Trinity Fields

A Novel by Bradford Morrow

Essay by Garry Victor Hill

In Trinity Fields (1995) Bradford Morrow makes the links between villain and hero, their similarities, extreme closeness and even symbiosis, obvious. He does this through his protagonists, both named William, although in early childhood they change their first names to Kip and Brice. These lifelong best friends could almost be twins, as they are born in December 1944, eleven hours apart in the same hospital at the enclosed, secret community at Los Alamos, where they grow up on the same block. Both have fathers involved in the Manhattan Project, which was America's 1940s secret scientific centre for developing atomic bombs. Both feel guilt, fear and alienation from their isolated, secretive and elitist community and its reason for continuing existence, the arms race. Both rebel. Kip Calder and Brice McCarthy go to school and then college together, run away together and love the same woman. Many people think they are brothers. Brice being the narrator says that they were so closely bound that if they had been born in one skin, they could not have become closer. When Kip runs away leaving Brice he felt as if my heart had been cored, and yet there are essential differences, even during their childhood, as Kip realises. Once again the frequent pattern of a man of action and a more passive, narrator are paired against a hostile, chaotic world. Kip soon emerges as the more aggressive, more reckless and more out of place, a cynical loner, while Brice becomes more cautious, reflective and idealistic, a man who wants to be part of society.

Although they share hostility to their military-scientific environment, their hostility develops in opposing ways. Kip becomes fearless, violent and reckless, while Brice develops fear and a sense of caution. Kip acts; Brice ponders. Kip rejoices in breaking superstitions: Brice fearfully believes in them, following avoidance rituals. Kip dreams up dangerous ideas and Brice fearfully follows. For Kip violence has an appeal. He dreams up the peppers game, where he and Brice take turns blasting at each other with shotguns, seeing how close they can come to being in range without being peppered with the pellets. Kip

happily takes the scars, This game and Kip's scars reflect the sublimated violence at Los Alamos, where war never enters the community there, but threats of it permeates the community's life. War or threats of war are why the community was created. Brice fearfully passes over his reaction. When in 1959 they run away from Los Alamos, Kip steals a car and intends to flee to Montana or Alaska on a wild joy ride and escape to some version of what novelist W.H. Hudson in 1908 named as a green mansion, that being a luxuriant, secluded natural wonder free of the world's cares and pressures. Brice shares this dream, describing it in classic terms which recall Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer, making these 1950s boys seem twin brothers, who are always looking for a remote territory to light out for. Significantly and ironically New Mexico can no longer appear as part of the free west, but has become civilization's biggest threat to a free unregulated life. They must flee further and they dream of the remote north. After working as cowboys they will hunt and fish in the far north, singing songs around their fire as they carve scrimshaw out of reindeer horns, make a living out of foresting timber and live in a hut built of peat. Living like this will make them heroes, they think. Read the description again and it comes across as a boy-scout camp without the scout masters, uniforms or pledge of allegiance.

Despite such joyous idylls that recall the freedom and self-reliance of the old West, Brice sees the running away as not only an escape, but also a moralistic atoning pilgrimage for their parent's role in the arms race. Brice may have the imagination to share this dream, but he also has a realist caution and lacks Kip's courage, consistency and will. When Kip repeatedly ignores Brice's suggestions that they should stop their escape, as they are pushing the idea too far, Brice contacts the police, who pick them up near the Wyoming border. For Kip this makes Brice a reject as a conspirator and a failure as a renegade. When Kip runs off again alone, Brice, now left alone becomes fearful at Kip's rejection and subsequently, other schoolchildren's ridicule. Fear increasingly

dominates much of Brice's thinking, from childhood onwards. He fears the bomb and the cold war, fears authority figures, and worries about social pressures and his future. Kip, possessing a sense of being permanently at war, absorbs conflict and becomes fearless. Soon after Kip realises how different they are as they daydream while watching cloud shapes. Brice describes creatures made out of clouds, the one who imposes order on meaningless patterns to feel secure. Kip sees in the hole in the clouds as a blue pony whom he can ride away to escape the authorities and the repressive atmosphere. He sees himself as inhabiting the sky and as a pilot ultimately does, while Brice remains earthbound. Kip differentiates between them further by insisting they have different coloured blood: his by supposedly being blue, implicitly linking him to the sky pony, which has an almost mythical appeal. He thinks as if he is a Palaeolithic warrior finding his totem, while somehow exists in the middle of the twentieth century. Brice has no tribe, group or mystical order in 1950s New Mexico and he also travels to fulfil his illusions, but within America.

Here Kip recalls Fiedler's comments in *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960) about the restless man of action in the West accompanied by the passive, more civilised observer. Other differences emerge more fully when Kip and Bryce go to Columbia University in 1962. At first being Westerners together in unfamiliar New York City binds them more tightly, but by 1964 Kip has become a loner who doesn't fit in with campus radicalism and the escalating American involvement in Vietnam divides them. Kip supports the government and joins ROTC. Now it is Brice who becomes the loud, defiant rebel, the one who conspires against authority. He also emerges as something of a sexual revolutionary, rapidly going through several sexual relationships, while Kip seems to be settling down with their flatmate Jessica. He finds himself being frequently arrested at demonstrations for violent resistance and his behaviour sometimes recalls Kip's adolescent reactions when resisting arrest at the Wyoming border.

As with Kip's adolescent rebellion, these escalating steps are leading Brice further away from respectability and by 1968 lead to becoming a radical, a soldier in civilian clothes, logical enough as during the occupation he says that he also had a war to fight. His description of that conflict uses the terminology of war. The angry, spirited students marched to occupy university buildings as it is their moment to seize, causing a tumult as they barricade themselves in the captured buildings for a weeklong siege in confrontations where wielding blackjacks and nightsticks police thrashed their way through a phalanx of sympathetic students. Swarming police end the siege by coming up through tunnels to break down doors with axes. After the occupation ends Brice comments that although thousands had built the barricades, other thousands had torn them down. This comment, as much as the battles at Columbia University reveal an America divided. Kip and Brice, once so close, also represent the 1960s divisions in America, for Kip serves in Vietnam. However like a pair of bookends, they still have much in common, even if like bookends, narratives and ideas come between them, yet their different narratives and ideas both lead to their personal failures. These failures are entwined with the failures of their causes.

Brice realises both his own transformation into a radical soldier and his failure, for Brice had joined those escaping from the last confrontation at Columbia by sneaking away at night, feeling that he had let himself and his principles down, while Kip being a soldier in Vietnam, was a real fighter and one who believed in his cause.

Ironically considering that Brice at Los Alamos was in the environment aiming to cause more wartime deaths than the world had ever known, his experience at the Columbia occupation was the closest to warfare he would ever experience and he was defeated. Almost as a masochistic atonement, he assaults a policeman at a demonstration and finds himself lucky to avoid jail and disbarment. He becomes more cautious after Columbia, rather than taking a

stand, he fakes a medical to avoid being conscripted. Although Brice continues with his activist radical politics for a few more years and never abandons his distaste for the right, after the Columbia occupation his enthusiasm for confrontationist politics slowly wanes. He gives no more accounts of such actions and little on his idealistic politics. Instead he narrates more about his concern for his career and family.

Developing the childhood differences, Kip becomes s a total contrast to Brice during the Vietnam War years. He joins ROTC to become an air force pilot and at one demonstration against ROTC they face each other on opposing sides. Kip serves three official tours of duty in the war, although he is no right wing ideologue or simple patriot. While serving late in the war when asked what cause he fights for he cannot articulate a proper reply.

With his Los Alamos background, war seems a natural state to him, a career option and then his letter to Brice refers to their childhood conversation about having different blood and although he does not explicitly recall it, this connects to his musings about riding a blue pony, escaping by flying. He uses what the system demands, a high level of successful service, to escape from being subservient to it. By being successful, he gains some control, he has found a niche. Kip also uses the Vietnam War for his own gratification. As Brice realises, in the jungles of Vietnam he finds the green mansion, the escape he has spent his life searching for.

Bored with inactivity and routine on a Vietnamese air base, he volunteers for flight work as a “raven” a clandestine flyer in the secret war in Laos. Kip even stays on long after the Military require him to, or even feel that he should stay. Kip stays with the heroic ideal long after the army has replaced it with a concept of limited duty, which resembles being a cog in a machine that should be replaced oupon reaching its use by date not overused. By wanting to be more than a cog, Kip goes beyond orthodox patriotism, beyond expected

duty, becoming one of those the army consider to be untrustworthy, a war hawk verging on madness.

For Kip no traditional hero's homecoming happens, only an ironic disillusionment with home. On leave between tours of duty, he cannot relate to the new America emerging in the hippie era, nor can he relate to Jessica or their baby daughter Ariel. He quite correctly exclaims that he does not belong there. Even his friendship with Brice becomes strained as Brice acts as a surrogate father, even choosing Ariel's name, which Kip dislikes. He thinks that Brice and Jessica are starting a romance and this reveals much about the two men, Brice does realise that he always wanted to be Kip. When Brice first embraces Jessica she is heavily pregnant with Kip's child. When he describes his love for Kip's fiancée and daughter he describes in detail their facial resemblance to Kip, but isn't sure of his first lover's hair colour. This suggests possible latent homosexuality, but with Kip's ingrained distrust of people, he can only love and trust someone who appears as almost his twin and therefore a mirror image of himself.

Kip seems to realise that he has been supplanted and returns to the war, which for him serves as his real homecoming. Even Brice says that after his return to Laos Kip becomes the maddest of all those mad boys still serving in the Vietnam War. With his background this epithet can only be unsurprising. He was born during a war in what was the world's most destructive community, one dedicated to nuclear destruction. This was his environment until his teen years were almost over. He realises that he follows in his father's footsteps by being involved in highly destructive and secret military missions. For Kip the clandestine Laotian war becomes as bizarre as life at Los Alamos. Even he describes the Laotian conflict as a strange war. It devours those who fight it, not only obviously by its casualty rate, but by the way it turns the foreign individuals such as Kip (who are aptly nicknamed spooks) into invisible men. They are invisible to the media, to almost all of the American home front and

even much of their own Military Industrial Complex. Where they are visible they are lethal spectres. This is what Kip figuratively becomes to Jessica and Brice and ultimately does become.

This fate works as Kip's cost for finding community and cause, which are united in his relationship with the Laotian tribe the Hmong. They remind him of the Amerindians near Los Alamos. Both are indigenous tribal groups who have retained some of their primitive ways. Both groups are dispossessed and oppressed by their government. The Hmong differ in their active resistance and the way they see the American government as an ally. Due to their aid Kip becomes part of that resistance, although this war contains aspects of primeval conflicts in its tribal culture, divisions and settings amid the jungles of Indo-China, Kip cannot be a primeval warrior fighting with primitive weapons against a technologically well-armed enemy. He makes war by aerial scouting and bombing of the enemy and they respond with anti-aircraft fire. His loyalty to the Hmong and love of Laos stays so strong that he stays on after the American withdrawal in 1973, and even after the Pathet Lao victory two years later. For Kip, Laos remains the best of both worlds. With the company of Wagner, another raven, he even has a loyal surrogate for Brice. Like so many Americans Kip has even perpetuated and transferred his childhood dreams of a green mansion in America's West in an exotic foreign setting. As Brice realises, Kip never stopped wanting that escapist dream he tried to make a reality by going north in 1959. Instead he went ever westward, like the earlier pioneers, finding a new wilderness in Laos. From the Roncesvalles idyll in Ernest Hemingway's 1926 novel *The Sun Also Rises* onwards the American loner finding (or more frequently trying to find) a surrogate Wild West overseas to serve as an idyll or as a battlefield for macho male games becomes a common literary theme.

For Kip, his vision of anarchic, pantheistic freedom derived from his needs and the inspiration of Thoreau has combined with his mixture of stubbornness,

rugged individualism and loyalty into leading him into being one of the last Americans still fighting the Vietnam War. As by the mid-1970s even the CIA has given up, he becomes a man without a country, going along with Wagner's erratic plans like a chip in a rotating kaleidoscope. He cannot even stay among the Hmong, for the Pathet Lao have found out that he and Wagner are smuggling Hmong refugees into Thailand. This discovery forces Wagner to flee, Kip breaks under torture and when residing in a Hmong village, he suffers gassing with "yellow rain" trichothecene mycotoxine, which years later is slowly killing him while he wanders over much of the world.

Until the collapse of his Laotian efforts, Kip had seemed to possess the traditional hero's invulnerability, confidence, courage and luck, but these can no longer work convincingly in modern fiction, where modern technology reduces everybody to almost powerless victims. Gassing and the cancer he may have picked up from living at Los Alamos destroyed his health and what he sees as betraying Wagner destroyed his sense of integrity. Both the physical and spiritual blows have hit at his confidence and America's military defeat, the Hmong's near genocide and what he sees as America's betrayal means that he has no cause or country, he endures as a hero with none of the traditional links to cause, victory or community.

When in 1993, after over two decades of invisibility to Brice and Jessica, he requests a meeting with Brice at the Chimayó Church, Kip initially seems another reborn traditional hero returning to Brice's life like Lazarus. However Brice quickly realises something must be wrong: Kip quickly starts resembling a haunting spectre, being an unwanted, living reminder of a war which nearly everyone wants forgotten, tucked away as history.

Kip no longer lives as a hero or a die-hard fighter, but has become a person who has learned realities by prolonged experience; although his learning will be at the cost of his life. Always extreme, he goes from being one of the last die-hards in Indo-China to an eccentric peacemaker. He now sees that the pride,

secret shame and danger of being part of the Los Alamos community was part of America's hubris, caused by their 1945 victory and this attitude lasted until the Vietnam morass ended in defeat. He tells Kip that America's involvement in Vietnam was foolish, painful and costly, but ultimately worked as a necessary and worthwhile learning process against impudence, over-confidence and delusions about a last frontier.

Although he lambasts the Indo-Chinese Communists as cruel, incompetent hypocrites, Kip now believes that without the communist victories in Indo-China and the subsequent loss of hubris those victories caused, America would be a nation continually expanding its frontier. On a global scale this would involve repeatedly enforcing its heroic traditions, repeatedly enacting out differing versions of its conquest of the West in exotic locales. America's sick narcissism would, if not defeated, lead the planet into becoming a grotesque American theme park. Obviously some uncredited self-analysis goes on here. Kip's possibility shows that by taking on this dominating, repetitive role America would become a national version of Campbell's holdfast hero, being a new development in not only being a nation taking on an individual's villainous role, but by doing what past villain's only dreamed of, taking over the world.

His concern with national hubris comes from a realisation that the rest of the world can no longer be seen as an adventure playground for Americans or a frontier to exploit. Just as Kip will pay with his life for his enacting out this escapist delusion, so America paid in humiliation and casualties for its delusion. Brice also parts with another delusion, that he was some sort of radical saint while still running from his past life at Los Alamos.

Kip and Brice symbolise the fate of those who right and left, went through the confrontations of the 1960s and lived to see the 1990s. The period of political rebellion and youthful idealism is indeed over; like many others of their generation Kip and Brice are remnants from another age, trying to retain

their distance from a system that still manipulates, while they make a personal peace over a conflict a generation past.

They realise that neither viewpoint can be totally wrong or right. In the locale where they grew up together they renew their friendship. Through their attempts at understanding the past and moderation, both men try to overcome being the crippled children located at the core of so many American heroes. Jessica also understood this when she said they were both Don Quixotes. This becomes ironic as like Quixote, Kip returns home from his heroic travels, gaining wisdom at his life's end by renouncing his heroic ideals as he is dying. Brice also implicitly comes to the same conclusion when he ironically recalls Jessica's comment. This leads his thoughts to how in childhood he and Kip often saw the world and themselves with the American hubris of that era, relying on simple, childish and traditionally heroic terms, as if those three attitudes go together. They took this attitude to the ultimate megalomaniac delusion, a unique invulnerability against death, first suggested by their peppers game.

Now that both men have outgrown such simple beliefs and abandoned being heroes for their conflicting causes, ironically they perform the functions of heroes, the gaining of understanding and the restoration of order in the land. War now connects with disorder. At the Chimayó church in front of them Kip explicitly symbolises their order by comparing them to the perfectly equal two towers, although both are flawed. One tower is empty, windblown and a haven for wild birds and therefore resembles Kip the wild, flying wanderer, while the bell tower resembles Brice. He knows that the bell is useless by itself: it must have a human ringer. This suggests that Brice was unable to do anything by himself, he needed Kip or Jessica to make him active. The comparison between the two towers and the men can goes further than Kip develops it as the bell also only tolls to announce a local death, and Brice will be the one to announce Kip's approaching death. The towers are also part of the local church, and so are

a part of the search for peace, atonement and remembrance that motivates the arriving pilgrims and Kip and Brice.

By embodying these symbolic links both men briefly echo the traditional hero's role, connecting to the religious world which represents the magical and the mystical, even though the church no longer connects to the secular world of New York City that Brice now sees as home.

Like so many of the modernist texts, *Trinity Fields* combines mythical and traditional elements in a narrative with characters who oppose or deride the cornerstones of traditional belief – Kip, Brice and Jessica all deride patriotism and nationalism. For the men their background on the hill makes them share ambivalence about their strange hometown and their scientist parents who without malevolence and with the good intention of ending the war, unleashed the nuclear terror on the world. This knowledge and guilt carries through their adult lives. They are ambivalent about the traditional family and filial piety. Kip also lives with an ambivalence towards militarism. Sharing Brice's background at Los Alamos, he shares his intense dislike for the organisation there, and feels betrayed over America's abandonment of the Hmong, yet for many years he was attracted to war's violence. Kip and Brice also share an ambivalent attitude towards religion: they like the Chimayó Church and sense the need for atonement, but elsewhere they seem, like Jessica, indifferent to religion.

If the characters show the collapse of the old values Morrow frequently tells their story with archetypes and traditional motifs that are to an extent exposed and deconstructed, even as they are used. Those scientists and their support groups live like a lost tribe in secretive, secluded Los Alamos, (the ironically named magic mountain) are called the Hill People. They not only live like goblins or elves, but are credited with similar magical powers and bizarre plans. When the world's first atomic bomb explodes nearby it is compared to the mythical powers of magic. In the 1940s Indians near Los Alamos adapt their traditional annual festival of burning their devil Zozobra into burning a new

devil called Hirohitlmus – an amalgam of Hirohito, Hitler and Mussolini. Brice suggests that the Hill People are just as naïve when they see exploding the Atomic bomb as making a torch to burn the living Hirohitlmus beyond resurrection. It would give off a flame so hot it could sear steely hearts. Yet this act of apparent patriotic piety works both a breaking with simple religious belief and the beginning of a familiar religious and mythic motif, that of hubristic men taking over a dangerous magic power they neither fully understand nor control. They think they are in control and do understand totally because in their minds they have the power, wisdom and ability to know the future, all possessed only by gods.

Brice can perceive the scientists responsibility and blindness, and sees the workers there as a mixture of villain and hero, but initially seems equally interested in working out if Kip is an angel or monster. Brice compares Kip to Caliban and compares the famous scientist Oppenhiemer, who does so much to develop the atomic bomb, to Prospero, a character in his and Brice's favourite play, but Kip shoots back that Brice is Prospero. Considering that in adulthood they are both fathers to Ariel this becomes ironic, nor is it the only ironic use of mythic elements. Like so many traditional heroes, Kip enacts his ultimate fate in unintentionally prophetic children's games and escapes, but this time death will come from modern poisonous chemicals, created by scientists very much in the role of those at Los Alamos.

Brice explains Kip's personality and his own with another ancient motif, the ying-yang symbol. Although he does not follow the symbolic usage beyond that each serves as a counterpart containing light and dark, the comparison can be taken further. Each has counterparts of reckless energy and caution, and a mixture of radicalism and conservatism. Each has desires for peace and war that as in the ying-yang symbol, dominate each man in opposing amounts. Beyond this comparison another meaning emerges. When they meet at Chimayó Brice says that that somehow they had come to a full circle. Brice implies that they

have come back to their childhood friendship in maturity, before politics divided them, but there, the circular unity of the ying-yang symbol also applies to them. For a full circle to be made which symbolises peace and order the two opposing sides must be harmoniously joined.

Morrow expresses the 1990s conflict resolution that shattered American certainties, not only in personalised terms, but also in ancient ones. Like so many characters in twentieth-century literature, their personalities and actions show that they are caught between an imploding old world and an emergent, yet inchoate new one.

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Frontispiece courtesy of Wikipedia

This is a thematic depiction, not a photo of the book cover