Those who despise literature often describe it as a factory of illusions. This makes good readers grin, as they see writers wear themselves out in the quest of singular and volatile human truths that are conveniently concealed amidst journalistic generalisations, these elements of the language of the chosen ones, notions of happiness or of success approved by society, the lies that each of us create in order to endure our existence... Thus, *A Permanent Member of the Family*, the latest collection by novelist Russell Banks, could be described as the dismantling of a factory of shimmering dreams – The United States – had the author not also addressed his own symptoms of self-poisoning in the new title. It tells the story of how Banks managed to convince himself that after his divorce, his family would remain united thanks to the dog – that he would keep, and that would somehow form a tie between his old and new homes. But is it not treacherous to attach such high hopes to the collar of an animal with a limited life expectancy?

But how can one not see Russell Banks as a paladin of truth? He knows the consoling virtues of illusion that he reveals in the aptly titled “Transplant”, where a young woman listens to her deceased husband’s heart beat in the chest of another man. A symbolic gesture, obviously vain, but who can blame her? Likewise, the woman in “Invisible Parrot”, who ticks off items on a grocery list she found on the ground in order to give others, and perhaps herself, the impression of being a part of the consumer society...

Banks goes back and forth between the news, examining individual illusions and those of others, displaying a keen interest in certain collective illusions. Thus, the first text tackles a central archetype of the American Dream: the ordinary, middle class hero. His incarnation of a typical Banks protagonist is named Connie, and proves to be soluble in the financial crisis. A former elite soldier, Connie raised his boys alone, with a love so intertwined with a taste of discipline that two of them became policemen, and the third, a prison guard. The novel opens to an ageing Connie, desperate since he lost his last job, and unable to disclose his shortcomings to his children: “He’s the father. Still the man of the house. A former Marine.” So, not wanting to worry anyone, not wanting to ask anything of his sons, and using a hearing aid that he has not paid for in order to speak with them, this paragon of pride and American-style righteousness begins to commit petty robberies. In ten pages, Russell Banks breathes life into one hundred real issues: The subprime mortgage crisis, the inadequate health insurance system all explode in the face of this American hero.

Let us not forget his novel “Blue”, perhaps the finest in the entire collection. It starts out as a capitalist fairytale – one poor, black woman has saved 3,500 dollars to purchase a beautiful used vehicle that will make her proud. It evolves into a horror story when the unfortunate employee is trapped on the dealer’s parking lot after hours, and stalked by a pit bull. Ultimately, it evolves into a satire when a journalist arrives and wonders if a black woman, threatened by a vicious guard dog in a used-car lot, would be a good news story. Once again, he focuses on the recent excesses of the real America – the obsession with security, the rise of individualism, the excessive right to information – and how they will all lead to the loss of an archetype: the bold employee who wants nothing more than a small slice of the consumer dream on wheels. Collective speech tells us everyone is entitled to a piece of it. This novel shows us under which conditions.