to marry, or not marry, a person of another race resides with the individual” they would have been old enough to marry, although not to vote.

Given their eventual occupations they would have been college students. Changes in law and custom would have made social contact between them more likely than it would have been in 1958, as in 1967 diversity of both gender and race were emergent initiatives in higher education. But the new “New Morality” (not to be confused with the old New Morality) and improvements in contraception would have made marriage nonurgent.

Still, as they matriculated, an old question, common in 1958, was raised anew by *Loving* and posed in print in both *Time* and *Ebony*: “Would you want your daughter to marry one?” A “liberal” response, even if accompanied by an invitation to dinner, would have prompted a whispered follow-up: “But ... what about the children?” In classrooms, even at liberal colleges, the answer was given in paradigms like “the tragic mulatto” and “the marginal man.”

A decade later, the narrator and his lover, in their thirties and joined together by the power vested in the Writer, faced those paradigms. Together they visited the graves. Perhaps that journey gifted them with the audacity of hope. But that is beyond the scope of the plot.

When published, *The Chaneyville Incident* presented the past viewed from the present. Republished, it presents the past viewed from the past. That there are differences between the two is certain, but just what those differences are is not for the Author Of to say.

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