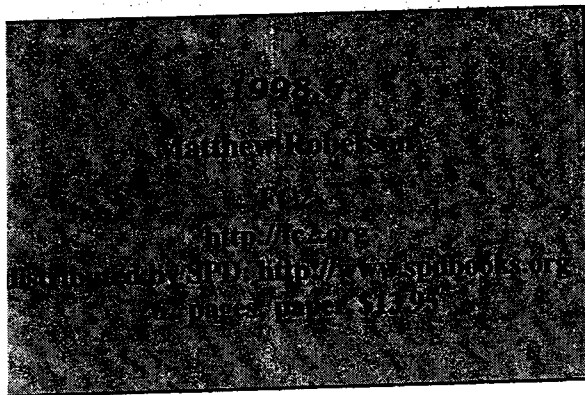


The Resettling of Sukenickland

Jerome Klinkowitz



Yes, this novel is modeled on Ronald Sukenick's *98.6* (1975). And, no, you don't have to know about Sukenick's work, much less like to appreciate Matthew Roberson's achievement. Chances are, of course, that anyone reading *1998.6* will be aware of the earlier novel's existence, and most likely of its importance. But as innovative fiction from the 1960s and 1970s fades into a past that seems increasingly Pleistocene, its contributions to the health of literature deserve attention. One way of doing this is to write literary criticism, in most hands a boring affair. Roberson's alternative is to draft his own creative work that employs Sukenick's forms and converses with his themes. It's because this older writer's forms and themes have become such a necessary part of contemporary existence that readers don't have to do any research to understand this new book. Like the business of a Petrarchan sonnet, it's with them even before they begin.

The plot of *1998.6* is straightforward and resembles that of Sukenick's first novel, *Up* (1968),

in which a harried young academic struggles with the last duties of graduate school while simultaneously writing a critical book, writing a novel, and living a life that in its pastiche of literary clichés undermines the seriousness of all these occupations. As Sukenick studied Wallace Stevens, Matthew Roberson studies Sukenick. But this is no Nabokovian hall of mirrors—Sukenick's fiction cannot be reduced to a Stevens aesthetic, nor can Roberson's work be summed up as a demonstration of Sukenick's literary ethic. Instead, both writers are inspired to write their own work based on what they know, only part of which is what they've read in books. Taking that book-learning and letting it be tested within the ongoing energies of life produces something worthwhile for writer and reader alike, and that's what happens in *1998.6*.

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This testing prompts Roberson to use formal elements from Sukenick's subsequent work, including the propulsively run-on sentences of *Out* (1973) and other momentum-building devices from *The Death of the Novel, and Other Stories* (1969). Revolutionary back then, these methods are commonly accepted now, and so Roberson can use them quite naturally. The only use that qualifies as an outright appropriation is the three-part

format of *98.6*. But even that can be generalized as the thesis-antithesis-synthesis structure that's been with us for two hundred years—in relative terms, an Ordovician development that provided the bedrock for modern thought. Far from toying with overly specific frivolities, Roberson is dealing in basics, albeit in a way that refreshes them for current use.

The energies running through *1998.6* are familiar yet still attractive ones. Who, in this day and age, hasn't been in graduate school? Who hasn't fretted over a sluggish thesis project or dissertation while enduring underpaid and unappreciated low-level teaching? As Roberson makes clear, there are specific motivations, including the chance to opt out of a real world of suffocating employment—if lucky, for a lifetime, but at least for the present in a style of life sustained by the university's artificialities. It's a hothouse environment, and in its traits of character and peculiarities of theme are bred and developed more quickly (and more intensively) than in conventional narrative. To this academic world Roberson introduces the themes and structures of *98.6*, Ronald Sukenick's first completely non-university novel. In 1975, the older author had been taking what he knew about Wallace Stevens and everything else from school and running it through the culture at large. Unsurprisingly, it produced a triptych of culture, counterculture, and superculture portrayed as "Frankenstein," "The

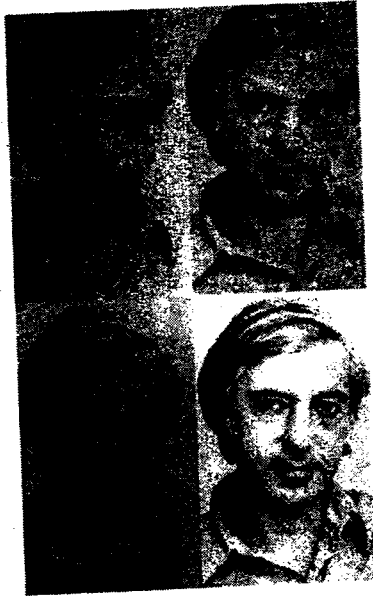
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Children of Frankenstein," and "Palestine." In the last of these, culture's ideal state, readers could savor the delights of Sukenickland, and, in 1998.6, Matthew Roberson charts his own progress toward this paradise. Or so it would seem to look to a young grad student in English a quarter century later.

The academic lessons for achieving this paradise are clear. From Wallace Stevens, an understanding of reality as flux. From Ronald Sukenick, a pursuit of reality not as a lost object but as the productive plenitude of desire's own energy. Roberson understands that there's really no need for a product at all, just a joy in process that can be sustained as long as motivation lasts. "This is the most meaningful time they'll any of them ever experience," Roberson's protagonist (named, of course, for himself) remarks. "This is what Matt thinks. He already misses it and it's not over yet."

Although inspiration for 1998.6 comes from Ronald Sukenick's work, the Sukenick canon is not essential to this work. It can stand alone, just as 98.6 can stand without direct knowledge of or sympathy for Wallace Stevens. In the larger cultures of 1975 and 2002, Stevens and Sukenick are there, as much as Frank Sinatra's and The Rolling Stones's music pervades the atmosphere even when not directly sampled. Much more evident as implied resources are the countless numbers of university novels, from Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* (1954) to more recent examples by Malcolm Bradbury and David Lodge. They are important resources because Roberson, using Sukenick's example, stands them on their heads while still acknowledging the essential artificiality of university



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existence. Authors trained outside of school, like Kurt Vonnegut, sometimes regret that today's students are exposed to nothing more than love and

death in the English Department. 1998.6 proves different, showing how matters inside the Department, at least for grad students, simply focus much larger (and otherwise disorganized) forces in their lives. The result is like another quasi-academic novel from the era of innovative fiction, E.L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* (1971), in which the protagonist delivers his soul-searing narrative to his dissertation director, its title page indicating its function as fulfilling in part the requirements for a PhD. Doctorow names the student "Daniel," as everyone knows. But who remembers that the dissertation director in this novel is "Dr. Sukenick"?

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neither of them has ever wanted children, and Andi has had her tubes tied to avoid any possibility of becoming pregnant.

At first everything seems to be going well,

(who has repeatedly proven himself to be a liar), there is no way to determine what the real content of these photos might have been. Indeed, Olsen's intention is to make it clear that, in the

and cruel, combative, recalcitrant, naïve, needy, histrionic, uninformed, opinionated, untruthful, insecure, moody, amoral, and physically and emotionally destructive." Andi is convinced. "I don't want something alien growing inside me," she