

O P E N B O O K

Beyond Brahminism

(see Vita, March-April 1998, page 48) with hatred not only of the maltreatment of sailors, but also of slavery and other injustices—causes he addressed as a lawyer. Amestoy, M.P.A. '82, a former chief justice of the Vermont Supreme Court, is the ideal extra-literary biographer. From the introduction to his account of Dana's "odyssey":

On an August day in 1834 a slight, nearsighted boy boarded a ship he had never seen before, joined a crew to whom his aristocratic family would have never spoken, and sailed where few Americans had ever been. The ship might have vanished with the forgotten lives of its sailors. Richard Henry Dana Jr.'s classic, *Two Years Before the Mast*, immortalized the harrowing voyage from Boston around Cape Horn to the remote coast of California. But when Dana witnessed the sadistic flogging of his shipmates, it prompted more than one of the most compelling scenes in American literature. It was the genesis of his vow to stand for justice. This is the story of how Dana kept his promise in the face of the most exclusive and powerful establishment in America—the Boston society in which he had been born and bred.

The drama of Dana's remarkable life arises from the unresolved tension between the man he became at sea and the Brahmin he was expected to be on shore. The qualities—courage, integrity, and a sense of justice—that led to his acceptance as a common sailor before the mast were the traits least valued by his peers. "He was

Richard Henry Dana Jr. in 1842 (above), and an image of the California hide trade used to illustrate a 1911 edition of his classic work, *Two Years Before the Mast*

Richard Henry Dana Jr. A.B. 1837, LL.B. '39, LL.D. '66, survives in modern memory as the author of *Two Years Before the Mast*. But his literary legacy alone sells him short, Jeffrey L. Amestoy argues in *Slavish Shore* (Harvard, \$35), the first full biography in more than half a century. Indeed, the voyage he undertook and recorded fired Dana

counsel of the sailor and the slave," wrote Charles Francis Adams Jr. [A.B. 1856, LL.D. '95], "courageous, skillful but still the advocate of the poor and unpopular....In the mind of wealthy and respectable Boston almost anyone was to be preferred to him."

Dana first broke with convention when he left Harvard to ship as a common seaman. He represented sailors, angering Boston's ship owners. He defended fugitive slaves and their rescuers when the "best people" believed opposition to the Fugitive Slave Act was treasonous. His brilliant argument before the U.S. Supreme Court preserved Lincoln's authority to carry on the Civil War. He was the special prosecutor who indicted Jefferson Davis for treason—and prompted the president to end the prosecution.

No lawyer of equivalent standing did as much on behalf of fugitive slaves and those who aided them, nor paid a higher price for doing so. Dana was socially ostracized, boycotted, and nearly murdered....George Ticknor [LL.D. 1850], social arbiter of Brahmin Boston, wrote to Dana that they were never to speak again.

night, copied the names off old team photos, and sent letters to everyone whose addresses he could find.

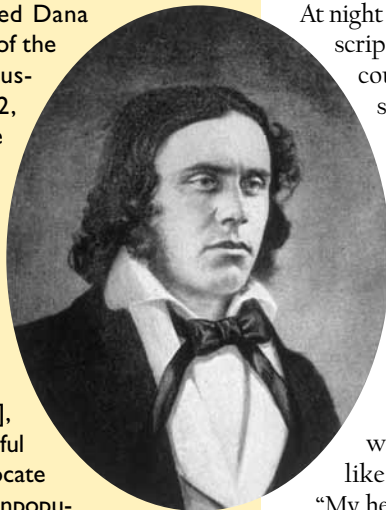
Movie in hand, he went to Hollywood and got a job, first with one producer and then another—buying organic food for the boss's Akita, getting the car windows tinted, and reading hundreds and hundreds of scripts. "That was like film school for me."

At night and on weekends, he was writing: scripts, stories, ideas. "I got to where I could write anytime, anywhere," he says. "Procrastination and perfectionism are two sides of the same coin, and they inhibit you from getting to your subconscious, which is where you want to access your ideas. And the pressures of television are wonderful for shedding those censors that stand between you and the work you want to do."

Despite an occasional screenwriting detour into feature films like 2015's disaster flick *San Andreas*, "My heart is in television," he says. Cuse describes the form's narrative challenge as almost architectural: the rigor is in building a strong structural framework, and "the fun part" is filling in the details. "And I love that it's really a collaborative medium, in this world we live in where enormous emphasis is placed on singular artistic achievement," he says. "I love sitting with writers in a room and coming up with ideas and figuring out how they all fit together."

His work has had demonstrable influence on series television. *Lost* broke many storytelling conventions, and then helped reshape them. The show's innovations "seem so benign now," says Cuse, "but in the television landscape of 2004, there was virtually no serialized storytelling in network television, and certainly nothing like the highly complex narrative of *Lost*," with its 16 regular characters and time-jumping plotline.

These days, he sees television evolving again: into "shorter-form narrative storytelling," with complete stories unfolding over eight or 10 hours, in a single season, or maybe two—the model of *Fargo* and *True Detective*, two shows he admires. "In an environment where there are so many shows, and really good shows," he says, "it's hard to get people to watch for 50 or 100 hours." And for Cuse that's exciting: it means more new ideas.



FROM TWO YEARS BEFORE THE MAST/HOUGHTON MIFFLIN CO. 1911