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## Stephen J. West's *Soft-Boiled: An Investigation of Masculinity & the Writer's Life*: A Review

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# Stephen J. West's *Soft-Boiled: An Investigation of Masculinity & the Writer's Life: A Review*

Stephen J. West's *Soft-Boiled* follows the writer as he shadows the private investigator Frank Streets. Though much of the book takes place in rural West Virginia, West is a western New York native and attended SUNY Geneseo. To say the book is a memoir is a limiting description, as West also writes as a reporter, critic, and essayist—not only does he report his interactions with Frank Streets, but he also reflects upon his childhood and adolescence, his relationship with his wife, his experiences with fatherhood, and his purpose as a writer. In addition, West attempts to answer a question that many of us as writers grapple with: why do we write? And what does it mean to be an artist?

West's title, *Soft-Boiled*, is a pun upon the genre of hard-boiled detective fiction, which the book both analyzes and scrutinizes. Intertwined with discussions of masculinity and artistry, West takes time to talk about the purpose of “escapist reading” and cites passages from W.H. Auden. In particular, West analyzes how these “whodunits” connect back to the idea of the Self-Made

Man—a concept that West interrogates in detail in his book. He compares, alongside Auden, the mystery stories such as Sherlock Holmes to the hard-boiled, “depressing” stories of *The Maltese Falcon* kind—a story that Auden believed to be “works of art.” However, West proposes a different conclusion: as the narrative concerning Frank Streets culminates in his arrest, West drops the fiction analysis, and begins comparing his motivation to write to his own metaphorical Maltese falcon. He begins to wish that Streets is guilty, so that his book can conclude with excitement. In the end, however, he finds himself ashamed of this fact—while also finding it ultimately inconsequential to the heart of his own story.

The Self-Made Man is a concept that is central to this book—it is one of the main ideas West seeks to understand, and it is discussed alongside other concepts such as “traditional American masculinity” and “authentic American brand of manhood.” These concepts seem to arise out of West’s questioning of his own motives: why is he writing in the first place? Very early on, West recounts an interaction between him and a writer friend, where he confesses that he is “uninteresting at a macro level” and could be described by sociologist Erving Goffman as “the one unblushing male in America.” However, West continues on about his experiences with gender theory, and writes, “Yet I blush, dear reader. I blush for my desire to matter more than my privilege. I blush for my need to make art, even when my art is not needed.” This raises an important question that is, perhaps, unanswerable—however, by the end of his book, West makes a strong attempt to answer it.

West’s analysis of masculinity majorly remains focused on himself throughout the book. However on occasion he also extends his internal discussion to the subject of his writing inspiration, the private investigator Frank Streets. As previously mentioned, West is motivated by an interest in detective fiction; it is for this reason that he chooses Frank Streets to interview and shadow while writing his elusive first book. In West’s description of his first meeting with Streets, there are numerous comparisons between the reality that West experiences and his previous knowledge of fiction: “He’s no hard-boiled private dick,” West writes, “he is a man of obtuse angles, not the stuff dreamed up in a hard-boiled novel.” However, this is not to say that Streets completely subverts West’s expectations, or that he is something beyond West’s conceptions of masculinity. In fact, West writes that Streets is a “bear of a human” and that “the room felt smaller with him in it,” all familiar descriptors for a stereotypically masculine man.

It is evident in West’s recounting of interactions with Streets that he views himself and Streets in high contrast—West, in dissatisfaction with his own masculinity, describes Streets as incredibly masculine, and himself as unfortunately feminine. This is most evident in the handshake the men share: “My hands are not small [but] grasped in Frank Streets’s calloused paw, my hand

looked girlish, like he might crush every bone in it by accident.” This is perhaps one of the most common ways that West reflects upon his masculinity throughout the book. In his descriptions of the interactions he has with others, he commonly writes his actions and dialog with negative and/or demeaning descriptors. Later on, during a meal shared with Streets and others, West describes himself as the following: “I sniffled and swallowed...I squawked...I chuckled and buried my face in my soda.” I found this detail to be intriguing; instead of using neutral descriptors, West chose these—why?

Perhaps because it lends itself to the idea that West embarked upon writing this book not only as “An Investigation of Masculinity” as the subtitle says, but as an investigation of “the Writer’s Life.” Aside from his chronicling of interactions with Frank Streets, West also analyzes his relationship with his wife and his experiences with fatherhood. In his recounting of a trip to Oaxaca, Mexico, to support the writing of his wife K, West laments, “that was before El and I nearly missed our flight because he wasn’t listed on my boarding pass; before I learned that a man traveling alone with an infant is more likely a human trafficker than a father...” What follows is a moving account of West struggling with his purpose in Oaxaca, his importance to his wife and child, as well as what it meant to be an artist. Following a tense conversation with K and an interaction with a street artist, West truly seems to open up to the possibility that he will never be a “writer smirking with the secrets of the world.”

It is at this point that the main ideas of the book come to a head. To be a writer has been West’s primary motivation for writing the book—a perhaps cyclic philosophy, but not one that has gone unquestioned by West. “Fuck books. Fuck art. Fuck the desire to be petty,” West writes. “Fuck all of it. I like being ordinary...Can I also be a man? Can I also be an artist?” Eventually, Frank Streets is cleared of all charges. Despite this, it appears that West has departed from his reasoning to writing about Streets. K has received a position teaching at SUNY Geneseo, and the pair have left West Virginia. West does not return to speak with Streets about his story; instead, he takes the final pages of the book to define himself. He reflects, once again, on the idea of his purpose. At the end of the exploration, West becomes content with his insecurity, and leads the reader to become content with theirs, as well.