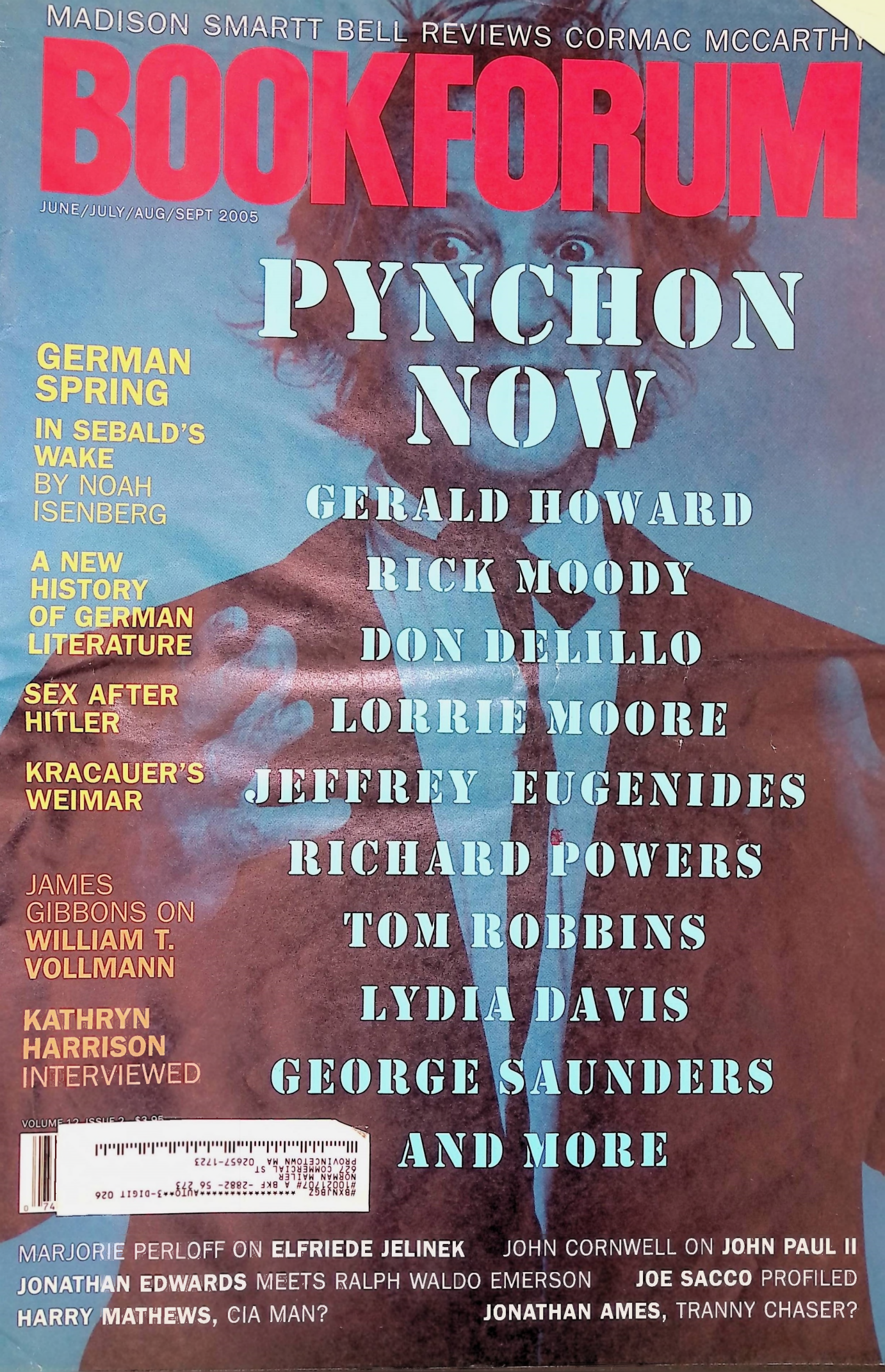
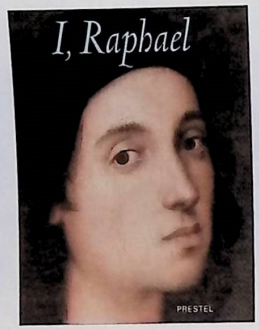

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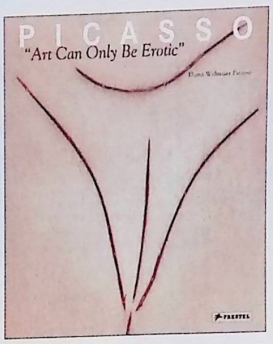


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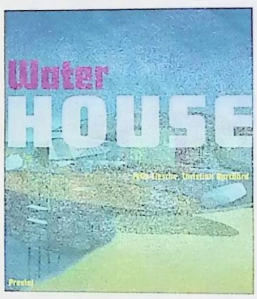


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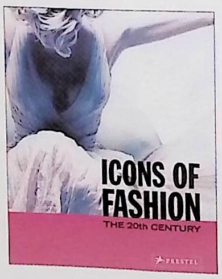
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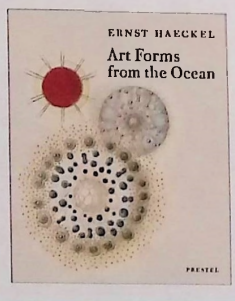
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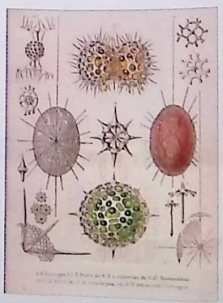
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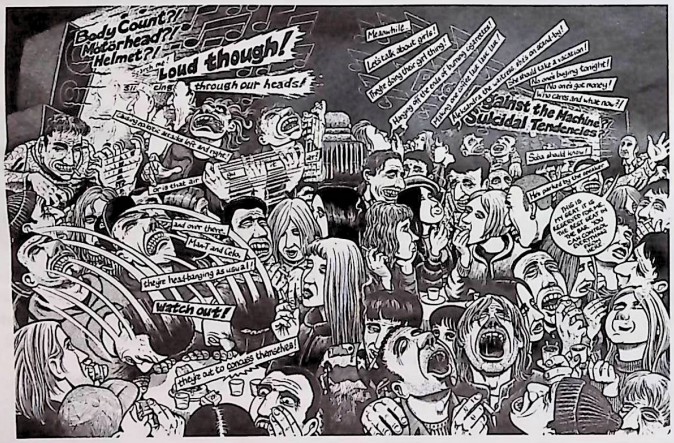
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BOOKFORUM (ISSN 1098-3376) is published by ARTFORUM International, 350 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10001. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to BOOKFORUM, Dept AF, Box 3000, Denville, NJ 07834-9950. (BOOKFORUM welcomes letters to the editor. Letters must be accompanied by a daytime telephone number. All submissions are subject to editing for length and clarity.)

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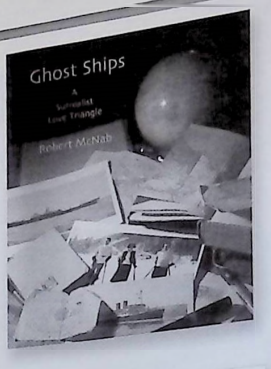
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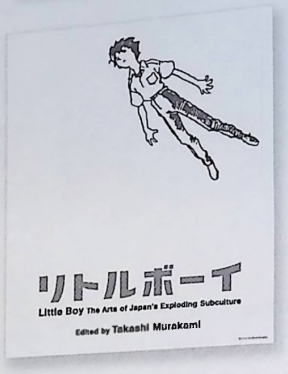
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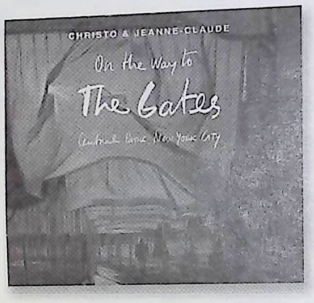
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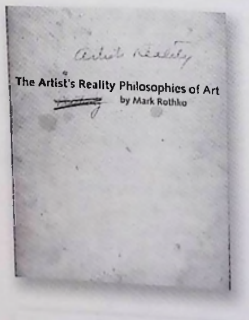
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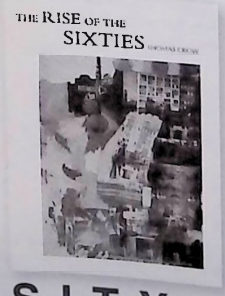












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Robert McNab

Preface by Werner Spies

This book tells the story of a secret journey made by three significant figures in the Surrealist movement—the painter Max Ernst, Paul Eluard (cofounder of Surrealism), and Eluard's wife Gala, explores their ménage à trois and the impact of the trip on their work and **"puts the founding of Surrealism in Paris in 1924 in a new light."**
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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Will the paranoid streak that runs broadly through contemporary cultural life ever lose its intensity? "The enemy is clearly delineated: he is a perfect model of malice, a kind of amoral superman—sinister, ubiquitous, powerful, cruel, sensual, luxury-loving." So Richard Hofstadter described in *Harper's* in 1964 the particular frame of thinking that made up the "paranoid style" of American politics. The historian famously traced this thread of anti-intellectualism throughout the country's history and sized up the damage it had done to our political culture: "We are all sufferers from history," he wrote, "but the paranoid is a double sufferer, since he is afflicted not only by the real world, with the rest of us, but by his fantasies as well." Hofstadter's target then was the conspiracy-minded Right of the John Birch ilk, but what's changed perhaps most radically since the time of his analysis is the leftward migration of the paranoid style.

More than any other book, Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* captured the very moment at which the paranoid worldview seemed to settle like a damp fog over American culture at large. In that sense, no writer was more of his time—or ours—than Pynchon. In this issue of *Bookforum*, we look behind the scenes at how this novel, which emerged as a cultural phenomenon, came to fruition—and how a difficult, spiraling 768-page book, and its Greta Garbo of a reclusive author, galvanized a reading audience that included many future writers. Gerald Howard's text, presented on page twenty-nine, masterfully relates the hows and the whys—a story that includes far-seeing editors, marketing coups, and awards-banquet shenanigans around the publication of Pynchon's epic. As we considered the force of Howard's own opinion concerning Pynchon's influential shadow, we invited twenty other writers to weigh in on the novelist and his thirty-two-year-old tome. (Our fiction editor, Albert Mobilio, deserves singular praise for the vision behind this selection.) The diversity of our respondents, in age, gender, and genre, speaks volumes about the gravity of *Gravity's Rainbow*. One virtue of the responses we have gathered here is that they make the case for Pynchon the writer—in some cases even when they are less interested in his picture-perfect reflection of paranoia as a cultural condition. It is what makes him so much more than a novelist of ideas—and makes his writing crucial even today.

Editorially yours,



CONTRIBUTORS



GERALD HOWARD has been a book editor since 1978, at New American Library, Viking Penguin, W. W. Norton, and Doubleday Broadway, where he currently serves as an executive editor at large. Howard has previously written on Harry Mathews and Wallace Markfield for *Bookforum*, and his essays and reviews have appeared in the *New York Times Book Review*, *The Nation*, the *London Review of Books*, and elsewhere. As an editor, he has worked with David Foster Wallace (*The Broom of the System*, *Girl with Curious Hair*), Don DeLillo (*Libra*), and William T. Vollmann (the paperback reprint of *You Bright and Risen Angels*), all writers he mentions in his essay in these pages on the publication history and influence of *Gravity's Rainbow*. PHOTO: SUSANNE WILLIAMS



THOMAS LAQUEUR is the Fawcett Professor of History at the University of California, Berkeley. Coeditor, with Catherine Gallagher, of *The Making of the Modern Body: Sexuality and Society in the Nineteenth Century* (University of California Press, 1987), he is the author of *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Harvard University Press, 1990) and *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation* (Zone Books, 2003). Laqueur has written reviews and critical essays for the *London Review of Books*, the *Threepenny Review*, *Slate*, and the *New Republic*. In these pages, he looks at the history of sexuality in postwar Germany.



Brooklyn-based writer **MARISA BOWE** is creative director of Wicked Wireless, a mobile entertainment company. A contributor to *New York Magazine* and *Slate*, she is coeditor of *Gig* (Crown, 2000), an oral history of Americans talking about their jobs, which was named one of the Top Ten Business Books of 2000 by the Harvard Business Review. Bowe is currently at work on MobART, a fine-art mobile phone application, which will allow users to download images of the work of contemporary artists for mobile wallpaper. For this issue, she examines the comics journalism of Joe Sacco.



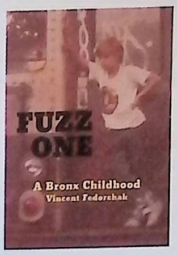
Director of the Kratz Center for Creative Writing at Goucher College in Baltimore, **MADISON SMARTT BELL** is the author of twelve novels, including *The Washington Square Ensemble* (Viking, 1983), *Straight Cut* (1986), and *Soldier's Joy* (1989; both Ticknor & Fields), the last of which received the Lillian Smith Award in 1989. His trilogy of novels on the Haitian revolution—*All Souls' Rising* (1995), *Master of the Crossroads* (2000), and *The Stone That the Builder Refused* (2004)—was published by Pantheon. *All Souls' Rising* was a finalist for the 1995 National Book Award and the 1996 PEN/Faulkner Award. In this issue, Bell considers the role of morality in Cormac McCarthy's new novel, *No Country for Old Men*. PHOTO: JÉRÔME DE PERLINGHI



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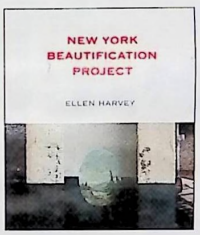
"Slot machines of visions," stated Octavio Paz, speaking of Cornell's shadow box assemblages. Editor Catherine Corman has combed through the voluminous diaries that Cornell kept throughout his life, now in the care of the Smithsonian's Archive of American Art, in search of the artist's own dreams. She found brief flashes of images, and short, enigmatic narratives of illumination—the verbal equivalent of Cornell's boxes.



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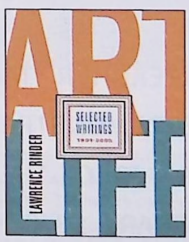
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Dresden Mon Amour

REALISM OR REVISIONISM? GERMANS REVISIT THE WAR

BY NOAH ISENBERG • "A SIGNAL IS NEEDED AGAINST THE ONE-SIDED MOURNING IN GERMANY," DECLARED PETER LAUER, A SIXTY-FOUR-YEAR-OLD SCHOOLTEACHER TAKING PART IN A NEO-NAZI COUNTERDEMONSTRATION TO MARK THE SIXTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF THE FIREBOMBING OF DRESDEN, ON FEBRUARY 13 OF THIS YEAR. "WE MUST ALSO MOURN THE GERMAN VICTIMS." THE EMOTIONALLY CHARGED ANNIVERSARY WAS ALSO MARKED BY AN OFFICIAL CEREMONY AND A MASS PROCESSION in which many of the marchers bore white roses as a symbol of opposition to the presence of Lauer's group, the largest neo-Nazi gathering in decades. But while Lauer identifies himself as a supporter of the rightist National Democratic Party (NPD), which now holds twelve seats in the local Saxon parliament, his sentiment does not represent merely Germany's fringe. Indeed, this year's anniversary of the end of the war has seen not only official commemorations of the enormous death toll brought about by the Nazi regime but also much attention paid to German suffering and German civilian casualties incurred during the Allied bombing of cities like Dresden. This development, which can be charted along a number of different lines (historical, literary, popular, etc.), was previously unimaginable.

For over half a century, German discussions of the Third Reich have focused almost unremittingly on the crimes committed by the Nazis, and in doing so have tended to implicate not only Hitler's most fervent supporters but the German population as a whole—for its passivity, for its basic endorsement of the regime, for its incapacity to recognize the heinous nature of the National Socialist cause. Even if these discussions have occasionally been punctuated by sharp challenges—such as the infamous *Historikerstreit* ("historians' dispute") of 1986, when a strident

WORKS DISCUSSED IN THIS ARTICLE:

THE END: HAMBURG 1943
BY HANS ERICH NOSSACK
TRANSLATED AND WITH A FOREWORD BY JOEL AGEE
CHICAGO: UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS. 112 PAGES. $20.

ON THE NATURAL HISTORY OF DESTRUCTION
BY W. G. SEBALD, TRANSLATED BY ANTHEA BELL
NEW YORK: MODERN LIBRARY. 224 PAGES. $13.

DRESDEN VATERSTADT
BY JOCHEN AND HARF ZIMMERMANN
BERLIN: NICOLAISCHE VERLAGSBUCHHANDLUNG. 120 PAGES. $26.

DER BRAND: DEUTSCHLAND IM BOMBENKRIEG, 1940–1945
BY JÖRG FRIEDRICH
BERLIN: LIST TASCHENBUCH. 589 PAGES. $14.

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effort to normalize the German past was put forward by conservative historian Ernst Nolte—Germans have generally felt deeply and irreversibly entrenched on the side of the perpetrators. As a result, a sense of bereavement for their own people has not come easily. In the late 1960s, the psychoanalysts Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich wrote presciently of Germany's "inability to mourn." In the years since, the self-imposed silence often elicited by mention of the war or the Holocaust has similarly impaired any candid expression of German loss.

But in fall 1997, in what was one of the first prominent, unflinching examinations of German suffering during the Allied air campaign, the acclaimed German novelist W. G. Sebald gave a series of lectures in Zurich under the title "Air War and Literature" (published in English translation, after Sebald's untimely death in 2001, as *On the Natural History of Destruction*). Pitched in a semipolemical vein, Sebald's remarks took to task German writers of the previous generation, and the German public along with them, for falling under the spell of a kind of "individual and collective amnesia," a willful forgetting that kept them from addressing this vital part of their postwar identity. As Sebald told it, from the end of the war into the late 1990s very few literary testimonies were written, and those that were faced severe delays in publication—as in the case of Heinrich Böll's dark war novel *Der Engel schwieg* (The Silent Angel), which was written in the late 1940s but didn't appear until 1992—or barely reached an audience. Despite the fact that so many Germans were profoundly affected by the unprecedented devastation—according to Sebald's calculations, some six hundred thousand civilians died in the air raids, and by the war's final days 7.5 million citizens of the former Reich were without a home—the topic was essentially closed to debate. Germany, in Sebald's words, was "always looking and looking away at the same time."

As a result, the subject of German loss had no place in the dominant postwar narrative of reconstruction and rebirth, the so-called *Wirtschaftswunder* ("economic miracle") for which the Federal Republic of Germany would soon become famous. Not unlike the protagonist of R. W. Fassbinder's politically minded 1979 film *Die Ehe der Maria Braun* (The Marriage of Maria Braun), a woman whose relentless zeal for upward mobility mirrors the development of the nation, postwar Germany was largely content to paper over its tarnished image, to rebuild directly atop the ruins, and to avoid, at all costs, looking back. As Sebald put it, "The darkest aspects of the final act of destruction, as experienced by the great majority of the German population, remained under a kind of taboo like a shameful family secret, a secret that perhaps could not even be privately acknowledged."

As we know from period documentary footage, mainly photographs and newsreels, a number of German cities were completely leveled in World War II. The Allied air campaign left them buried beneath mountains of ruins; Dresden alone had as much as 42.8 cubic meters of rubble per inhabitant. The Allied bombing of Dresden represents, for many, an especially tragic example, given that it occurred so late in the war, that it destroyed the city's most precious cultural institutions, and that Dresden, unlike Hamburg, was not considered a vital military target. In his survey of the destruction, Sebald includes, as he typically does in his fictional work as well, an array of uncaptioned photographs, providing a visual dimension to his words. The poignant images—decimated cityscapes dotted with heaps of rubble, charred body parts strewn across a city street, bombed-out buildings evoking statuelike severed torsos or ancient ruins—betray not only the horrifying scale of the destruction but also the sweeping effort to repress these horrors. In a number of instances, Sebald includes a diptych, the first an image from the aftermath of the bombings, the second a shot of the city reconstructed. (A recent German publication, *Dresden Vaterstadt*, a father-son photographic collaboration by Jochen and Harf Zimmermann, takes a similar approach—presenting snapshots from 1949 juxtaposed with those taken from the same vantage point in 2004—to show the complex course of urban development and to remind viewers what the city had looked like before it was rebuilt.) "People's ability to forget what they do not want to know," Sebald avers, "to overlook what is before their eyes, was seldom put to the test better than in Germany at that time. The population decided—out of sheer panic at first—to carry on as if nothing had happened."



ERICH ANDRES/DENKMALSCHUTZAMT, HAMBURG BILDARCHIV

Opposite and above: Hamburg, July 1943.

While very few works of the so-called *Trümmerliteratur*, or "rubble literature," published in the immediate postwar period meet Sebald's exacting standards for an unrestrained confrontation with German experience of the air raids, there are several that pass the initial test. He mentions, with qualified praise, literary works by the German authors Böll, Arno Schmidt, and Hermann Kasack, as well as non-German eyewitness reports by Stig Dagerman and Janet Flanner, among others. Also on his list is one of the most riveting accounts of the war, novelist Hans Erich Nossack's threadbare, laconic rendering of the firebombing of Hamburg, *Der Untergang: Hamburg 1943*, first published in Germany in 1948, as part of a collection of the author's shorter pieces titled *Interview mit dem Tode* (Interview with Death), and published in English translation this past winter as *The End*. Nossack recorded his observations of the decimated city in November 1943—during the actual attacks, he and his wife happened to be vacationing in a village beyond the city outskirts, across the Elbe River—just a few months after Operation Gomorrah, as the Allied air campaign was called, had taken its toll. Nossack opens in the matter-of-fact style he maintains, with a few notable exceptions of allegorical and poetic flourish, throughout much of his account: "I experienced the destruction of Hamburg as a spectator. I was spared the fate of playing a role in it. I don't know why. I can't even decide whether that was a privilege. . . . For me the city went to ruin as a whole, and my danger consisted in being overpowered by seeing and knowing the entirety of its fate." He then explains, with acute self-awareness and unusual foresight, the nature of his undertaking:

> I feel that I have been given a mandate to render an account. Let no one ask me why I presume to speak of a mandate: I cannot answer that. I feel that my mouth would remain closed forever if I did not take care of this first. Also, I feel an urgency to set it down right away, even though only three months have passed. For reason will never be capable of comprehending as a reality or preserving in memory what happened there. I am afraid that, if I do not bear witness now, it will gradually fade like an evil dream.

As if possessing a sick, prophetic sense of the blanket of silence that would soon come to shroud the event, Nossack then proceeds to transcribe his impressions of the devastation around him. Like his fellow wartime diarist Victor Klemperer, whose multivolume *Ich will Zeugnis ablegen bis zum letzten* (I Will Bear Witness) gives a Jewish eyewitness account of the war years, Nossack sees his role as a kind of moral imperative.

Nossack's chronicle addresses, and even anticipates, many of the same issues that Sebald would treat in his lectures more than half a century later: the "uncanny silence," the almost immediate desire to move forward, the guilt, fear, and shame that promptly set in. *The End* portrays, in a number of revealing instances, how the trauma from the attacks manifested itself: "People were simply without a center, the roots were torn out and swayed back and forth in search of some soil." A woman Nossack observes, surrounded by rubble, insists on frantically scrubbing her windows. In a related moment, he notes how Hamburg's citizens, reverting to their established bourgeois habits in the wake of the bombing, sit on their verandas and drink coffee. Even those who lost family and friends appear, in Nossack's account, bent on erasing—or repressing—the experience. "How often, when I ask one of the victims about someone who I know was their friend, do I hear the answer: He's finished for me." One finds in Nossack's narrative that along with the palpable sense of doom (the original German title, *Der Untergang*, means at once "the collapse," "the demise," and "the downfall"), there are also hints of a new beginning. Unable to dismiss or repress these urges, and clearly made uncomfortable by them, Nossack instead confronts them as they impinge on his project. "Why go on? I mean, why record all this? Wouldn't it be better to surrender it to oblivion for all time? For those who were there certainly don't have to read it. And the others, and those who will come later?"

Nowhere in Nossack's short work does one detect anger at what has occurred or anger directed at those who dropped the bombs. Although he refers to the air raids as "punishment" (in German the word he uses is *Gericht*, which comes from juridical language and means "tribunal" or "judgment"), he is also quick to insist, "I have not heard a single person curse the enemies or blame them for the destruction. When the newspapers published epithets like 'pirates of the air' and 'criminal arsonists,' we had no ears for that." It's almost as if he quietly accepts the bitter hand dealt by the Allied attacks and sees them as a justified response to the Nazi megalomania: "We felt our fate to be the end." It is, perhaps, this remarkable candor and humility that first prompted Sebald to champion Nossack as the sole German writer who "was ready or able to put any concrete facts down on paper about the progress and repercussions of this gigantic, long-term campaign of destruction."

If, as Sebald suggests, the German public was incapable of countenancing Nossack's unvarnished account at the time of its initial publication, the American public was no better equipped. Translator Joel Agee notes in his foreword to the English edition that when he first tried to find a publisher for the work in the early '70s, during the Vietnam War, he was told that "Americans just weren't prepared to sympathize with a German description of the suffering of Germans in World War Two." Now, however, sixty years after the end of the war, Americans may be more willing to

accept the idea of German suffering. Even more important is the unmistakable affinity that Nossack's text has with other accounts of terror and trauma, and that, in the wake of our own experience with air attacks at home, we are now, sadly, able to appreciate. Anyone who witnessed 9/11 firsthand is apt to relate to Nossack's somber, almost surreal landscape, "the smell of charred household effects, of rot and decay, hanging over the city," coupled with "the population's readiness to help."

The American edition of *The End* includes, as an appendix, a selection of the wartime photographs of Hamburg surreptitiously taken by acclaimed photojournalist Erich Andres. There are, as one might expect, images of the spectacular ruins, some of them still smoldering while the city's inhabitants traverse the rubble; there is also the shocking image of charred corpses lying next to a scorched bucket, the same photo that Sebald incorporates into his text. But the shot that may speak most directly to an American audience still haunted by the specter of photographs of missing loved ones plastered on the walls and lampposts of New York City shows a soldier writing in chalk on a bare concrete wall. In the adjacent photo appear the words "Hilde, where are you? We're alive" (this is echoed in Nossack's text: "Where are you, Mother? Please let me know. I now live at this and that place").

When Sebald wrote his Zurich lectures, and when he articulated his claim that "we [Germans] have not yet succeeded in bringing the horrors of the air war to public attention through historical or literary accounts," military historian Jörg Friedrich had yet to publish his monumental, highly controversial work *Der Brand: Deutschland im Bombenkrieg, 1940–1945* (The Fire: Germany in the Bombing Campaign, 1940–1945, the English translation of which is forthcoming from Columbia University Press). In a radical departure from previous scholarly norms and standard areas of emphasis—Friedrich himself previously worked on research projects dealing with Nazi war crimes and the Holocaust—*The Fire* sets out to document the full magnitude of the Allied air raids as experienced in German cities across the Reich. When the work appeared in Germany in 2002, critics were quick to call foul, not so much because of what Friedrich had attempted to do but because of how he had done it. By personalizing the story, by providing eyewitness accounts in lurid, painful detail (an act of "hysterical expressivity," as one German critic called it), and by employing the type of language previously reserved for discussing victims of the Holocaust, Friedrich opened himself up to charges of historical revisionism and cozying up to the radical Right.

Yet Friedrich's book is also brimming with statistics, which he often wields the way a talented trial lawyer marshals evidence. Consider, for example, his discussion of the Hamburg firebombing, an odd mixture of straight information and rhetorical flourish: "The approximately 40,000 fatalities in the July 1943 campaigns are, together with those in Dresden, Tokyo, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki, emblems of the most extreme kind of violent warfare ever inflicted upon a creature. Not because of the streams of blood spilled, but rather because of the way that living beings were erased from the world with a deadly wind. In fire bombing as in nuclear war very little blood flows. Rescue workers in Hamburg report that the hurricane-like, blazing gusts of air reached hundreds of people one later found lying naked in the streets. Their skin was allegedly of a brown texture, their hair in good condition, their mucous membranes in their faces dried up and incrusted." Friedrich was castigated for such passages and also for failing to emphasize sufficiently that Germany had itself pioneered the bombing *continued on page 8*

NEW GERMAN CRITIQUE

Mark M. Anderson on German Literary History

A NEW HISTORY OF GERMAN LITERATURE
EDITED BY DAVID E. WELLBERY (EDITOR IN CHIEF), JUDITH RYAN (GENERAL EDITOR), HANS ULRICH GUMBRECHT, ANTON KAES, JOSEPH LEO KOERNER, AND DOROTHEA VON MÜCKE (EDITORS)
CAMBRIDGE, MA: HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS. 1,004 PAGES. $45.

In 1989, as the theory wars over deconstruction and poststructuralism were beginning to ease up, Harvard University Press published *A New History of French Literature*. Edited by Denis Hollier, the volume did away with the traditional taxonomies of literary movements and writers by organizing itself as one long series of dates, each of which testified to a signal moment in French literary history. Apart from its novel presentation (itself no mean achievement in the often dusty realm of reference works), this editorial technique had the advantage of stressing the contingent, "happening" quality of literature: literature in the making rather than as a collection of timeless and fixed "great works." And because each entry was written by a different scholar, the encylopedia offered a cornucopia of French literary criticism at the time, a "tasting menu," as it were, of leading critics, sensibilities, and methods. Literary history became an encounter.

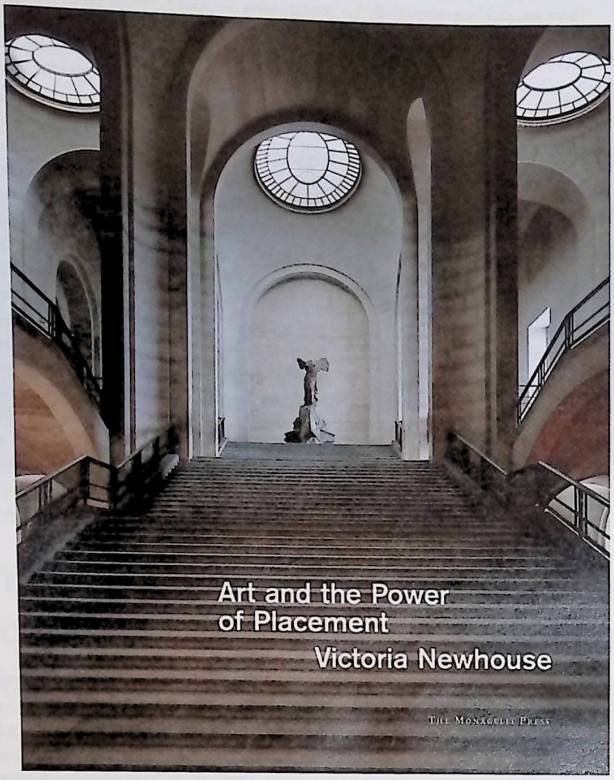
Fifteen years later, *A New History of German Literature* uses the same structure of momentous dates and subjective critical perspectives to similar effect and gain. "Every poem is datable," wrote the poet Paul Celan, by which he meant (as editor in chief David Wellbery writes in the introduction) that the "meaning of literary texts . . . is inseparably tied to the singularity of their moment, to their primary historical character as contingent events." This conception of history owes much to Walter Benjamin, who emphasized the breaks in the temporal continuum in order to disrupt the monumentalizing and ossifying tendencies of traditional historicist views and to make history come alive for each human subject. In practice, this approach can be disorienting. Students of German literature will search the table of contents of *A New History of German Literature* in vain for such terms as *Sturm und Drang*, *Romanticism*, and even, believe it or not, the name *Goethe*. We find instead enigmatic and somewhat mystifying titles, such as "Contagious Violence," "Pathologies of Literature," and (my favorite) "An Alien Fallen from the Moon," which come coupled with precise but equally enigmatic dates: "circa 1200," "1774, January–March," or "1796, June 10." Only by scouring the index or reading the entries in question can the reader discover that these titles and dates refer to the composition of the medieval epic *Nibelungenlied*, to Goethe's breakthrough novel, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, and to the arrival in Weimar of Romantic author Jean Paul, dismissed by Schiller as an "alien" to classical German literature.

The use of these titles is somewhat of a tease (they provide, in essence, the poetic half of traditional academic titles, leaving off the descriptive half that usually follows the colon), but speaks to Wellbery's stated desire to enliven and disrupt conventional histories. Goethe, that "towering figure of the German literary tradition," is to be met in this encyclopedia not in his monumentality but at three or four moments of his career: "We see him writing his *Werther*, censoring his own *Roman Elegies*, declaring his *Faust* complete; in one entry, we even see him hiding behind a curtain to listen to F. A. Wolf lecture on Homer." Although this strategy sometimes descends into the anecdotal and arbitrary, more often than not the entries succeed in illuminating the "dynamics of their various subject matters," as well as testifying to the theoretical paradigms, insight, and sensibility of the individual contributors.

Interdisciplinarity and methodological eclecticism are the rule. This is very much a "German studies" account of German literature, reflecting the state of a discipline that has moved increasingly toward the study of literature and language as cultural forces in a historical and social context. Readers will find articles on the Crusades and Luther, on Wagner's *Ring* cycle and Schopenhauer's philosophy of the will, on Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* and the New German Cinema of the 1970s—all written by Germanists currently working in American German departments. But readers will also find "visiting" scholars from other fields, some quite unexpected: early-modern historian Anthony Grafton on Johannes Reuchlin and the Kabbalah; pop music critic Greil Marcus on Dada; historian of science Lorraine Daston on Lichtenberg's aphoristic mode; Arthur C. Danto on Hegel and the "end of art"; even the Harvard executive editor himself, Lindsay Waters, on Walter Benjamin's celebrated essay on art in the age of mechanical reproduction.

A New History of German Literature is large: In just over a thousand pages it winds its way over a thousand years of history, across different genres, disciplines, and cultures, from the tenth-century magical formulas written in alliterative Old High German to W. G. Sebald's 2001 novel *Austerlitz*. But despite its gargantuan scope, the focus on single moments makes the reader aware of just how fragmentary and subjective the *New History* is. There are clear winners and losers. An astonishing amount of space (some 340 pages) is allocated to the medieval, Renaissance, and Baroque—periods that are virtually untaught today in most German literature departments throughout this country. A welcome corrective to this curricular gap, the articles in the section provide a rich portrait of historical, scientific, and social forces in the pre-Enlightenment development of German literature. The other clear winner, at more than four hundred pages and nearly seventy articles, is the twentieth century. In addition to entries on individual texts by Kafka, Rilke, Thomas Mann, and Paul Celan, we find essays on Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, Daniel Libeskind's new Jewish Museum in Berlin, and "spectacles of multiculturalism" and Turkish identity politics in contemporary Germany.

The problem with these riches is that little space is left over for the rest of German literature. Only 170 pages are devoted to the Enlightenment, Classical, and Romantic periods from 1750 to 1821—arguably the most important phase of German literature, when it developed into a modern idiom and a European force, a "world" model for other literatures. (The imbalance is particularly odd since Wellbery's own specialization is in this period.) The real loser is the post-Romantic nineteenth century, from Heine to Hauptmann, not only because it receives a scant hundred pages but because much of this section doesn't specifically deal with literature. One welcomes, to be sure, articles on Schubert's *Winterreise*, Schopenhauer's philosophy of the will, Marx's "Communist Manifesto," and *continued on page 8*



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Art and the Power of Placement

Victoria Newhouse

Where and how an artwork is presented can enhance it or detract from it, or even alter its meaning. Depending on the display, painting and sculpture can denote a religious, political, decorative, or educational significance, as well as aesthetic and commercial value. Just how powerful the effect of placement can be is demonstrated in this book by in-depth case studies and comparisons of art installations around the world and from antiquity to the present, all richly illustrated. Newhouse explores noteworthy displays of art in commercial galleries and in private homes and gardens, as well as a number of unusual venues; she also offers some guidelines for display that apply as much to the hanging of a picture in a private interior as to the installation of a museum show.

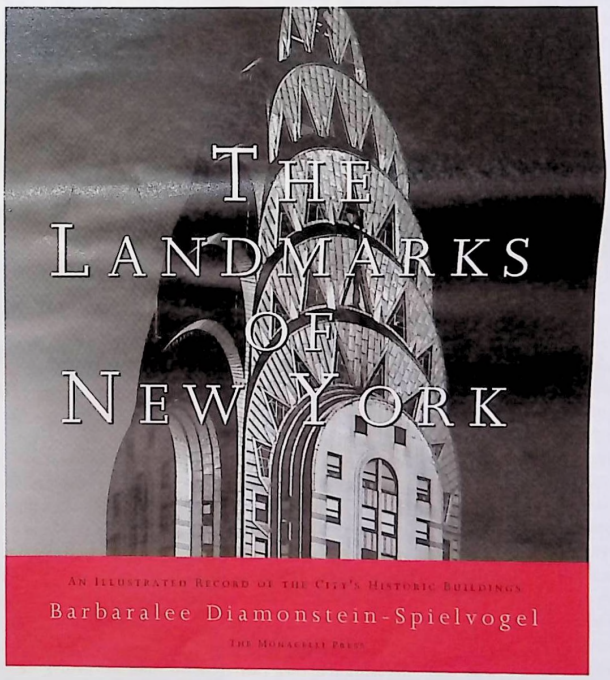
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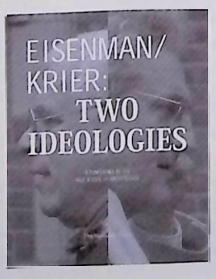
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Isenberg continued from page 6 raids, in cities such as Warsaw (1939), Rotterdam (1940), and Coventry (1940). In reaction, in a recent piece in the German daily *Die Welt*, published just days before the sixtieth anniversary of the firebombing of Dresden, Friedrich made a point of noting the German precedent but added a critical rejoinder. In his words, "It was only since 1943 that the incineration of cities from the air had amounted to deliberate mass killing. The fire bombing of Hamburg killed 45,000 [*sic*] people overnight, more than the Luftwaffe had achieved in nine months of dropping bombs on England." Just as the *Historikerstreit* applied great pressure to the issue of moral equivalency—with the effort from the Right to compare the crimes of Hitler with those of Stalin—so, too, the issue resurges in Friedrich's work.

What Sebald lamented about the lack of open discourse on the air war appears to have been blown apart with the publication of *Der Brand*, and in the three years since, the topic of German suffering has been addressed with more fervor than Sebald may have been able to imagine. Authors as diverse as Günter Grass and Uwe Timm have taken up variations of the subject in their work—the Russian sinking of a Nazi cruise ship carrying German refugees in the case of Grass, and the indoctrination and ultimate sacrifice of young, naive Germans at the hands of the SS in Timm—and contemporary filmmakers have similarly seized on the occasion to shift their focus to formerly taboo terrain. Though it has the same title as Nossack's book, Oliver Hirschbiegel's blockbuster film *Der Untergang* (Downfall) is not about the Allied air raids in Hamburg, but about Hitler's final moments under siege in Berlin. Much of it takes place in the depths of Hitler's bunker, where the increasingly deluded Führer, played with mesmerizing skill by Bruno Ganz, loses his grip. The film follows Hitler on his suicidal path, but it also shows how those around him—especially his young, naive secretary, Traudl Junge (Alexandra Maria Lara)—are made to suffer. We witness the poisoning of the Goebbels children, the mass suicides, the destruction of those who act out their ideological will to sacrifice, and, finally, the salvaged hopes for rebirth among those who survive Hitler's wrath. In his review of the film, J. Hoberman likened it to a German *Kammerspiel*, or "domestic drama," a tradition that tends to emphasize the intimate nature of characters and their social relations over external politics and larger concerns. Although it has been criticized for humanizing Hitler, what *Downfall* really does is domesticate German suffering, an effect it may share with Friedrich's work.

While this debate raises real, well-placed fears of vulgar revisionism, and of playing into the hands of neo-Nazi slogans such as the "Bombing Holocaust" (even Nossack's text has found its way, in excerpted form, onto the American right-wing website Stormfront, the "White Nationalist Community" platform from which David Duke airs his weekly speeches), it also has led to positive developments. German authors, filmmakers, historians, and the public at large have been challenged to face a part of German history that needed to resurface. Even if some of the consequences may be frightening, bottling up this agonizing chapter of history is no longer an option. Toward the end of *In My Brother's Shadow: A Life and Death in the SS*, Uwe Timm observes, "They [the Germans] did not know because they would not see, they looked away." A mere eight years after Sebald voiced grave concerns about Germany's propensity to repress the past, to always be "looking and looking away at the same time," it is now no longer possible to look away. □

Noah Isenberg is chair of humanities at the New School in New York. His writing has appeared in the *New York Times*, *The Nation*, the *New Republic*, and other publications.

Anderson continued from page 6 Wagner's *Ring*—texts that are all interesting in their own right and that have played an incalculable role in the development of German literature. But the heart sinks when one considers the omissions: nothing substantial on Heine's poetry or his Judaism; nothing on the Realist authors Storm, Grabbe, and C. F. Meyer; only passing reference to Gerhart Hauptmann, the Zola of German Naturalism; and nothing at all on the Jewish genre writers Auerbach, Franzos, and Sacher-Masoch.

To be sure, every literary history has to make choices, and writers' reputations rise and fall over time. But the real issue is the "German studies" approach behind so many of these articles, which tend to put aside formal literary questions (genre, prosody, figural language, stylistics, etc.) in order to probe connections with nonliterary realms. The editorial mandate to choose a specific date almost automatically pushes the contributors away from a text's formal literary features in favor of a historical event in which its ideological or extraliterary significance can be understood to crystallize. This technique works best when larger issues are addressed, in particular for the medieval and early modern periods, whose specialists have long employed historical and interdisciplinary methods. The fascinating article "The Culture of the Book," on Renaissance Nuremberg, by Tracy Adams and Stephen G. Nichols, is a case in point: It not only sketches a miniature portrait of that city's "world" significance for early modern Europe, but also suggests how knowledge of Renaissance book culture can expand and transform our present-day notion of authors and readers. A manufacturing and trading center located at the crossroads of twelve trade routes, Nuremberg was also the "de facto capital of the Holy Roman Empire," the site of Germany's first municipal library, and the printing capital for its flourishing Humanist studies. Marion Aptroot's article "The Emergence of Yiddish Literature" uses the scholarly debate over a collection of ancient manuscripts in Hebrew script in order to point out the linguistic and ideological stakes in determining the border between Middle High German and Yiddish. Are these manuscripts, discovered in the late nineteenth century in a Cairo synagogue, essentially German texts written in Hebrew letters, or are they Yiddish texts in a Jewish literary tradition that borrowed elements from the surrounding German culture? Orrin Robinson's model essay "Luther's Bible and the Emergence of Standard German" convincingly tempers the widespread view that Luther's translations and writings "created the German language" (as Heine put it), allowing us to see them as part of a broader literary development as well as a decisive intervention in their own right. In these and many other essays (on monastic scriptoria, medieval court life, Old Norse literature, mysticism, and scholastic theology), we find a felicitous mix of broad historical knowledge, philosophical insight, and traditional philology, which, to this reader at least, proves exhilarating as well as convincing.

For the modern period, however, this interdisciplinary, event-driven conception of literary history is decidedly mixed, and reflects more the current interests of American *Germanistik* than German literature per se. Large chunks of the history of poetry and drama largely disappear, to be replaced by film, photography, philosophy, and politics. David Bathrick's discussion of songwriter and poet Wolf Biermann rightly focuses on issues of censorship and East German party politics (Biermann's poetry is not formally interesting), but the lack of any sustained discussion of Else Lasker-Schüler, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Bertolt Brecht, Ingeborg Bachmann, Johannes Bobrowski, Günter Eich, or Ernst Jandl *as poets* makes it impossible to follow the internal, formal development of a genre that was vitally important to German readers throughout much of the century. (Here I can cite my own contribution—mea culpa—as an example: Though Ingeborg Bachmann's poetry is arguably better, in sheer literary terms, than her novel cycle *Todesarten*, I was commissioned to write on the latter, no doubt because of its greater resonance for German feminist discussions of patriarchy and fascism.) Is this political tendency the result of a "Benjaminian" attempt to break open German literature for new readers and surprising uses, or merely the reflection of poetry's waning influence in the age of the artwork's "mechanical reproducibility"? Ironically enough, Walter Benjamin (like Hannah Arendt and Gershom Scholem) wrote poetry himself, and no doubt he would have lamented the loss of this tradition.

This loss is also a gain, though, since it is intimately connected with the expansion of the traditional study of German literature to include what has become known simply as "visual culture." A fascinating article on Bauhaus photography and typography by Brigid Doherty (a trained art historian who currently teaches in the Princeton German department) has little to do with literature; indeed, it discusses the end of literature (as in Moholy-Nagy's 1923 prediction that "photography will lead in the near future to a replacement of literature by film") and serves as a reflection of the current move toward visual culture in American literature departments. The same can be said of the (excellent) articles by Anton Kaes on German Expressionist cinema, by Eric Rentschler on the German *Heimat* films and the Holocaust, and by Edward Dimendberg on the fall of the Berlin Wall and the new "architecture of commemoration." These topics have all become vital areas of contemporary American *Germanistik*, compelling to students and a *rich* terrain for New Historicist or cultural-studies methods: archival research, heterogeneous juxtaposition, and an eye toward popular culture and ideological conflict.

In a few places, *A New History of German Literature* falls into topical anecdote or mere theorizing at the expense of literary history. For example, the political importance of *Mein Kampf* is unquestionable. But its impact *as a text* on German literature, or even on German readers, is never clearly demonstrated in an article that highlights instead a piquant but irrelevant detail of the book's reception history (starting on May 1, 1936, it was distributed to all newlywed couples in Germany). "All this," we are told, "was part of the Nazis' effort to create a new aural and visual space in which Germans would be . . . encouraged to assume social and racial identities as so-called Aryans in the 'thousand-year' Reich"; later the author questions whether Germans actually read the book, noting that they "kept and discarded [it] opportunistically." One wonders just how important the "Carnival of Cultures" in Berlin in 2000 will prove to be in the long run for Turkish and other immigrant groups' identity; its importance for German literature is not even discussed. Finally, given the hostility of deconstructionist critics to historical contextualization, one might ask why they make an appearance in what is, for all its theoretical self-consciousness, an Enlightenment attempt to order and make (new) sense of the past. Carol Jacob's brilliant reading of Enlightenment philosopher Johann Hamann predictably winds up concluding that despite his religious conversion and use of scripture, his prose remains caught up in the aporia of language (its "unencompassable figures") and fails to bring about aesthetic closure. And however suggestive it is to see Heine's writing as an allegory of the "instability" and "unidentifiable" nature of the poetic self, one longs for a cogent discussion of *The Book of Songs*, arguably the most popular German work of the nineteenth century, as well as its fraught and fateful significance for generations of German and Jewish readers.

To these minor details one must also add the publisher's unfortunate decision not to send final page proofs to the contributors for correction, which resulted in numerous factual errors, omissions, and stylistic inconsistencies, marring an otherwise elegant volume. Cost-cutting measures seem to have hampered this project throughout its decade-long gestation. Given the importance of visual materials in the editors' conception of literary history, the almost complete lack of illustrations is unfortunate, though no doubt also necessary for reasons of space and finances. These material details, however, should not diminish the stunning intellectual achievement and pedagogical usefulness of *A New History of German Literature*. One can only wish that its absorbingly fresh account of literature and the interpreting process—"here and now," as Wellbery puts it with infectious enthusiasm in his essay on Goethe's *Faust*—will reach the broadest possible audience. □

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Strange Bedfellows

SEXUALITY AND ITS DISCONTENTS IN POSTWAR GERMANY

THOMAS LAQUEUR • IN NO WESTERN COUNTRY WERE QUESTIONS OF SEXUALITY MORE POLITICALLY CENTRAL DURING THE SECOND HALF OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY THAN THE FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY. AFTER THE COLLAPSE OF NATIONAL SOCIALISM IT WAS, IN THE SLANG OF THE TIME, *THEMA 1* ("TOPIC NO. 1"); BY 1970 THE *NOUVEL OBSERVATEUR* COULD CLAIM THAT THE GERMANS WERE SEX-OBSESSED—*"SEX ÜBER ALLES"*—NOTING THAT

the heavy breathing of orgasm had mercifully replaced the stomping of boots. Nowhere were sexual and political liberation linked more fiercely during the 1960s and '70s, and nowhere—with the possible exception of the United States—was the backlash in the decades that followed more painful. Even in the German Democratic Republic, where socialism supposedly made matters of personal sexual morality less pressing, Siegfried Schnabl's 1969 *Mann und Frau intim* (Man and Woman Intimately) was the biggest-selling title of any book in East German history (the nearest competitor was a book on gardening).

Why this was the case lies at the heart of Dagmar Herzog's brilliant, deeply researched, and beautifully written book, *Sex After Fascism*. Herzog can only hint at the deep structures of an answer, the *longue durée* of the history of sexuality in Germany. That would be another project. She does point to the attraction that public nudity has held for Germans—and the Nordic peoples more generally—since the late nineteenth century. And she does link the post-Nazi reading and misreading of the political history of sexuality to earlier exercises of a similar sort: German conservatives of the 1920s, for example, blamed the supposedly novel sexual liberalization of the post-Versailles era on military defeat and the Communists when in fact it was merely the continuation of trends already well under way in a reaction against official Wilhemine morality. Indeed, the Nazis intensified many of the liberalizing trends of Weimar at the same time that they presented themselves as the saviors of Germany from the rampant, Jewish-led sexual depravity that supposedly characterized the republic.

There is, however, more to the prehistory of the postwar story. The '60s notion that the unshackled body is central to the reform of life was already present, for example, in the iconic, endlessly reproduced and reworked 1894 "*Das Lichtgebet*" ("The Prayer to Light"), by Hugo Höppner (aka Fidus), picturing an androgynous, decidedly Nordic nude, standing on a high cliff with arms upraised in praise to the sun. The commitment of West German radicals of the '60s to liberating the sexuality of children was also prefigured, if more coyly, in the image of lithe, naked children dancing on the cover of the 1902 volume *Die Kunst im Leben des Kindes* (Art in the Life of the Child). In other words, there is even more historical weight behind the story Herzog tells than she has space to relate.

Herzog's answer, though, is more precise and detailed: Sexuality, central to "meaning making" in any culture, was, in postwar Germany, determinative of how the Third Reich would be remembered and how succeeding generations would come to terms with the Holocaust. The range of sources Herzog marshals to support her view is breathtaking: from local church pamphlets to the pronouncements of bishops; from autobiographical snippets to political manifestos and theoretical statements; from legislative histories to the recounting of central episodes in the battle for sexual liberation. There is plenty on what was said but also a great deal on what was done—including detailed descriptions of innovative day-care initiatives, the 1974 demonstrations in support of a lesbian couple accused of murdering the abusive husband of one of the two, and the suicides of at least six gay men prosecuted in 1950 under the notorious Nazi holdover Paragraph 175, which criminalized homosexuality.

Central to Herzog's story is the history of sexuality itself in the Nazi era, because what actually occurred is crucial to understanding how it was misremembered and misunderstood by the generation of 1968. Of course the '68ers were wrong and perhaps naive in their belief that Auschwitz "was typical of a society that represses sexuality" or that "brutality and lust for destruction" became "substitutes for sexual pleasures." But theirs was a morally serious misunderstanding, grounded in a distortion of the past that they inherited from their parents' generation and that was itself the result of the complex story of National Socialist sexuality.



GETTY

Sepp Hilz, *Peasant Venus*, 1939, oil on canvas.

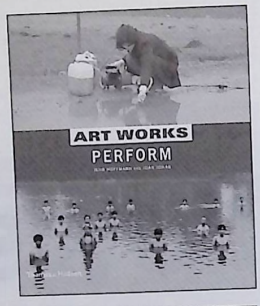
In fact, the Nazis were, as the German churches pointed out timidly during the Third Reich and vociferously afterward, the sworn enemies of "traditional" bourgeois sexuality. Of course the Nazi regime made abortion a capital offense, tightened the 1871 criminal penalties against homosexuality, and mounted hyperbolic attacks on Weimar as the golden age of Jewish/Communist sexual perversion. Sexual license was for the master race alone, under prescribed circumstances. Still, Hitler was an avowed enemy of prudery. Premarital sex was standard and uncontroversial National Socialist policy; pro-sex polemics were part of a neo-pagan attack on Christian morality; illegitimacy was destigmatized; and every opportunity was seized to encourage early sexual exploration among the party's young faithful.

Nudes constituted fully one in ten paintings of those officially shown under Nazi auspices. The Nazis were, as Herzog points out, far from chaste. (One wishes for reproductions to help make her case: The subject of Sepp Hilz's *Peasant Venus*, for example, stands enticingly naked before her bed. The coy girls in *The Four Elements* by Adolf Ziegler, the "master of German pubic hair" and president of the Reich Chamber for the Visual Arts, could only be invitations to desire.) As Herbert Marcuse wrote in the early '40s: "The abolition of sexual taboos [made] this realm of satisfaction an official political domain" that bound individuals to the party.

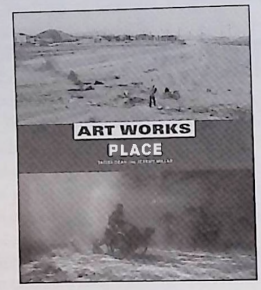
The generation of '68 was thus responding not to the sexual repressiveness of the Nazi regime but to a

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BY DAGMAR HERZOG
PRINCETON, NJ: PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS. 361 PAGES. $30.

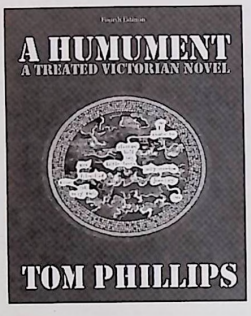
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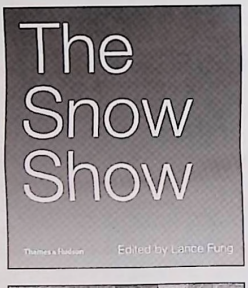
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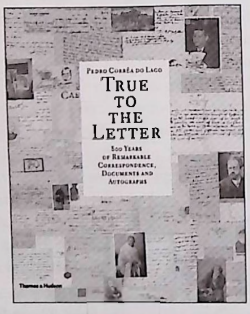
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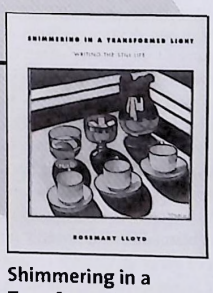
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postfascist formation, the cultural work of their parents in coming to terms with defeat and the Holocaust without getting into moral deep water. A brief period of postwar libertarianism and openness—a sort of breezy time that extolled the return of heterosexual romance, cheerful femininity, and chivalrous masculinity, which Herzog argues banalized the worst aspects of the Nazi regime and provided cover for a renewed persecution of homosexuals—gave way to the astonishingly repressive and hypocritical years of Christian Democrat rule. Adenauer represented a return not to the '20s but to the most conservative norms of Wilhelmine Germany. This regime the baby boomers mistakenly identified as fascist.

Creating a world safe for husbands who were "real men," able to support their families single-handedly, and for wives who uncomplainingly tolerated whatever their men did and happily sacrificed themselves for the greater good of society, became, as Herzog shows, a widespread project that deflected attention away from what really stank in Germany. The churches and the state struggled mightily to distinguish their antiabortion, anti–birth control, antigay stances from those of the Nazis: Killing the unborn was cast as a version of the Holocaust, for example; federal commitment to Paragraph 175 as a defense against a seemingly communicable wave of homosexuality was made without any reference to the legislation's odious, murderous history. It was precisely these continuities that the '68ers would cite when they insisted that the postfascist culture of conservatism was really just a continuation of the Nazi regime in unconvincing disguise. Parents and teachers, and a flood of religious and secular publications, preached the virtues of premarital chastity as if it were the highest good at the same time as they remained silent about their own lack of virtue during the years 1933 to 1945.

The social history of sexual practice itself had a different trajectory, one that Herzog documents beautifully. In fact the currents of sexual behavior run far deeper and more slowly than changes in norms and memory. Abortion in West Germany in the '50s and early '60s was the primary form of birth control, not as policy (as in some central European Communist states) but as a matter of social practice; premarital sex was the norm—something on the order of 90 percent of girls admitted to it at a time when Kinsey and others reported the figure to be around 50 percent in the United States—and one-third of all children born were conceived before marriage.

In the realm of memory, however, the new conservative regime made itself felt with a vengeance. To those who came of age after 1945, the 1950s consensus represented the continuity of Nazi oppression. Both in its divergence from reality and in the secrecy with which all matters sexual were treated, it stood as a monument to hypocrisy and silence generally, to an unmastered and unacknowledged past. *Sexuality and its discontents* bore the burdens of history from one generation to the next.

The goal of the sexual revolution of the 1960s and early '70s was to transcend this past, to demolish root and branch, intellectually and institutionally, what progressive contemporaries took to be the psychological foundations of fascism. A new morality of pleasure, they hoped, would replace repression with freedom, overweening child-rearing practices with a new openness, hypocrisy with truth. "Never again" was to be written on the body.

Herzog subtly chronicles this mighty, pathos-laden struggle, treating it with the seriousness it deserves without airbrushing its blind moments or gestures of excess. Radical Freudian theories about fascism were at its theoretical core. "Read Wilhelm Reich and act accordingly" read the graffiti on a Frankfurt wall in 1968—and millions did just that. "Breathlessly," we are told, they made their way through *The Function of the Orgasm* and *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*. Nowhere else were these views so central. A "special sort of sexual tension was the 'driving force' of 1968" wrote the New Left cultural critic and historian Klaus Theweleit. (Theweleit wrote one of the most important post-1968 accounts of politics and sexuality—two volumes published in the late '70s on the sexual fantasies of the Freikorps—in which he attempted to remain faithful to the idea that fascism was at its core a battle against pleasure, while acknowledging that its success lay also in its refusal to relinquish desire. He also took on the specifically antifeminist anxieties of his own generation and those of the '20s. Herzog's account of his project in her last chapter, like her analysis of other writers, is both generous and appreciatively critical.)

Reich's central insights—that cruelty was the result of chronic sexual dissatisfaction and that "genitally satisfiable people" were prone to be nicer and kinder—found expression in all sorts of reform movements, some silly, some long overdue. The '68 generation, for example, fought to create schools that valued the views of children and allowed the freer expression of child sexuality, the very existence of which an earlier generation had denied. If their parents had been taught to obey blindly, their own offspring would not be so burdened. (Well-publicized excesses—allowing six-year-olds to paint the naked bodies of their peers, to play with their own genitals and those of their friends in public, and to fondle their teachers—made the reformers vulnerable to false charges of pedophilia and worse.) The revolution made itself widely seen and heard. Explicit sex scenes appeared in films—some sponsored by the Social Democratic government—and on TV; pornography was everywhere. The teachings of the churches on questions of sexual morality were challenged across a broad front, and many clergy hastily responded that Christianity was in fact not as hostile to sex as it first appeared. Paragraph 175 was modified in 1969 to decriminalize homosexual acts between consenting adults, and the age of consent was lowered to eighteen in 1973 (Paragraph 175 was finally repealed in 1994). Abortion became legally available more widely, if unevenly.

Herzog herself is critical of the '68 generation and recounts its own self-evaluations. The Holocaust was an all too easy way, used by all sides, to tar the proposals of one's enemies. Latent anti-Semitism lay just below the surface. (She might have made more of the fact that for the '68ers Jews existed largely in their absence. That the sophomoric level of the exhibits at the Berlin Jewish Museum is considered revelatory by Germans of my generation shows just how abstract and empty the presence of Jews in Germany had become.) What Herzog describes as the "manic society-wide escalation of a culture of constant sexual invitation and arousal" came hard upon the revelations of the Auschwitz trials of 1963. Perhaps, she suggests, it kept self-confrontation at bay; perhaps it allowed children to identify with their parents as common victims of repression. But all this said, Herzog forces us to take seriously the politics of desire if we are to understand the peculiar passion of the '60s or the backlash of later decades.

The GDR provides Herzog with a counterfoil to this story. In a Germany that defined itself as antifascist, there were few hints of the neighboring Federal Republic's story: The East German government promulgated a proreproduction policy without aligning itself with similar, and equally unsuccessful, Nazi efforts; sex became a free space rather than an arena for contesting the past; and both the regime (reluctantly) and various intellectuals (more eagerly) insisted that socialism produced mutually satisfying gender and social equality. Indeed, the regime seemed to embrace aspects of sexual liberation as a way of ingratiating itself to its citizens.

In her chapter on the GDR, Herzog seems less interested in the question of how thinking about sexuality masters the past than in showing that there was actually some truth to East German claims. Socialist Germany did seem to produce a unique sexual culture, different from both that of the capitalist West and that of the rest of the often homophobic and straitlaced Eastern bloc. By contrast, we have some evidence that the continued hypersexualization of a unified, post-1990s Germany resulted in a distinct and growing *Lustlosigkeit*, a lack of desire, compared to the '70s. (A fuller version of this story would have to take up what has happened to German family size, among the lowest in Europe. The proliferation of masturbation aids and pornographic websites may have more to do with the fact that more people live alone in Germany than almost anywhere else.) Memory enters Herzog's picture of the GDR only in the '90s, when the good old days of easy nakedness, harkening back to Weimar Germany and beyond, made real intimacy a key component of *Ostalgie*.



Spread from the East German women's magazine *Für Dich*, December 1972.

The last chapter and an epilogue try to make sense of how the revolutions of the '60s and '70s have played out in subsequent decades. This story tracks in many ways that of the rest of Europe and the United States: a backlash against feminism; a mocking of the New Left's sexual politics, for both its overweening ambition and its misogyny; an effort by conservatives to regain moral ascendancy. Unease about how the Holocaust was all too easily elided with less weighty matters gives the story a particularly German twist. It is an ongoing tale and by its nature inconclusive.

Herzog has no truck with '60s-bashing. Even as she shows that the '68ers profoundly misremembered the past by conflating a fascist formation with a postfascist one, she remains profoundly respectful of their struggles. They got it wrong: It was, in fact, an antibourgeois incitement to desire that was somehow linked to mass murder. But this does not detract from the seriousness of their effort to rethink the past critically and to query "the possible relationship between pleasure and evil."

Sex After Fascism is one of the best books of the past twenty years on the history of sexuality, and certainly the best book on this particular subject. But it is also a book for anyone who wants to figure out why homophobia, antifeminism, and a passionate opposition to abortion and premarital sex have become the emotional core of right-wing politics in the United States. Other possibly than death, nothing is more important to making meaning than sexuality. □

Thomas Laqueur is professor of history at the University of California, Berkeley, and the author of *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation* (Zone Books, 2003). (See Contributors.)

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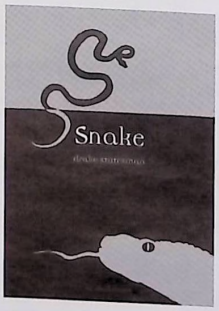
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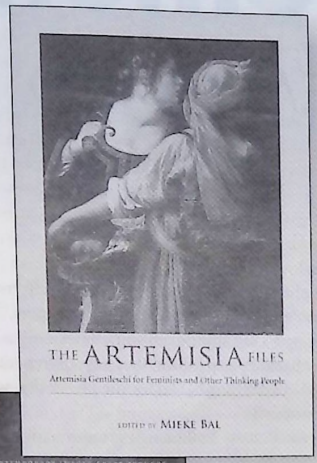


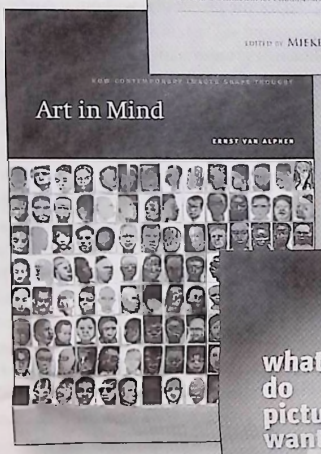
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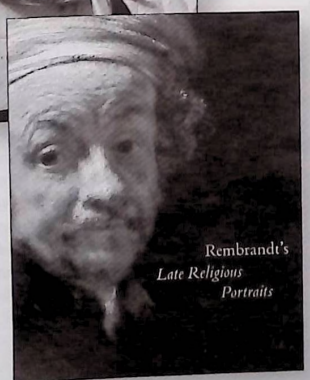
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WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN'S REAL WORLD

BY JAMES GIBBONS • IN THE STOCK MARKET WE CALL LITERATURE, THE BEST ANTHOLOGIES PAY HEFTY DIVIDENDS. IT'S HARD TO IMAGINE FAULKNER'S ASCENDANCY AS NOBEL PRIZE WINNER AND "AMERICAN SHAKESPEARE" WITHOUT THE CATALYST OF MALCOLM COWLEY'S *PORTABLE FAULKNER*—AS WILLIAM STYRON RECALLED, THE INTRODUCTION TO THE COLLECTION, ISSUED IN 1945, "OPENED UP FAULKNER'S WORLD FOR ME WHEN I WAS A VERY YOUNG MAN STRUGGLING TO READ A DIFFICULT writer who was then out of print, little known and less understood." Few writers have been blessed with as beneficent an intervention as Cowley's, which, luckily for Faulkner, occurred just as Americans were beginning to get curious about modernism's intriguing formal innovations. And *The Portable Faulkner* remains the gold standard for single-author anthologies because, as Styron's remark indicates, an audience's willingness to grapple with the complexities of a difficult writer isn't enough; the work needs to be "opened up," to be made accessible and intelligible without diminishing the allure of its mysteries, and that is precisely what Cowley achieved in his collection.

Among contemporary writers, perhaps no one deserves a retrospective anthology at midcareer as much as William T. Vollmann, whose staggering rate of production has made it all but impossible to keep up with him—just blink and it seems he has brought out yet another doorstop. Since his debut novel, *You Bright and Risen Angels: A Cartoon*, appeared in 1987, he has completed four outsize installments of his magnificent *Seven Dreams* project, a "symbolic history" related through novels that stretch back in time to the first Norse incursions into Greenland and Newfoundland, and portray the clashes of European colonizers and their descendants with indigenous North Americans. He has also published *The Atlas*, a collage of dispatches from some of the world's riskiest locales; *An Afghanistan Picture Show, or, How I Saved the World*, a memoir of sorts recounting his 1982 trip in search of mujahideen at war with the Soviets; *Europe Central*, just out this spring, a collection of fictionalized portraits that explore the lives of intriguing and often morally ambiguous figures who lived under the twin totalitarian evils of Stalinism and Nazism, with emphasis on the war years; and five books, set in the present, that have emerged from his abiding fascination with prostitutes, mostly, along with a supporting cast of urban-underbelly types. Alternately hard-edged and lyrical, lurid and incandescent, Vollmann's visions of contemporary life—especially in *Whores for Gloria* and the monumental *Royal Family*, in which he's forged a phantasmagorical urban realism to chronicle San Francisco's lower depths—are shot through with brutality, yearning, and fever-dreams that fuse squalor and transcendence.

As extensive as this listing of works is, it falls well short of encompassing the full cyclone of Vollmann's creativity, which also includes poems, reviews, occasional pieces, and even numerous "book objects," which feature his own artwork along with contributions by collaborators such as photographer and friend Ken Miller. At the core of his oeuvre, though, is what he himself describes as his life's work, some twenty years in the making, the seven-volume, 3,352-page treatise *Rising Up and Rising Down: Some Thoughts on Violence, Freedom, and Urgent Means*, first published by McSweeney's in 2003 and reissued in a single-volume abridgment last year by Ecco Press. Toiling in a sweatshop of his own devising, clocking up to sixteen hours a day at his desk, the forty-five-year-old Vollmann has exacted a considerable toll on his body at a relatively young age. In his 1998 essay "Writing," considering his "swollen and aching fingers," he tells how "sometimes the ache oozes up to my shoulders, sometimes only to my wrists; once or twice I've felt it in my back. Poor posture, they say, or 'repetitive stress injury,' or possibly carpal tunnel. . . . Writing is bad for me physically, without a doubt, but what would I do if I stopped?"

Whatever the personal cost, Vollmann's graphomania foregrounds what it means to be prolific in an age when most people will devote only so much of their leisure time to reading. Perhaps there are some sort of tacit guidelines regarding output that "serious" writers are expected to follow, because Vollmann's productivity has been, at best, a mixed blessing for his career. The truly prolific author, as distinct from the merely respectably productive one, is either a genre writer or a relic. From our distant vantage, the exhausting labors of a writer such as Trollope are merely an instance of his era's diligence and discipline (those Victorians and their steady habits!); the hypercaffeinated energies of Balzac, too, seem of a piece with the transformative currents that coursed through the nineteenth century. But these days writers reap greater rewards if they publish less frequently. Those who write on a grand scale can shape an entire career around a few magisterial efforts, usually spaced a decade or so apart, with well-placed excerpts offered as teasing previews of the masterpiece in the making. This of course is the Joycean model, and it's rather shrewd. Had Joyce published eight or nine massive novels in the seventeen-year interim between *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, would we regard either of those books, or Joyce himself, in quite the same way?

By amassing such a vast bibliography in less than two decades, Vollmann has probably denied himself the readership he might otherwise have enjoyed. I'm not suggesting that he's laboring in obscurity. He's been showered with attention to a degree that other writers must envy, having been the subject of profile pieces in *Esquire* and the *New York Times Magazine*, as well as publications abroad. Most of his books have been brought out by a major trade publisher. He can count on a fanatically committed cult following: "Boys at least as intelligent as I ship off copies of my books to be autographed," he wrote in the 1993 essay "Honesty." "Girls regularly send naked photos." And though it hasn't been unanimous, there has been ample praise from critics, as admirers have studded his reputation with superlatives from the beginning. But as judgments superlatives are often superficial, even when they're true. The recognition that Vollmann has received has had a curiously static quality, focusing on his ambition and preternatural talent, qualities that say as much about his potential as his actual achievement. Early on he was repeatedly likened to Thomas Pynchon, a pairing that was perhaps inevitable given the forbidding ambition and daunting intelligence of both writers. Vollmann's methods and aims, however, were initially quite distinct from Pynchon's and have diverged even further over time. Such comparisons were concerned primarily with ranking Vollmann among his contemporaries, serving as a kind of default reaction—if he's really so good, he *must* be like Pynchon—which catapulted him into an elite clique of American writers while masking the bewilderment at what exactly to make of such an idiosyncratic wunderkind.

By now Vollmann is no longer the youthful prodigy he once was, and as his books have issued steadily forth they've been duly noted, sometimes applauded, sometimes disparaged as bloated, muddled, or as examples of "postmodern" excess—a lazy shibboleth of the smug reviewer. But, on the whole, the work lacks the primacy among American readers that it deserves. A new Vollmann book isn't greeted as an "event" the way recent novels by DeLillo and Roth, and even David Foster Wallace, have been. In light of their remarkable reach and virtuosity, Vollmann's historical novels in particular seem undervalued. Set within landscapes possessed

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EUROPE CENTRAL
BY WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN
NEW YORK: VIKING. 832 PAGES. $40.

EXPELLED FROM EDEN: A WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN READER
EDITED BY LARRY MCCAFFERY AND MICHAEL HEMMINGSON
NEW YORK: THUNDER'S MOUTH PRESS. 479 PAGES. $18.

of sublime enchantment and power, his *Seven Dreams* books depict the saga of European settlement in North America as an outrageous dynamic of violence and transformation. As Vollmann probes the fundamentals of life on this continent during the last millennium, he unsettles reductive notions of identity and history, us and them. These novels—four of the projected seven have so far been published: *The Ice-Shirt* (1990), *Fathers and Crows* (1992), *The Rifles* (1993), and *Argall* (2001)—are a morality play of aggressors and victims, but have been stripped of any facile moralizing on Vollmann's part. The logic of conquest is laid bare relentlessly, along with the recurring fears and paranoia of the colonizers; and the victims, of whom there are many, are given a reality that far surpasses mere victimhood. There has been no dearth of books (to say nothing of movies) about the struggle for and in the New World, but no one has tackled the subject with the dazzling fusion of erudition and imaginative intensity displayed in *Seven Dreams*, and no writer has depicted this clash of civilizations with quite the sense of epic sadness that pervades Vollmann's novels.

How, then, to get a handle on a writer as various and formidable as Vollmann? *Expelled from Eden: A William T. Vollmann Reader*, edited by two of his most fervent fans, the critic Larry McCaffery and the novelist Michael Hemmingson, shrinks his sprawling body of work down to a digestible abstract. Weighing in at about half the size of the average Vollmann book, their *Reader* is a useful and often surprising introductory sampling for anyone looking to grasp hold of Vollmann's heady, hard-to-pigeonhole achievement. It won't, however, do for his career what Cowley's *Portable Faulkner* did for Faulkner's. Given the reading public's diminished appetite for iconoclastic writers, it's probably unreasonable to expect it to. The editors' palpable excitement about Vollmann is salutary because it counters one strand of adverse criticism, which is that his books are too cerebral and cold, or simply too mannered, to connect with readers. McCaffery and Hemmingson's awestruck worship resembles the fierce loyalty that certain indie-rock bands elicit from their followers. But infatuation can take you only so far. The *Reader*'s editing, it must be said, is at times irksomely clumsy. The headnotes can be surprisingly slack (for instance, a few lines beneath the title of a piece dated in large type "Oct 30, 2001," we're told "it should also be noted that this review appeared eighteen months before the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq"). And there are puzzling editorial inconsistencies. In his introduction, McCaffery notes that in *The Ice-Shirt*, as in the other *Seven Dreams* novels, "Vollmann embeds his narrative within a broader framework that includes numerous illustrations and maps, glossaries, a chronology, and an elaborate series of source notes and footnotes. . . . *The Ice-Shirt* is not 'merely' a novel, but a new sort of book entirely—a 'textual assemblage' that . . . makes *The Ice-Shirt* and the other *Dreams* perhaps the most unique reading experience since Nabokov's *Pale Fire*." This is a fair assessment. Why, then, do the editors not include the line drawings and notes that accompany the extracts in the original novels? Reading "The Hermaphrodite," excerpted from *The Ice-Shirt*, I miss Vollmann's stark, haunting illustration "Younger Brother Alone on the Ice" and the loosely drawn intricacy of the leaves in "Arctic Heather, Slab-Land," an image that all but explodes on the page amid the description of a punishing Arctic spring at last relenting ("Presently summer came. Pink and yellow flowers sprang up"—and there, in midsentence, Vollmann inserts his drawing). The source notes, too, seem essential because of how seriously Vollmann takes his research. Marathon bouts of reading have channeled what he's called his "appropriately filtered and disciplined" imagination to bring forth works "whose untruths further a deeper sense of truth." As such the notes are vital, and they contain revealing glosses. For "Subzero's Debt, 1991," the account of Vollmann's near-fatal Arctic research trip, excerpted from *The Rifles*, I wish the editors had included the note with his wonderfully deadpan reflections on his sleeping bag's failure to protect him from the cold. On the equipment malfunction that almost cost him his life, Vollmann writes: "I very much like this sleeping bag in the abstract. It may well do its job in moderately cold temperatures. However, for extreme temperatures I cannot recommend it." The editorial apparatus of *Expelled from Eden* takes up a good fifth of the anthology's pages; couldn't the editors have made space for these notes and illustrations? McCaffery himself, after all, points out that these components are crucial parts of Vollmann's gesamtkunstwerk.

Vollmann's journalism has been featured in an unlikely assortment of publications—not just the more literary glossies (the *New Yorker* and *Esquire*) but also *Gear*, *Spin*, and *Outside*. His pieces have, however, frequently been mangled by editors. "As a professional author," Vollmann writes in *Argall*, "I am often shocked by the magazine versions of writings which appear under my name." A fair portion of his journalistic writing is included in *Expelled from Eden*, and unfortunately, here too there is editorial incoherence. McCaffery takes pride in the *Reader*'s restoration of deleted passages, as in "The Stench of Corpses," Vollmann's sly 2001 mock-review of *Argall*, which originally contained a sentence predicting "our obliteration of Iraq in 2003" and the "absolutely essential police measures taken in Palestine in 2004" that was cut by the *Los Angeles Times*. Regarding "the compromises he feels he has had to make as a journalist," McCaffery cites Vollmann's belief "that he can live with such compromises only so long as he insists on retaining 'the right to republish everything the way it should be in a book someday.'" Despite that the editors were given access to Vollmann's papers, several pieces in the *Reader* insist on reverting to their periodical sources. Vollmann tells us that his essay "Melville's Magic Mountain," in *Civilization* magazine, was drastically cut and reordered, and yet the redacted text is the one printed in *Expelled from Eden*; his essay on the Taliban was published in the *New Yorker* after enduring some forty edits, but it is this account, not the version included in *Rising Up and Rising Down*, that has found its way into the *Reader*. Having stressed Vollmann's sometimes unsuccessful efforts to publish his work as he intends it, the *Reader*'s editors might have provided an explanation as to why they sometimes opted for the magazine versions. Such editorial fumbling doesn't nullify the *Reader*'s virtues, but because Vollmann has repeatedly been asked by his publishers to compromise (as with *The Royal Family*, for which he took a substantial cut in royalties to keep the book at its original length), these issues matter more in his work than they do for other writers.



KER MILLER

William T. Vollmann at home in Sacramento, CA, 1994.

Nevertheless, the *Reader*'s editorial flaws are quite overshadowed by the breadth of its overview. The editors have chosen well from each of Vollmann's books, and their selection should help readers decide which of those books they want to read in their entirety. The anthology's most welcome achievement is its gathering of disparate autobiographical material, culled from obscure as well as readily available sources. *Expelled from Eden* adopts a nearly irresistible orientation that emphasizes Vollmann's life and personality. Although not restricted to his personal writings, the *Reader* serves as surrogate autobiography, a patchwork of memoir, adventure stories, straight-talking essays, and book reviews that shed light on his core beliefs, and even a few manifestos drawn from professional correspondence, such as "Crabbed Cautions of a Bleeding-hearted Un-deleter—and Potential Nobel Prize Winner," a 1998 letter to his editor at Viking, Paul Slovak. Also included are several compelling curiosities, such as a fond, almost folksy, reminiscence of his time at Deep Springs College, and a list from 1990 of contemporary books he admires. *Contemporary* Vollmann takes to mean "from the last two hundred years," and he includes some unexpected titles drawn from his omnivorous reading: Tadeusz Konwicki's *Dreambook for Our Time*; works by Pär Lagerkvist and Sigrid Undset's *Kristin Lavransdatter* trilogy; science fiction (Philip K. Dick but also James Blish and Walter M. Miller); and quite a bit of Japanese fiction (especially Kawabata and Mishima but also the Christian novelist Shusaku Endo).

Such entertaining miscellanea ornament the edges of Vollmann's larger-than-life persona. Set beside the lives of his contemporaries ensconced in the unobjectionably attractive stability of writing-program appointments, his biography has long seemed the stuff of legend. Trouble is, it's not always clear *which* legend. Viewed from one angle, he is a haunted melancholic, pursued like a figure out of Poe by the implacable demons of childhood hurt. This is no metaphor. The accidental drowning of his six-year-old sister in 1968 was the source of nearly unendurable feelings of guilt and grief. "I was supposed to be watching her and I didn't," he recalled in an interview with Madison Smartt Bell for the *Paris Review*. "I always felt guilty about it and my parents kind of blamed me for it a little bit, too, I think. . . . I had nightmares practically every night—of her skeleton chasing me and punishing me and stuff like this—pretty much through high school." Or, as he described the experience wrenchingly in "Under the Grass":

> Immensely long skinny leaves of fear (spider lily, *crinum asiaticum*) grew around my throat every night like thick sad trees over a lava hole where the sea comes sadly in. You rushed as a yellow skeleton into every dream. If I screamed myself awake, you waited until the long skinny leaves of sleep choked me back to you again. You came clacking and scuttling like a yellow spider until I screamed crimson tears. A package arrived from the post office of dreams and you skittered out to punish me.

It's almost unseemly to regard the artistry of this recollection in isolation from its raw content as memory. But so much of Vollmann the artist is revealed here. There is his sense of terrifying mutability—those "long skinny leaves" manifesting themselves as fear and sleep, just as his sister assumes the forms of skeleton and spider; his coupling of the dreamlike and the specific in the care he takes to identify the nightmare's leaves by their botanical name, *crinum asiaticum*; and his ability to jolt the reader with an unlikely and incongruous metaphor, as in the midst of primal nature-imagery there appears a parcel, an object of the mundane world, encasing its terrible punishment.

After this sort of childhood trauma, one might expect a heightened sense of inwardness, a retreat into the safety and richness of books, especially in a boy as bright and withdrawn as Vollmann was, even before his sister's fatal accident. As a kid he was "trapped in books," he recalled. "In the end the books won. I had simply spent too much time inside them." His reading grew to encyclopedic proportions. He is as widely read as any novelist. Rarely have writers of historical fiction embarked on the sort of research that Vollmann devoted to *Seven Dreams* and *Europe Central*. Research requires immersion in a separate world; but Vollmann takes this absorption in scholarship one step further. Much of what impels him to write is an urge to create something as vast and multifaceted as the universe, to establish in his books a parallel realm, one attuned to his obsessions, mapping out his philosophy of history.

But that, of course, is less than half the story. Rather than turn away from the world, Vollmann has ventured out to embrace it. A reporter in the tradition of Orwell, Stephen Crane, and Hemingway, he travels to war zones, interviews terrorists, sails hazardous rivers teeming with toxins (as told in "The Water of Life," the *Reader*'s excerpt from a work in progress about California's Imperial Valley). He feeds a bottomless appetite for risk by questing after firsthand experience where one's very survival is at stake. He rescued a child from a Thai brothel by kidnapping her; he nearly froze to death in the Arctic; he lived through a mine exploding beneath his jeep in Bosnia (two other passengers, including a friend he'd known for nineteen years, weren't so lucky). He courts danger, but is never ostentatiously reckless. He is no testosterone-fueled "cowboy," addicted to kicks. An attentive observer, he is an even better listener, often writing as a sort of ethnographer of the outcast, an oral historian of despised, abused, or otherwise marginal populations: Greenland and Canadian Inuit, skinheads, *yakuza* foot soldiers, and above all the girls, transvestites, and women in "the life," the variegated and deeply respected array of prostitutes that inspired the novels *Whores for Gloria*, *Butterfly Stories*, and *The Royal Family*. He craves understanding through contact, seeking out encounters that provide the grounding for his ethics, scorning all judgments that are based on moral abstractions without the corroboration of experience. In "Some Thoughts on the Value of Writing During Wartime," a lecture given in November 2002, he advised writers, "Whatever you write about, let your subjects teach you in their own way, and show them that you have learned it and respect it. Let them be round characters always." He went on to make a disarmingly straightforward suggestion, but one that in the present atmosphere comes across as nearly utopian: "In these times, any one of you who feels inclined to risk a little and learn a lot should travel to an Islamic country to make friends and to learn, not to teach. . . . You should get to know them well enough to understand why what they believe is plausible to them, and you should explain their views to other Americans as sympathetically and as accurately as you can."

For all his audacious travels, Vollmann's feats never come across as exhibitionistic. Acutely aware of human vulnerability, he seems incapable of swagger. He never attempts to hide his physical awkwardness. As a reporter confronting degradation and atrocity, his forthright, unidealized self-presentation is alien to the school of writer-adventurers to which he belongs. We know from his fiction that he can write in any register, delighting in baroque metaphors and elaborate prose fantasias, so the account of his 1992 visit to besieged Sarajevo in *The Atlas* is all the more powerful for its plainspoken restraint:

> I wasn't afraid of being shot there anymore. I feared only getting my stomach blown open. In general, of course, I remained just as afraid. A week later, when I was standing outside one of the apartment buildings near the front, waiting for my friend Sami to buy vodka, I felt a sharp impact on the crown of my head. Reaching up to explore the wound, I felt wetness. I took a deep breath. I brought my hand down in front of my eyes, preparing myself to see blood. But the liquid was transparent. Eventually I realized that the projectile was merely a peach pit dropped from a fifteenth-floor window.

There's a long tradition of writers, Hemingway and Faulkner among them, who have exaggerated war wounds or fabricated them altogether. But in this passage, or even more so when he discusses the mine exploding beneath his jeep in Bosnia, there is no self-aggrandizement on Vollmann's part. Neither is there the suggestion that as war correspondent he's some sort of heroic witness, nor even the subtle egotism of someone who takes pride in surviving a brush with death. He grieves for the friend killed in the explosion but recognizes, as he told one interviewer, "It was just an average sort of war murder." There may be something protective about his detachment, but even so, he is not striking a pose; his treks to the outposts of extremity—not just war zones and remote Arctic islands but also those right in our midst, such as the crack hotels of American cities—only confirm what he already knows, that death and suffering are everywhere, so often meaningless and so rarely redemptive. "Political death, cancer death," he writes in *Rising Up and Rising Down*, "it's all the same."



Ink drawings by William T. Vollmann, intended for publication in "The Ghost of Magnetism" (1991). From *Expelled from Eden*.

Only it isn't, quite. Political death is a lot more interesting for a writer, or at least for one like Vollmann, who has devoted so much thought and energy to understanding violence. His latest book, *Europe Central*, is in part a meditation on political death as practiced—perfected, one might say—under Soviet communism and German fascism. Here Vollmann presents a panorama of wartime devastation, including lengthy and vividly rendered scenes of the sieges of Leningrad and Stalingrad, but he is also keen to trace more shadowy, less spectacular evidence of state violence, such as the sinister, ubiquitous "Black Marias," in which those suspected of subversion by the Stalinist authorities were hauled off to meet their fate. *Europe Central* is Vollmann's latest foray into imaginative history, and as is evident from more than fifty pages of notes, it was as rigorously researched as the *Seven Dreams* books. But just as some of the most powerful poetic translations eschew a literal rendering of their source texts, here the lives of historical figures—among them Shostakovich, Tsvetaeva, the filmmaker Roman Karmen, the German field marshal Friedrich Paulus, and Hitler himself, called "the sleepwalker"—are freely adapted for his fictional aims.

Death hovers over nearly all the stories in *Europe Central*, but the collection of overlapping tales is ultimately more concerned with survival, sometimes in the most basic physical sense but more often as a category of morality. Vollmann tells us that "the goal here was to write a series of parables about famous, infamous, and anonymous European moral actors at moments of decision." In many cases these "moments of decision" lead only to further quandaries. He is especially intrigued by what might be called the problem of moral endurance, how a person living under a corrupt and menacing political order can retain some measure of moral dignity—or, as in the case of the draconian judge Hilde Benjamin (Walter's sister-in-law, profiled in "The Red Guillotine"), can indulge a taste for monstrous acts. Looming largest in *Europe Central* is the figure of Dmitri Shostakovich, whose career was compromised but not corrupted by Stalin's propagandistic, frequently capricious and absurd demands. The drama of his struggles with the Soviet authorities is spread over several chapters, threaded together by the story of his longing for the dark-haired beauty Elena Konstantinovskaya (a lifelong desire, mostly unrequited apart from an affair they had in the '30s). Some have condemned the composer for alleged complicity with Stalinism, a charge Vollmann dismisses as naive fantasy. Had the composer been "a member of some fairytale anti-Soviet Resistance," Vollmann writes, he surely would have been executed. "When I think of Shostakovich," he reflects, making a characteristically nuanced, generous, and informed evaluation,

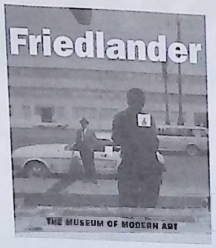
> I imagine a person consumed by fear and regret, a person who . . . did what little he could to uphold the good—in this case, freedom of artistic creation, and the mitigation of other people's emergencies. He became progressively more beaten down, and certainly experienced difficulty saying no—a character trait which may well have kept him alive in the Stalinist years. In spite of the fact that he joined the Party near the end, to me he is a great hero—a tragic hero, naturally.

For some American readers, the world war at the heart of *Europe Central* will seem unduly circumscribed. Because the combat scenes depict fighting between the Germans and the Russians—the eastern front sieges, the fall of Berlin—Americans are at most a marginal presence. And even as *Europe Central* rolls forward into the first years of the cold war, where it ends, the book's focus remains fixed on partitioned Germany and the Soviet Union. The lone story in which an American plays a significant role is "A Pianist from Kilgore," based on Van Cliburn's 1958 visit to Moscow and his winning the International Tchaikovsky Prize. It's easy to picture a sequel made up of cold war portraits, in which Americans would by necessity figure more prominently. By coincidence, I finished *Europe Central* on the day that diplomat George Kennan died, and reading the obituaries, I couldn't help but wonder how Kennan's life—his prescience in the '40s about the Soviet Union's demise, his role as the prime architect of the United States' cold war foreign policy, his uneasy sense late in life that his counsel had "inadvertently loosened a large boulder from the top of a cliff"—would be transformed and clarified in one of Vollmann's biographical fictions. Perhaps the highest praise for *Europe Central* is that its epic tales of war and moral deliberation lead to this sort of speculation. How might Vollmann approach a new set of "moral actors" in a different political climate? The same could be said of *Seven Dreams*. How might he recast in fiction other sorts of encounters between Europeans and indigenous peoples—in Brazil, say, or Africa?

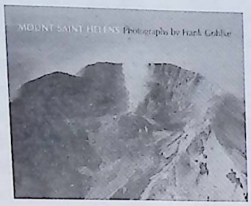
Because of Vollmann's unshakable addiction to writing—recall those swollen fingers and his blunt self-evaluation ("what would I do if I stopped?")—*Expelled from Eden* is likely to be little more than a footnote to his still-evolving career. *The Portable Faulkner* took shape as a definitive retrospective in part because Faulkner's best books were already behind him in 1945; Yoknapatawpha County had been thoroughly mapped and explored. Vollmann's Yoknapatawpha County encompasses nothing less than the world itself. A mere two decades into his career, he promises fresh and startling vistas in the years to come. □

James Gibbons is associate editor at the Library of America and writes frequently for *Bookforum*.

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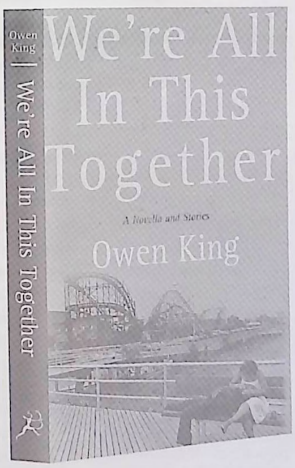
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THE GREAT RECKONING

Leigh E. Schmidt on Jonathan Edwards and Ralph Waldo Emerson

JONATHAN EDWARDS
BY PERRY MILLER, WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY JOHN F. WILSON
LINCOLN: UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PRESS. 348 PAGES. $17.

JONATHAN EDWARDS: AMERICA'S EVANGELICAL
BY PHILIP F. GURA
NEW YORK: HILL AND WANG. 284 PAGES. $24.

In April 1880, the Radical Club, a high-profile literary society for New England's intellectual elite, met for its latest confabulation. The poet Oliver Wendell Holmes had offered to present a paper "on a somewhat interesting subject," the eighteenth-century Calvinist divine Jonathan Edwards. That hardly seemed a congenial topic for a group dedicated to the advance of liberal religion and freethinking inquiry. Ralph Waldo Emerson, who served as the club's oracle, had helped inaugurate the association in 1867 with a Transcendentalist paean to "the sacred books of every nation" and to the progressive, cosmopolitan faith of the future. Edwards was being set up to take the fall for the advance of religious universalism against evangelical provincialism.

Being proud and genteel New Englanders, the salon-goers covered up their patricide with flattery, duly noting Edwards's considerable intellect and pious reputation. Holmes even held out hope that there was some truth to the rumor that Edwards had left behind a manuscript confessing at last to a Unitarian creed; perhaps, he speculated, Edwards had secretly achieved a partial emancipation from the theological bonds that had so long hobbled him. Most in the audience, though, ignored that fancied olive branch. No good "ever came out of Edwards's philosophy," David Wasson, a convinced disciple of Emerson, claimed during the discussion. Edwards rolled the tortures of the damned "as a sweet morsel under his tongue"; he was, Wasson concluded, a coldhearted scoundrel. The hardly radical conclusion at which this club of Emersonians arrived came down to this: Edwards was of no lasting importance because he was not Emerson.

The sage of Concord was still the measure of the pastor of Northampton in the first major twentieth-century biography of Edwards, Ola Elizabeth Winslow's *Jonathan Edwards, 1703–1758* (1940). For Winslow, the "tragic pity" of Edwards was that he remained "the prisoner of his own ideas" and lacked the imagination to step free of the Calvinist theological system—the whole of it, from double predestination to the imputation of Adam's sin to all humanity. With a little dexterity, though, the doctrinal idiom—"the arid stretches of theological quibbling"—could be peeled away; underneath was a religion of individual experience and mystical inwardness that just might satisfy the spiritual longings of latter-day romantics and twentieth-century seekers. If readers pried the "husk" of theology off Edwards, they would see the kernel of Emerson hidden within: "Forget the creeds and find God for yourself today and tomorrow," Winslow exhorted.

The most famous, controversial, and enduring twentieth-century biography of Edwards came nine years after Winslow's, when Harvard's Perry Miller attempted his own reclamation project. It is a testimony to the staying power of Miller's treatment that the University of Nebraska Press has now reissued his *Jonathan Edwards*, with a new introduction by Princeton's John F. Wilson, one of this generation's leading scholars of Edwards. Even as new biographies of Edwards for the twenty-first century are now appearing, Miller's eccentric rendering still shadows them, fifty-six years later, as a classic in American Studies.

Miller, a hard-drinking atheist who relished the stark realism of Reinhold Niebuhr's neoorthodoxy, enjoyed turning the tables on Holmes, Wasson, and company—on all those liberals who had so happily made the unusable Edwards so useful for their own self-congratulation. To hell with worrying about where Edwards fell short of Emerson, Miller chided: The eighteenth-century divine was every bit the seer and luminary that the writers of the American renaissance were. "The truth is," Miller claimed, "Edwards was infinitely more than a theologian. He was one of America's five or six major artists, who happened to work with ideas instead of with poems or novels." By comparison to Edwards, the Transcendentalists seemed transparently starry-eyed—"debauchees of dew," Miller had called them in one of his more notorious essays, "From Edwards to Emerson" (1940). Though also a close observer of nature, Edwards managed, in Miller's estimation, to overleap the gushing pantheism of the nineteenth century and cut to the existentialist chase of the twentieth. With an abiding sense of terror and depravity, Edwards was not a hellfire evangelist but a philosopher of "the meaning of meaning." Talk about carnivalesque inversions: Edwards now stood atop Emerson. He was no longer Winslow's Emerson in chains; he was America's Kafka.

Whether cast in favorable or unfavorable terms, all these Edwards-to-Emerson comparisons were a little bizarre, of course, and much of the subsequent writing on Edwards has concentrated on resituating him in the dense particularities of the eighteenth century, especially within the rise and spread of the evangelical movement in New England and the larger Atlantic world. The Edwards now in full view is the Edwards who faced (and often failed) the routine challenges of the local Congregational ministry, who helped forge the networks of an international Protestant awakening, who plotted out the history of the work of redemption and the place of revivalism in that divine scheme, and who assumed the presidency of Princeton to educate evangelical ministers, not spearhead the Enlightenment. It is the Edwards who hallowed as a model of evangelical dedication the self-abasing missionary David Brainerd—a melancholy young man kicked out of Yale College because of his "wildfire party zeal" for New Light preaching (rather than for the partying passions that now earn the censure of college deans and Tom Wolfe). Edwards saved Brainerd from ignominy and obscurity, turning his diary into the hagiography of a chastened saint and an inspiration for one evangelical missionary after another in the nineteenth century and well beyond.

The Edwards of evangelical Calvinism is currently very much the Edwards of record. This is especially evident in George M. Marsden's definitive, Bancroft prize–winning biography, which Yale University Press published in 2003. Marsden's work stretches to more than six hundred pages, but the only Emerson to gain mention is a young minister from Massachusetts, Joseph Emerson, who became infatuated with Edwards's sixteen-year-old daughter Esther in late 1748. The unrequited desires of Joseph get some play in Marsden's painstaking biography (Esther decides, sensibly, that true love should wait). Meanwhile, Ralph Waldo and his Transcendental Club compatriots are nowhere on the horizon.

Into this changed scene steps Philip F. Gura, William S. Newman Distinguished Professor of American Literature and Culture at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, with his biographical entry, *Jonathan Edwards: America's Evangelical*. Gura is understandably a little sheepish about offering a scaled-down biography only two years after Marsden's long-awaited behemoth. When Miller had offered his biography in the wake of Winslow's, he had simply shrugged off his competitor's contribution as a yeomanly effort—solid, thorough, reliable, and entirely beside the point. Edwards was a monumental intellectual, an artist in the world of ideas; his mind was all; the colonial world was a happenstance, an insignificant distraction on the order of youthful frolics.

Gura is hardly positioned to perform that hubristic gesture in relation to his even more proximate and commanding competitor. Nor is he inclined to try. A winsome scholar of American literature and music, with a collector's knack for the serendipitous discovery (he gained considerable attention a few years ago for finding—on eBay, no less—what looks to be only the second-known photograph of Emily Dickinson), Gura lets Marsden's work stand as the authoritative biography. Offering his own volume as a more modestly framed "consideration" of Edwards, he largely hews to the neoevangelical line on Edwards. "America's most famous and successful evangelical" is the label Gura firmly affixes to his subject at the outset. (How George W. Bush would feel about playing second fiddle to Edwards, Gura does not speculate. In any case, one always has a sense of wishful naïveté about such superlative claims on behalf of Edwards—as if concentrating long and hard on his agile, exegetical mind is enough in itself to serve as a corrective to the American evangelical movement's long-standing tendency to anti-intellectualism.)

Even with the evangelical story line carefully and rightly emphasized, Gura still creates some room for his own reflections, including a subtle reengagement with Miller's more literary and artistic insights. Perhaps this vein in Gura's work has genetic—or tribal—sources: at Harvard, Gura was a student of Alan Heimert's, who was, in turn, a student and successor of Miller's. So, not surprisingly, Emerson—Ralph Waldo, not Joseph—makes a reappearance, a cameo in which Gura places the soon-to-be-finished critical edition of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* on a level with the now completed edition of the *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. These two ventures, Gura suggests, are the most heroic scholarly endeavors in American cultural history of the last generation. Now, that is a grand claim (not to mention, a telling comparison); only a scholar raised in the "from Edwards to Emerson" home of Perry Miller would feel fully comfortable making it.

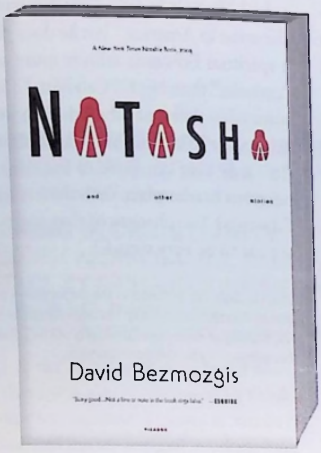
Gura follows Harriet Beecher Stowe (as well as Miller) in suggesting that the Edwards worth considering is the Edwards who is "both a poet and a metaphysician." He points to Edwards's understanding of "spirituality" as possessing, once "liberated" from its eighteenth-century vocabulary, a transcultural and transhistorical significance. "The marvel is that his work is so deep and broad that it can transform the understanding of personal religious experience across generations, denominations, and even cultures," Gura avows. "This is the Edwards whom we must recover," the one who serves as "the progenitor of a remarkable American spirituality."

Gura redraws the boundaries that the interlocutors at the Radical Club had etched so clearly at their meeting in 1880, placing Edwards within the pale of Emerson's religious universalism rather than outside it. That assembly of liberal Christians and post-Christians had explicitly rejected Edwards not only as a theologian but also as a mystic. As James Freeman Clarke, a respected scholar of comparative religions at Harvard, had concluded that day, Edwards's "mysticism" was simply not "in accordance" with "Concord mysticism." Sure, Clarke conceded, Edwards had been "a powerful thinker" and "a Calvinistic saint," but his spirituality, like his metaphysics, had "produced no lasting results." Gura turns the tables on that sort of Transcendentalist presumption. Edwards's spirituality matters, and it does so apparently on terms that liberals can hardly gainsay—as part of the rich variety and universality of religious experience.

Still, Clarke's dismissive conclusion, however skewed, is worth a second look as a warning. How helpful is it to try to save Edwards for twenty-first-century readers through assimilating his understanding of religious experience into the expansive vocabulary of liberal cosmopolitanism that swept through the nineteenth century and remains very much with us today? When Edwards relates his desire to be "alone in the mountains, or some solitary wilderness" in order to abstract his soul from the world in devout meditation, it is tempting to read such longings as part of a universal human quest after God. But it is tempting to do so precisely because the Emersonian or Transcendentalist sensibility has become so pervasive: "Can any one doubt," Emerson asked in a lecture in 1862, "that if the noblest saint among the Buddhists, the best Maho-

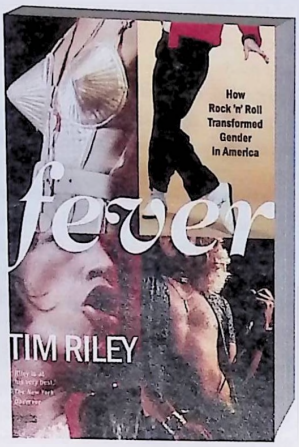
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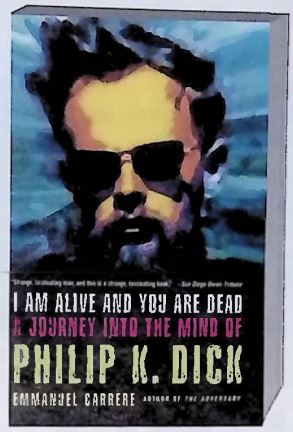
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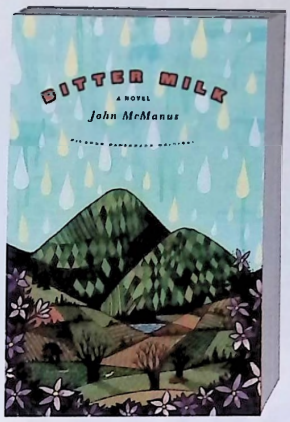
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metan, the highest Stoic of Athens, the purest and wisest Christian . . . could somewhere meet and converse, they would all find themselves of one religion? . . . Could these converse intimately, two and two, how childish their traditions would appear!" To lift up Edwards as a bearer of a universal spirituality is to take him on Emersonian terms. It is to savor the sweets of Edwards's solitude through Thoreau's tongue.

To be sure, it is fascinating to examine the spiritual horizons of Edwards from the democratic vistas of the next century, but certainly as much to illuminate the different trajectories of evangelical Calvinism and liberal universalism as to discover their soulful affinities. Take one tiny comparison. When Edwards's beloved Brainerd is walking by himself one Sabbath morning in 1738, he pauses to assess his own situation in relation to that of the animals: "From the view I had of my sin and vileness, I was much distressed all that day, fearing the vengeance of God would overtake me. I was much dejected, kept much alone, and sometimes envied the birds and beasts their happiness, because they were not exposed to eternal misery as I evidently saw I was."

Now, flip ahead a little more than a century to that scion of Emerson, Walt Whitman, and his parallel (or, rather, perpendicular) musings:

> I think I could turn and live with animals,
> they are so placid
> and self-contain' d,
> I stand and look at them long and long.
> They do not sweat and whine about their
> condition,
> They do not lie awake in the dark and weep
> for their sins,
> They do not make me sick discussing their
> duty to God.

Whitman, who even more than Emerson lifted up "spirituality" as the essence of religion, traveled an irreducibly different road from Brainerd. Placing Edwards's piety within a discourse that nineteenth-century liberals and romantics especially favored and made their own—the universality of spirituality, mysticism, and religious experience—is a move that would have made the evangelical Edwards bristle, if not weep once more for our sins.

Perhaps quarreling about the relationship of Edwards to Emerson is old-fashioned, if not impertinent. After all, Gura offers a sharply honed biography of Edwards, sculpted down with a supreme discipline befitting its evangelical subject and yet fleshy enough to offer a full sense of Edwards and his times. Precise in his discernments, just as Edwards was when evaluating the religious affections of the converted, Gura gently cracks open Miller's old door, mostly kept shut of late. In the resulting shaft of light, Gura no longer spies Miller's Edwards, "a prefiguement of the artist in America," but he does glimpse a spiritual Edwards who is more small c "catholic" than big C "Calvinist." That is a somewhat different Edwards than we have now come to expect. Still, can this catholic Edwards ever compete in the American religious marketplace with the evangelical Edwards? The chances of that, sad to say, appear to be very slim. □

Leigh E. Schmidt teaches in the Department of Religion at Princeton University. His book *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality* will be published this summer by HarperSanFrancisco.

PAPAL BULL

John Cornwell on a biography of John Paul II

UNIVERSAL FATHER: A LIFE OF JOHN PAUL II
BY GARRY O'CONNOR
NEW YORK: BLOOMSBURY. 436 PAGES. $25.

Karol Wojtyla's first love was the theater. At school he acted in and directed ten plays; his early university courses included studies in Polish drama. After the Nazi invasion of Poland in 1939, he was a crucial figure in a drama society that met in secret. As Garry O'Connor points out in *Universal Father*, by the age of twenty Wojtyla had written three plays centered on David, Job, and Jeremiah, "three of the most tested and exposed biblical figures," and "mingled these with Polish warriors and priests." O'Connor is known for his biographies of stage actors and his writings on theater. At first this might seem a strange background for a papal biographer, but O'Connor makes great use of his knowledge of theater, and his book offers an intelligent appreciation of Wojtyla's early orientation.

What is intriguing, however, is O'Connor's view of the future pope's choice of the priesthood as diverging markedly from his earlier life as a dramatist, actor, and director. In Wojtyla, the man of the stage and the man who would become prelate and pope are like two fierce flames conjoined. For this pope was uniquely, and without precedent, a theatrical one: a brilliant manager of public appearances and the media, a master of the minimalist gesture. And therein lies a contradiction: John Paul II's unique ability to project the Christian message was inextricably tied to his tendency to seek and steal the limelight. At first sight, it may seem impossible to do one without the other, but future commentators on his papacy will be disputing the question for decades to come.

In any number of ways, John Paul II will be remembered as a very great pope, and future biographies (many now in preparation) are unlikely to dissent from that point of view. The idea that the pontificate has been great in every respect has been challenged, however. In fact, disagreement on this point has largely defined the polarization in the Catholic Church between conservatives and progressives for many years, and this polarization is only likely to increase with his death.

O'Connor is not, as far as I can tell, a typical conservative but rather one of those admirers of John Paul II driven by personal sentiment and popular Catholic loyalty. He writes from the heart. Not much wrong with that, one would think, particularly when the author's book is a sustained personal testimony to faith. But surely a biographer should speak from both the head and the heart, and from an objective as well as a subjective viewpoint. Those who wish to believe that their pope is ultimately responsible for the good and positive things in the Catholic Church must also be prepared to assign to him at least a measure of responsibility for the things that have gone wrong as well. O'Connor follows papal biographer George Weigel in listing John Paul II's many superlatives: the most traveled pontiff, the most prolific papal writer, the youngest pope in four hundred years, the longest-lived pope in the last century, etc. But surely any fair evaluation of John Paul II's tenure—that is to say, any biography that aims to be more than mere hagiography—must also acknowledge the huge defections of the faithful, the inept handling of the pedophile-priest crisis, the extraordinary campaign in Africa against the use of condoms, the unresolved problems of Catholics who have remarried without an annulment, and the inexorable weakening of the diocesan church in favor of increased centralization. The very title of O'Connor's book—*Universal Father*—acknowledges, without irony, the most fundamental problem of John Paul II's papacy. The Catholic Church, as the Second Vatican Council of the early 1960s recognized, beats with two pulses: the local, represented by the parishes and dioceses and bishops, and the universal, uniquely represented by the pope, as bishop of Rome. In the view of many faithful Catholics, including lay people, priests, and bishops, John Paul II systematically, over the course of his twenty-six years as pope, created an imbalance between the church's center, in Rome, and its periphery, where the bishops are father. It is difficult in a period when Catholics have largely enjoyed freedom of worship to assess just how enfeebled the church has become at the local level. But the inept handling of the sexual abuse crisis, with supine bishops hiding the problem away and looking to Rome for solutions, reveals at least one consequence of the centralizing process.

Nevertheless, as on the issue of a local church versus a universal one, it is a healthy thing for dialogue and debate to continue between progressives and conservatives on the question of John Paul II's legacy. The Catholic Church, after all, is a conversation between peoples of varying cultures, backgrounds, and viewpoints, as well as a dialogue between the past and the present. The pluralist dynamic of this conversation is what makes the church alive and relevant. What is deplorable, though, is the tendency to exclude certain Catholics from the conversation by crude accusations, falsehoods, and name-calling. And this is precisely what O'Connor does at the heart of his heartfelt book.

O'Connor describes a disparate group of eminent and faithful Catholic writers, who have done enormous service to the church, as Judases. Yes, Judases. He cites David Willey, the BBC's veteran correspondent in Rome (author of the very fine papal biography *God's Politician: Pope John Paul II, the Catholic Church, and the New World Order* and a constant supporter of the pope); John Wilkins, for more than twenty years editor of *The Tablet*, the world's foremost international Catholic weekly; Jack Dominion, one of London's leading psychotherapists and a distinguished Catholic writer; and Margaret Hebblethwaite, who works among the poor in Paraguay and is a prolific author of works of spirituality. I myself am also cited as a Judas, despite the fact that I have in two recent books emphasized the late pope's greatness. Having selectively, and in one case wholly inaccurately, cited the above authors, O'Connor alleges they all claim that the pope should be "answerable" to them. I myself cannot recall any of these authors ever making such a claim. (O'Connor accuses me of writing that the pope had a "mystical" sense of entitlement to longevity, when he knows all too well that the pope himself claimed that the 1981 attempt on his life had been thwarted by the direct intervention of the Virgin Mary. It was in this sense that I was appealing to the mystical element in the pope's thinking. That conviction on his part gave his papacy its special sense of purpose: He was saved *for a reason*.)

O'Connor likens Wilkens and the others to the Judas of the Dorothy Sayers radio-play cycle "The Man Born to Be King." In Sayers's dramatization, it is Judas who feels betrayed by Christ rather than Christ by Judas: "The noblest dreams I ever dreamed, the holiest prayer my heart could utter, all my hopes, all my ideals, seem incarnate in him. Yet he has lowered himself to the measure of little minds, eating the applause of the ignorant . . . Why could he not listen to me?" O'Connor then writes: "All critics of the Pope unite in this theme, that he eats the 'applause of the ignorant.'" All critics?

What unites the above writers is in fact their insistence that John Paul II consumed not the applause of the ignorant but the authority of his bishops. In truth, none of these writers is foolish enough to think that the church is a democracy. All, however, stop short of comparing John Paul II with Jesus Christ the Son of God—which is precisely the implication O'Connor is making.

By denigrating others who have tackled the subject of John Paul II's papacy, O'Connor's biography loses much. The life of a plaster saint rather than a human being, it will satisfy those Catholics who believe that John Paul II set the agenda for Catholicism for the next century and beyond, leaving nothing for future popes, bishops, or laity to do except follow his lead. But for those Catholics who believe that this pope failed to support some of the key decisions of the great reforming council of the '60s—not least collegiality, i.e., the sharing of authority between the pope and bishops—*Universal Father* comes across as simply another attempt to silence dissent within the church by means of outrageous denunciation. □

John Cornwell is the author of *The Pontiff in Winter: Triumph and Conflict in the Reign of John Paul II* (Doubleday, 2004) and *Hitler's Pope: The Secret History of Pius XII* (Viking, 1999).

EDIFYING DISCOURSE

Gordon Marino on Søren Kierkegaard

SØREN KIERKEGAARD: A BIOGRAPHY
BY JOAKIM GARFF, TRANSLATED BY BRUCE KIRMMSE
PRINCETON, NJ: PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS. 867 PAGES. $35.

TRAINING IN CHRISTIANITY
BY SØREN KIERKEGAARD, TRANSLATED BY WALTER LOWRIE, PREFACE BY RICHARD JOHN NEUHAUS
NEW YORK: VINTAGE. 260 PAGES. $13.

After the abattoir of two world wars, there was a new openness to thinking on such existential topics as anxiety, despair, and the meaning of freedom. Like Dostoyevsky, the lyrical Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard was a master at working with the strange shadows of the inner world, and as a result his work enjoyed a brief second life during the late 1940s and throughout the '50s. However, when the analytic approach to philosophy, which made god-terms of clarity and precision, began to seize control of the intellectual curriculum, Kierkegaard was cast into the outer darkness. Indeed, when I undertook my own graduate studies, in the '70s, it was not uncommon for a professor to begin a seminar by reading a passage from Kierkegaard or one of his disciples and sneering, "How could anyone take this gobbledygook for philosophy?"

But then, in the late '70s, Richard Rorty and a few other members of the philosophical officer class began to decry the desiccated state of the field and to confess that they had actually learned something from such blacklisted sages as Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and even Derrida. By the last decade of the twentieth century, postmodernism had blown the door wide open. Those patrolling the borders between academic disciplines began to relax, and Kierkegaard's highly unorthodox authorship once again began to spellbind readers in philosophy, religious studies, and literary criticism.

Born in Copenhagen in 1813 (he died in 1855), Kierkegaard is widely and properly regarded as the prime mover of the existential movement. Unlike other members of the philosophy guild, Kierkegaard gave much thought to the question of how to communicate what he sometimes termed "essential truths"—that is, the truths of ethics and religion. He developed a highly original and effective method of indirect communication that included the use of pseudonyms, which was one way for him to vitiate the philosophical fantasy that the truth that is a way in life can be broadcast and memorized. Kierkegaard argued—almost always indirectly—that most philosophers are guilty of "forgetting that they exist," in that they try to ponder life from some "perspectiveless perspective," i.e., one outside of time. Scribbling in an era of increasing social mobility and during the construction of the "iron cage," Kierkegaard stressed the significance of such categories as "the single individual," "passion," "choice," and, most important, "faith."

Kafka, Heidegger, Sartre, Wittgenstein, Barth, Jaspers, Tillich, Bultmann, Auden, and many others were mesmerized by the luminous spindrift of Kierkegaard's thought. Yet for all his monumental influence, there was until recently nothing approaching a satisfying biography of the Danish writer. That gap on the bookshelf has been especially unfortunate given the prominence of the biographical strata in most of Kierkegaard's writings. For prime example, his sudden, inexplicable decision to break off his engagement with Regine Olsen provides an important subtext to his classic *Fear and Trembling*. In this meditation on the Mount Moriah story, Kierkegaard emphasizes the symbiotic nature of the relationship between the poet and the hero. Glossing the perennial subject of the relationship between words and deeds, the author of *Fear and Trembling* insists that it is the duty of the poet to preserve the memory of the hero. Kierkegaard is an intellectual hero of the highest order, and Joakim Garff is his poet.

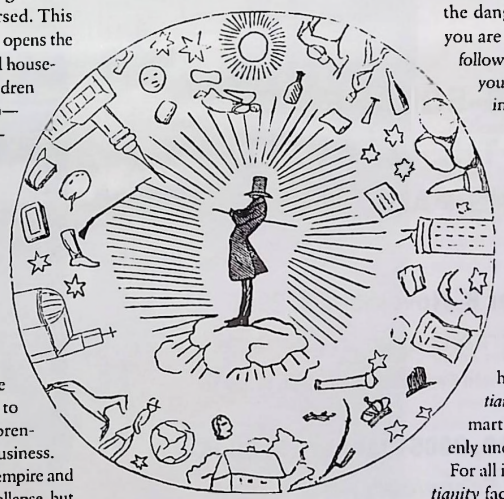
Brilliantly translated from the Danish by Bruce Kirmmse, *Søren Kierkegaard* serves as a Baedeker to the Copenhagen that Kierkegaard both loved and cursed. This massive but easily flowing volume opens the portal to the neurotic Kierkegaard household. The youngest of seven children and nicknamed *Gaflen* ("fork")—for his ability to discern weaknesses in others and to stick it to them—Kierkegaard had a complicated relationship with his elderly and melancholic father, Michael Pedersen.

Kierkegaard père grew up a poor shepherd boy on the heaths of the Jutland peninsula. One dreary day, he cursed God for his plight, and as though God had mistaken his invective for prayer, he was transported to Copenhagen, where he was apprenticed in his uncle's dry-goods business. The nineteenth-century Danish empire and its economy were in a period of collapse, but the shrewd young man managed to amass a fortune. After his first wife died, Pedersen married his housekeeper, Kierkegaard's eventual mother. Like the philosopher himself, Kierkegaard's father combined a kind of pietist faith with the dialectical skills and baloney detector of a Socrates.

In Kierkegaard's fifty-odd volumes of published writings, journals, and diaries, many of which are dedicated to his father, there is not a single word about his mother. His thoughts seem to circle endlessly around the man whom Kierkegaard once approvingly claimed had "ruined his prospects for happiness but prepared him for faith." In his study, Garff deftly limns the tensions and intense ties that bound these two men, as well as the complicated relationship between Kierkegaard and his elder brother, Peter Christian, with whom he had an intense rivalry and who would one day be appointed bishop of Ålborg, and then, on another day, resign the post because of a crippling depression.

Kierkegaard's preternatural productivity was sown in the hothouse of early-nineteenth-century Copenhagen. A demiurge of ideas, the philosopher was also a polemical individual whipped into creativity by antagonists. Prior to Garff's tour de force, it would have been impossible for non-Danish readers to fathom the fact that for all his battles with the world-historical Hegel, Kierkegaard was usually triggered by writers who are considered immortal only by those who dwell within the Danish shores. Garff more than acquaints us with a veritable congregation of nemeses, such as the author and editor Aron Goldschmidt, the professor and, later, bishop H. L. Martensen, the playwright J. L. Heiberg, and other members of the Danish literati whose favor the young Kierkegaard initially courted but who soon became the targets of his critical thrusts.

In *Works of Love* (1847), Kierkegaard proclaims that we see most clearly when we are blinded by love to the worldly faults of others. Garff has been walking with his subject for decades and has great affection for his mage. But he is not oblivious to Kierkegaard's vices. The Danish thinker



Caricature of Søren Kierkegaard from the Danish newspaper *The Corsair*, March 6, 1846.

was vain, often vicious, and hypocritical. A writer who can himself move the waters of language, Garff has, I think, been transfixed by Kierkegaard's divine ability to express deep insights into human nature with a few verbal flicks of the wrist. And yet that light touch is noticeably absent in *Training in Christianity*, recently reissued in Walter Lowrie's translation.

Training—or as it has been recently and I think more aptly translated, *Practice in Christianity*—was Kierkegaard's last published text. It was written under the pseudonym Anti-Climacus, who, according to his creator, lived in categories that Kierkegaard confessed he could not himself abide in. As Garff observes, this austere book was penned during a very dark time in Kierkegaard's life. His battle with the Danish rag *The Corsair* had left him an isolated, negative media star who was widely regarded as intellectually washed-up. His body too was beginning to sink beneath the rivet-bursting hyperactivity of his spirit.

In his preface, Richard John Neuhaus makes the astute point that while Kierkegaard is often regarded as a conservative, Counter-Reformation thinker, he was in truth a hippie in a cravat. Looking back on the '60s, Neuhaus notes that everyone was reading "Marcuse on one-dimensional man, Charles Reich on the greening of America, C. Wright Mills on the power elite, Malcolm X on revolutionary violence, Jean-Paul Sartre on the nausea of society—and . . . Kierkegaard on authentic existence." Neuhaus stresses that despite the hodgepodge variety of these writers' books, they all had one theme in common: "a relentless hostility to the Establishment." In *Training*, this hostility is focused in the form of a charge that the Established Church has become a form of blasphemy.

Garff, a professor of theology, observes that there are cracks in the underlying logic of *Training*. On the one hand, Kierkegaard trumpets religious inwardness. On the other, the text rings with warnings about the dangers of imagining that as long as you are deep, deep down inside, you can follow the Crucified One even as you take your monthly visits to the spa. According to the regimen outlined in *Training*, following Christ means doing what Jesus would do. It may sound as quaint as wearing a WWJD bracelet, but there is one proviso: Kierkegaard warns that if you are getting a lot of speaking invitations and have been asked to serve as a deacon, you should take it as a sign that it isn't Christ you are tracking. Everywhere Jesus went, he was reviled. *Training in Christianity* is a puzzling call to Christian martyrdom in a world that mistakenly understands itself to be Christian.

For all its blemishes, *Training in Christianity* facets one of Kierkegaard's great epiphanies, one that should speak to much current theology and Christology. From the beginning to this, the end of his authorship, Kierkegaard contends that there is no faith without the possibility of offense. As he reasons, if God could directly identify himself as God with a light show and power display—that is, without offending anyone's expectations about God—there would be no need for faith; the understanding would do the spiritual trick. But that is not what the God of Abraham standing over Isaac had in mind. Sometimes with a mallet, the author of *Training* bangs out the injunction that the so-called Christians of his era related more to the glorified Christ than to the Christ who in many respects was as repugnant as an insane street person blathering about being the savior. □

Gordon Marino is Boldt Chair in the Humanities and curator of the Hong/Kierkegaard Library at St. Olaf College in Northfield, MN.

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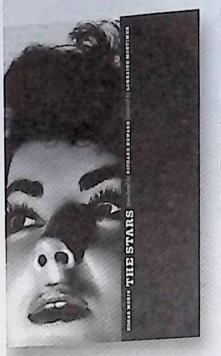
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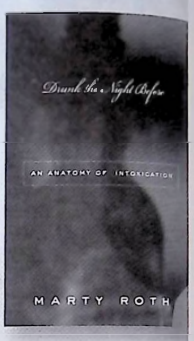
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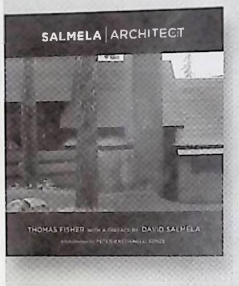
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SOME TYPES OF AMBIGUITY

Charlotte Taylor on William Empson

WILLIAM EMPSON: VOLUME 1: AMONG THE MANDARINS
BY JOHN HAFFENDEN
NEW YORK: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS. 695 PAGES. $45.

When Jacques Derrida died last October, his obituary in the *New York Times* provoked a flutter of controversy. The writer in the *Times* explained deconstruction as "the method of inquiry that asserted that . . . the author's intent could not overcome the inherent contradictions of language itself" and suggested that it not only "robbed" literature of "truthfulness, absolute meaning and permanence" but could also exculpate an alleged anti-Semite and Nazi sympathizer (deconstructionist critic Paul de Man). Any number of scholars wrote irate letters protesting this account as a slanderous caricature. Whatever else it proved, the debate showed that methods of interpretation can still get people angry.

When interpretation defies the intuitions of the average reader, it is often perceived as an expression of arrogance. Beneath stock accusations of ivory-tower elitism lies the conviction that rational analysis should not get the better of common sense—that is, the perceptions that we have in common. The arrival of the first volume of John Haffenden's exhaustive and authoritative biography of poet and literary scholar William Empson, then, is timely. For one thing, it shows that the debate rekindled by Derrida's death has been going on, in one form or another, for the better part of a century. More significant, though, Haffenden offers an intimate view of Empson's own grappling with the uses, challenges, and limitations of rational inquiry.

Empson's pioneering work of intensive literary interpretation, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, itself met accusations of self-indulgent obscurantism when it was published in 1930. By "ambiguity," Empson meant "any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language." He proposed to study those moments when the words in a poem seem to mean two or more things at once—to take a brief example, when Shakespeare describes the leafless branches of a tree as "Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang." Wrote Empson:

> The comparison holds for many reasons; because ruined monastery choirs are places in which to sing, because they involve sitting in a row, because they are made of wood, are carved into knots and so forth, because they used to be surrounded by a sheltering building crystallised out of the likeness of a forest, and coloured with stained glass and painting like flowers and leaves, because they are now abandoned by all but the grey walls coloured like the skies of winter, because the cold and Narcissistic charm suggested by choir-boys suits well with Shakespeare's feeling for the object of the Sonnets, and for various sociological and historical reasons (the protestant destruction of monasteries; fear of puritanism), which it would be hard now to trace out in their proportions; these reasons, and many more relating the simile to its place in the Sonnet, must all combine to give the line its beauty, and there is a sort of ambiguity in not knowing which of them to hold most clearly in mind.

If Empson was not the first to analyze closely the complex workings of poetic language, no one before him had sustained analysis at such dazzling length or in such a systematic manner. Critics protested that his interpretive acrobatics were absurd if not misleading, and that at any rate they offered little help in describing the beauty of a poem or explaining its value.

Seven Types of Ambiguity marks a turning point in twentieth-century literary criticism, but versions of the protests it met with have followed in its wake. Empson has often been credited with inspiring New Criticism, the movement that came to dominate midcentury American universities and that gave us such terms as "intentional fallacy" and "language of paradox" (Empson himself had no desire to claim paternity of the movement). Before deconstruction, the New Critics drew fire for asserting the autonomy of the literary text—in particular the poem, whose words created meaning primarily through reference to one another. Poetry, they argued, must be interpreted without recourse to its author's intentions or its historical context. Detractors maintained instead that analysis, if too close or complex, could make a text mean anything.

As Haffenden shows, Empson's work has often been misrepresented in such debates. Empson never claimed that the poem must be studied in isolation; his analyses consistently drew on what he believed to be commonsense meanings of words and phrases. He also held it as axiomatic that the critic must concern himself with the author's intentions, for poems interest us precisely because they are responses to experience. At the same time, however, he was dedicated to gleaning as much insight about poetry as he could through methodical interpretation. Even pleasure, he contended, could be analyzed.


GETTY

William Empson, United Kingdom, 1946.

Given this conviction, it's no surprise to learn that Empson came to literature late in his studies, from mathematics. At Cambridge, he became keen to join the vibrant literary circles, and while his early efforts to shine yielded mixed results—after one particularly humiliating failure in the formidable debating hall of the Cambridge Union, he resolved to abandon his aspirations and devote himself to the scientific study of jellies—he eventually switched his course of study to literature. His mentor was I. A. Richards, who was then in the process of applying the principles of psychology to the study of literary value. Richards encouraged Empson to develop the analytic method that he had begun to explore, and the result was *Seven Types of Ambiguity*.

But if Empson's background tempts us to see *Seven Types* as an appeal to scientific method or mathematical logic, his work is saturated with an awareness of all that analysis can't explain. This sense of limitation comes through most clearly in Empson's poetry, which confronts the difficulty of achieving insight into the spiritual and moral complexity of the human condition. In "This Last Pain" (1935), he compares the individual seeking answers to such questions to an inquisitive and impertinent servant: "Man, as the prying housemaid of the soul, / May know her happiness by eye to hole." The schemata we invent to represent spiritual meanings are fictions, and all we can know is the mechanism by which the magnificent illusion is created:

> All those large dreams by which men long live well
> Are magic-lanterned on the smoke of hell;
> This then is real, I have implied
> A painted, small, transparent slide.

Science, in Empson's view, only heightened the difficulty facing the ever-aspiring human imagination. Far from offering rational explanations of experience, such advances as the theory of relativity challenged us to consider metaphysics and morals in a different light.

Seven Types of Ambiguity might have become the foundation of a conventional academic career, but Empson was expelled from Cambridge before he completed the text. He had just been granted a fellowship for postgraduate study when it was discovered that he had been carrying on an affair with a woman (he also had involvements with men) in his university lodgings. Empson found himself finishing his manuscript in a squalid rented room in London while worrying over what to do next. Despite the attention his book garnered, he couldn't get a teaching post in England and so finally accepted one in Japan.

Empson worked for three years as a professor of English at the University of Literature and Science in Tokyo. Later he would return to the Far East to teach in China. His time there coincided with the crisis points in the conflict then gripping Asia, and he endured a variety of adverse conditions. He arrived in Tokyo in August 1931, only a few weeks before Japan launched its invasion of Manchuria. In 1937, when he was appointed to teach for three years at Peking University, he arrived just as the Sino-Japanese war erupted. The Japanese military destroyed the university facilities, and students and faculty joined the masses fleeing the occupied areas for inland China. The academic exiles found their way to

Changsha, where they joined forces with similarly displaced students and teachers from Tsinghua University and Nankai University to form the "Temporary University." The faculty had practically no books, and living conditions were often difficult (later, after a second relocation, Empson would find himself using his blackboard, propped up on supports, as a bed), but Empson and his fellow teachers continued to devote themselves to the business of education. His students were equally devoted to his lectures, and amazed by his ability to recite long passages of *Paradise Lost* from memory.

Haffenden often loads his narrative with a cumbersome amount of detail, but his liveliest pages recount Empson's years in Japan and China (this first volume ends in 1939, with Empson's return from China to an England on the brink of war). The scholar not only faced adversity with remarkable hardiness, but profited from the difficulties of teaching in an unfamiliar culture. When he asked his Japanese students to write an essay on irony in *Mrs. Dalloway*—in particular, the effect of soldier Septimus Warren Smith's suicide at the climax of Clarissa Dalloway's party—they declined to do so. With their country in the grip of nationalism, they feared the question might lead them into politically suspect territory. Empson was brought up short by the extent of their anxiety; he mulled the topic over and wrote his own essay, which contained the seeds of his second major critical work, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (1935). The pastoral literary form, he argued, represents the divisions between rich and poor, insider and outsider; and any given pastoral work may criticize or apologize for these divisions through its portrayal of the tensions between competing groups and values.

Noting that a Japanese student of his had written that ballads should be "vulgar," Empson observed that the mistakes made by nonnative English speakers often arose from the use of a word in its strictly accurate sense, without regard for its value-laden overtones. The word *vulgar* means "common"—in other words, ballads, as the students understood, use ordinary rather than elevated diction—but it also, in this case, derides a social class. Empson became increasingly interested in analyzing the relations among the multiple kinds of meaning a single word carries. During his years in China, he worked on the series of essays that would eventually become *The Structure of Complex Words* (1951).

The projects that Empson undertook after *Seven Types of Ambiguity* show him extending the ground his analytic methods could cover. *Some Versions of Pastoral* addresses social ironies through an analysis of literary ones, while *The Structure of Complex Words* explores the expanding horizon of meaning any given word possesses. As one reads Empson's criticism, the principle of ambiguity seems to enlarge to become nothing less than a theory of the human condition. A description Empson once offered of his poetry might serve as the motto for his criticism: "to convey a mental state of great tension, in which conflicting impulses have no longer any barriers between them and therefore the strangeness of the world is felt very acutely." □

Charlotte Taylor is a writer based in New York.

MASS CONFUSION

Dagmar Barnouw on Siegfried Kracauer

ORNAMENTS OF THE METROPOLIS: SIEGFRIED KRACAUER AND MODERN URBAN CULTURE
BY HENRIK REEH
CAMBRIDGE, MA: MIT PRESS. 264 PAGES. $40.

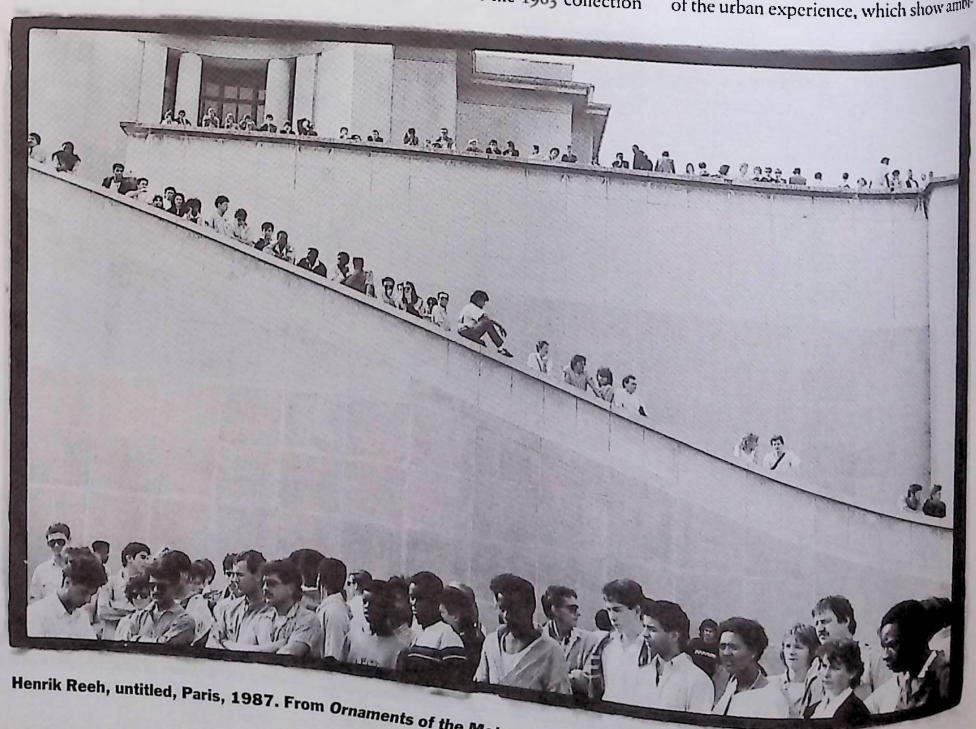
The enduring fascination with Weimar culture has been focused on its unresolved central conflict: the exhilaration of rapid scientific and technological development versus the anxiety of unredeemed mechanization, fragmentation, anonymity, and (self-)alienation of a modern urban-mass society. It is a conflict instructively reflected in some of Siegfried Kracauer's texts of the late '20s, the focus of Henrik Reeh's *Ornaments of the Metropolis: Siegfried Kracauer and Modern Urban Culture.*

Weimar modernity was the result of a shifting complex, through the nineteenth century, of interactions between Enlightenment and (neo-)Romantic positions: Where the Enlightenment concept of identity was an open-ended process of transformation fed by curiosity about "the world out there," the poet-critics of the Romantic period sought a final transformation of identity as rebirth into a "true" self, both individual and collective. From the retroperspective of two centuries later, neo-Platonic, neo-Romantic, neo-Hegelian eschatological impulses, intensified by a curiously mixed utopianist-pessimist messianism, appear as Weimar culture's most transhistorically relevant, transferable aspect—and therefore its most seductive feature. The remarkably enduring fascination with the work of Walter Benjamin is a good case in point. Seen within the ongoing, changing, and, above all, diverse cultural actuality of the Weimar years, Benjamin's verbal and conceptual messianist hermeticism appears more transparent and problematic. The consequences of the quintessentially modern World War I, the rapidly accelerating interdependencies of technological and social change resulting in cultural and political polarization, seemed to elude rational intellectual intervention. The now much more broadly diffused experience of modernity was eliminating the familiar cultural demarcations that had directed such intervention in the past. At the same time, it encouraged the rapidly expanding business of culture, which meant new visibility and social accessibility but also the political exploitability of cultural activities, among them the novel print and electronic mass media.

Whereas Benjamin was a marginal figure in Weimar culture, Kracauer was temporarily at its center: a successful highbrow journalist, the feuilleton editor of the influential liberal daily *Frankfurter Zeitung*, he was both sympathetic to and skeptical of the Hegelian-Marxian vanguard project of Ernst Bloch, Lukács, Benjamin, and Adorno. Though these figures differed with respect to ideological details, they shared a fundamental openness to the seductions of meta-empirical, trans- (or post-)historical meaning, which Kracauer increasingly questioned. Yet in his attempts to mediate between concept and sensation, the general and the particular, his essayistic cultural critique shared with those of Robert Musil, Benjamin, and Bloch an ideational-sensual focus on the explicitly modern "ordinary" phenomena of the contemporary life-world.

Even if the debt was not always explicitly acknowledged, all these writers owed much to Georg Simmel's conceptual and stylistic explorations of modern urban life, especially in his enormously influential *Philosophy of Money* (1900). Kracauer's discussion of Simmel in *Soziologie als Wissenschaft* (1922) is awkward and opaque (as is the text as a whole); but in his earlier, less "theoretically" ambitious essay on Simmel (included in the 1963 collection *Das Ornament der Masse* [The Mass Ornament]), he emphasized what was congenial to him about Simmel's approach: "He always traces what he has seen (*Gesehenes*). Basically, all his thought is nothing but a grasping (*erfassen*) of objects by looking at them (*durch das Hinblicken auf sie*)." This evaluation of Simmel's "mixed" philosophical-essayistic discourse emphasizes precisely those aspects that were to become important to the development of Kracauer's own writing during the '20s.

In his essays on the new phenomenon of urban mass culture, Kracauer tried to deal with the bewildering complexity of cultural changes through tentative observations of "surfaces," the densely interrelated phenomena of everyday life. And here especially the texts strain for more general, "theorizing" definitions of the modernity of the urban experience, which show ambi-



Henrik Reeh, untitled, Paris, 1987. From *Ornaments of the Metropolis.*

guities, contradictions, and lacunae. One of the most instructively troubled essays in this respect is "The Mass Ornament" (1927), with its focus on the epistemological significance of the insignificant, easily overlooked surface expressions of a culture: In their "unself-consciousness" (*Unbewusstheit*) these surface expressions allow access to the "fundamental content" of an epoch—an argument ideologically important as well to Benjamin, Bloch, and Adorno (who for this reason chose it as the title essay for the 1963 collection of Kracauer's Weimar essays).

The projected "automatic" mediation between a (neo-Platonic, neo-Romantic) fundamental truth underlying cultural phenomena and an observer's (correct) consciousness points to one of the more problematic aspects of Kracauer's concept of "*reale Dialektik*." Meant as an alternative to his friends' insistence on the redemptive power of Hegelian-Marxian "*emphatische Theorie*," this concept retained vestiges of the latter's potent fallacies. The opacity of the argument in "The Mass Ornament" has its source in a concept of the masses that anticipated certain aspects of the Frankfurt School's rigid perspective on mass culture, notably the global range and the conceptual patterning of their total rejection of it. Kracauer stated explicitly that his critical observation of urban masses was aimed at understanding rather than rejection. But for an experienced observer of a contemporary urban environment, he appears curiously ill attuned here to the multifaceted phenomenon of crowd behavior, which played a hugely important role in Weimar's modern mass democracy. His curiosity was not provoked by the diverse forms and purposes of actual crowds: large groups spontaneously gathering for demonstrations, crowding around a charismatic leader, drawn by political-organizational directives of varying kinds or by political threats and promises; large numbers of people across the whole political spectrum, attracted by the new phenomenon of spectator sports. He also showed little interest in the significance of the particular places where such crowds gathered: the streets, squares, halls, sports fields, and stadiums. Rather, he focused on selective attributes of modern mass man and woman—their desire for distraction, their becoming anonymous particles contained in abstract ornamental patterns—and then presented them "dialectically" as general attributes of Weimar modernity.

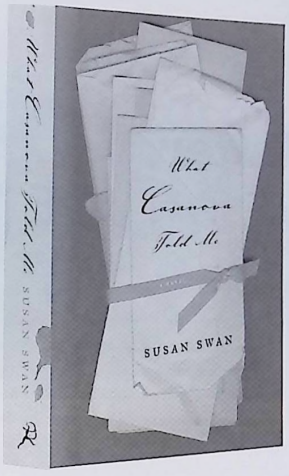
Invoking the ambiguity of the phenomenon as he had constructed it—not unlike in his openly self-contradictory (though in some ways seminal) essay of 1927, "*Die Photographie*"—Kracauer relied on formulaic arrangements of concepts to set up general cultural correspondences. Thus he proposed a significant resemblance between the crowd fitting itself into an abstract ornament and the abstractness of capitalism—a resemblance located precisely in a shared ambiguity: Capitalism is presented as a stage on the way to "disenchantment," a process set in motion by the Enlightenment, which Kracauer, following Weber, regarded as central to modernity. Linking Taylorist production methods to the Tiller girls' regimented dancing to the "ornamental" configurations of crowds in the modern metropolis, he seems to anticipate the equation "Enlightenment = Mass Deception" in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. But Kracauer's perspective also clearly differs from that of the Frankfurters in that he acknowledges the importance of contemporary social phenomena *in themselves* and the need to understand them on their own terms. Three years later he would record them in probing detail in *Die Angestellten* (1930), his classic documentary study of white-collar workers, the most impressionable mass audience, both for the movies and for Hitler.

How important, then, was the concept of ornament for Kracauer's views of modern urban culture during the Weimar period—for himself? For his readers? And how important are Kracauer's views for Reeh's argumentation? This beautifully produced book—containing a substantial number of Reeh's own photographs of urban ornamentalism, visually pleasant but insufficiently motivated—clearly reflects Kracauer's growing cult status: His texts have become authorization for others' writerly creativity—in this case applied to "modern urban culture," no matter how eclectic or how tenuous the connection. Reeh's attempts to assign canonical status to the argumentation of "The Mass Ornament" (he refers to it as a "seminal programmatic essay" and a "general program of cultural criticism") provide a good case in point. What exactly is the "program" in Reeh's view? He draws mainly on Kracauer's autobiographical novel, *Ginster* (1928); *Straßen in Berlin und anderswo* (1964), a collection of the early texts published in *Frankfurter Zeitung*; and *Jacques Offenbach and the Paris of His Time* (1938)—all of which "suggest ways in which the subjective can reappropriate urban life." "Resubjectivization" of the urban experience, introduced in Simmel's *Philosophy of Money* as a concept allowing plural reactions to urban life, is in *Ginster* a strategy to create space in the city for reflection. In their "photographic" precision, the sketches of urban life in *Straßen in Berlin* suggest yet another meaning of *resubjectivization*: Given the medium-specific openness of photography, these "snapshots" also show what the photographer overlooked in the moment of taking the picture but was there and is present in the image—an openness to multiple viewings that supported Kracauer's argument of the specific importance of photography to cultural modernity because it redefined the concept of objectivity.

Reeh uses the concept of resubjectivization too indiscriminately (fudging its different meanings) and too narrowly (as pertaining to the reappropriation of urban life). He does the same with the concept of ornament, and here the problem is more serious because it concerns the organizational focus of his study. Reeh's reading of "The Mass Ornament" mimics rather than analyzes the text's conceptual opaqueness, and yet he hopes "to demonstrate that the cultural, social, and historical conclusions from [it] can, with due caution, be extended to encompass a close connection between *ornament*, *critique*, and *urbanity*"—the subject of his book. But *what kind* of critique? What is the *meaning* of ornament in its relation to urbanity? Kracauer's problematic distinction between ratio and reason anticipates the Frankfurters' equally problematic Schopenhauerian distinction between "instrumental" and "critical" reason; and in this essay he is indeed closest to their position and also seemingly most uncomfortable with it. Reeh's insensitivity to Kracauer's pervasive mistrust of theory limits his ability to ask questions and thereby the usefulness of his study for readers who do. □

Dagmar Barnouw is professor of German and comparative literature at the University of Southern California.

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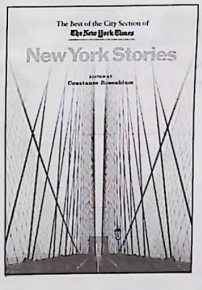
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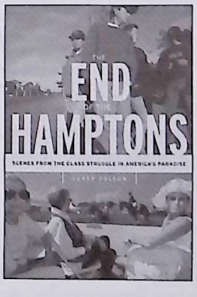
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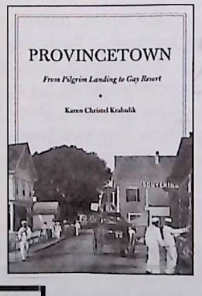
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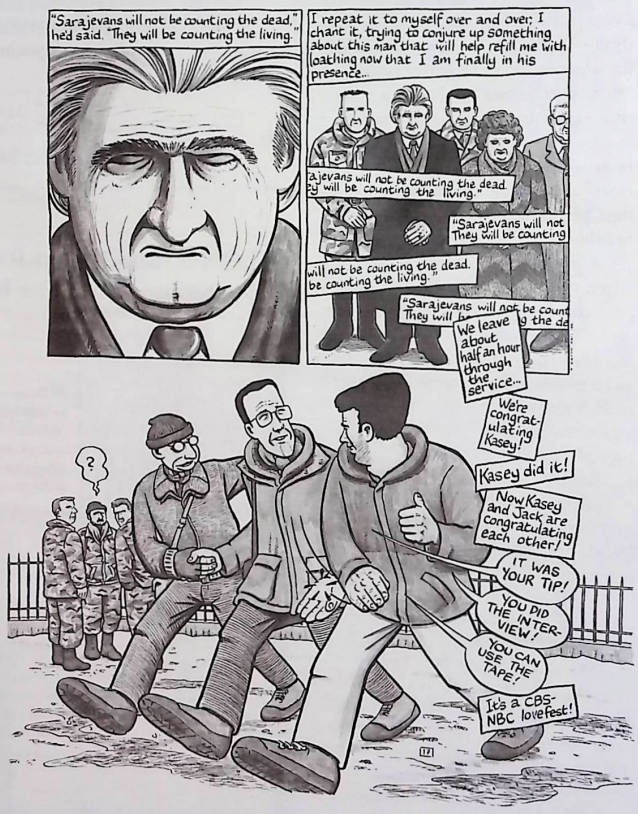
No Laughing Matter
MARISA BOWE ON JOE SACCO

In 1991, when Joe Sacco created the thirty-three-page, multipart comic "How I Loved the War," about his coming-of-age as a couch-potato war junkie during the first Gulf conflict, he went into flashback mode to tell the story of a long-distance romance (Sacco was then living in Germany, his girlfriend in Iowa). Near the beginning of the tale, he drew himself, referring to the couple's idealism in agreeing to an "open relationship concept" while apart; printed in small letters were the words "Confident phase." The next frame, dark and suffocating, depicted Sacco on a small mattress in what was presumably his Berlin bedroom, beginning a staccato series of panels that shrank successively, until they were smaller than a postage stamp, as Sacco's obsession with his girlfriend's waning affection grew fiercer and the intervals between his bouts of angsting about it shorter.

As that passion burned itself out, the national amp-up to the war became more inflamed, and Sacco's parallel pacing was perfect. In two side-by-side panels, one, an empty, dark horizon, was captioned, "Anytime after next Tuesday after midnight the 'mother of all battles' will begin"; the other, equally dark, showed Sacco back in his bedroom, lying immobile, his face a death mask of self-pitying agony. "Meanwhile, a smaller battle is all but over," the caption read. When he finally breaks off the relationship, he reports feeling much better. "And, anyway . . ." he continues in the next panel—the cartoon Sacco is back in his apartment but now standing up and slipping off his jacket, implying that he's just been out and about—"I still had my other relationship . . . 'Honey, I'm home!'" he smilingly calls out to the TV, as it continues to broadcast: "Our Gulf War coverage continues after this. . . ."

Although the elements were cleverly intertwined, they were not self-consciously wrought to emphasize theme and structure. They simply blended the quotidian and the spectacular, the same way the two come together in Sacco's later work, as his war jones pulls him away from the TV and into the more exotic and frightening terrains of Palestine and Bosnia. Construing Big Meaning from these events isn't Sacco's bag. He abstains with remarkable discipline from infusing his material with any sort of "wisdom," instead trying to show only that which, despite relentless "coverage," hasn't been shown. So although his own, somewhat abstracted figure (blank eyeglasses, cartoony gestures) makes frequent appearances throughout his work, it's only to remind readers that what they are reading is being observed and constructed by Sacco; it is not an "objective" fragment.

Noticing the visual changes that reveal Sacco's increasing strategic subtlety is one way to grasp the evolutionary leaps in his work; charting the press attention is an easier one. "How I Loved the War" made Sacco a comics-world practitioner to watch. *Palestine* (Fantagraphics, 2002), his book on the Israeli occupation of Gaza and the West Bank from the point of view of ordinary Palestinians, vaulted him to the cross-over top. It was a genre breakthrough; no comics artist had ever before taken on contemporary political events with anywhere near such depth and scope. Media *machers* took note. Some of them were almost gushing in their praise. Of *Palestine*, Edward Said wrote: "With the exception of one or two novelists and poets, no one has



ever rendered this terrible state of affairs better than Joe Sacco." Reviewing *Safe Area Goražde* (Fantagraphics, 2000), about Bosnians' experiences during and after the little-understood war there, David Rieff commented in the *New York Times*: "The best dramatic evocation of the Bosnian catastrophe . . . Few have told the truth more bravely."

Sacco hadn't intended to pioneer a new genre. He received a journalism degree from the University of Oregon in 1980, but hadn't done much with it. Then, as he described it to *Publishers Weekly* in 2003, "I had always wanted to go to the Middle East, to the occupied territories, and after I got there I thought, Well, I should do comics about this and my experiences. My journalism training just kicked in." We should all be so successful at what we're not setting out to accomplish.

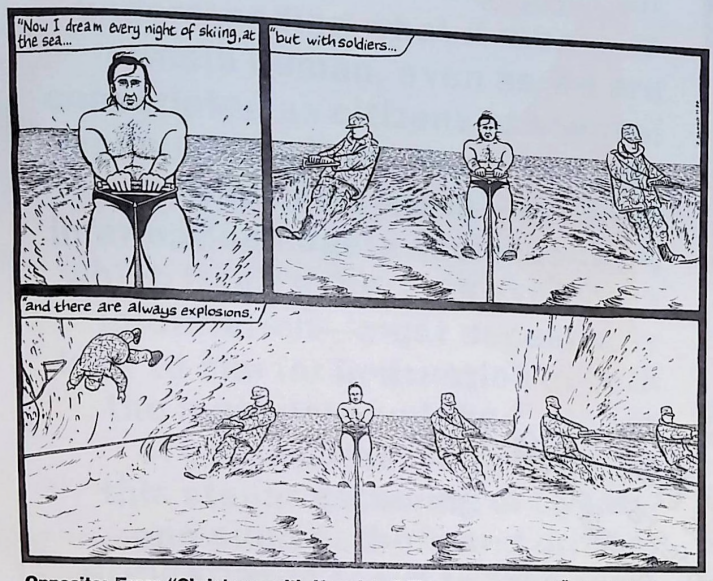
The most recent addition to the Sacco oeuvre, the just-published *War's End: Profiles from Bosnia 1995–96* (Drawn & Quarterly), combines two Bosnian stories previously published in comic-book form. "Christmas with Karadzic" has Sacco and two journalist companions in Bosnia chasing phony leads in an attempt to track down Radovan Karadžić, who, along with Ratko Mladić and Slobodan Milošević, bears most of the responsibility for the war crimes committed during the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. When Sacco and his companions finally do catch up with Karadžić, the event is quintessentially anticlimactic—though it bears noting that in so doing, Sacco and his colleagues achieved what, in nine years of trying, NATO has still been unable to do. The first story, "Šoba," is a sympathetic and moving portrait of a young Sarajevan artist and rock singer whose life as he knew it, like those of so many others, went into long-term suspension when the Serbian Chetniks began their siege of the city. Here, the characters Sacco creates show spectacular development, even more than in his first Bosnian portrait, *The Fixer: A Story from Sarajevo* (2003, Drawn & Quarterly), most likely because he knew Šoba far better than he did *The Fixer*'s shadowy protagonist. Šoba comes off as funny, reflective, charismatic, inspiring, heroic—and utterly real:

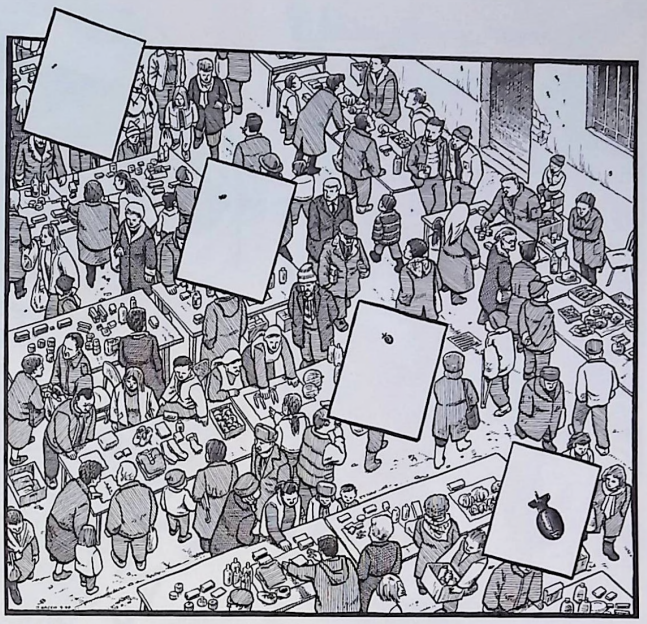
> Vlado and Šoba are discussing the porn flick they want to make some day, starring Šoba of course . . . Šoba posits the opening scene of his porno flick. He and Vlado are lying on a bed, see, talking philosophy, Hegel, then the camera pans down and—
>
> Šoba: —"and there's a couple of girls smoking our dicks!"
>
> "*Sucking* our dicks."

Sacco's tonal finesse makes transitions from humor and irony to grisly terror to mind-bending tragedy both smooth and plausible. The artistry is at least as much visual as it is verbal: Sacco's drawing style, clearly influenced by Robert Crumb, is deceptively informal, emphasizing the ugly and misshapen (at times one wonders how such unlovely-looking characters can *love* for one another), and yet it is exactingly considered and precise. Devoting ample space to horrific gore without sensationalizing it, it lends its subjects an aching humanity without descending into melodrama. Sacco is an explorer of the psychology of war—how some people survive it, others justify it, some see it from afar, and still others ignore it. His dedication to accuracy doesn't allow for emotional contamination.

Although he himself has never been through a war, Sacco did absorb some of World War II's effects secondhand during his childhood. "My parents went through World War II in Malta, and I grew up hearing about it. We lived outside Melbourne when I was a kid, and all their friends in Australia went through the war, too. Whenever they got together that's all they talked about," he explained to *LA Weekly* last year. "It made me understand that the world can be violent; war etc. are a real possibility." Sacco told me recently. "You can have many years of your life robbed by political events. It's not just something put on screen by Steven Spielberg." Sacco drew on his mother's experiences in creating "More Women, More Children, More Quickly: Malta 1935–43 as Recollected by Carmen M. Sacco," a story collected in *Notes from a Defeatist* (Fantagraphics, 2003).

Sacco was born in Malta in 1960; he and his family moved shortly thereafter to Australia, where they lived until he was twelve. After two years in Los Angeles, they settled in Portland, Oregon, where he has continued to live between long stints in Malta (again), Berlin, New York, Switzerland, and, of course, the places portrayed in his work.





Opposite: From "Christmas with Karadzic." This page: From "Šoba." All from *War's End: Profiles from Bosnia 1995–96*, by Joe Sacco.

Portland is a convivial comics scene—it's home to comic-book publishers Dark Horse and Top Shelf Productions, and Fantagraphics, the most well known alt-comics publisher, is in nearby Seattle—but Sacco had fallen in love with the medium long before he lived in Oregon. "I've been doing comics since I was six years old," he told *LA Weekly*. When he moved to the United States, he came upon *MAD* magazine, a formative influence. In high school he discovered the work of Sergio Leone, which so impressed the teenage Sacco with "the way shots were framed, the close-ups, the way it gloried in gritty ugliness, the sweating, dogs, old growth of beard" that he remembers drawing an homage called "A Fistful of Tequila."

During college, Sacco was focused on his studies, so he "wasn't really pursuing pop culture," though he did come across the comics of Crumb for the first time. Despite his affinity for Leone's grungy world, he didn't like Crumb's work "because it was too ugly and . . . too depressing for me," he told Thom Powers in a 2003 interview for WNET's *Egg* television program. "Later on, of course, I modified that opinion. At a certain point, Crumb did begin to influence me because his drawings were so organic. Everything looked like it had a soul. The chair, the table, a spoon, all looked like he had put thought [into them]. He had a big impact on me."

Another model for Sacco was Brueghel. "I love the solidity of the people in his paintings," he told *LA Weekly*, "and his work provides a window into daily life in Flanders during the sixteenth century in a way the Italian Renaissance simply doesn't." After college, Sacco discovered others whose work would contribute to molding his own. "Céline was influential for the way I break down panels," he says. "The way he stacked words and ellipses, using four-word phrases and expressions redundantly, made a staggering impact." Michael Herr's *Dispatches* and the work of Hunter S. Thompson and George Orwell were also inspirations, as were the autobiographical comics of Harvey Pekar.

When Sacco graduated, good jobs in journalism were scarce, and he ended up moving to Los Angeles to work for the journal of the National Notary Association. Unfulfilled by the fast-paced world of actuarial news, he returned to Portland a year later, in 1985, and, after a stint at a local weekly, he founded a local alternative magazine called *The Permanent Press*. When that tanked fifteen months later, he became a staff news writer at *The Comics Journal*, covering freedom of speech and censorship issues in the industry. In 1987 he started a comics anthology, *Centrifugal Bumble-Puppy* (the name of a children's game in Huxley's *Brave New World*), and the year after that, his own comic, *Yahoo* (borrowing the title from Jonathan Swift), each of which lasted about a half-dozen issues.

After reading Edward Said and Noam Chomsky on the Middle East in the mid-1980s, Sacco took off for Israel in 1991 to see the situation for himself. That trip began his transformation into a rigorous international journalist, a transformation that would result in multiple awards for him, including an American Book Award and a Guggenheim.

Sacco's early comics career didn't necessarily indicate future greatness. Judging from the compilation of his pre-fame work, *Notes from a Defeatist*, his preoccupations avoided the most juvenile of typical comics themes (hacked, exploding, and/or festering bodies; potty humor; the ever-baffling mystery of Gurlz), but they were essentially the same as those of seemingly all the young alt-comics dudes. The self-absorbed whines, the kittenlike swipes of the snarky junior satirist, the not-so-epic quest for sex, drugs, and/or rock 'n' roll—Sacco undertook all these with the same predictability as other members of his guild. But he got better results: Even back then, in a story most of his peers would have rendered as self-indulgent autobiography—"Cartoon Genius," a pseudoreport on his lack of success at the time—he demonstrated a relaxed mastery of figural gesture and nuance that belies the irony of the title.

The first panel has Sacco lying on his disheveled bed, one knee bent, arms behind his head. His posture telegraphs the funny combination of arrogance and loserdom he riffs on for the remainder of the story. A later page is topped with an image of Sacco leaping for joy—borderless, above-margin, crowning the other panels—at being offered the kind of temporary hack work he had faux-nobly denounced only a couple pages before: "The S.S. 'Joe Sacco' sails the sea of truth . . . Fuck the market! . . . I'm a cartoon fucking genius!"

Unlike his later work, the drawings in *Defeatist* vary quite a bit stylistically, wandering from goofily named characters (Alessio Easelsmear, Stanton K. Pragmatron, Oliver Limpdingle) whose cartoonish features convey their stereotyped personae (square-jawed popular jock; beret'd and goateed artiste; thin-shouldered, receding-hairlined corporate drone) to an absurd, Brueghelesque medieval tale, to a piece whose visual references range from faded black-and-white snapshots to Soviet social realism to Fernando Botero. The longer, more journalistic pieces near the end resemble the expressive realism of the quasi-muckraking comics that Sacco would later become known for. But if the pieces as a whole demonstrate a rich gift for comics artistry, they give little hint of the political depth he was to display later on.

That begins with "When Good Bombs Happen to Bad People," a transitional piece that combines drawings and text . . . and text . . . and more text . . . to expose the hypocrisy, ruthlessness, and detachment of the British and American generals and politicians responsible for the bombings of Germany, Japan, and Libya. While Sacco's passion is manifest, the piling on of wordy evidence undercuts the comic's effectiveness. They bring to mind another category of young American male: the fanatical lefty-politics geek, hammering home his second-hand Chomsky over and over again. Luckily, Sacco was wise enough not to linger in this phase of his artistic development.

In their puzzlement over how to describe Sacco's work, readers have ranged from wondering whether to praise him as "the world's best comics journalist"—if in fact he's the only comics journalist—to denying that what he does is "mere" comics. That question notwithstanding, if one accepts the descriptor "comics journalist" (another coinage, "reality comics," is too good to leave forever on the editing-room floor), what kind of journalism is it that Sacco is doing?

"Oral history" is an inadequate term, bringing to mind tape-recorded interviews with Depression-era agricultural workers rather than a range of spoken testimony that includes stories about ongoing events. "Comics" implies work created solely for the purpose of humor, and "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer," Scott McCloud's definition of the term in his 1993 book *Understanding Comics*, is just too cumbersome. "Documentary," though happily growing more and more flexible in terms of form and subject matter, generally refers to film. However, it's not exactly radical these days to say that drawings can have as much documentary credibility as anything shot through a lens. So, pretending for a moment that all of these terms are more apt than they are, let's refer to Sacco's work as "documentary oral history in comics form."

Although military and political leaders put in cameo appearances in his comics, what Sacco provides is purely "history from below," giving voice to "ordinary" individuals. Like any skilled visual interpreter, he tends to show rather

continued on page 57

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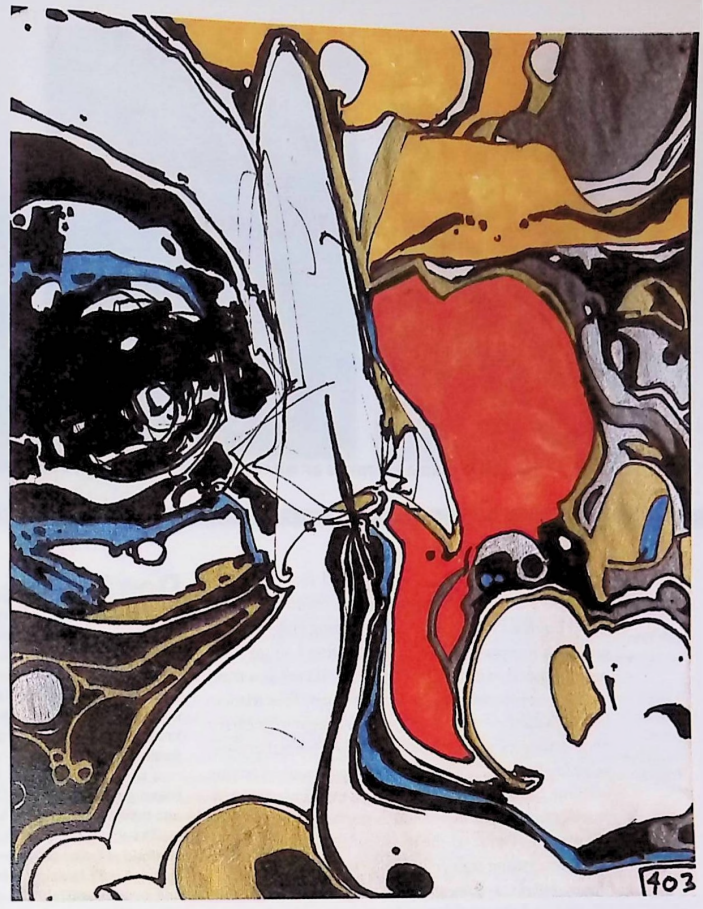
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No account of American literature's past four decades can ignore the catalytic significance of Thomas Pynchon. In his fiction he has devised a luminous blueprint for understanding what it means to remain human, even as we are conscripted as citizens of a global technocracy. Writers who engage this brave new world—in which information begets social control, which itself generates ever more information—must necessarily look to him for instruction in both the materials and the methods of exploration. In presenting this stellar gathering of twenty-one such authors and critics, BOOKFORUM seeks to take some measure of Pynchon's achievement and enduring influence.



PYNCHON FROM A TO V

"There is a key, among the wastes of the World."

ROCKET REDUX

GERALD HOWARD ON GRAVITY'S RAINBOW: REMEMBERED, REREAD, RECONSIDERED

IN 1973, THOMAS PYNCHON'S *Gravity's Rainbow* landed on my brain and exploded there like, well, a V-2 rocket. It was precisely the book I needed at the time, which tells you something about my mental and spiritual condition. Hey, it was the '70s. The country was low in the water and so was I. Tar-black humor, crushing difficulty, rampant paranoia, accelerating entropy, jaw-dropping perversity, apocalyptic terror, history as a conspiracy of the conjoined forces of technology, death, and sinister Control—it was all good. I preferred having my spirit crushed by a great American novel to the everyday humiliations of my first year of postcollegiate life and the cultural and political demoralizations of the era.



ILLUSTRATIONS BY ZAK SMITH, FROM *PICTURES OF WHAT HAPPENS ON EACH PAGE OF THOMAS PYNCHON'S NOVEL GRAVITY'S RAINBOW*, 2004, MIXED MEDIA ON PAPER.

Don DeLillo

It was as though, in some odd quantum stroke, Hemingway died one day and Pynchon was born the next. One literature bends into another. Pynchon has made American writing a broader and stronger force. He found whispers and apparitions at the edge of modern awareness but did not lessen our sense of the physicality of American prose, the shotgun vigor, the street humor, the body fluids, the put-on.

I was writing ads for Sears truck tires when a friend gave me a copy of *V.* in paperback. I read it and thought, Where did *this* come from?

The scale of his work, large in geography and unafraid of major subjects, helped us locate our fiction not only in small anonymous corners, human and ever-essential, but *out there* as well, in the sprawl of high imagination and collective dreams.

Don DeLillo's most recent novel is *Cosmopolis* (Scribner, 2003).

The year before, I had graduated from Cornell, Pynchon's alma mater, with an instrumentally useless BA in English (at least in terms of gaining employment) and been redeposited, dazed and confused, in my natal neighborhood of Bay Ridge, Brooklyn. If I tell you that I grew up on precisely the same street where Tony Manero lived in *Saturday Night Fever*, you may begin to grasp my plight. After six weeks of pounding the Manhattan pavement in search of "college graduate" positions—carrying with me, and I wince at this now, a remaindered hardcover copy of Nabokov's *Ada* as my downtime reading matter—I got a job as the most sullen and undermotivated advertising trainee in the history of hucksterism. Bluntly put, I was a big problem to myself (and my poor parents) and the world wasn't coming to the rescue.

I decided, in the absence of any other alternative, to read myself out of the slough of despond. Metafiction therapy in the outer boroughs—not the most promising of strategies. But I was lucky to find a superb guide and boon companion in a most unlikely place: a playground basketball court along the Narrows, to which I repaired evenings and weekends for my two other chosen anodynes, hoops and weed. It turned out that the skinny regular by the name of Peter Kaldheim not only had a highly effective bank shot but was a recent Dartmouth grad and aspiring writer who had a synoptic acquaintance with the period's advanced fiction, especially Thomas Pynchon. So began one of those transformative friendships, fueled by passionate reading and conversation and similar taste in drugs, that change a life. At least it changed mine. I draw on our shared literary tutorials to this day.

Our reading list, I sometimes joke, was based on three principles: nothing more straightforward than Donald Barthelme; nothing less gothic and desperate than Harry Crews; nothing more inviting and less dense than William Gaddis. Avid for stronger wine and madder music, we plunged headlong into the thickets of early-to-middle-American postmodernism, getting lost in the funhouse with Barth and Abish, Coover and Elkin, Reed and Sukenick, Mathews and Sorrentino (a Bay Ridge boy!), Gass and Hawkes. A significant subset of our reading was concerned with the specifically male problem of surviving in our native land in the wake of the post-'60s crack-up; hence Hunter Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, Fred Exley's *A Fan's Notes*, Tom McGuane's *Ninety-two in the Shade*, and Robert Stone's *Dog Soldiers* became our touchstones. We discovered the glories of early Don DeLillo, *Americana* and *End Zone* (football as a metaphor for nuclear war—precisely!), with almost ungovernable excitement.

We had, of course, little use for the standard-issue Big Names. Bellow had put himself beyond the pale with his churlish *Mr. Sammler's Planet*; Cheever and Updike were too suburban; Vidal wrote historical novels *with plots*, for God's sake (great essays, though); and Malamud was a downer but not our kind of downer. Only two Big Names escaped our scorn: Philip Roth, as a result of all the excellent trouble he caused with *Portnoy's Complaint*, and Norman Mailer, for his omnidirectional rage against the machine.

Dogmatic and hipper than thou, we were probably insufferable, but then again what rising literary generation isn't? We'd done the critical reading and so could sort through the often rebarbative yet always challenging works we favored. Roth had declared that American reality "stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's own meager imagination." So fiction *had* to go to extremes of content and technique. Susan Sontag had as much as proclaimed "Matthew Arnold, he dead" when she erased high/low distinctions and aesthetic moralism, and proscribed interpretation in favor of simple sensation. William Gass, the reigning philosopher-critic, focused our attention on the not always obvious fact that fiction was made *of language* and elegantly drew out the implications of that. Most famously, John Barth's essay "The Literature of Exhaustion" propounded a theory and an aesthetic of ironic, parodic self-consciousness that felt appropriate to the tail end of the modernist period.

These ideas were our mental tools as we romped in the forest of first-growth postmodernism. What was strange and gratifying was how completely in sync this writing was with our educated baby-boomer sense of squalor and betrayal. Then, no less than today, a culture war was being fought—but the battleground was an interior one, within our minds and souls.

And then, enter Commandant Pynchon, a one-man government-in-exile, rumbling down from the mountains into the capital city of American consciousness with something like the ultimate weapon: *Gravity's Rainbow*. Peter and I had both read *V.* and *The Crying of Lot 49* with fanatic attention, reverence, and awe, and plenty of criticism to go with them as well. We could cite the second law of thermodynamics accurately; we knew that Herbert Stencil's third-person prose had been modeled on *The Education of Henry Adams*; phrases such as "the dynamo and the Virgin" sprang from our lips with practiced ease. Like a number of other '60s classics, these novels weren't mere reading experiences; they seemed to demand a radical change of attitude on the part of the reader. We tried to embody McClintic Sphere's dictum to "keep cool, but care"; like Oedipa Maas, we strove to find the resources to master our vertigo and panic over a world turned illegible. Among American novelists, only Pynchon seemed to have the resources to master the intricacies and inner dynamics of this strange new post-Enlightenment era.

So when I spied a notice in *Esquire* of the imminent publication of *Gravity's Rainbow*, I was in the bookstore like a shot to plunk down $4.95 for Viking's original trade-paperback edition (clearly someone at that publishing house understood the impecunious nature of the Pynchon audience, I noted gratefully). Everything about the bright orange book appealed: the cover art; the minimalist approach to jacket copy (no promotional folderol, just that indelible first sentence, "A screaming comes across the sky. . . ."); the dedication to dead folkie-hipster novelist Richard Fariña; the darkly ironic epigraph from Wernher Von Braun. Oh yes, this was going to be something.

And it was. Its portrayal of a world rife with mendacity, corruption, and geopolitical intrigue, of a history whose surface chaos masked plots within plots, of technology off the leash and in the service of death offered us purchase on the scary drift of American life since 1945. The book's antihero, Tyrone Slothrop, the map of whose fornications in London during the Blitz predicts the pattern of V-2 landings, was a classic schlemiel in the mold of Nathanael West's Lemuel Pitkin and Joseph Heller's Yossarian. Here was Norman O. Brown's vision of Eros and Thanatos translated into brilliant novelistic terms. Slothrop was haplessly in the clutch of large, impersonal (or are they?) forces, yet he struggled with a sort of Mickey Rooney pluck to scry for some pattern of meaning in the phenomena of

George Saunders

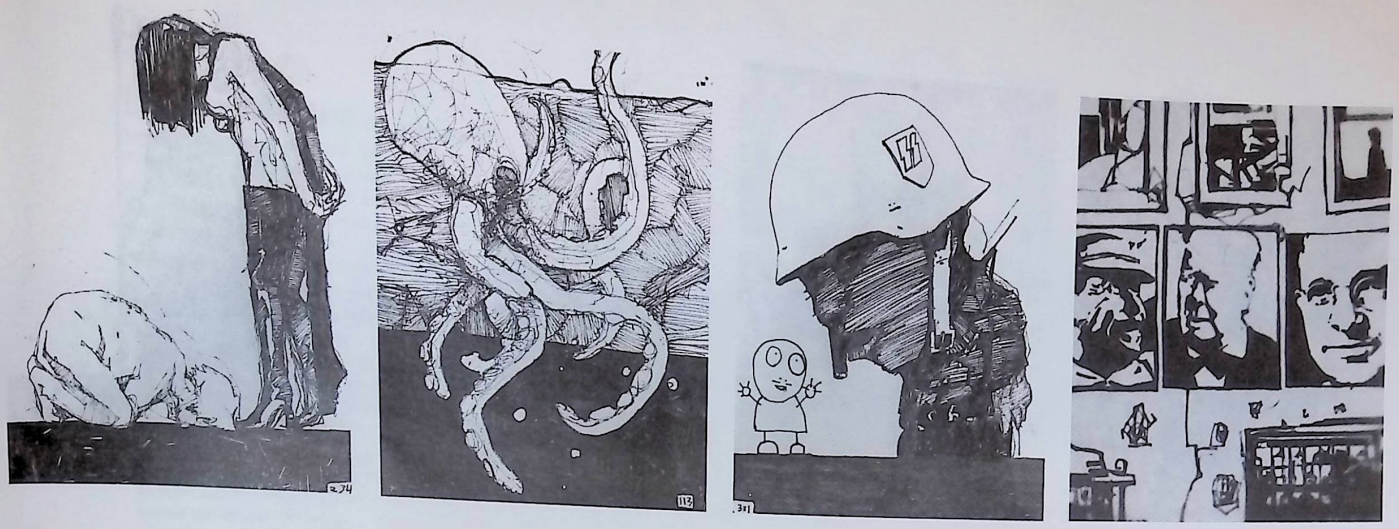
I don't think anyone has gotten closer than Thomas Pynchon to summoning the real audacity and insanity and scope of the American mind, as reflected in the American landscape. I read Pynchon all out of order, starting with *Vineland*, and I still remember the shock of pleasure I got at finally seeing the America I knew—strange shops and boulevards, built over former strange shops and former boulevards, all laid out there in valleys and dead-end forests, heaped on top of Indian cemeteries, peopled with nut jobs and hustlers and moral purists—actually present in a novel, and present not only in substance but in structure and language that both used and evoked the unruly, muscular complexity of the world itself.

In Pynchon, anything is fair game—if it is in the world, it can go in the book. To me there is something Buddhist about this approach, which seems to say that since the world is capable of producing an infinity of forms, the novel must be capable of accommodating an infinite number of forms. All aesthetic concerns (style, form, structure) answer this purpose: Let in the world.

This is why Pynchon is our biggest writer, the gold standard of that overused word *inclusiveness*: No dogma or tidy aesthetic rule or literary fashion is allowed to prefilter the beautiful data streaming in. Everything is included. No inclination of the mind is too small or large or frightening. The result is gorgeous madness, which does what great literature has always done—reminds us that there is a world out there that is bigger than us and worthy of our utmost humility and attention.

I have often felt that we read to gain some idea of what God would say about us if someone were to ask Him what we're like. Pynchon says, through the vast loving catalogue he has made, that we are Excellent but need to be watched closely. He says there is no higher form of worship than the loving (i.e., madly attentive) observation of that-which-is, a form of prayer of which Pynchon's work is our highest example.

George Saunders is the author of the novella-length fable *The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil*, forthcoming from Riverhead Books.



the world—like his Puritan forebears he had "a peculiar sensitivity to what is revealed in the sky." No overmarketed-to baby boomer could fail to identify with the suggestion that Slothrop had been from birth the subject of a secret experiment in behavioral modification. So had we all.

The novel in which Slothrop yo-yo'd around seemed to sum up everything American fiction had attempted and achieved up to that point. It was polyvalent, polyphonic, and polymorphously perverse. Its contents were by turns phantasmagorical, hyperreal, surreal, and saturnalian. Like *Moby-Dick*, it made a complete hash of formalist or genre distinctions, obliviously mixing high and low. Pynchon shuffled scenes of horror and sexual obscenity with music-hall burlesques, with Busby Berkeley production numbers in prose, with historical tableaux of virtuoso authenticity, with anachronistic, pun-besotted humor of the sort more often found on comedy albums by Cheech and Chong or Firesign Theatre. The latter was fine with us; we were usually smoked anyway, and floating free from linear thought was a fruitful frame of mind in which to approach *Gravity's Rainbow*'s labyrinthine complexities.

You could glean a tremendous amount of fresh and pertinent information from this book—about the Zoot Suit riots and Maxwell's Demon, the Kirghiz Light and the Herero uprising, Ufa Studios and the history of expressionism in German film, the psychedelic properties of the rye fungus called ergot and its effect on European history, August Kekulé's discovery of the structure of the benzene ring in a dream, and especially the physics and technology and analytical geometry and calculus of the process whereby a multi-ton package of steel, fuel, and explosives could be sent special delivery from thousands of miles away with lethal accuracy to a spot just above *your* head. We duck-and-cover kiddies took this sort of thing seriously. As the narrator says of Slothrop, "He has become obsessed with the idea of a rocket with his name written on it—if they're really set on getting him." Indeed.

Pynchon's vocabulary was fantastically recondite, and I still have the notebook in which I jotted down the meanings of *oneiric*, *abreaction*, *runcible spoon*, *hebephrenics*, *Antinomian*, *rachitic*, *velleity*, *preterite*, and a couple dozen other words impossible to use in ordinary conversation. To readers adrift in the spiritually rudderless '70s, the bold willingness of Pynchon's narrator to tell us What It All Means, in eloquent homiletics, was a tonic, a lifeline, a sign, and a revelation:

> Don't forget the real business of the war is buying and selling. The murdering and the violence are self-policing, and can be entrusted to non-professionals. . . . The true war is a celebration of markets . . .
>
> Taking and not giving back, demanding that "productivity" and "earnings" keep on increasing with time, the System removing from the rest of the World those vast quantities of energy to keep its own tiny desperate fraction showing a profit: and not only most of humanity—most of the World, animal, vegetable and mineral, is laid waste in the process. The System may or may not understand that it's only buying time.
>
> It means this War was never political at all, the politics was all theatre, all just to keep the people distracted . . . secretly, it was being dictated instead by the needs of technology . . . by a conspiracy between human beings and techniques, by something that needed the energy-burst of war, crying, "Money be damned, the very life of [insert name of Nation] is at stake," but meaning, most likely, *dawn is nearly here, I need my night's blood, my funding, funding, ahh more, more.*

The man was channeling Randolph Bourne, C. Wright Mills, Max Weber. I damn near got whiplash from nodding my head in furious assent.

Reading *Gravity's Rainbow* was admittedly a slog. Many pages at a time would pass with only the dimmest comprehension of what the welter of character, event, and implication actually meant. But at reliable intervals I would encounter something that left me gasping with amazement. There was the virtuoso comedy of the two old biddies virtually asphyxiating Slothrop with vile British candies; the shocking act of coprophagia between Katje Borgesius and Brigadier Pudding; the plainsong-inflected epiphany of Roger Mexico and Jessica Swanlake's Christmas visit to a country church; the shattering emotional impact of Slothrop's "Tantivy . . ." when he learns of his friend Mucker-Maffick's demise, which my friend the critic John Powers calls "the most poignant ellipsis in all of fiction." Most unforgettably, there is the immortal scene in which Slothrop, hooked up to a sodium Amytal drip, hallucinates dropping his harmonica down the toilet of the Roseland Ballroom, a nightclub where Red, aka Malcolm X, sells gage while Charlie Parker is onstage laying down some *very* advanced changes on "Cherokee." Down the shitter Slothrop goes, into the murky, fecal depths of white America's racial imagination, in an inward journey that reads like a cutting session with Ralph Ellison, James Joyce, Sigmund Freud, and Leslie Fiedler. Astounding.

As Peter and I raced to the chilling finish, the rocket poised to obliterate a movie theater in Los Angeles, managed by a Nixon surrogate named Richard Zhlubb, we confirmed for each other the conviction that this was the finest novel by an American—hell, by *anybody*—that we'd ever read. It was *our* great book, in *our*

Percival Everett

Thomas Pynchon used to be a client of my now deceased agent. He's a recluse, I'm told, but not invisible, and therein lies the problem. Tom is eight feet tall. Well, he's seven feet eight inches tall, which is the same as eight feet to me. Tom is terribly self-conscious about his height, having actually been born that length. His birth lasted some four days. I feel bad revealing the truth of Tom's height, because now he might find it difficult to hide. As it is, he can walk around without anyone noticing. He did this all through grade school, junior high, and high school as well. When the teacher called roll, he simply would not answer. No one put a name to the face and so he became "unseen." And no one therefore knew where he was, but still the teacher called his name every day, and still the assignments and test papers bearing his name showed up. Tom believed he had achieved a kind of sympathy with the world at the molecular level and that was why he was unseen. In fact, that might well be the case, as I have walked with him down the street and observed that he is in fact not seen. At times, all seven feet eight inches of him becomes unavailable even to me, and I have a face to go with his name. Tom tells me that he cannot control his slipping into an entropic state here and there. He calls it the curse of James Clerk Maxwell, but he doesn't seem to mind it much. It's the curse of Heisenberg that seems to annoy him. Tom can never quite know where he is. Oh, he can guess with some statistical accuracy where he's likely to be at any given moment, but what good is that when you're doing your laundry or trying to eat an egg salad sandwich?

All this serves as a kind of metaphor for Tom's place in the literary landscape. Who cares if he's a recluse? That's his business. Small minds become fascinated with that kind of detail. But the work . . . the work is wonderful and sheer play, making sense when we want it to and then not. Reading Pynchon is like caving. You might get lost, you will get wet, you will need to bring your own light, and you will have to find your own way out. What more can we ask of art? Just so you know, Thomas Pynchon is actually the pen name of . . . well, you wouldn't want to know.

Percival Everett's novel *Wounded* will be published by Graywolf Press in September.

Joanna Scott

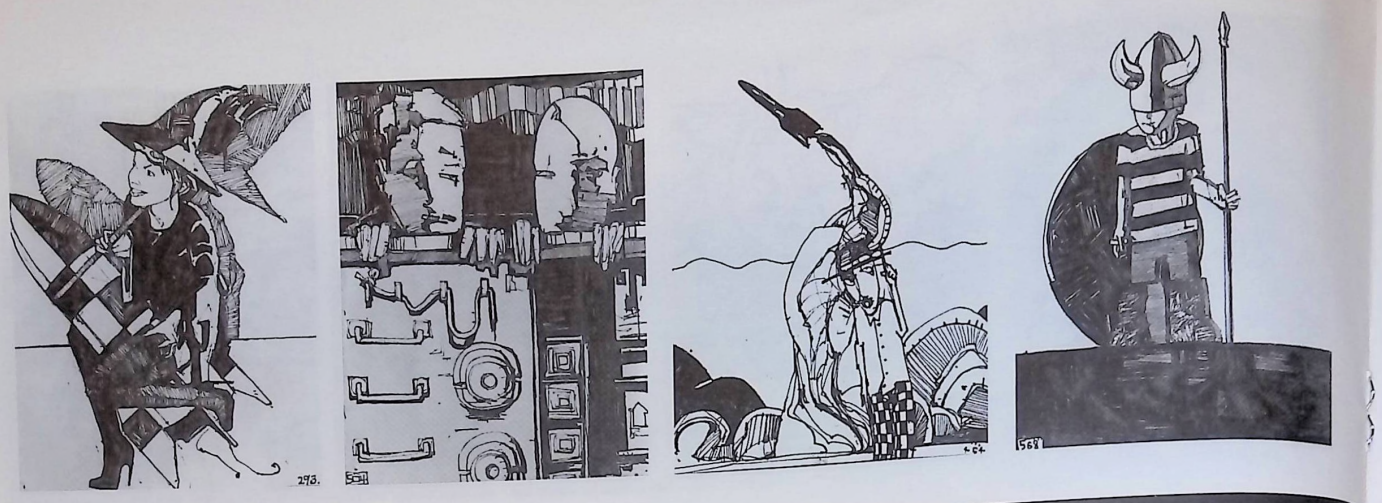
In an attempt to be concise, I'll ignore the ambiguities of Pynchon's *V.*, the diverging convergences of mystery and meaning, the tangled intricacies, and instead suggest that in his vast first novel, Pynchon is making a simple point about the stupidity of common sense. With any one of the many characters who populate *V.*'s varied landscapes, the effort of interpretation and the decision to take action are doomed by contingency. What we call common sense is in fact no more than a dim guess.

In *V.*, nothing makes absolute sense—not Sidney Stencil's "dreamscape of the future," not Benny Profane's dream street of his awkward present, and not the nightmare that constitutes history. After sixteen chapters and an epilogue, with journeys around the world, underground, out to sea, and through time, Herbert Stencil hasn't found what he's looking for, and Benny Profane has nothing to show for his fabulous experiences. "Offhand," says Profane near the end of the novel, "I'd say I haven't learned a goddamn thing." *V.* remains, in its essential form, no more—and, paradoxically, no less—than an initial.

But when impenetrable mystery becomes a generating force, then we can understand actions as reactions. And if there's one presiding consistency in *V.*, it can be found in the pattern of (stupid) reactions. Whether it's Dr. Schoenmaker piecing together a nose, Porpentine falling from a window, or Benny Profane shooting an alligator, every attempt to control experience can be seen as a reaction to an encounter that is only partially perceived. The problem is, these characters keep forgetting that perception is partial. They're stupid. We're all stupid. Pynchon arrived on the scene in 1963 to illuminate the mess that is civilization and to remind us that even though we can't see clearly enough ever to completely justify action, even though common sense is neither common nor sensible, we can at least learn to be more cautious. When a deliberate effort is called for, we can follow Profane's example as he faces the alligator in Fairing's Parish: In a moment that might not last very long but extends over a page, he hesitates, filling time with reflective thought.

Yet this is only a new beginning of the story, for caution proves an inadequate antidote to stupidity. There *is* no adequate antidote. Benny Profane shoots the alligator, and his flashlight goes out. In the novel—as in life, which along with most everything else in the universe seems to be within the scope of this novel's implications—we plunge into darkness, where we find, reading on, that paranoia is irresistible to those who miss the productive significance of the simple point embedded in the complex Pynchon formula. Imaginative invention begins in darkness. If in fact we keep making mistakes, no matter how careful we are, then we have good reason to laugh in despair, and the grand project of fiction can continue.

Joanna Scott's novel *Liberation* will be published by Little, Brown in the fall.



time, a visionary and instructive text which summed up all that could possibly be said about the meaning of postwar history. In this belief the wider literary world provided plenty of support. To this day I have not seen a more impressive *Anschluss* of critical praise. Richard Locke raved about it in a splashy front-page write-up for the *New York Times Book Review*, brilliantly edited in those days by the irreplaceable John Leonard. An even more extraordinary effusion appeared in the daily *New York Times* from Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, who famously concluded, "If I were banished to the moon tomorrow and could take only five books along, this would have to be one of them." Most important, Richard Poirier wrote an eloquent essay for the generally middlebrow *Saturday Review* that firmly placed the book in the wider context of Western literature—*Faust*, *Moby-Dick*, *Ulysses*—and correctly predicted that Pynchon's effort to renew that literature by drawing his material from such nonliterary realms as parapsychology, statistical analysis, and film would get up the noses of certain of the Authorities: "If literature *is* superior to any of these things, then it takes a book as stylistically wide-ranging as *Gravity's Rainbow* to prove it." Poirier's piece remains the single best work of criticism on the novel yet produced, the takeoff point for all commentary to come.

Gravity's Rainbow received the National Book Award for fiction in 1974, alongside, in a strange split decision, I. B. Singer's *Crown of Feathers*. At the award ceremony, to the audience's perplexity, the professional bafflegab artist Professor Irwin Corey accepted the award for, or maybe as, Pynchon, and launched into a semicoherent leg-pulling speech that began, "However . . . accept this financial stipulation—ah, stipend in behalf of, uh, Richard Python for the great contribution and to quote from some of the missiles which he has contributed. . . ." *Und so weiter*, and it

Tom Robbins

Although I'm hypnotized by the colored lights he plays upon the disco ball of history—by the way he illuminates a shadowy panoply of conspiracies, atrocities, buffooneries, and arcana, causing it to sparkle in every direction—what I ultimately find thrilling and inspiring about Thomas Pynchon is an ostensibly far simpler thing: his choice of nouns.

His verbs, adverbs, and adjectives are engaging as well, but Pynchon is most impressive when he reaches into the vast bin of squirming language and somehow plucks out a noun that is fresh and unexpected, yet totally appropriate. For example, in *Mason & Dixon* he has the Reverend Cherrycoke (a splendid appellation!) wipe his bum with "a handful of Clover." A lesser writer might have settled for *grass* or *leaves* or *straw*, none of which could have lit up the scene the way that *clover* does. Small choices such as that one, choices to which, except subliminally, the general reader is oblivious, tote the freight of genius.

Mark Twain opined that the difference between the perfect word and one that is merely adequate is the difference between lightning and a lightning bug. Well, move over, Zeus! Take to the storm cellar, ye firefly farmers! Pynchon has got his trigger finger glued to the thunderbolt machine.

Tom Robbins's collection of fiction and essays *Wild Ducks Flying Backward* will be published by Bantam this fall.

Jeffrey Eugenides

I have a coffee cup in storage in Berlin. It bears a fetching image of a V-2 rocket and the name of the touristic locale in Germany where I bought it: Peenemünde.

The most brilliant epigraph in the history of literature (I'm making a sweeping claim not out of omniscience but wild enthusiasm) comes at the beginning of *Gravity's Rainbow*: "Nature does not know extinction; all it knows is transformation. Everything science has taught me, and continues to teach me, strengthens my belief in the continuity of our spiritual existence after death.—Wernher Von Braun." When I first read those words, as a college freshman, I took them at face value—as scientific proof (very much in vogue at the time) of the reality of the spiritual realm. I had no idea that Von Braun, developer of the V-2, was Hitler's chief rocket scientist. Still less did I know of his salvation at the hands of American troops, as Berlin fell, or of his subsequent rehabilitation in the United States, where he became Nixon's chief rocket scientist and a member of the NASA team that put the first man on the moon (no wonder Von Braun believed in life after death).

Let's appreciate everything this epigraph accomplishes: It stems from, and summons, the historical period Pynchon writes about; it simultaneously inspires and lampoons religious sentiment; and, with savage irony, it comes out of the mouth of someone personifying the novel's central theme—that the Powers That Be operate behind the scenes, owing allegiance to no nation or ideology.

Twenty years after first reading *Gravity's Rainbow*, I rented a car and drove to the island of Usedom, which lies on the Baltic in what used to be East Germany. I didn't know much about the island and was heading for the beach resort of Heringsdorf when I saw the sign pointing to Peenemünde.

Immediately, I made the detour. But I wasn't desperate to see Peenemünde or the V-2 rocket on display outside the local museum. The mission I was on, in my rented diesel Mercedes, was one of pilgrimage. I wanted to visit a crucial setting in *Gravity's Rainbow* and, by doing so, pay homage (for here was a spiritual realm I did believe in) to the writer who, probably more than any other, set the example for my generation of what an American novelist should be. Pynchon's fiction made it clear that, if you wanted to write, you had to know everything: everything about history, science, politics, even calculus; you had to know everything while being funny at the same time, and lyrical, bringing into the novel a freewheeling, present-tense, colloquial-poetic American voice, in books that were like adventure stories and comedy routines, and where the characters were forever breaking into song.

I've never been temperamentally disposed to conspiracy theories, and the darker preoccupations of Pynchon's work weren't what got to me. But great writers don't only describe the past or the present; they predict the future. Pynchon's estimate, back in 1973, of the path the postwar American imperium would take only seems more acute, valid, and prescient today that it did at the time. The things he was trying to teach me at twenty I'm only now beginning to learn, another life later.

When I bought the souvenir coffee cup, I had the idea to send it to Pynchon. He isn't as hard to find now as in the old days. I could probably get it to him. But I ended up keeping it. Every summer, when I go back to Berlin, my Peenemünde cup comes out of its box and back onto the kitchen shelf. I never use it. I keep it there, untouched. It's a sacramental object for me, the tiny V-2 rocket on its side, like Shiva, no longer a destroyer of worlds, but a creator, too.

Jeffrey Eugenides's most recent novel is *Middlesex* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2002).

being the '70s, there was also a streaker. That sublime stunt may have been on the minds (and I use the term in its loosest possible sense) of the idiots on the Pulitzer Prize advisory panel when they decided to ignore the unanimous recommendation of the fiction jury—consisting of (for God's sake) Benjamin DeMott, Elizabeth Hardwick, and Alfred Kazin—that *Gravity's Rainbow* get the prize, and instead awarded it to . . . nobody. It was decades before anybody could trust the Pulitzer Prize again as anything other than a dish for dullards.

Meanwhile, back in Bay Ridge, I began to pursue my Pynchonmania at a higher energy level. I reread *Gravity's Rainbow* six months after first finishing it. I made murky photocopies at the New York Public Library of uncollected early stories in *Epoch*, *New World Writing*, and the *Saturday Evening Post* (!), and a superb nonfiction piece, "A Journey into the Mind of Watts," in the *New York Times Magazine*. I was seized by the conviction that Stanley Kubrick *had to* bring *Gravity's Rainbow* to the screen and that somehow *I* could be involved in this task. I did nothing at all about it, but I still think it was a damned good idea. And I continued to read and read and read, but now in a vaguely postcoital mood. If literature was exhausted, a dying star, then *Gravity's Rainbow* was the inevitable supernova, compacting all that was exciting and explosive into a spectacular end-time display. William Gaddis's *JR*, which won the National Book Award in 1976, felt like the last aftershock of the whole imperial novel enterprise. Pynchon's novel took up residence in my head as the peak of posthumanistic achievement, a work finally adequate to the beauty and terror of a world utterly transformed by science and technology. The human imagination could still avail, but it had to adapt radically to do so—a great solace wrapped in a bold challenge. And somewhere along the way, I got my first job in publishing, which led to a position as an assistant editor at Viking Penguin, which brought me, by a commodius vicus, to my first meeting with Corlies M. Smith, Pynchon's longtime editor.

One Friday in summer 2004, I spent a memorable afternoon in the half-deserted offices of Viking Penguin going through the thick editorial file for *Gravity's Rainbow*. There was in this experience the poignance of office technologies past (carbons, telegrams, memos typed on manual typewriters) and the names of the distinguished departed—from Malcolm Cowley, Viking's longtime literary adviser, to other colleagues, mentors, and friends. But there was also the sheer fascination of peering behind the curtain like Dorothy to discover how the levers had been pulled to launch one of the most consequential novels of the twentieth century.

As most Pynchonians know, Corlies Smith—universally called Cork—was Pynchon's editor from the very start of the author's career. A tall, handsome, casually aristocratic publisher of the old school (tweed jackets, unfiltered Pall Malls), he was idolized by the younger set at Viking for his staggering achievements, his impeccable literary taste, and his dry and sometimes startlingly profane wit ("It does, however, have the best horse-fucking scene I've ever read," he deadpanned memorably about a novel at one sales conference). A kinder, more honest, more straightforward man you never met. Cognoscenti of the art of fiction editing put Cork at the very top of the heap. Authors he has worked with besides Pynchon include Muriel Spark, Robertson Davies, Jimmy Breslin, William Kennedy, Harriet Doerr, Madison Smartt Bell, Gloria Naylor, and Carolyn Chute. About three hours after I got to Viking Penguin in 1980, I was in Cork's

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Lorrie Moore

Pynchon's mind is the steel trap of American literature: Nothing, large or small, has ever escaped it. Each "novel of ideas"—because Pynchon is arguably our brainiest novelist, this anemic and offputting label gets slapped on his books like an award sticker—is built detail upon detail, painstakingly, by a man with a tireless eye and appetite for the world. The narrative mosaic that emerges is strong and dazzling as a mirror, depthlessly reflective as a mirror, and, not unlike a house of mirrors, each novel manages to ensnare an entire era, its facts and wandering energies enticed and held captive there, though rarely without mercy. Delicious peanuts are tossed in to amuse and feed; for in art, even a mirror is a living creature.

Pynchon has a historian's sense of story (front and back), a musician's sense of line, a philosopher's sense of truth and woe, a hip vaudevillian's wit. His books keep unearthing a hidden America and reinventing the language in which we think and speak of it—or might think and speak of it, or will soon think and speak of it. His novels leap and trespass; they even violate the oft-repeated advice not to begin a story with a character waking up (*Gravity's Rainbow*; *Vineland*) and can be found to have applicable political currency when quoted virtually at random: "It is a universal sin among the false-animate or unimaginative to refuse to let well enough alone" (*V.*). Or, "'Why fire at Sideling Hill?' Dixon all innocence. 'Not at the Hill,' chuckles Capt. Shelby, '—at what's coming *over* the Hill'" (*Mason & Dixon*).

Pynchon's work is fearless, funny, questing, teeming with all manner of originality and surprise.

Lorrie Moore is the author of two novels and three story collections, the most recent of which is *Birds of America* (Knopf, 1998).

Andrew Hultkrans

Sometimes a book finds you at just the right moment, neatly dovetailing with events in your own life and seemingly answering questions you were about to ask, if only you had the words. *The Crying of Lot 49* was such a book for me, and it still shades my entire worldview. In college it was the focus of my senior English thesis, an earnest, scholarly work that, despite its criminally pretentious title—"Toward an Entropic Multiverse: Subjective Order Systems in *The Crying of Lot 49*"—earned me good marks from my readers. During that same year, my mother was dying of cancer. I had already lost my father to the disease when I was twelve. He had left to my mother's care an impossibly tangled and not very valuable estate of oil and gas holdings, ensnared by lawsuits and technicalities—an objective correlative for a lost era of wildcat exploration and frontier business, a maddening metaphor for an American life. When my mother died, in April, I had just completed my thesis, and the estate, in all its labyrinthine inscrutability, became my charge.

This is, of course, how *The Crying of Lot 49* begins, with its heroine, Oedipa Maas, named coexecutor of a staggeringly complex estate of far-flung business interests, the totality of which seems to contain all the mysteries and existential conundrums of a post-God, post-Bomb, post-Meaning America. The novel's central question is, How does one make sense of decay and death in the absence of God, the life-giving force that brings order to an apparently chaotic world-system? Various characters in the book adopt secular order systems to replace the lost Organizer—physics, Freud, technology, LSD, recovery groups—while Oedipa finds herself on the threshold of uncovering an underground postal system that, if real, would reveal both a shadow America and something akin to what Gnostics called the demiurge, a corrupt anti-God who created the entropic, disintegrated physical world in his own flawed image. Despite its grim implications, the existence of the Tristero postal system would be more comforting to Oedipa than the absence of any system whatsoever: "For there either was some Tristero beyond the appearance of the legacy America, or there was just America, and if there was just America then it seemed the only way she could continue, and manage to be at all relevant to it, was as an alien, unfurrowed, assumed full circle into some paranoia." For perhaps obvious reasons, the essence of Oedipa's quandary is my own, and has been since I graduated college—hungry for explanations, seeking transcendent meaning, riddling about America, wanting to believe, unsure if I can.

To date, my father's estate has not been closed; its lots have not been cried. I remain unfurrowed, still on the case.

Andrew Hultkrans is at work on a book about surveillance in America.

Kathryn Kramer

There's Pynchon the writer and then there's Pynchon the phenomenon. As phenomenon he's a mnemonic, like certain Beatles songs or the Kennedy assassination. I first heard the name early one morning in the '70s—a visitor stopped by as if to bring the news: "Everything's seen through the eyes of a paranoiac," this friend said admiringly. An odd virtue to celebrate, it seemed at the time.

In graduate school, there was a look in a classmate's eyes as they fixed on the backs of strangers in diners hunched over coffee. *That's him!* So it could have been—and the next time and the next. Pynchon was like Santa Claus: Whatever you believed, he was. Then, later, someone who claimed to know (though he was constrained from saying how) told me Pynchon had spent a year in New Hampshire, not far from Hanover. Salinger, I'd heard, once worked in the typing room at the Dartmouth College library; I imagined the *two most secretive writers in America* face to face across a library table, typing their respective novels, exchanging an incognito wink.

The phenomenon of Pynchon preceded and, in a way, impeded my reading. I'd read knockoffs in my graduate fiction workshop before I read the original—obscure, mediated quests leavened by goofy poems. When I sat down to read the novels, they were somewhat vitiated for me by the awe in which I'd learned to hold them. It was hard just to like what I liked. The lyrical authority of lines like "A screaming comes across the sky. The evacuation still proceeds . . . but it's all theatre"; the combination of vigor and eloquence in the prose, responding to the pressure of what can only be belief; the trademark eerie aura, updating and Americanizing the Kafkaesque; the complicity and deference with which Pynchon treats his characters, strangely enough not altogether unlike Salinger's—all this then meant more to me then Pynchon's dazzling range of scientific knowledge and teasing anonymity, the heralding banner waved around his reputation that had nearly daunted me into not reading him.

But the one single phrase that most frequently recurs to me is from *The Crying of Lot 49*. During the performance of the play *The Courier's Tragedy*, "a gentle chill, an ambiguity, begins to creep in among the words. Heretofore the naming of names has gone on either literally or as metaphor. But now . . . a new mode of expression takes over. It can only be called a kind of ritual reluctance."

Ritual reluctance. In context it means information known but not articulated; too dangerous to be articulated; evidence of (overall) the "secret richness and concealed density of dream . . . a network by which X number of Americans are truly communicating." Wouldn't it be pretty to think so. Romanticism's the flip side of paranoia—the reason, no doubt, we've been treated to so many repackaged, low-octane versions of Pynchon's vision (which always make it a profound relief to return to the real thing). I have to confess that for me, over time, the phrase has come to stand for a general (because "ritual," somehow authorized and approved) reluctance about nearly everything. Perhaps I've used it unfairly to dignify a personal recalcitrance, though if you don't learn ritual reluctance from reading Pynchon, it's hard to know what you would learn.

Kathryn Kramer's most recent novel is *Sweet Water* (Knopf, 1998).

Lydia Davis

A rather appealing specimen of early Pynchon is the last story in his collection *Slow Learner*. The story, "The Secret Integration"—first published in the *Saturday Evening Post* more than forty years ago (three years after *V.* appeared)—involves a gang of young practical jokers and a rich childhood setting of an old town with a new development, a sprawling estate with a derelict mansion, and a downtown, complete with seedy hotel. In one deftly described scene, the boys coast on their bikes down a long hill in the early evening toward the hotel, "leaving behind two pages of arithmetic homework and a chapter of science" and, on the TV, "a lousy movie, some romantic comedy." Because all the televisions in town receive only one channel, the boys, as they fly by, are able to follow the movie's progress from house to house, through doors and windows "still open for the dark's first coolness."

In his introduction to *Slow Learner*, Pynchon, who somewhat preempts our reactions to the story, remarks that he likes it more than he dislikes it. In fact it is so likable that one envies the boys their comfortable society and the fields, streams, and town of their games. Their collaboration and apportioning of assignments is charming (to develop an arsenal for sabotaging the railroad; to enlist malcontent first-graders to destroy the boys' latrine; to infiltrate PTA meetings); the elaborateness of their schemes, and the number that succeed, is impressive; and the animation of the central character, Grover the boy genius—with his enormous vocabulary, fund of information, and flights of hilarity—is particularly savory. The pranks the boys plan are potentially devastating to the community, yet, as Pynchon says in a lovely bit of writing, the boys would never actually take "any clear or irreversible step," because "everybody on the school board, and the railroad, and the PTA and paper mill had to be somebody's mother or father, whether really or as a member of a category; and there was a point at which the reflex to their covering warmth, protection, effectiveness against bad dreams, bruised heads and simple loneliness took over and made worthwhile anger with them impossible."

There is a lyrical humanity in this story, an almost unapologetic gentleness, inviting and inclusive, that contrasts with the weightier, complex pessimism and bravura of Pynchon's later works, in which perhaps it is more difficult for the characters to go home and be comforted at the end of the day.

Lydia Davis's collection of stories *Samuel Johnson Is Indignant* was published by McSweeney's in 2001.

Carter Scholz

In 1973, *Gravity's Rainbow* was, improbably, a nominee for the Nebula award, given each year by the Science Fiction Writers of America (it lost to *Rendezvous with Rama*, by Arthur C. Clarke, at that time not yet Sir Arthur). This was of note to me because that year I attended the Clarion Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers' Workshop. I was looking for ways to narrate a world so constrained and impelled by technology that no honest account, I thought, could omit it. Yet most fiction I read did in fact omit it. Science fiction didn't, but tended to exclude even more. So reading *Gravity's Rainbow* gave me a moment of false satori; if this was "science fiction," I was in the game, and furthermore genre was dead—*genre* meaning any normative practice, whether laid down at Clarion or at the University of Iowa's writing program. After this, no one could write another space opera or suburban angst-fest with a straight face—or so I kidded myself. Pynchon's book had marrow.

Pynchon knew the high-lit conventions, how to sink a putt with aplomb, et cetera, but . . . what's this? *Byron the Bulb? "Fickt nicht mit dem Raketemenschi!"? Imipolex G?* Equations, even—a-and . . . calculus jokes?! Sir Arthur smiles thinly, taps his foot to the music hall parodies; Asimov chuckles at the limericks; but sooner or later, usually by the time the Herero tribe comes on, the SF guys are out the door. The Iowa contingent is lost at the first mention of Poisson distributions. This weird book has put them all somewhat in the position of its character Ensign Morituri, the bemused Anglophile unwilling to join the English: "And find out what you people are really like? Oh my golly. What if phile changes then to phobe?"

On the available evidence, Pynchon is neither a technophile nor a technophobe, neither dystopian nor transcendentalist. He's a believer in possibility, an acute observer of rhetorics. He knows how science and technology embed social and personal histories. His narrative strategy is pretty consistent: He presents the world as an intersection of secret histories, personal and political. A sort of double exposure projects one historical period or sensibility onto another, in recognition that historical "moments" are never momentary, never transparent, never singular, but actually overlays of barely comprehended pasts bound into overdetermined yet uncontrollable futures. If the nineteenth-century novel of public events as practiced by Dickens, Hugo, Tolstoy, or Stendahl aimed to be a master narrative, Pynchon takes it as given that any twentieth-century master narrative is propaganda, and that True History, if it exists at all, can be detected only by its silence, in the interstices of public noise, like some phantasmal melody produced by the different tones between audible oscillators. It's not something that the pursuit of "normal" science, as Thomas Kuhn says, will let you hear. *Kekulé dreams the Great Serpent . . .*

I was wrong about genre, of course. Genre endures, which can be a comfort, if brands reassure you. There's even a kind of boutique-lit brand that traffics in the adjective *Pynchonesque*. But genres, per se, tend to miss the point. If 1973 opened a door labeled Way Out, door number two was opened by George Lucas in 1977, and most of the smart money headed there. But that first door remains open, and it's not a brand, and its true number is something like aleph-null.

Carter Scholz's novel *Radiance* was published by Picador in 2002.

FORGETTING PYNCHON

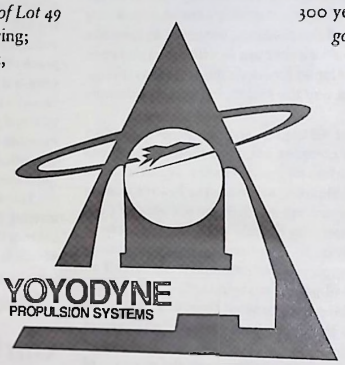
RICK MOODY ON THE CRYING OF LOT 49

Like many writers my age, in 1985 I pored over the introduction to *Slow Learner*, the authorized bootleg edition of Thomas Pynchon's early stories, as if it were the Rosetta Stone, as if whole civilizations could somehow be founded on its disarmingly accessible and humble pronouncements.

One sentence *really* set me back, though: "The next story I wrote was 'The Crying of Lot 49,' which was marketed as a 'novel,' and in which I seem to have forgotten most of what I thought I'd learned up till then." I read and reread this passage, trying to arrive at an interpretation different from the manifest one, namely, that Pynchon is somehow critical of his own short novel.

I, too, know what this impatience about juvenilia feels like, especially when that work gets an undue share of attention. And yet, since my reading life was completely remade by *The Crying of Lot 49* (before Pynchon: Vonnegut, Brautigan, Heinlein, Irving; after Pynchon: Borges, Beckett, García Márquez, Burroughs, Coover, Gaddis), it seems severe for Pynchon to hold that novel to the high standards of, say, *Gravity's Rainbow* or *Mason & Dixon*.

To make sure, I reread the novel last week. From the first page, with its unsettling "greenish dead eye of the TV tube," straight through to the apocalyptic auctioneer on the last page ("Passerine spread his arms in a gesture that seemed to belong to the priesthood of some remote culture"), this slender volume hurtles along, deadly serious, totally hilarious, by turns sacred and profane, despairing and joyful, and completely resistant to easy interpretation.



So much is outrageously good about *The Crying of Lot 49*: the pitch-perfect parody of the seventeenth-century drama, *The Courier's Tragedy*, at its center; the great constellation of conspiracy theorists who variously beset the protagonist Oedipa Maas, like the members of Inamorati Anonymous and the Peter Pinguid Society; and, of course, the fascinating and intensely complicated use of thermodynamic and informational entropy that undergirds much of the novel's action.

While it's true that Pynchon's fascination with entropy turns up in an eponymously named early story collected in *Slow Learner*, the idea really gets its first deluxe presentation in *The Crying of Lot 49*, and it's fair to say that American fiction, at least the speculative wing of it, has never quite recovered. You could spend a long time turning over this pivotal scene in the novel, which has Oedipa, in the company of a sleazy inventor, attempting to turn a piston just by looking at it. Especially murky is the function of "the sensitive," the role Oedipa attempts to play in the scene, in a union of hard science and countercultural mysticism, as explicated by the inventor John Nefastis: "Communication is the key . . . The Demon passes his data on to the sensitive, and the sensitive must reply in kind. There are untold billions of molecules in that box. The Demon collects data on each and every one. At some deep psychic level he must get through. The sensitive must receive that staggering set of energies and feed back something like the same quantity of information. To keep it all cycling. On the secular level all we can see is one piston, hopefully moving."

Some of what's unsettling in this passage has to do with one of the most enduring planks of Western empiricism, namely, the second law of thermodynamics. But some of it also has to do with Nefastis and his belief that communication can still confer on speaker and auditor a sense of uniqueness and presence that enables these individuals to avoid the isolation and poverty of consciousness that otherwise seem to afflict the citizens of California in *The Crying of Lot 49*. To put it another way, the idea that communication is what it appears to be—and that there is not some other sinister conspiracy happening beneath and within it, emblematic here in the postal conspiracy variously known as "the Tristero" or "the Trystero"—is an idea whose only unyielding proponent in this novel is a nerdy inventor who thinks that it might be possible to turn a piston just by thinking. What an unforgettable scene!

Wait, is *unforgettable* the right word? Unforgettable? If, as the book seems to suggest, knowledge is in some way impossible, if knowledge is incapable of conferring certainty upon Oedipa, as she goes about her search for the origin and dimension of the Tristero conspiracy, then is not *forgetting* somehow an integral part of *The Crying of Lot 49*? Isn't it the case that everyone else in the novel either dies or manages to turn their face away from the scale of the threat? Don't they in some way *forget* the conspiracy, despite Oedipa's growing desperation? "For there either was some Tristero beyond the appearance of the legacy America, or there was just America, and if there was just America then it seemed the only way she could continue, and manage to be at all relevant to it, was as an alien, unfurrowed, assumed full circle into some paranoia." If intellectual or psychological mastery is impossible, then isn't *forgetting* somehow a logical, even crucial, strategy in the creation and maturation of identity?

I haven't looked up all the available verb forms—*forget, forgets, forgetting*—but some relative of the word *forgotten* appears forty-three times in Pynchon's output. I have given you the problematic example from the front matter of *Slow Learner*, but since the word appears multiply in every book the author has written, a brief catalogue is perhaps in order. From another of the stories in *Slow Learner*: "The Sirdar had retaken Khartum, the outrage was avenged, but people had *forgotten.*" From *V.*: "The barrenness of that place howled around me, like a country the demiurge had *forgotten*. There could have been no more entirely lifeless and empty place anywhere on earth." From *The Crying of Lot 49*: "Were the squatters there in touch with others, through Tristero; were they helping carry forward that 300 years of the house's disinheritance? Surely they'd *forgotten* by now what it was the Tristero were to have inherited; as perhaps Oedipa one day might have." *Gravity's Rainbow* features a great helping of *forgotten* items. Some of them are arrestingly beautiful, e.g., ". . . toward the Nativity, a violence, a nova of heart that will turn us all, change us forever to the very *forgotten* roots of who we are." Or, "But this is even more than the bureaucracy of mass absence—some still live, some have died, but many, many have *forgotten* which they are. Their likenesses will not serve." In *Vineland*, with its bittersweet recollections of the ferment of the '60s, we have, "Damn Fool Zoyd. Sent so gaga by those mythical days of high drama that he'd *forgotten* he and Prairie might actually have to go on living years beyond them." [All italics mine.]

Forgetting is as American as apple pie. Forgetting is integral to getting through the day, surviving it, in just the way that Maxwell's Demon, the presumptive molecule sorter, in the entropy passage of the novel, has to find somewhere to throw off the heat it receives from sorting molecules hot and cold. The Demon has to get rid of the heat or he will be destroyed by it, and that's where the sensitive comes in. The sensitive has to feed back some of that wasted energy, as Nefastis describes it. There's a cycle being enacted. It's not hard to see that Maxwell's Demon is both Oedipa herself trying to sort through the evidence of the Tristero conspiracy, and Pynchon himself, trying to sort through the detritus of California, for this gem of a book. And that, dear reader, makes you the sensitive, the one who completes the cycle. You are the one who devises a hermeneutics of Pynchon.

When I encountered the quotation from *Slow Learner* this time around, I finally had a new way to read it. I began to feel as though the author, so judicious about the particulars of his words, was saying something different from what I'd first imagined. First, Pynchon says that he *seems* to have forgotten what he'd learned, which implies, of course, that there is no forgetting at all. Second, he remarks that he has forgotten "most of what I thought I'd learned up till then," which suggests that, as a then young writer (he was twenty-seven when *The Crying of Lot 49* was issued, in 1965, and had already written *V.* and the stories in *Slow Learner*), what he *thought* he'd learned was not as important as previously imagined, especially since, as the title to *Slow Learner* suggests, it's not as if these early stories are the greatest part of his legacy. Third, since forgetting is a self-protective trope in a great portion of the quotations catalogued above, one that is crucial to the formation of identity and purpose, an essential gesture in the bittersweet pursuit of life here in the Gnostic, entropic wasteland, maybe Pynchon is saying that it was only the *forgetting* that made possible the beautiful, luminous, unearthly, and deeply scary *Crying of Lot 49*. □

Rick Moody's novel *The Diviners* will be published by Little, Brown in September.



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What's in it for you?



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office, which led to a small but excellent Pynchon adventure. Loyal Big Red alum that I was, I deplored the fact that Richard Fariña's great (well, pretty good) Cornell novel, *Been Down So Long It Looks Like Up to Me*, was out of print, and maybe his pal Pynchon would like to contribute an introduction to a Penguin reissue? He did, writing a piece of surpassing grace and affording me the opportunity to talk to him on the phone—his voice reminiscent of late-night beatnik DJs in the early '60s—on some issue of Spanish verb tenses. Heaven! Cork told me that when the Fariña novel had been submitted to him in 1965 he had rejected it, telling the agent it struck him as (ouch!) "imitation Pynchon."

Erik Davis

When I first plowed through Pynchon, I was living in a notoriously sleazy Berkeley co-op called Barrington Hall and read things only for the flash: science fiction, esoterica, visionary poetry, '60s and '70s counterculture literature. From where I sat, Pynchon's true peers were not Barthelme or Melville, but Philip K. Dick, the weirdos behind the *Principia Discordia*, and Robert Anton Wilson, who penned *The Illuminatus! Trilogy* with Robert Shea before writing the *Cosmic Trigger* trilogy, which described how Wilson's occult conspiracy fiction leaked into his real life. All these heads tangoed with revelation and absurdity, reveled in pulp, and experimented with forms that pulled readers into the plot. The literary values that separated Pynchon from the rest mattered less to me than the hunches and madcap mysticism they shared. All these writers drew material from the posthuman petri dish of California, whose spiritual peculiarities shaped my sensibility and have lately been a research obsession of mine. Dick barely left the state; Wilson wrote the *Cosmic Trigger* books in early '70s Berkeley; *Principia* was birthed after its authors had a vision of the goddess Eris in an all-night bowling alley in Whittier in 1958 or '59 (they can't remember). Pynchon thoroughly grokked the Golden State, as *The Crying of Lot 49*, *Vineland*, and his 1966 essay on the Watts riots all make clear (even the mysterious Wanda Tinasky sent her letters to Mendocino County's *Anderson Valley Advertiser*). All this makes sense, because California is the visionary crossroads of technology, American prophecy, and trash.

Pynchon remains the classiest of the literary heads, although I do understand why, when hands are periodically wrung over the hollowness of contemporary fiction, he is slammed by many for playing a detached game of postmodern dodgeball. The yucks can grow thin. But the image of Pynchon as David Foster Wallace in bellbottoms misses the oracular import of his fictions, especially those that precede *Vineland*. Like certain SF authors, Pynchon recognized the engineered character of history—the wiring under the floorboards, the business of technoscience, whose positive feedback loops force us all onto the apocalyptic bus, whether we want to be there or not. Pynchon understood that the site of epiphany—the spiritual core of modernism—had migrated into these thickening networks of information, electronic media, and chemical, even pharmaceutical, control. For Pynchon, the Gnostic glimpse—the blinding flash of the Kirghiz Light—is no joke, even if it is funny. It just no longer has a proper place; its center is everywhere and nowhere, like the networks that entangle us all. Pynchon is not detached—if anything, like *Gravity's Rainbow*'s Byron the Bulb, he is too plugged-in.

Erik Davis's history of California spirituality, *The Visionary State*, will be published by Chronicle Books next spring.

Cork had been a young associate editor at the Philadelphia-based publishing house of Lippincott in 1960 when he bought one of Pynchon's first short stories, "Low-lands," for the literary magazine *New World Writing*. A contract for an untitled novel on an unspecified subject was signed around the same time, the legendary Candida Donadio serving as agent. I have—I'll never tell how—photocopies of some twenty editorial letters between Cork and Pynchon about the novel that would eventually come to be called *V.* But not before some simply awful alternative titles were at least briefly considered: *The Yo-Yo World of Benny Profane*, *The Quest of Herbert Stencil*, *World on a String* (all Cork's ideas), and *Blood's a Rover*, *Down Paradise Street*, *And His Ass Falls Off*, *Footsteps of the Gone*, *Dream Tonight of Peacock Tails*, *The Republican Party Is a Machine* (Pynchon's). How they settled on the perfectly obvious title of *V.*, the letters do not say. Early on, Cork visited his new author during a "scouting trip" to Seattle, where Pynchon worked as a technical writer for Boeing on such projects as the Minuteman missile—perfect research for the future bard of the V-2 (interestingly, the late poet and teacher Richard Hugo, a veteran of the bombing campaign against Germany, worked in the same department at that time). The tone of their correspondence is serious, affectionate, and droll, by turns. A lot of close-in editorial work got accomplished on both ends, and Pynchon comes across as a young writer not in the least resistant to advice ("I do not, frankly, know dick about writing novels yet and need all kinds of help") but confident enough to stand his ground when he had to. One small shocker is that Cork somehow thought the McClintic Sphere material angled the book unhelpfully in the direction of a "Protest novel" on "the Negro Problem" and suggested it be cut. Pynchon, thank Monk, thoughtfully but firmly demurred.

They did pretty good work. *V.*, published in 1963, is now generally considered one of the finest first novels of the twentieth century. Three years later, Lippincott published *The Crying of Lot 49*, regarded at the time as something like an elegant coda to *V.*, but really more like an elegant overture to the operatic production to come. By that time, Cork had left Lippincott for the Viking Press, and, as editors do, he arranged to bring his star discovery along with him.

On January 24, 1967, Pynchon signed an option agreement with Viking in the low five figures for an "as yet untitled novel," the final terms, including advance and royalties, to be agreed on upon delivery. The delivery date was optimistically scheduled, heh heh heh, for December 29, 1967. This would seem to imply that Pynchon had already written a significant part of the book, although nothing in the file indicates whether anyone at Viking had read anything as yet, or even if anyone knew its subject matter, let alone its projected length. My publisher's guess is that Pynchon and Cork had had some very general conversation or correspondence about a novel dealing with German rocketry at the end of World War II, and given Pynchon's blue-chip status and how badly Viking wanted him on its list, that had been sufficient.

Time passed. On January 21, 1969, Cork wrote to Edward Mendelson, perhaps Pynchon's most astute and devoted academic critic, that "we have been expecting a manuscript of his new novel momentarily for some months. . . . I don't know what Pynchon is doing in Los Angeles of all places, but I like to think he's writing a novel." On October 20 of the same year he wrote again to the eager critic: "Sorry, nothing new on Pynchon's novel." On March 5, 1970, Pynchon wrote to Cork to apologize that he was not going to make an April 1 deadline and asking that it be moved to July 1, 1970. He thanked him for his forbearance and ended by expressing his worry, with what degree of irony only he can say for sure, that the novel "could be the biggest piece of shit since *The Crying of Lot 49*." More time passed. Then, on January 27, 1972, Cork wrote to Candida Donadio: "It is with an inordinate amount of pleasure that I enclose our check for $ _____, the amount due Thomas Pynchon on delivery of his novel." Untitled novel had arrived; the "Brief Description" on the contract signing notice reads, "Free-swinging, wide-ranging story of numerous far-out characters in England and Europe at the end of World War II and immediately after—most of them haunted by the V-2 rocket bomb."

And what a big untitled novel it was! The first read alone took quite a while. Alida Becker, Cork's assistant in those days, told me that one day not long after delivery, Pynchon called the office to speak to Cork. He was out, however, so Pynchon asked Becker what *she* thought of the book. Cautiously she replied that she was enjoying it very much, but that it was very demanding and she hadn't yet finished it. "It's quite long," she explained, to which Pynchon replied proudly, "I typed it all myself, you know." The editorial file I examined has some obvious lacunae and is very thin on letters *from* Pynchon (someone probably filched them, alas). There is not much at all of an editorial nature in there, especially in contrast to the *V.* letters. On the other hand, not much large-scale editing was actually done on the book. I'm told there were some weak initial noises made to Pynchon about the desirability of cutting, but he refused to consider it. Speaking as a book editor myself, I would not know where to begin or where my cuts might be severing important subterranean connections of plot and symbol, and apparently neither did anyone at Viking. So the untitled novel that Pynchon delivered—which at some point acquired the working title *Mindless Pleasures*—is at least 99 percent the book that readers of *Gravity's Rainbow* encountered.

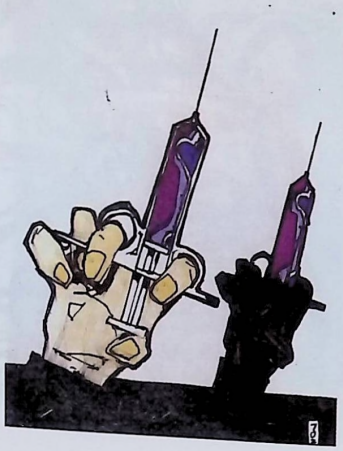
The task of close-in, line-by-line editing was assigned to Edwin Kennebeck, Viking's head copy editor, who emerges as one of the undersung heroes of this saga. His letters to Pynchon are warm, chatty, and exceptionally meticulous—he obviously "got" the book, and he and Pynchon clearly got on. I remember Ed Kennebeck from my time at Viking Penguin as a pleasant, mild figure. In addition to his fine wordsmithing skills, he brought an exceptionally

Trey Ellis

The dizzying cacophony Pynchon never fails to create describes the modern condition so accurately that all other novelists, regardless of our penchant for conspiracy, comedy, or particle physics, owe him our creative lives. At this very moment, my kids are thirty feet from me playing Twister Moves, an amped-up version of the '70s classic, complete with its own driving techno beat (or is it jungle? drum 'n' bass? house?). I've told them that I'm trying to work, but it's wet outside (a rarity in southern California). ("Right foot blue, left hand purple. It's time to get your stomp on!" chirps DJ Somebody from the boom box they took from my room.) Now where was I? Oh yes: Pynchon somehow coordinates the clutter and writes not to show us how clever he is (the most common and unforgivable of writerly sins), but to express his ideas in ways never before done. He's my hero.

Trey Ellis's first novel, *Platitudes*, was reissued in 2003 by Northeastern University Press.







useful qualification to this important job: In World War II, Kennebeck had served in the Eighth Air Force as a radio operator on B-17s and made thirty-five bombing runs over Germany, including the Dresden mission. He was able from firsthand knowledge to correct a number of technical mistakes (Spitfires were fighters, so they did not carry bombs; B-17 bombing runs took place so early in the day that the planes would never have been seen flying east in the afternoon). In one letter he shares his memories of London during the V-2 attacks of 1944–45 and reassures Pynchon: "I must say though that, except for the most meager things like the slang, your evocation of the scene is totally convincing."

Kennebeck's letters solve one mildly important interpretive question, sort of. It is generally thought that the line of seven squares that serves as a graphic device to separate the unnumbered chapters in the novel is meant to suggest the sprocket holes in film reels, indicating that the book is to be "read" cinematically as a kind of film in prose. Wrong. In one of his letters Kennebeck refers pointedly to the "oblong holes" in censored correspondence from World War II soldiers, then termed *V-mail* (there's that letter again), and in a letter to Donald Barthelme accompanying a finished copy of the book, Kennebeck makes jocular mention of the sprocket-hole theory, first floated in the Poirier review, and comments, "I little knew what I was contributing to the history of literature." Sometimes a rectangle is just a rectangle—or maybe a censor's mark.

The copyediting of the novel was done by Faith Sale, a Cornell classmate of Pynchon's and the wife of the social critic Kirkpatrick Sale, who appears as a character in Fariña's book. Sale, who at the time was also working as an editor at *Fiction*, a metafiction hotbed, was an early reader of Pynchon's work and did a superb job of addressing the stylistic, orthographic, and punctuational complexities of the massive manuscript. I have heard that her editorial involvement went much deeper than the average copy editor's, but there is no written proof of that, and Sale, who went on to a distinguished editing career herself, died in 1999. I would certainly have loved to see her style sheet.

Then there was the thorny question of the title. Although *Mindless Pleasures* was used in Viking's original announcement to the press, no one at all seemed pleased with it (it comes from a phrase that occurs twice in the book), and Kennebeck floated, with the air of semidesperation one feels in these situations, such duds as *Powers That Be*, *Angel of the Preterite*, *Control*, and *Slothrop Dodging* (well, you try it). I'm guessing that Pynchon came up with *Gravity's Rainbow*, which was perfection. But Kennebeck was the one who hit on the minimalist-jacket-copy approach, which had the effect of making the book's first sentence the most famous since "Call me Ishmael."

Now the real problem presented itself: How to publish a seven-hundred-plus-page book at a price that would not be grossly prohibitive for Pynchon's natural college and postcollegiate audience. *V.* and *The Crying of Lot 49* had each sold more than three million copies in their Bantam mass-market editions. (Let us pause here to contemplate what these numbers say about the extent of literacy in the America of the '60s. Then I suggest we all commit suicide.) According to a letter from Cork Smith to Bruce Allen (who reviewed *Gravity's Rainbow* for *Library Journal* but wrote to Viking complaining about the novel's price), Viking would have had to sell thirty thousand copies at the then unheard of price of $10 just to break even. By comparison, *V.* and *The Crying of Lot 49* had sold about ten thousand copies apiece in hardcover. So how to reach even a fraction of the cash-strapped Pynchon-loving millions? Cork himself hit on the then unique strategy of publishing an original trade-paperback edition at $4.95 and "an admittedly highly priced hardcover edition" at $15, each identical in paper stock and format, differing only in their binding. The gamble: "We also thought that Pynchon's college audience might, just *might*, be willing to part with a five-dollar bill for this novel; after all, that audience spends that amount over and over and over again for long-playing records." The other gamble was with the reviewers, who rarely took paperback fiction seriously, but as Cork wrote, "We feel—as, clearly, you do—that Pynchon *cannot* be ignored."

Thus locked and loaded, Viking proceeded to do what it did as well as any American publisher in those days: generate high-end literary anticipation and excitement. The advance galley and complimentary copy lists in the editorial file offer a vividly detailed snapshot of elite American literary culture circa 1973. Bound proofs were sent for possible blurbs and general buzz generation to the likes of Irving Howe, Alfred Kazin, Leslie Fiedler, Frank Kermode, Ken Kesey, William Gaddis, Benjamin DeMott, Paul Fussell, John Updike, John Cheever, George Plimpton, Lionel Trilling, Richard Ellmann, Kurt Vonnegut, and similar folks. In the file there is a memo, in Cork's hand, in which are written the names Heller and

Robert Polito

Vineland **is a romance—romance as in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—about fascism. Pynchon casts a sly glance at Orwell via the date in his opening sentence: "Later than usual one summer morning in 1984, Zoyd Wheeler drifted awake in sunlight through a creeping fig that hung in the window, with a squadron of blue jays stomping around on the roof." I remember thinking as I finished the novel for the first time and turned back to start rereading: 1984 . . . fascism in America . . . not BIG BROTHER but instead watching and being watched by television and computers.**

That was over the 1989–90 Christmas holidays. Now I think, How did Pynchon see the next fifteen years so clearly? Clearly, decisively, yet without despair or bitterness? For all its tender, plangent marvels, *Vineland* is the novel as public service announcement. Of course it's a Pynchon PSA, set to a slinky tune:

THE TUBE

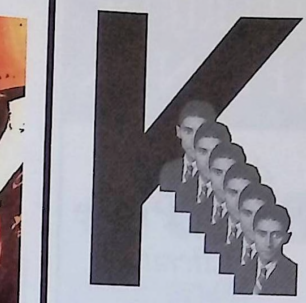
Oh . . . the . . . Tube!
It's pol-soning your brain!
Oh, yes. . . .
It's dri-ving you, insane!
It's shoot-ing rays, at you,
Over ev'ry-thing ya do,
it sees you in your bedroom,
And—on th' toi-let too!
Yoo hoo! The
Tube . . .
It know, your ev'ry thought,
Hey, Boob, you thought you would-
T'n get caught—
While you were sittin' there, starin' at "The
Brady Bunch,"
Big fat computer jus'
Had you for lunch, now th' Tube—
It's plugged right in, to you!

Is it widely known that in 2003 Pynchon contributed a foreword to the "centennial edition" of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*? This is one of his infrequent, astonishing essays, shot through with the kind of smart, sometimes wiseguy insights and phrases that no one else would write. But these sentences, toward the middle, sneak up on you:

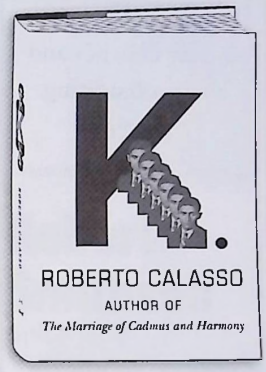
"What has steadily, insidiously improved since then, of course, making humanist arguments almost irrelevant, is the technology. We must not be too distracted by the clunkiness of the means of surveillance current in Winston Smith's era. In 'our' 1984, after all, the integrated circuit chip was less than a decade old, and almost embarrassingly primitive next to the wonders of computer technology circa 2003, most notably the Internet, a development that promises social control on a scale those quaint old twentieth-century tyrants with their goofy moustaches could only dream about."

As Bottom says, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, "I will get Peter Quince to write a ballad of this dream. It shall be called 'Bottom's Dream,' because it hath no bottom."

Robert Polito directs the Graduate Writing Program at the New School in New York.



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***The New Yorker* says,**
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–*Publishers Weekly*

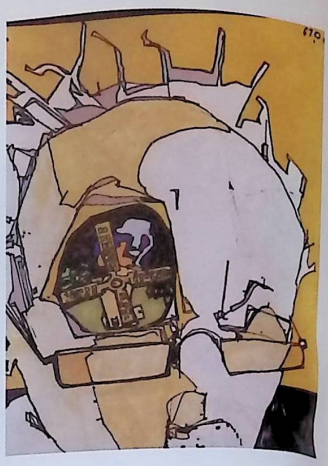


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Jim Shepard

It goes without saying that Thomas Pynchon occupies a place in our collective literary imagination so secure he doesn't need praise from the likes of me. But given what he's meant to all of us who attempt any kind of fiction that's vexed, playful, and hybridizes high and low culture—if those categories even still have meaning—who among us wouldn't be eager to contribute to some kind of motley chorus of celebration in his honor?

And then there's the sense of giddy elevation involved in being asked to talk about what Pynchon has meant to *us*. To *our* writing.

The writers who've meant the most to me, over the course of my halting and nonlinear and oafish development, have been either enabling (as in, *I didn't know* that *was allowed*, or *I think maybe I could do a paltrier version of that*—i.e., a Salinger or a Hemingway) or awe-inspiring (as in, *Oh my God: Is* that *what you can do with sentences?*—i.e., a Joyce or a Nabokov). Pynchon is one of the few writers I've encountered who operates for me in both categories—who reminds me that to write about America you have to write about physics *and* bop, war *and* postal systems, absurdity *and* agony, crushing historical patterns *and* our own invincibly breezy ahistorical obliviousness, and that when writing about such things, you have the revolutionary duty, to paraphrase Gabriel García Márquez and Isaac Babel, to write well. Perhaps no one but Nabokov writes as well about both the necessity and, as Pynchon himself put it when reviewing García Márquez, "the hazards of skepticism and mercy." No one alive works so tirelessly to remind us of the need to be obsessive readers of our world. I return to Pynchon's fiction because it reminds me that at any given moment, someone else may be patterning our lives. It reminds me of our duty to reinvent ourselves. It reminds me of one of Blake's lines: "I must Create a System, or be enslav'd by another Mans."

Jim Shepard is the author, most recently, of *Project X* (Knopf, 2004) and *Love and Hydrogen* (Vintage, 2004).

Puzo, both Donadio clients, and alongside them the annotation "still trying to get through *V*." Richard Poirier was sent a very early photocopy of the manuscript by Elisabeth Sifton, the superb editor just then starting out at Viking. There is a much longer list of people who received complimentary copies, which spreads an even wider net among writers and review editors, and included as well a great many publishing figures, some still around, some sadly gone (I had not thought death had undone so many). It also includes, amusingly enough, the recently departed actor Jerry Orbach and the society bandleader Peter Duchin. One complimentary copy is so puckishly hilarious that its accompanying letter, from Kennebeck, needs to be quoted in full. It is addressed to Fairchild Industries in Germantown(!), Maryland, and reads, "Dear Dr. Von Braun: I am sending you herewith a copy of Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, with the compliments of the author."

That's how the thing was done three decades ago. Even if Pynchon hadn't been the reclusive man he was, venues for author readings were largely nonexistent, and the idea of discussing a book of this length and difficulty on Carson or Cavett was laughable. The dark arts of author publicity were in their infancy; it was the reviewers who had to do their job. And did they ever. The publication date of *Gravity's Rainbow* was February 28, 1973. By March 9, a Viking press release was crowing that the house was receiving seven hundred orders *an hour* as a result of ecstatic lead reviews everywhere. After a first printing of 23,000 copies, a second of 12,500, and a third of 25,000, the publishers rushed through "an order for paper for 50,000 more copies"—a perfectly astonishing number even in retrospect. Viking had an awfully hot hand that year; two other commercially significant books it published at the same time were Frederick Forsyth's *Odessa File* and Peter Maas's *Serpico*. I'm sure you could have cut the giddy joy in the halls of 625 Madison Avenue with a knife. Thomas Guinzburg, Viking's president and publisher, was in London in early May, and there are two marvelous telegrams to him in the file. One, from Rich Barber, Viking's shrewd publicity director, says simply, "PYNCHON DELIGHTED FREDDIE LUKEWARM MAAS ENRAGED." The other, from Pynchon himself, reads, "DEAR TOM GUINZBURG, WHEREVER YOU ARE, I THOUGHT YOU WOULD LIKE TO KNOW I'M NUMBER EIGHT AND MY FRIEND FREDDIE IS NUMBER TWO." In other words, by some accounts the most difficult American novel of the twentieth century was selling as well as or better than a high-octane assassination thriller and a high-profile copper as-told-to—an amazing feat of publishing prowess. *Gravity's Rainbow* went on to spend four weeks on the *Times* fiction list, selling some 45,000 copies in paper and cloth combined. Its Bantam mass-market edition, published one year later, sold about 250,000 copies over the course of ten years.

The award nominations were inevitable, of course. In those days the National Book Awards were announced before the ceremony, so Viking knew ahead of time that *Gravity's Rainbow* had won half of the fiction prize. There was no expectation that Pynchon would actually show up, but his publisher was nervous that he might simply refuse to accept the award—as indeed he was to do a year later, for somewhat tortuous reasons, when he declined the Howells Medal from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. It was Guinzburg who hit on the inspired wheeze of smuggling in Professor Irwin "The World's Foremost Authority" Corey as Pynchon's alter ego. Corey could be seen in those years from time to time on the late-night talk shows, a manic figure in a frock coat, half-knotted bow tie, and mad-scientist haircut who tied the English language into knots with mock erudition. Poor Ralph Ellison got saddled with the job of presenting the award ("My apologies if we're as . . . if you were as confused as I was") to the man he thought was Pynchon. Remember, *nobody* knew what Pynchon looked like, so the disheveled being who leapt to the podium from the

Emily Barton

When I was in college, I sang in a band named after the superplastic in *Gravity's Rainbow*: Imipolex G. The guitarist, who wrote most of our songs, had read and idolized the novel. For my part, I had read only *The Crying of Lot 49*, little knowing that as an adult I would consult it as the ancients had consulted *The Aeneid* or that I would so revere *Mason & Dixon* that I'd schlep my five-pound clothbound copy with me everywhere I went, through two complete readings. *The Crying of Lot 49* was unlike any other book I'd read. Pynchon's humor (alternately sly, subversive, and Mel Brooks–broad), manic drive, and intimations of threat and conspiracy troubled and confused me and consistently raised the hair on my arms. Even then, I knew how rare this feeling was; I knew I should cultivate it wherever I found it.

Our songwriter wrote pretty good lyrics, but by far the best piece Imipolex G played was a rendition of "Serge's Song," one of the Paranoids' numbers from *The Crying of Lot 49*, which we performed as straight-ahead '60s surf rock. In paying homage to Pynchon, I can't do better than to present a portion of that song's lyrics, which remain one of the best, if most twisted, testimonies to teenage love I know:

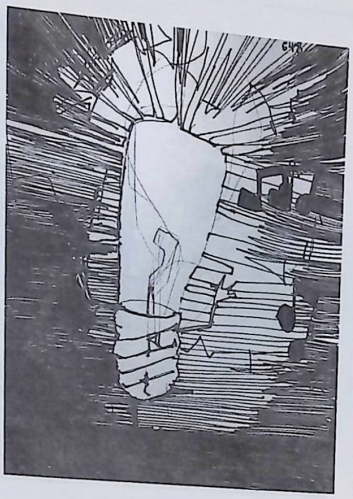
What chance has a lonely surfer boy
For the love of a surfer chick,
With all these Humbert Humbert cats
Coming on so big and sick?
For me, my baby was a woman,
For him she's just another nymphet;
Why did they run around, why did she put me down,
And get me so upset?

Ten years after Imipolex G had graduated and dispersed, I sent Pynchon a tape of the band performing the song, along with a letter thanking him for the blurb he'd written for my first novel and explaining the profound debt I feel to his work. I couldn't write as I do without reckoning with his optimistic cynicism or his perverse understanding of history; and American letters might long ago have shipwrecked on the shoals of commercialism without his unmatched ability to satirize the same topics (war, the military-industrial complex, paranoia, drugs, the Transit of Venus, ketchup) to which he simultaneously pays the deepest and most scholarly respect.

I don't know if he read my letter; true to form, he never wrote back.

Emily Barton's second novel, *Brookland*, will be published by Farrar, Straus & Giroux in 2006.







audience *could have been the guy*. Oh, the delicious perplexity there must have been in the room as Corey launched into his priceless speech, the text of which can be easily found on the Web. When the streaker raced through the place, Corey ad-libbed brilliantly, "I want to thank Mr. Knopf, who just ran through the auditorium."

The Pulitzer Prize episode was by contrast a distinctly *un*funny joke. John Leonard summed it up best in a *New York Times Book Review* column. He pointed out that the advisory committee, in deciding simply not to give an award that year, had ignored such plausible candidates as Vonnegut, McGuane, Vidal, Singer, Cheever, Malamud, and Gardner. He concluded his scathing piece thus: "What was laughable or boring about the behavior of the Pulitzer people in the past is now scandalous. Either the advisory panel and the trustees of Columbia University should take a crash course in remedial reading or they should get out of the awards business altogether." Pynchon readers everywhere simply concluded that our hero had told the truth about things in so definitive a fashion that the Authorities couldn't handle it.

Thirty-one years later, a very different person inhabiting a radically altered literary landscape, I undertook to reread *Gravity's Rainbow* but not without trepidation. It might be no country for middle-aged men. Did I have the mental stamina to go the distance, to keep its fissured and forking narrative scheme, dozens of oddly named characters, daunting thematic, scientific, and symbolic materials, and baroque syntax straight in my head? Had a professional life devoted to the service of clarity and linear development in the written word unfit me for this magical mystery tour? *Suppose I didn't like it?* I read in the spirit of a thought experiment—no recourse to the criticism and companions and concordances and crib notes that have proliferated from the academic Pynchon industry in print and on the Net. Mano a mano, me against the text, just like in 1973, minus the drugs.

My first reaction: Jesus, this is a tough book. The prose was gorgeous, with a density of allusion and implication and hyperalertness that almost no one writing today would even attempt, let alone pull off. If you did not pay maximum attention and, paradoxically, avoid, Keats-like, an "irritable reaching after fact," you were going to be lost. And as a fifty-four-year-old with responsibilities rather than a feckless twenty-two-year-old luftmensch, I had stuff to do that confined my reading to the 10 PM–midnight slot. I'd stumble off to bed, my brainwaves commandeered by Pynchon's insinuating narrative voice, to a night of uneasy dreams that fed off some of the most disturbing latent content modern fiction can provide. It was a strange six weeks, and I had the sense that I was leading a kind of secret life in my own Zone.

I got impatient more than I had in 1973. I certainly never felt that I was reading gibberish, but there were stretches of the book that felt so private and hermetic I decided that Pynchon was mostly talking to Pynchon. Some of the puns and other humor were so silly as to be regrettable ("I Ching feet"), and the anachronisms bothered me a bit. I believe that the me who read *Gravity's Rainbow* back then was a more flexible and generous, less peckish reader than I am today. I also think that kid was faking it a lot.

But in the end (and the middle), *Gravity's Rainbow* impressed me even more than it did three decades ago. There is simply no work in all of American literature that approaches its staggering intellectual reach and erudition. And the cosmic drama of the thing! Pynchon is our Melville and our Blake, our epic poet of good and evil, innocence (the American variety) and experience. Vidal, in a dissenting essay on what he termed the "R and D" novelists, has hard things to say about Pynchon's ear for prose, but I disagree. His quicksilver shifts of register—from the lyrical to the scrupulously historical to the scatalogical (he is also the poet of shit) to the ontological/hysterical to the goofball to the vatic and prophetic—are the work of a virtuoso. It seems to me now that Pynchon's great achievement was to create a narrative voice that is supple enough to say and do anything. The narrator is almost premodern in the freedom he exercises to comment on matters large and small. *Gravity's Rainbow* is not, I finally realized, a novel in the generally accepted sense—it is a *text*, intended for moral instruction. This is fitting from a writer whose Puritan ancestor William Pynchon came to this country on John Winthrop's fleet and wrote an anti-Calvinist tract, "The Meritorious Price of Our Redemption," so controversial that it was banned in Boston. Far from being the nihilistic work some lazy critics have accused it of being, *Gravity's Rainbow* contains a superabundance of meaning, of signs, portents, and pedagogical occasions.

It is also farsighted. It is no more valid to judge *Gravity's Rainbow* on the accuracy of its predictions than it is to rate Orwell on how close he came to describing the real 1984, but from the perspective of the present there are a number of startlingly proleptic moments in there. A German engineer in the Zone

Jay Cantor I'm sure Professor Irwin Corey will take the podium soon to discuss Pynchon's Paranoia (named for its discoverer and first victim), which has served our writer better than Marxism (for example) might have, kind of exploding such Old World clatterings by finding more signs and enemies than just one Ruling Class, and more desiring machines by which it operates than just base and superstructure. Pynchonian Paranoia joyfully takes the Entire Fucking Universe as the field in which the enemy is likely to operate, and places its armies both outside and inside your body, for example, agents busily colonizing your desires. Or maybe, you bastard, you are Your Own Worst Enemy (and mine!) and your sadomasochistic desire gave rise to the Evil Empire in the first place.

Or vice versa.

I'm sure, too, that Professor Corey will elucidate for us the geeky science-fiction aspect of those Pynchonian themes, as if Pynchon had imagined we were all teenage outcasts, protecting ourselves from the sight of our own pathetically small muscles through hyperbolic technofantasies that made us feel connected to powerful machines—until maybe we actually built the apple of our imagining in our garage, only to find it co-opted by the Other and his plans to colonize . . . our hyperbolic imaginings. Or maybe—ha!—our little device now actually manipulates the Other and Us, and the computer is in control! You be the judge—if you think you're wise enough. Or leave it up to the tarot cards.

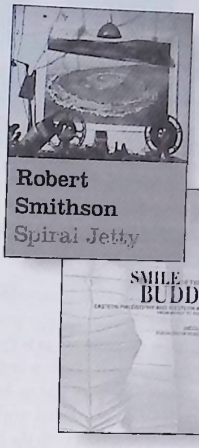
Anyway, that's for the professor. For me, the great and amazing Pynchonian Device™ is his sentence, American angular (tubular?) rather than Proustian mellifluous, because, like this country and its fine, fine Empire, the sentence's conjunctions and twists have to take in the most disparate materials, our high ideals and our beloved junk (besides, who says it's junk? Maybe *they* call it that to shear us away from its significance, the Presence as likely to be hidden in a pop song or a rusty radiator as in a hymn); and then having stopped for that digression, the sentence has to turn right from the radiator and encounter bits of history with its harmonica, a piece or two of disgusting toad-flavored candy, a randy member, and then swallow also a few fragments of our grand(iose) attempts to theorize what's going on in the world and the sentence.

Why such a big ol' sentence (big as Texas, big as my heart)? Because we have to get the whole damn thing in one *schematic* so we can hold it in our minds and take control of things. (Or maybe our being such control freaks is what got the whole thing going? So let's just say *tinker with it* instead.) We need one sentence, so we can see the process as it unfolds and connects and disperses, and maybe refolds itself, like DNA.

How does a whole book take shape, then? Does Pynchon fail to write such an utterly complete sentence—paranoia perfected—and have to try again by writing another? Or does he succeed and find he's enjoying himself too much to stop? Or is it his curse to write like this and he *can't* stop—blessing or bliss, damned or saved, maybe just one more sentence, written or read, and he'll find out . . .

Jay Cantor's most recent novel, *Great Neck*, was issued in paperback by Vintage last year.

On Art & Artists



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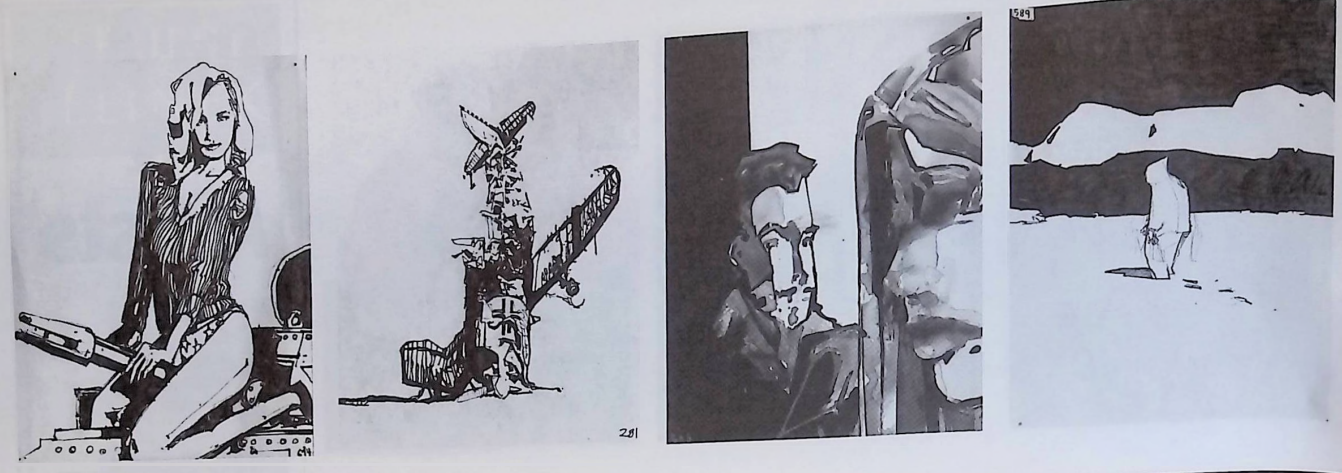
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foresees the mass commodification of guilt: "Extermination camps will be turned into tourist attractions, foreigners with cameras will come piling through in droves." This is exceptional, as is Pynchon's drilling down into the history of such German concerns as IG Farben and their scummy wartime activities—and the disturbing connections they had to American business. Even more exceptional is the book's prefiguring of a digital world and an information-based economy. Here, after all, is a book obsessed with the human tendency to reduce all phenomena to "the zero and the one." Uh-huh. In Zurich, a Russian black marketeer complains to a Slothrop in search of information, "Is it any wonder the world's gone insane, with information come to be the only real medium of exchange?" and predicts, "Someday it'll all be done by machine. Information machines. You are the wave of the future." Quite true—the hypersurveillance of Slothrop's precognitive erections and all else anticipates our lives today, every keystroke noted by spyware, every transaction transmitted to a data bank. Slothrop's ego decay and psychic dispersal can easily be regarded as all our eventual fates in the real kingdom of the zero and the one.

Gravity's Rainbow has, in my view, only gained in stature and pertinence in the intervening decades. But what has been its wider effect on American fiction? To begin with, it has no real rival among the novels published since. Certainly not in either of Pynchon's subsequent novels, *Vineland* and *Mason & Dixon*, each of which has its many excellences, but neither of which anyone is planning to take with them to the moon. William Gaddis's *JR* is a virtuoso turn, and a highly predictive one, but it has the air of a formal stunt, while his subsequent books were marred by his ultra-Swiftian disgust with human stupidity. Then there is the special case of Don DeLillo, the other giant figure in postwar American fiction, who, like Pynchon, has used the novel as a vehicle of inquiry into the uniquely unsettling state of being a late-twentieth-century American, with all its attendant terrors, mysteries, and absurdities. As definitive a summing-up of the meaning of the cold war as *Underworld* was, the scope of DeLillo's achievement is best grasped by considering that book in the company of its three great predecessors, *Mao II*, *White Noise*, and *Libra*. Like *Gravity's Rainbow*, those books comprehend American life as mediated by science and technology, and the vast systems that underlie and are made possible by them. They show how the dream of perfect safety and control breeds paranoia, and how free radicals like Lee Harvey Oswald can wreak havoc in such a world. In temperament and style DeLillo is Apollonian, a secret sharer with his technocrats and obsessives, whereas Pynchon is chthonic, in touch with darker gods. In the end one is relieved not to have to choose between the two, secure in the thought that a century from now, people will read these authors' books to understand the contours and nature of our odd lives.

What about the question of *Gravity's Rainbow*'s "influence"? Certainly its effect can be seen in what I think of as the "high-IQ wing" of younger American novelists. The brainy, cyber-savvy Richard Powers has learned from Pynchon the art of structuring his novels along metaphorical pathways drawn from the realms of science, mathematics, genetics, and music. William T. Vollmann, with his ambitious and polymathic reach, is the most Pynchon-like of his generation, but he has yet to solve the problem of form. David Foster Wallace may be the only certifiable genius in American fiction besides Pynchon, and his massive *Infinite Jest* was published as if it were the second coming of *Gravity's Rainbow*, with some justification. But where *Gravity's Rainbow* looks outward and seeks an escape from the tragic neuroses of Western history, *Infinite Jest* burrows inward, its antennae tuned to the psychic frailities we all harbor and our culture's tendency to mesmerize itself into a fugue state. Finally there is Jonathan Franzen, who married a Pynchonian sensibility to the family novel to explosive effect in *The Corrections*, but who should have done a Pynchon in another sense when Oprah came calling.

I do worry, though, that *Gravity's Rainbow* may be turning into an undervisited monument. In a poll of sixteen assistants and assistant editors under the age of thirty at my publishing company, a marvelously well-read group, I discovered that only two of them had read the book and only five had read any books at all by Pynchon. The comments from those who had read Pynchon suggested that they found him slow going stylistically and that his concerns were in general alien and irrelevant to them. This makes sense. Pynchon is a pure product of the cold war and the arms race and the adversary culture that opposed them, whereas these young people came of age after the fall of communism, in a time when technology is viewed as the royal road to imaginative and personal freedom. In a very real sense, then, *Gravity's Rainbow* is turning historical—an inevitable fate. Three decades on, it has acquired something of the "aura" that Walter Benjamin ascribed to works of art produced before the advent of mechanical reproduction. The question that remains is whether the book will come to seem dated in the years to come, or if it will pass the Poundian test of being news that stays news. Who can tell? What I do know about *Gravity's Rainbow* for absolute certain is this: There is nothing to compare to it now.

Richard Powers

"Information. What's wrong with dope and women? Is it any wonder the world's gone insane, with information come to be the only real medium of exchange?"

"I thought it was cigarettes."

"You dream." (*Gravity's Rainbow*)

I remember the thing homing in, soundless, of course, on its parabolic arc, *that purified shape latent in the sky*. No clue, no advance warning until it hit. I thought I knew how fiction worked, what fiction did, the proper object of its only subject. Then those sentences, screaming across the page, each one skywriting: *You dream*.

For three decades, I've retraced that arc once a year, *that shape of no surprise, no second chances, no return*. And every time, I'm thrown back on mute, wild surmise. The war is everywhere and real, our terrors threatening to perfect us, the technologies of our desire extending into networks too complex for anything but unhinged and macaronic fiction even to hint at.

For thirty years, early each winter, as the newspapers roll out their end-of-year obituaries and take to listing the year's proudest, most achieved disasters, I've read out loud, to myself or to anyone who will listen, a passage from that book that ruined me for science and made me think of writing as a life. Nine pages: that battery-ringed evensong service, set somewhere in Kent—the closest thing I have to a private religious ritual. I do it to remind myself of the size of the made world, of what story might still be when it remembers itself, of the look of *our maximum reach outward*, of the devastating charge of words. I do it to remind myself of our only real medium of exchange.

Richard Powers is the author of eight novels.

Life is a haunting thing. In preparation for this piece, I made a lunch date with Cork Smith for October 14, 2004, to catch up and to interview him. Two days before, his wife, Sheila Smith, called to say that Cork was in the hospital for observation with what looked to be a case of congestive heart failure. He had not been well the past couple of years; he'd had successful open-heart surgery but suffered from an emphysema that was getting worse. Still, three weeks later Cork called to say that he was feeling "okay" (translation: not well at all, but what the hell can you do?), and we rescheduled lunch for the Monday after Thanksgiving. Two days before the holiday, I opened up my e-mail to find a message with the subject heading "Cork died last night." Now I would never have the chance to talk to him about the triumphant publication of *Gravity's Rainbow*, or about anything else.

Cork . . . □

Gerald Howard is an executive editor at large for Doubleday Broadway. (See Contributors.)

Steve Erickson

For American literature in the last half of the twentieth century, Pynchon is the line in the sand that Faulkner was in the first half. In the same way that Faulkner's fiction took into account the ideas of Freud—which isn't to suggest that Faulkner emulated or even cared about Freud, but nonetheless he was informed by a Freudian age—Pynchon's fiction takes into account Einstein's ideas: the circularity of time, the elasticity of space, the way geographic and temporal coordinates are crosswired with emotional and psychic ones; and the way these ideas change the meanings of all our lives and the way we write about them. In Pynchon's novels God is, well, not unlike how we imagine Pynchon himself: a supremely overarching intelligence that could write *V.* at the age of twenty-five or whatever (around the same age as Welles when he made *Citizen Kane*, and the same age as Dylan when he recorded *Blonde on Blonde*), as well as a compassionate clown, not above squirting water in our eye from a flower on his lapel or slipping a whoopee cushion under humanity's ass. Pynchon's universe is a feat of great cosmic slapstick. The one time I met Pynchon he gave me an Amy Fisher comic book, an altogether Pynchonesque (Pynchonian?) act; the only thing more Pynchonesque about him was that if there was ever anyone not taken with the Mystique of Pynchon, it's Pynchon. Other novelists have found they must position themselves in relation to the line he has drawn, on Pynchon's side or the other: DeLillo is on the Pynchon side, Updike is on the other. That's not to say that DeLillo writes like Pynchon; of course DeLillo doesn't write like anyone but DeLillo. It is to say that Pynchon has been in the air for more than forty years and has compelled all of us who write novels to make a stand, in favor of or opposed to a Pynchonesque literature, a Pynchonian future.

Steve Erickson's most recent novel is *Our Ecstatic Days* (Simon & Schuster, 2004).

JAMES SUROWIECKI

Cardinal Sin

In August 2003, the St. Louis Cardinals hosted the Chicago Cubs for a three-game series at Busch Stadium. The Cardinals and Cubs are historic rivals—over the years, in fact, they've had arguably the best rivalry in baseball—and they were battling each other for first place in the National League's Central Division, so the series was a little more interesting than your average Devil Rays–Rangers clash. But fundamentally those three games were indistinguishable, in the way they were played and in the way they turned out, from the vast majority of the thousand-plus major-league games of 2003. The only reason we'll remember their specifics in the future is that the journalist Buzz Bissinger decided to write a book about them called *3 Nights in August: Strategy, Heartbreak, and Joy: Inside the Mind of a Manager*. And that tension—between the essential interchangeability of the games on the one hand and Bissinger's quest to make them resoundingly dramatic on the other—is what makes *3 Nights in August* a profoundly flawed book that still also manages, almost in spite of itself, to say something important about the nature of baseball.

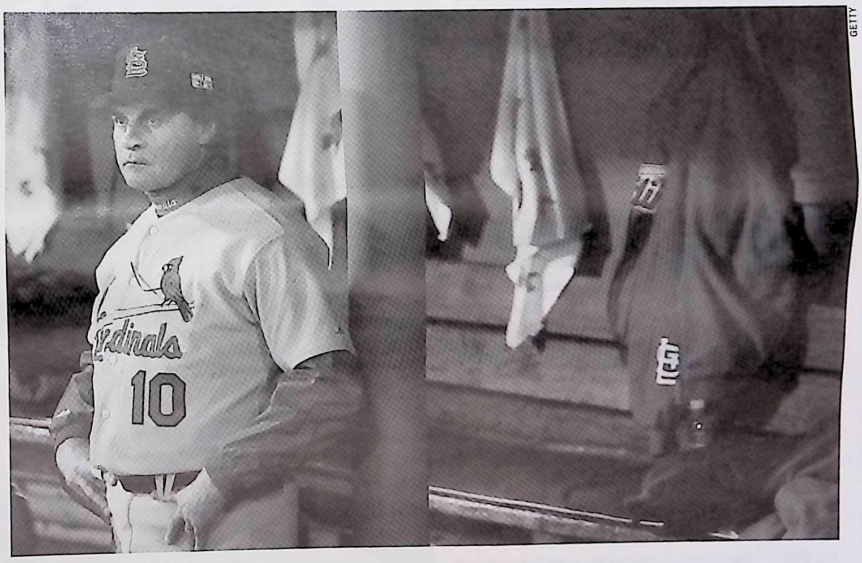
From a narrative point of view, there is no way to quarrel with Bissinger's book. Its structure is pleasingly Aristotelian, bounded in space and time and guaranteed a cathartic resolution (one team, after all, will have to take the series). And Bissinger does a nice job of capturing the rhythms of baseball—from the leisurely pregame preparations to the mild pep talks (so different from the rah-rah exhortations of football or basketball) to the way the game itself seems to come in and out of focus as the action unfolds. As Daniel Okrent did years ago in *Nine Innings: The Anatomy of a Baseball Game*—a wonderful book-length dissection of a single game—Bissinger deftly uses the action on the field to set up a series of riffs on strategy and tactics and individual players, moving smoothly back and forth between them. Most important, Bissinger's narrative has a hero—Tony La Russa, the manager of the Cardinals—which gives the book a coherence it would otherwise have missed. In the end, the games are seen for the most part through La Russa's eyes, and it is his thinking that Bissinger is interested in understanding.

La Russa is a good choice. He's not quite out of central casting, since he was never much of a ballplayer and has always had a tinge of the intellectual about him (traditionally not a good thing in the dugout), being among other things the only manager in baseball with a law degree. But he's an obsessive. He lives alone during the baseball season—his family is apparently happier not to have to deal with him while he's working. He's a thinker, perpetually analyzing and reanalyzing situations and statistics, convinced that a little more work will give him the angle he needs. And, at least on the surface, he's a control freak, a man convinced that "when we suck it's mostly because I suck." All this makes him an ideal character for Bissinger, who likes to write about "heart, desire, passion" and who is a little too fond of overwrought prose and purple similes. La Russa's ferocious intensity is a perfect match for Bissinger's desire to make those three nights in August seem like a mix of Ali-Foreman and Fischer-Spassky. It allows Bissinger to craft a story about a farseeing manager who's always trying to stay two steps ahead of his opponent, who obsesses over his players and does his best to keep them in line and keep their heads straight; a manager whose tactical genius has a profound effect on the outcome of games he manages, and whose random thoughts on the game are as valuable and accurate as the most rigorous statistical studies. This is unquestionably an entertaining story. The problem is that it's also a deeply confused one. Bissinger seems to have done an excellent job of capturing the way the game feels—at least to those who manage and play it. But in the process, he's offered up a deceptive picture of the way the game actually is.

Take, for instance, La Russa's role as manager. Because the book is structured, in some sense, around his decisions, it inevitably makes those decisions seem crucial—La Russa decides to hit-and-run or pinch-hit or leave a pitcher on the mound, and therefore important things happen. But the reality is that most of the decisions La Russa makes, in terms of their effect on the outcome, are ambiguous in their effect at best, and irrelevant at worst. At one point, for instance, the Cubs put a man on third base with no one out, and La Russa has to decide whether or not to play the infield in (playing the infield in makes it harder for a runner to score from third on a ground ball, but also improves the batter's chances of getting a base hit). Bissinger takes us through the myriad permutations that La Russa considers—infield in, infield back, third baseman and first baseman in at the corners, infield back but charging, etc.—before he finally settles on bringing all the infielders in. The first batter, as planned, grounds out, and the runner on third has to hold. But the next hitter singles to left, and the runner scores—as he would have had La Russa left the infielders back. In other words, lots of mental work for no reward.

More important, the outcomes of most games are shaped by factors over which La Russa has little or no control: namely, how well the Cardinals hitters hit and how well the Cardinals pitchers pitch. In the book's epilogue, for instance, Bissinger talks about the 2004 season, when the St. Louis Cardinals, after winning the division and the pennant, lost four straight games to the Boston Red Sox in the World Series. La Russa, of course, blames himself for doing a bad job of managing. But as Bissinger notes parenthetically, the heart of the Cardinals' batting order had exactly one hit in thirty-nine at bats during the Series. That is the reason St. Louis was swept, not anything La Russa did or didn't do. And while Bissinger tries, over the course of the book, to show how La Russa influences the performance of his players, his case is never convincing. It's undoubtedly true that some players thrive in certain environments and not in others (although most players appear to play as well as they can, regardless of where they are), but there's not much evidence that anyone's figured out how to systematically make players better. Picking the right players for the team, of course, matters a lot, but that decision belongs much less to the manager than to the front office.

The point is not that what La Russa does is irrelevant. In any game, the choices he makes do have an effect. The point is that most of the time those effects are small, and inconsistent. He makes some good decisions, some bad ones, and in any given game it probably doesn't matter that much. La Russa may be at the center of Bissinger's book, but in most games he's peripheral to the outcome (this is in stark contrast, by the way, to football, which Bissinger wrote about so well in his 1990 book *Friday Night Lights: A Town, a Team, and a Dream*). It's not clear if Bissinger understands this. But what's interesting is that La Russa does. Early on in the book, he says that a manager can only change the outcome of four or five games a year. That means change for better or worse, which means there may only be three or four games a year that even the best manager can actually win. In other words, of all the games La Russa manages, he only makes a real difference in one out of every forty or fifty.



GETTY

Tony La Russa, 2004.

The trick, though, is that a manager doesn't know in advance when he'll be able to make a difference, and so he has to prepare equally hard for every game. The key to successful baseball is to keep making the right decisions again and again, even though you know sometimes they'll turn out wrong, because you trust that over time they will pay off. That's why La Russa says the crucial thing is to "focus on the process and not the result": If you get the process right, eventually the results will come. Baseball is, in the end, all about percentages, which means that's it's all about time, because it's only as time passes that luck and randomness drop away and the truth of those percentages emerges. And this is the paradox of *3 Nights in August*. It wants to make a three-game series a microcosm of baseball. But what it ultimately shows is that a microscope is the wrong instrument with which to see the game, and drama is the wrong genre to describe it. □

James Surowiecki's *The Wisdom of Crowds: Why the Many Are Smarter Than the Few and How Collective Wisdom Shapes Business, Economies, Societies and Nations* will be published in paperback by Anchor in August.

A Fan's Notes examines the genre of sportswriting.

ROBERT POLITO

Our Man in Oulipo

The erudite and steely James Jesus Angleton, creator of the sinister HONETEL secret counterintelligence investigation unit within the CIA, routinely recited a passage from T. S. Eliot's "East Coker," which his friend and Yale roommate, the poet Reed Whittemore, read at the small memorial service for Angleton I attended with Jimmy Merrill, Joe Brainard, and David Kalstone in May 1987, at Rock Spring Congregational Church, in Arlington, Virginia:

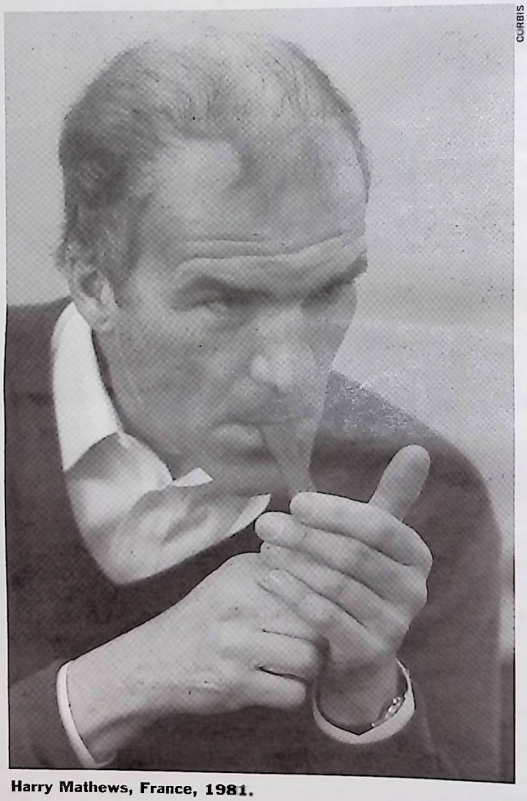
> Home is where one starts from. As we grow older
> The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated
> Of dead and living. Not the intense moment
> Isolated, with no before and after,
> But a lifetime burning in every moment
> And not the lifetime of one man only
> But of old stones that cannot be deciphered.

Many of the mourners, you sensed, had come to corroborate for themselves that the terrifying Angleton, infamous for his ruthless and destructive mole hunts, was indeed dead.

Eliotic intimations of multiple, parallel lives and fiery but elusive knowledge radiate from Harry Mathews's new memoir—or is it a novel?—*My Life in CIA: A Chronicle of 1973* (Dalkey Archive). The only American elected to the experimental Oulipo (Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle, or "Workshop for Potential Literature") group, and incidentally a close friend of Kalstone, Brainard, and Merrill, Mathews puts the intelligence back in counterintelligence.

Consider this. The year is 1973, Mathews is residing in Paris, and he finds himself in the dining room of a Napoleonic mansion adjacent to the Church of Les Six Saints Jean. Among those gathered are Florence and Harald—Eurasian "twins," perhaps forty inches tall—and a gruff, boxy man named Zendol, who emerges as a bullyboy in the fascist Ordre Nouveau, "a dangerous lunatic." Mathews arrived at Zendol's on a dolly, rolled inside a carpet. He had been interrupted while making love to a woman in the storeroom of a rug shop and crawled inside to hide before being whisked away. The woman, Rkia, aka Jo, has just woven a shawl for him in a pattern known as a "false-color map," and Mathews hopes to sell it to some American clients as a guide to the clandestine Soviet atomic energy complex in Siberia, furnished to him by the dissident scientist Plishkin.

I probably should explain that Mathews is also scheming to convince everyone but a few intimate friends, such as Oulipo novelist Georges Perec, that he works for the CIA—or just "CIA," since, as he learns, "nobody connected with the Agency calls it *the* CIA." His ruse originated in a mistake. What Mathews styles his own "social prattle"—Firbankian convivial embellishments at a party in Laos, where he was visiting his friend the British ambassador—led to the CIA rumors. As an American writer of esoteric poetry and fiction living abroad with no evident sources of support, he prompts gossip: Despite a past marriage and many girlfriends, he is often thought gay; a small inheritance from his grandmother convinces people he is wealthy.



CORBIS

Harry Mathews, France, 1981.

My Life in CIA opens as Mathews hears again, this time from a married lover, that he is *obviously* CIA. His alternately violent and clever denials only seem to confirm the charge, so, against his own leftist political convictions, Mathews decides to embrace his CIA identity. Spurred by mischievous Chilean supporters of Salvador Allende and later assisted by Patrick Burton-Cheyne, a genial former John Ashbery scholar turned international businessman, he starts to act, well, suspect. He exits and enters his apartment as though shedding a tail. He marks random walls with pink chalk. He conspicuously delivers packages. As his CIA "cover," Mathews opens a travel advisory agency he calls Locus Solus, after the literary journal he edited with Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, and James Schuyler in the early 1960s. The Plishkin map, or shawl, will be, as he writes, an "irresistible" prize.

But inside Zendol's dining room, as he flirts with the diminutive Florence, he must now spin in reverse. He needs to convince the assembled fascists he is merely a poet, not a spy. The scoffing Zendol tosses him some rhyme words, and Mathews is off, dancing as he improvises lyrics to music from the latest dance rage, "Watergate Squat":

> Not bitch fascist (squat!) with swastika
> And bumper (squat!) double-cross sticker
> Let's anagram (squat!) and acrostic her
> Let's lock her in a paddock
> In six feet of rotten haddock
> Sing high (squat!), speak low (squat!)
> Ho heigh (squat!), heigh ho (squat!)
> Then we'll go play chess (squat!) life-size in Marostica!
> *Squat squat squat,*
> *Squat squat*

The rounds and inversions of *My Life in CIA* suggest a shell game. There is little that is impossible inside these pages and lots that is readily verified; but still those peas are somewhere else every time you lift the walnut. As he loops along his delirious spirals of facts, names, dates, and places, Mathews pauses for snapshots of French intellectuals and celebrities, from Philippe Sollers to Jacques Brel, and manages fresh, astute takes on 1968 Paris. Finally shamed by the CIA-sponsored coup in Chile, he decides to quit his one-man covert operation, only to discover his "game" is already sour, and deadly: The fascist thugs he's inadvertently courted arrange to pin the assassination of a fugitive Baader-Meinhof member on Mathews, and an East German professional killer is after him.

Sometimes Mathews indicates that spying is a shadow for his erotic life—Jo, Florence, or a tantalizing Marie-Claude Quintelpreaux, who transports him in a tantric charade of almost-sex. "I'd learned that the biggest excitement of subterfuge is getting other people involved," he writes. "Other people brought an almost carnal scratch to the itch of my inflamed imagination." Still, whenever Mathews imagines that the situation is sexual, the affair winds up espionage. He also casually anticipates objections and caveats. Dismissing some spy novels he consulted early on for help with CIA habits, he asks, "And who can trust a novelist?" He watches a young writer on a French talk show called "*Apprendre à mentir*"—"Learning to Lie." And as the hit man closes in, Mathews confesses his worst fear is that the whole convoluted racket might be an Oulipo hoax.

My Life in CIA may not proceed strictly from Oulipo principles—like Perec's infamous *e*-less novel, *La Disparition* (translated into English as *A Void*)—yet there are convulsive Oulipian flourishes. In his Locus Solus advisory guise, Mathews offers a lecture for victims of "travel-stress dyslexia." His solution? "Rule one: *they should only take trains and buses whose departure times read the same right to left as they did left to right.*" He prepares an alphabetical tour of the French countryside for an American couple and in interviews with potential clients answers questions with other questions. The Mathews of this memoir emanates as at once ingenious and clueless—he executes recondite ploys with panache yet is recurrently gulled by the blandishments of his elusive friend Patrick, a likely author of his elaborate doom.

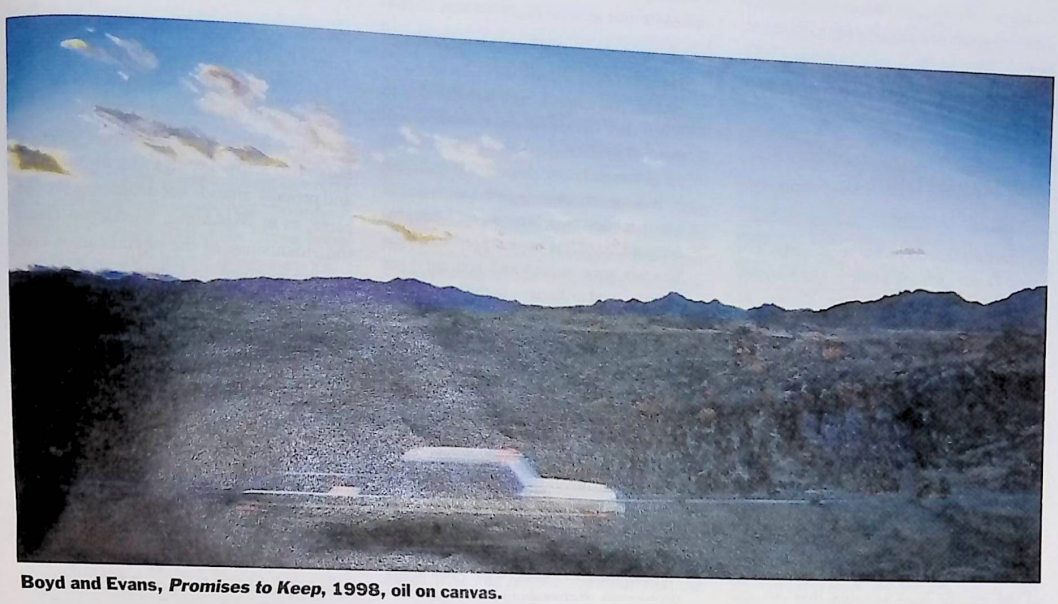
If counterintelligence is a cover for the making of art, then *My Life in CIA* restores to writing the secret whispers of play, put-on, delirium, and madness, never forgetting the game is also hazardous, maybe even sinister. A reading of Allan Hepburn's elegant *Intrigue: Espionage and Culture* (Yale University Press) discloses just how resourcefully Mathews overturns classic spy "tropes": the agent's visibility versus his invisibility, his desire to know against his desire to baffle, the "riddles of political identity," and the conundrums of conduct and action as a Baedeker for character. Hepburn diagrams espionage rhetoric and codes, and probes both American and European models, from Greene and le Carré to Didion and Barth. Yet tracked alongside the giddy dramatization of these same notions in *My Life in CIA*, *Intrigue* inevitably sounds ordinary, predictable. Perhaps the only words from *Intrigue* that Mathews might have been tempted to use are those of the dedication: "This book is dedicated to the memory of my mother, Audrey Hepburn, 1932–2002." □

Shooting the Piano Player looks at noir literature, crime writing, and the fiction and film underworld.

Robert Polito's most recent book is *The Selected Poems of Kenneth Fearing* (Library of America, 2004). He directs the Graduate Writing Program at the New School in New York.

MIGHT OF THE HUNTER

Madison Smartt Bell on Cormac McCarthy



Boyd and Evans, *Promises to Keep*, 1998, oil on canvas.

NO COUNTRY FOR OLD MEN
BY CORMAC MCCARTHY
NEW YORK: KNOPF. 320 PAGES. $25.

As Faulkner did, Cormac McCarthy likes to have his characters crushed by overwhelmingly, monstrously huge forces that can scarcely be recognized or defined, as there is nothing to compare them to on a human scale. Of course, the presence of irresistibly hostile circumstances is an essential ingredient of tragedy. Equally essential is an affirmation of human values, however futile, in the face of inimical circumstances. Most of Faulkner's work makes that affirmation. Most of McCarthy's does not.

It's not that McCarthy is a nihilist, or anything like it. The sum of his masterful fiction, from *The Orchard Keeper* at least through *All the Pretty Horses*, makes it clear that he believes in an order in the universe. The big difference between him and most other great writers spawned by the Judeo-Christian tradition is that McCarthy believes we are much further from the center of order than we prefer to imagine. Human existence, individual or collective, means as much in his scheme of things as dust.

It's difficult to get this comfortless message onto any US bestseller list. Furthermore, although McCarthy's weltanschauung is probably not much darker than Raymond Carver's, it's a whole lot harder for most people to read, due to McCarthy's ambitious, unforgivingly difficult prose style. McCarthy has internalized the most grandiose excesses of Faulkner's style and transformed them for his own purposes, much as Carver did with Hemingway's style. During the same period when Carver's deceptive plainness made him more and more trendy (among his imitators as well as readers), McCarthy's aggressively uncompromising style and increasingly unpalatable substance pushed him further and further from the public eye, to the point that *Blood Meridian*, still perhaps his greatest work, was noticed only by members of the cult for whom he had become a "writer's writer," and who were probably happy to keep him as their secret.

McCarthy solved his commercial problem with *All the Pretty Horses*, a short, relatively accessible novel that offered not only the first wholly sympathetic protagonist he had ever presented but also a bona fide love story. The McCarthy cult, by then substantial, felt betrayed by these supposedly pandering features. When read carefully, however, it is plain that *All the Pretty Horses* is by no means a sellout. The love passages, mercifully infrequent, are embarrassing; like a lot of great male writers, McCarthy is good at capturing women he doesn't like, but women he does tend to dissolve into Eternal Feminine Syrup. The romance in *All The Pretty Horses*, though, is doomed in exactly the same way that all civilizing endeavors are doomed in McCarthy's work. The considerable heroism of the protagonist, Texas horseman John Grady Cole, is beautiful in and of itself but futile in the face of the same cosmic indifference to the human race and its moral structures that was so awesomely unveiled in *Blood Meridian*.

No Country for Old Men has a much sharper, brighter edge than the meandering last two volumes of the Border trilogy. Like *Child of God*, McCarthy's brilliant depiction of a serial-killing necrophiliac, the new book gets its plot from an atrocity crime spree; also, as in *Child of God*, the author punctuates quick-moving, third-person action scenes with first-person monologues in a homely regional dialect. *Child of God* adopted a story of backwoods depravity that hardly anyone but McCarthy could have recognized as material for great art. *No Country for Old Men* pulls its plot from much more familiar headlines, and also seems to owe something to books and movies like *Natural Born Killers*, *A Simple Plan*, and *First Blood* (the sire of Rambo).

Dostoevsky was, on one level, a writer of thrillers, and Nabokov was wrong to sneer at him for it. *No Country for Old Men* offers much more hard-driving suspense than any of McCarthy's previous works; in fact the plot's motor is so overdriven that one tends to read too fast to savor the writerly nuances. At the same time, certain literary gestures seem overt; McCarthy's villain, who kills with a pneumatic slaughterhouse hammer powered by an oxygen tank on his belt, is the image of the villain of Conrad's *Secret Agent*, that "pest in the street full of men," clothed in a bomb whose trigger is a bulb always in the palm of his hand.

Despite its urgency, the plot doesn't make a whole lot of sense, and probably isn't supposed to. Out antelope hunting in the southwestern desert, Llewelyn Moss happens upon a stack of bodies from a drug deal gone to hell, and walks away with a valise filled with more than two million dollars in cash. Later that night, for no plausible reason, he decides to revisit the crime scene, where a fresh contingent of criminals separates him from his truck. He flees but they pick up his trail from the registration.

"There is no description of a fool," Moss tells himself, "that you fail to satisfy." This episode is barely even necessary to the plot, since the money bag contains a transponder that would allow the bad guys to follow Moss anyway.

Meanwhile, the local law enforcement, particularly one Sheriff Bell, is shocked and mystified by a series of apparently pointless, horrific crimes: The arch-villain Anton Chigurh garrotes a deputy with his own handcuffs, flees in a patrol car, then stops and slays an unlucky motorist to obtain a less compromising vehicle . . . and so on. Chigurh's connection to the drug deal is tenuous; he's not one of the original players (and in fact we never quite learn how he knows about it). Suffice it to say that he too is on Moss's trail, and that Moss, though a Vietnam vet with combat experience and capability enough to limp away, bloody but still breathing, from half a dozen shootouts, is in the end no match for him.

Like the amoral "judge" in *Blood Meridian*, Chigurh plays the role of Evil Genius, but if his skill, stamina, and pure ruthlessness make him fairly compelling, he remains a flatter, less fascinating character than the judge. Moreover, the judge can't really be called evil at all, since *Blood Meridian* pointedly refuses to create a context in which such terms are meaningful. In extreme contrast to practically all the rest of McCarthy's work, the new novel is organized around a conventional moral compass, mostly furnished by the good Sheriff Bell.

Bell is the source of the first-person monologues—meditations on his family history and his own long experience in rural law enforcement. Sometimes there's humor to his observation of the changing times: "These old people I talk to, if you could of told em that there would be people on the streets of our Texas towns with green hair and bones in their noses speakin a language they couldnt even understand, well, they just flat out wouldnt of believed you. But what if you'd of told em it was their own grandchildren?" Sometimes Bell is as appalled as the old folks at the pass things have come to: "I used to say they were the same ones we've always had to deal with. . . . Back then they was rustlin cattle. Now they're runnin dope. But I dont know as that's true no more. . . . I aint sure we've seen these people before. Their kind." Or, "I never had to kill nobody and I am very glad of that fact. Some of the old time sheriffs wouldnt even carry a firearm. . . . It takes very little to govern good people. Very little. And bad people cant be governed at all."

All of a sudden we seem to be looking at the sheriff played by Gary Cooper in *High Noon*. But in McCarthy's world, the white hats don't win. By the end of the story, Chigurh has killed almost all the main characters, less for the sheer fun of it than to fulfill his own strange sense of the fitness of things. Bell survives only because he drops pursuit and retires, and because he was never on Chigurh's hit list in the first place.

Love is supposed to count for something in this novel, though fending off its presence doesn't do much to fend off the outer dark. The love story between Moss and his young wife is so understated that we need Bell to point out to us that it even exists. Bell's affection for her is presented as the most important thing in his life, but McCarthy has trouble talking about it: "That's my heart yonder, he told the horse. It always was." Or, "If I didnt have her I dont know what I would have. Well, yes I do. You wouldnt need a box to put it in, neither."

Much more deeply convincing is Bell's dream about his father, from whom he draws his own sense of moral orientation in a world that fluctuates between indifference and hostility. This image is as starkly numinous as many of the most alienating passages in McCarthy's previous books, but it conveys something quite different, a peculiarly human warmth: "It was like we was both back in older times and I was on horseback goin through the mountains of a night. Goin through this pass in the mountains. It was cold and there was snow on the ground and he rode past me and kept on goin. Never said nothin. He just rode on past and he had this blanket wrapped around him and he had his head down and when he rode past I seen he was carryin fire in a horn the way people used to do and I could see the horn from the light inside of it. About the color of the moon. And in the dream I knew that he was goin on ahead and that he was fixin to make a fire somewhere out there in all that dark and all that cold and I knew that whenever I got there he would be there. And then I woke up." □

Madison Smartt Bell is the author of *The Stone That the Builder Refused* (Pantheon, 2004). (See Contributors.)

VIENNA ROAST

Marjorie Perloff on Elfriede Jelinek

THE PIANO TEACHER
BY ELFRIEDE JELINEK, TRANSLATED BY JOACHIM NEUGROSCHEL
LONDON: SERPENT'S TAIL. 280 PAGES. $15.

WONDERFUL, WONDERFUL TIMES
BY ELFRIEDE JELINEK, TRANSLATED BY MICHAEL HULSE
LONDON: SERPENT'S TAIL. 253 PAGES. $15.

In the English-speaking world, the decision to award the 2004 Nobel Prize in literature to the Austrian novelist-playwright Elfriede Jelinek met with puzzled incredulity or downright outrage—that is, when it was met with any reception at all. Last fall, British papers such as *The Scotsman* chuckled that the Nobel could go to an obscure Austrian feminist communist "porn author," whose small independent publisher in Britain, Serpent's Tail, supposedly sold only 270 copies of *The Piano Teacher* in 2003, "while three other novels [*Women as Lovers*; *Wonderful, Wonderful Times*; and *Lust*] sold barely 50 copies between them." Other papers were less amused. In the *Daily Standard*, Stephen Schwartz declared: "The infamous snobs of the Swedish Academy . . . have returned to their habit of awarding the Nobel Prize for Literature to an unknown, undistinguished, leftist fanatic. . . . This time they got a two-fer shot at destroying literary standards, since Jelinek's writings mainly verge on gross pornography." This sentiment was echoed by the *New Republic*, where Ruth Franklin concluded that Jelinek's sexual and political notions were so "appalling" they alone should have disqualified her from consideration for the prize.

Normally, such put-downs of a radical feminist and onetime communist author (Jelinek was a member of the Austrian Communist Party from 1974 to 1991) would trigger a defense from the Left; but since Jelinek does not yet have a US publisher, and only four of her novels (and none of her plays or poems) are available in English, there has been little debate, even though German feminist scholars have argued—and I shall take up this point later—that Jelinek's "pornography," like her seeming allegiance to communist doctrine, must be understood in the context of her excoriating critique of Austrian neofascism, especially with regard to its impact on women.

Ironically, the one work that does seem to be known in the United States is not actually a work by her at all but Michael Haneke's film adaptation of her novel *The Piano Teacher* (starring Isabelle Huppert), which won the Cannes Film Festival Grand Jury Prize in 2001. On its own terms, Haneke's psychological thriller—about a psychotically repressed middle-aged piano teacher whose masochistic and morbid sexual fantasies turn into terrifying realities when she becomes involved with one of her young students—is a haunting film, particularly because of the ironic tension generated between the gorgeous classical-piano score and the sinister violence of the film's surreal imagery. But the film in fact has little to do with the novel; on the contrary, a comparison of the two makes clear just how remarkable a novel *The Piano Teacher* is, and how little of its verbal energy and complexity were translated onto the screen.

First and foremost, *The Piano Teacher*—or, more accurately and ambiguously, *The Piano Player* (Jelinek's title is *Die Klavierspielerin*)—is about post-Nazi Vienna, as seen through the eyes of a half-Jewish writer who grew up in the Austrian capital and attended both the Vienna Conservatory and the University of Vienna. Although the film is nominally set in Vienna, by making it a French film with French-speaking actors, Haneke gives Jelinek's raw and jumpy interior monologues a very different spin: One forgets that Jelinek's is a tale not just of bourgeois hypocrisy and capitalist commodification, but quite specifically of the middle-class venality that characterized Austria in the aftermath of the period euphemistically called "the seven years" (1938–45), when, in the wake of the *Anschluss*, Austria was a willing accomplice of Hitler's Third Reich. During the Allied occupation that followed, the Austrians came to fear and despise their Russian occupiers more than they ever hated Hitler, and thus the de-Nazification campaign so prominent in West Germany never quite took place in postwar Austria. From the revelations of Kurt Waldheim's military role in the Nazi SA (revelations made while he was serving as president of the republic in the late '80s) to the prominence of the far-right Freedom Party leader Jörg Haider in recent years, Austria has been haunted, despite a succession of Social Democrat and centrist governments, by the shadow of fascism.

There is thus no parallel between the bourgeois, upwardly mobile *Musikkultur* of Vienna and its counterpart in Paris. For one thing, Vienna *was* the great capital of classical music, from Haydn and Mozart to Schoenberg and Webern. The study of music was—and in part remains—integral to Austrian life in a way that has never been the case in France. Indeed, Jelinek's Erika Kohut, the failed concert pianist turned conservatory music teacher, has a cachet not applicable to piano teachers elsewhere. She is after all a professor—a title that attracts the young, petit bourgeois Walter Klemmer, triggering fantasies of possessing his cold, condescending teacher. More important, however, the real center of the novel is not, as in the film, the sadomasochistic sexual relationship between teacher and pupil but the deathly union, very much played down in the film, between Erika and her monster of a widowed mother—a mother who had been married for twenty years before giving birth to her only child. As for Erika's father, he evidently cracked up soon after her birth and was put away in an asylum.

In the novel's first scene, Erika comes home to the flat she shares with "Mother," only to be subjected to an inquisition worthy of a criminal court, and all because Erika, the family's breadwinner, dared to buy herself a dress now hidden in her briefcase. Mother's outrage at this unnecessary expense is rendered through her unique language and syntax:

> They are saving to buy a large condominium. The cramped apartment they now rent is so ancient, you might as well just abandon it. When they decide on the condominium, they will be allowed to specify where to put the closets and partitions.
>
> You see, an entirely new construction system is being used. Every aspect is custom-designed, according to your precise wishes. You pay your money and you get your choice . . . and Erika pays. In the brand-new, state-of-the-art condominium, mother and daughter will each have her own realm, Erika here, Mother there. . . . Even here, in this dump, which is slowly falling to pieces, Erika already has her own realm, her own roost, which she rules and is ruled in. It is only a provisional realm; Mother can walk in at any time. There is no lock on Erika's door. A child has no secrets from her mother. . . .
>
> Erika has never had to do housework, because dustrags and cleansers ruin a pianist's hands. During Mother's rare breathers, she occasionally worries about her vast and varied holdings. You can't always tell where everything is. Just where is Erika, that fidgety property? . . . Mother worries a lot, for the first thing a proprietor learns, and painfully at that, is: Trust is fine, but control is better.

Here and throughout the novel (ably translated by Joachim Neugroschel), plot is character and character plot, both being expressions of a larger cultural unconscious. The first sentence above seems to be matter-of-fact disclosure on the part of an omniscient narrator, but as the second and third sentences reveal, it is more accurately a condensation of Mother's typical thoughts, packed as they are with the truisms of her time and place, like the notion that when something is old, get rid of it! With the "You see" in the fourth sentence, the distinction between Mother's mental state and the ads she reads and sees on TV breaks down: She accepts the enticement of the custom-designed partitions with alacrity. If she is a dupe, though, she is a sinister one: "You pay your money and you get your choice"—meaning that it is mother who chooses and daughter who pays. Indeed, this genteel bourgeois household, where the young pianist's hands must be protected, is no more than a jail. A child has no secrets from her mother, and so the two women sleep in the same bed, the "proprietor" having learned a maxim that echoes recent Nazi rule: "Trust is fine, but control is better."

Of course, *Erikamother*, as she is often designated in the German original, wouldn't verbalize it this way; she is a respectable lady who knows something about music and proudly attends her daughter's recitals. Here, as in *Wonderful, Wonderful Times*, the viciousness of the portraiture is convincing because, in Jelinek's dark vision, the "victims" are just as poisonous as their victimizers. When Mother berates Erika for buying the unneeded, too brightly colored cocktail dress, Erika, in a moment of rage, pulls so hard at her mother's hair—hair Erika had painstakingly colored only a few days before—that tufts fall out and leave bald spots. Indeed, Erika's violent physical assaults on her aging mother are, to my mind, more shocking than Walter's physical assaults on Erika herself. For the violence against parent is the most blatant exposure possible of Austrian society's endless show of "correct" behavior and formal politesse. In concert settings, Erika is always addressed as 'Professor Kohut," Walter as "Herr Klemmer," and Erika's mother, in her "black Persian-lamb-paw coat," as "Gnädige Frau." Thus the most shocking scene in *The Piano Teacher* is the one in which Erika brings Walter home to Mother, takes him into her "room"—a room with no lock on the door, which Mother has always entered at will—and has him wedge a heavy credenza against the door so that her enraged mother can only try to *hear* what is happening. She, not Erika, is now the *voyeuse* behind the walls that are not yet the movable partitions featured in the state-of-the-art condos to come. And the final irony is that the vile actions Erikamother imagines as taking place are not committed at all but only talked about, as Erika gives Walter her wish list of sadistic acts to be practiced in future encounters.


MAGNUM

Elfriede Jelinek, Vienna, 1991.

All this activity is rendered in a deceptively simple prose, which, without actual dialogue or direct narratorial intrusion, shifts, within the space of a sentence or even a clause, from one point of view to another, so as to ironize the situation.Take a sentence like, "Mother, with less hair on her head, stands crying, in the living room, where her Erika often gives private con-

certs." The speaking voice seems to be the narrator's, but when we come to "her Erika," we see that the perspective is actually Mother's own. Indeed, the complex layering of Jelinek's text makes it impossible to view Erika as the sex-starved spinster she is in the film. Rather, she, along with Mother and pupil-seducer, is a pawn in a bitter satire on latter-day Vienna, a city that has tried to graft its brilliant prewar artistic culture—or at least the memory of what that culture might once have been—onto a new, suspect social order. In this postwar moment, elders (like Herr Witkowski in *Wonderful, Wonderful Times*) are former SS officers, returned—without enlightenment or even a change of heart—to seedy, petty bourgeois modes of life in the shell of the former imperial capital, a shell where *thingness* is all.

Jelinek's writing bears the stamp of the avant-garde poetics of the *Wiener Gruppe*, as well as the prose of Ingeborg Bachmann and Thomas Bernhard. Like her two Austrian predecessors, Jelinek began as a lyric poet and writes sardonic elliptical plays as readily as novels, in both cases vigorously satirizing her native city. The musical soirée in *The Piano Teacher* recalls the all-night "artistic" dinner in Bernhard's *Woodcutters* or the Salzkammergut society luncheon in Bachmann's *Malina*. Jelinek's communism must be understood in this larger context. In a 1993 interview with Eva Brenner, Jelinek confessed that "being a communist means nothing more or less to me than taking a stance against capitalism—a system which despises human beings—and believing in the necessity of another social arrangement." This is as naive as Jelinek's radical feminism, assuming that communist societies *do* value the individual and treat women more humanely. But if we understand Jelinek's communism to be no more than a form of utopianism necessary to survive in an otherwise unbearable world, it becomes less problematic. As for the Austrian Communist Party, after 1989, when the horrors of the GDR were finally revealed, the novelist resigned her membership. Indeed, she tells Brenner that she considers her years in the party "the gravest mistake of my life."

The linkage, in *The Piano Teacher* as in the other novels, of the political and the sexual is more problematic. Jelinek's lurid descriptions of sex acts are not so much pornographic (they certainly don't titillate) as they are overwritten and overly long—especially in *Lust* (1989), where the factory manager–husband's endless sexual assaults on his submissive wife are related in such exhaustive and repetitious detail that the reader (at least this reader) loses interest. Is there, one wonders, no other form capitalist "perversion" and power play can take? Conversely, is women's experience of sex really never more than a sense of acute violation or rape?

Wonderful, Wonderful Times (the title is a particularly foolish one, giving the reader no sense of the original *Die Ausgesperrten*, which means "The Locked-out") is less dogmatic than *The Piano Teacher* on these issues. Both Rainer Witkowski, the pseudo-intellectual, depraved teenage gang-leader son of a one-legged former SS officer turned night porter, and Hans Sepp, a fellow gang-member son of a Communist Party member who was killed in a concentration camp, are in love with the rich, beautiful, vicious, but virginal Sophie, an aristocrat's daughter who engages in the gang's depraved and gratuitous crimes just for kicks, knowing she will soon assume her rightful position in society. However perverted Rainer's half-baked political views, however garbled his analysis of Sartre, Bataille, and Camus, his love for Sophie is oddly disinterested. Only when he is finally forced to concede that there is no hope does he find his consummation—in the brutal slaughter of the final scene, in which Rainer, in his own distorted version of an existentialist *acte gratuit*, kills both his parents and his twin sister, Anna.

Wonderful, Wonderful Times probes, in a series of hallucinatory episodes, what happens when there is no past to illuminate the present, when history has become a mere hole, which no stuffing, not even the best straw, can fill. Jelinek's dissection of contemporary capitalism sometimes sounds shrill and simplistic, but in her best work, economics takes a back seat to larger, more metaphysical questions. Her Vienna is the site of a collective refusal of memory, the memory of How It Was not so long ago—and to a large measure still *is*—in our postwar, post-Holocaust landscape. Given the refusal to meet the past honestly, *things*—whether household gadgets or new clothes, elaborate meals or virtuoso performances, and especially human beings, objectified and commodified—come to dominate all relationships. In the Café Sport, where Rainer kills time before he is ready for the real kill, he takes momentary pleasure in being the owner of "fashionable diamond-shaped perspex sunglasses." Together with his new "Caesar haircut," they give his face just the right look. □

Marjorie Perloff's most recent books are *The Vienna Paradox* (New Directions, 2004) and *Differentials: Poetry, Poetics, Pedagogy* (University of Alabama, 2004), cowinner of the 2004 Robert Penn Warren–Cleanth Brooks Award.

BRUSH STROPHES

David Antin

THE BURIAL OF THE COUNT OF ORGAZ AND OTHER POEMS
BY PABLO PICASSO, EDITED WITH TRANSLATIONS BY JEROME ROTHENBERG AND PIERRE JORIS, AFTERWORD BY MICHEL LEIRIS
CAMBRIDGE, MA: EXACT CHANGE. 352 PAGES. $20.

On April 18, 1935, at the age of fifty-four, Pablo Picasso suddenly launched into a career as an experimental writer that lasted until late August 1959. It was a serious career because over the course of those twenty-five years he composed 340 poems and two plays; it was an obscure career because until Gallimard's 1989 publication of *Picasso: Ecrits*, the extent and nature of his writing during this period, sometimes undertaken on a nearly daily basis, was virtually unknown. In fact, less than a quarter of these works had ever seen the light of day. Now a team of excellent poet-translators—headed by editors Jerome Rothenberg and Pierre Joris—have rendered these poems, composed in Picasso's native Spanish and quirky, idiosyncratic French, into a brilliant American vernacular, so now English-speaking readers can ask: What propelled Picasso into this writing? What kind of writer was he? And what relation did his plays and poetry have to his work as a visual artist?

By April 1935, the prodigiously productive Picasso had stopped painting and was in the middle of a messy attempt at divorce from Olga Khoklova, the beautiful Diaghilev dancer he had acquired in 1918 while working on the set designs for the ballet *Parade*. The interruption of his painting may have been due to temporary aesthetic exhaustion, or it may have had practical, economic—as well as psychological—causes. French community-property laws required a complete inventory and appraisal of Picasso's works in order to divide his assets equally. Any new paintings would have increased not only the headache of appraisal but also Khoklova's take. Whatever the reason, with painting blocked as an outlet for his creative drive, Picasso plunged into writing. Under the heading "Boisgeloup-18 April XXXV," starting simply in Spanish with a mildly fanciful declarative sentence, he elliptically evokes his economic problems on a lazy Thursday:

> if I should go outside the wolves would
> come to eat out
> of my hand just as my room would seem to
> be outside of
> me my other earnings would go off around
> the world
> smashed into smithereens but what is there
> to do today
> it's thursday everything is closed . . .

From this point, Picasso rushes without punctuation or pause into a series of short staccato sentences that gradually pick up a train of relative clauses and appositional phrases, bearing an increasing load of more fantastically depicted images of bulls and horses, swallows and blackbirds, armadas and mirrors, randy girls, and nuns, jackknives, and grenades—images of winning and losing, of being constrained, wounded, suffering and breaking free—this goes on for nearly twenty pages of what Rothenberg refers to as "wall to wall poetry." This was the poetry that Gertrude Stein disdained and Andre Bréton admired and published in a special issue of *Cahiers d'art* at the end of 1935. It is a poetry of rapid flows, quick turns, and uncensored images, but it's not automatic writing. The manuscript pages reproduced in *Ecrits*, which the volume of translations does not include, show numerous crossouts, additions, and revisions, which testify to the calculated effects of this rapidly constructed work.

In some ways, Picasso's process of considered but quick composition parallels his practice in painting. But there is no similarity in outcome. The paintings, sculptures, drawings, and engravings, no matter how whimsical, impulsive, or violent—from the never-completed playing-card nightmare of *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* to the monumental comic strip of *Guernica*—all come framed by an elegance of composition either inherent in Picasso's visual sensibility or learned through his long and deep engagement with the painting tradition from Velázquez to Cézanne. They are also bracketed by an irresistible comic sensibility that permeates his darkest works. While there are flashes of wit in the torrent of language that Picasso's poetry presents, there are few signs of the painter's compositional elegance. There are also occasional experiments with lineation—one in fact that has an odd resemblance to William Carlos Williams:

> tonight
> i saw
> the last
> person
> leaving the concert
> at the salle Gaveau
>
> and then i went to get some matches in the
> tobacco shop a bit further along the same
> street

Overall, though, such experiments with observation, derived precision, and articulation are rare.

There is an even greater difference between the poetry and the painting, which is a consequence of the difference between visual and verbal imaging, especially the kind of verbal imaging Picasso deploys. A painting's images are definitive visible objects, however dissimilar they may be to anything in our physical world, but in language works, you can say anything that's pronounceable or write anything that's legible, whether it makes any realizable sense or not. You can say "The sun somersaults over the body of three anxieties," and any speaker of English will understand what you've said, even if they have no idea what such an action might look like:

> the battle began at two that afternoon the
> roses started
> shooting rounds and yanked out their gun-
> powder nails in
> little dandruff filings which did open fire on
> the snares and
> cut the words to pieces hanging from the
> olive tree when
> hands were twisting waves and threw them-
> selves down on
> the ground and naked polished off the stone
> enchantment
> blinding their delights up in the bough . . .

It's easy enough to parse these relatively simple sentences without having any idea or even caring what "gun powder nails" are or how words can be cut to pieces by gunfire from roses or how hands can twist waves. In this kind of writing, the words go by, flashing lexical meanings that only intermittently combine into articulated sentential semantic wholes. The reader's pleasure comes from the flashing succession of word meanings as they ignite within the sentences that surround but do not control them.

So these poems are haunted by the ghosts of representations—of landscapes, of meals, of battles, of lovemaking. This is something they have in common with the paintings of Picasso's most inventive period—his Cubist works between 1907 and 1914—which even at their most abstract are always beset by specters of representation. It's possible that these journal-like poems served Picasso as a way to get his head together, to bring him back to his artistic roots among the poets, alongside his gone friends Jacob and Apollinaire. It was not for nothing that Picasso had scrawled in the old days on his studio door *Au rendez-vous des poètes*. □

David Antin is a poet and critic whose most recent book, *i never knew what time it was*, has just been published by the University of California Press.



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ODD SQUAD

Christine Schutt

WILLFUL CREATURES
BY AIMEE BENDER
NEW YORK: DOUBLEDAY. 224 PAGES. $23.

Aimee Bender's second collection of stories, the absorbing *Willful Creatures*, is full of surprise and dark instruction conveyed with graceful humor. Divided into three parts, the collection's mood tilts upward, from the first low, sobering note of "Death Watch" to the trilling paradoxes of the closing tale, "Hymn." Loss is alive in everything; just as, indeed, everything imaginable is alive. Potatoes, irons, and teakettles are humanly animated and mourned in these tales. Characters with beautiful deformations—the boy with keys for fingers or the shapeshifting child—are revealed as consolatory and illuminating disfigurements: "Make yourself a structure you can live inside." This is good advice, but failing to erect one's own structure, a reader might live for a time in Bender's fabulous house of fiction.

The fables and fairy tales in Part One are the bleakest in the collection. Men and women are depicted as willful yet powerless; they are tyrannized and tyrannizers both. In "End of the Line," a big man in search of a pet buys a little man, whose requests for typical comforts—"an actual pillow . . . a lamp and some books"—amuse the big man, and for a while the two get along. Then the little man's stories of his past life begin to nettle, until "after hearing about the tenth meal in Paris" the big man starts to torture him. Sexually humiliated, refrigerated, and toasted, the little man grows used to suffering and a fearlessness sets in: "Pain was no longer a mystery to him, and a man familiar with pain has entered a new kind of freedom."

One of Bender's better tricks is the ease with which she reveals truths; sentences that for all their wisdom might nonetheless clunk are here right and welcome. So the big man discovers that a man made "less of a person . . . was easier to get along with and less fun to play with." Although he frees his battered pet, his curiosity about little people swells to yearning. "I just want to be a part of your society," the piteous giant calls out to the little people: "I will protect you from us," he promises, but the big man finds no more sign of the little men and women than a little yellow hat, which he puts on "his enormous head." He is a doleful sight to one wary of these "aliens the size of God," yet the owner of the hat holds still with unexpected "pity that kept unbuckling in her heart."

In a similar vein, "Debbieland," the last story in Part One, involves tyrannical ownership, this time of the despised high school student Debbie. The plural narration by her classmates is menacingly apt. "In preparation for the harming of Debbie," they bait her with flattery until, beguiled and expectant of friendship, she is cornered and savagely beaten. The violence is shocking; ordinary language is put to mean use: "We rip the skirt off . . . and her underwear is almost too much to bear, with that pattern that is the knockoff of the expensive one, and a giant maxi pad weighing down the middle." Released, Debbie "slinks off, sobbing," and were it "not so boring" to prey on her "every day for a year," the group would go on beating her. Their hatred is "bottomless," yet once "removed from her skirt, we washed [Debbie] from our viewpoint. She of course will remember us forever." Memory has its thuggish ways. Willful creatures who "provoke or extract or soothe" our tears will be remembered. But the good news for these grief hunters is that "crying is not an endangered action. There are endless tears to hunt down."

The predatory pall lifts in Part Two with consideration of romantic entanglement. Bender turns away from pain to consider the mystery of desire. "Motherfucker" is the opening story, and the motherfucker of the title is the hero. He comports himself in a seemly way and doesn't "fuck married mothers, only available ones," those "who wanted to date and who'd lined up an appropriate babysitter." The motherfucker is an instructive lover. "Desire is a house," he says; it "needs closed space." And the mother he seduces is no dumb starlet. She quickly learns how small a space—"the closest it can be to being your actual size"—and in the moment she masters the lesson on desire and feels a transporting connection with the motherfucker, he walks out and thus becomes the ubiquitous motherfucker we've all heard about.

In fact, all the stories in Part Two involve leave-taking. "Jinx," the shortest one, presents teenage girls, best friends, "both wearing . . . great new butts" but only one with developed breasts, walking to the store where the "cute boy" works. In the store, the girls respond to a lascivious poster of a rock 'n' roll star, calling it gross at the same time. "Jinx!" they say and laugh with delight at their likeness. But what happens next speaks to their bodily difference: They separate. The girl with breasts is out back kissing while the flat-chested girl is alone on the street. "This is so rare," she thinks. But it is not funny to her, nor to her friend, when later on the phone they find themselves, for the first time in their friendship, at a loss for words.

Bender is a nimble writer; her unadorned, everyday language is deftly brightened by an occasional silly word or striking comparison. Only in descriptions of melodious romance do her high notes squeak, yet such slips are rare; more frequently the reader is overtaken by the figurative flourishes and playfulness.

In Part Three, Bender accentuates the positive, featuring images of reunions and feasting. The large-hearted "Dearth" is a revelatory tale of disguised bounty. When asked if her children have magic powers, the mother in the story answers simply, "They stay." These abiding children are in fact not human but potatoes, yet in the alchemy of storytelling, Bender has made them real and beautiful. The dirge of human mutability, limits, and loss turns hymnal in the last stories, with their celebratory gestures of homecoming and homemaking. The "Amen" that serves as the book's final line is fully earned in this wise book. □

Christine Schutt's novel, *Florida*, was a National Book Award finalist in 2004 and will be published in paperback in the fall by Harcourt. Her short story collection, *A Day, a Night, Another Day, Summer*, has just been published by Triquarterly.

ATTENTION MUST BE PAID

Maggie Paley

THE HISTORY OF LOVE
BY NICOLE KRAUSS
NEW YORK: NORTON. 320 PAGES. $24.

A successful first novel is a hard act to follow. The writer, whose first book was composed in utter privacy, now has a public to please and critics to answer to. As a consequence, many second novels suffer in one way or another from lack of nerve. No so with Nicole Krauss's *History of Love*; in scope and depth it fearlessly outpaces *Man Walks into a Room*, her estimable debut. That book—praised by many, including Susan Sontag—concerned a man who loses all memory of his adult life and then embraces his new blankness, rejecting even his wife, who remembers the person he used to be. And in it, Krauss demonstrated an eye for evocative detail and a sharp wit that made a virtue of restraint.

The History of Love, by contrast, is emotionally direct. Brilliantly told, the novel serves as a reminder that accessibility need not mean dumbing down. Love is its subject: the urge to know and make oneself known, and to do so, as well, through the act of writing.

The book opens with the voice of Leo Gursky: "When they write my obituary. Tomorrow. Or the next day. It will say, *LEO GURSKY IS SURVIVED BY AN APARTMENT FULL OF SHIT.*" Though only one of three protagonists, whose stories are gradually braided together, Leo is the central character, and his voice—passionate, skeptical, hilarious—reverberates throughout the work, making his presence felt even when he's offstage. Leo's life, we learn, has been full of sorrow. As a young man in Poland he wanted to be a writer. "I wanted to describe the world, because to live in an undescribed world was too lonely," he says. He was writing a novel about the woman he loved when her family shipped her off to America. He sent her portions of the novel by mail. Then the Nazis came; he escaped by hiding out in forests and potato cellars, eating rats raw when he was hungry enough. He lost his desire to describe and believed his novel to be lost as well. By the time he made his way to New York, the woman he loved had married someone else. She told him he had a son who didn't know he existed. He worked as a locksmith and tried to make himself invisible.

An old man now, Leo doesn't want to die alone, so he goes out into the world and does small things to be noticed. "I'll buy a juice even though I'm not thirsty. If the store is crowded I'll even go so far as dropping my change all over the floor." Knowing his time is short, Leo lets nothing escape his attention; the world and everything in it, himself included, serve as his entertainment, his sustenance—and his material. He has written a second novel, and one day he wraps it in brown paper and mails it to his son, Isaac, who is now a famous writer, and whose life and career Leo has followed from afar.

Enter Alma, a precocious young Brooklyn teenager who keeps a journal written in prose of childlike clarity. Like Leo, Alma pays attention; she is young enough to love the world wholeheartedly. Her father is dead and she worries a lot—about her mother's happiness; about the sanity of her younger brother, who thinks he's the Messiah; about her own future. Then a letter arrives from a mysterious man, asking Alma's mother to translate from Spanish an obscure novel by Zvi Litvinoff called *The History of Love*. Alma, who as it happens was named after the heroine of the novel, begins to do some detective work.

Leo goes to his son's house in Connecticut to retrieve the manuscript he sent, taking a taxi from the train station: "A white house came into view. A little wind was chasing the clouds. Between the branches, I saw a lake. I'd imagined his place many times. But never with a lake. The oversight pained me." The old man lets himself in; as he explores the house—opening the refrigerator and the medicine cabinet, sitting at the typewriter, conjuring the son he never knew—the effect is devastating.

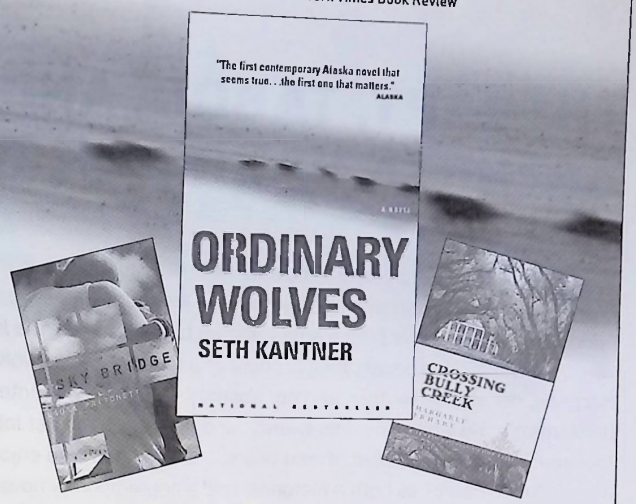
Cut to Chile, some years earlier, where Litvinoff, an immigrant Polish intellectual, is translating the novel *The History of Love* from Yiddish into Spanish, giving the pages day by day to his wife, who is the one who insisted he publish it. The gradually revealed connections between Leo's world and Alma's and Zvi's are complex, and the urge to unravel them creates a powerful momentum. Yet for all its verbal and emotional heat, the narrative is constructed with cinematic precision.

Still, there are flourishes: pages with one line of text on them, and excerpts from the novel within the novel, presented for their own sake. With titles such as "The Birth of Feeling" and "The Age of Silence," these selections verge on the excessively whimsical—but they are attempts to say what it means to be human, and more often than not they succeed. For an example, one passage describes the protagonist kissing Alma for the second time. "He ran his fingers down her spine over her thin blouse . . . grateful for the world, which purposefully puts divisions in place so that we can overcome them, feeling the joy of getting closer, even if deep down we can never forget the sadness of our insurmountable differences."

In another passage, Krauss refers to "the insoluble contradiction of being animals cursed with self-reflection, and moral beings cursed with animal instincts." Then how, we might ask, are mere humans to live? Leo is saved by his capacity to address the world in spite of its cruelties. Alma, at fourteen, has the perspective, and exhibits the peculiar joy, of a practiced observer. Litvinoff lives by the word. And Krauss provides an answer by her own example. Give the world your attention. Attention is another way of saying *love*. □

Maggie Paley is the author of the novel *Bad Manners* (Crown, 1986); the nonfiction study *The Book of the Penis* (Grove, 1999); and *Elephant* (Groundwater Press, 1990), a chapbook of sestinas.

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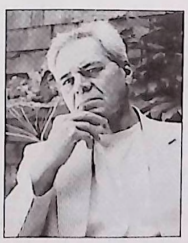
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THERAPY, TABOO, AND PERDITION ETERNAL: KATHRYN HARRISON TALKS WITH BOOKFORUM

As the author of six novels and five nonfiction works, Kathryn Harrison has two distinct identities in the literary world. She is perhaps best known for her memoir *The Kiss* (1997), a devastating account of a family triangle involving Harrison, her elusive mother, and her absent father, who only entered the author's life when she was twenty, and then seduced her into a four-year affair. For the past fifteen years, Harrison has also enjoyed a remarkable career as both a historical and a contemporary novelist; she is as assured describing the inside of a nineteenth-century Shanghai brothel as she is evoking a crystal meth–driven shoplifting spree in Manhattan's Bergdorf Goodman department store. Her ability to train an unflinching eye on some of the more frightening aspects of eroticism and the human psyche, combined with her uncommon wisdom, distinguishes her as one of the finest and most fearless storytellers writing today.

Envy (Random House) is Harrison's first novel with a contemporary setting since *Exposure* (1993), and her second to feature a male protagonist. Set in the Brooklyn brownstone neighborhood of Park Slope, the novel depicts the midlife crisis of psychiatrist Will Moreland, a man whose ten-year-old son has recently died in a boating accident. His grief is wreaking havoc on his marriage and his libido, as well as dredging up unresolved business with his estranged twin brother, Mitch, who hasn't spoken to him since the night of Will's wedding.

Late in March, Harrison came over to my Park Slope apartment, not far from her own house—it's the neighborhood we both call home. In talking about the new novel, we touched on the potential dangers of the therapist's office for both the client and the shrink, and the way women can win the battle for power between the sexes. Then we broached the topic of book reviewers: Harrison revealed herself to be as honest as she is gracious, even when discussing one of her fiercest critics for the first time in print.

—KERA BOLONIK



JOYCE RAVID

Kathryn Harrison in Brooklyn, New York, 2004.

***BOOKFORUM*: Grief is the catalyst for Will Moreland's unraveling, after he loses his son, Luke, in a drowning accident. But envy seems to further propel his crisis. It bonds him with his twin brother, Mitch, a world-champion long-distance swimmer. He's also jealous of an old lover he runs into at a college reunion, who has a daughter that may or may not be his. And he envies his wife, Carole, her ability to grieve privately and calmly.**

KATHRYN HARRISON: And he also envies his father, who seems to handle life with much more grace than Will. I titled the book after I'd finished it. I didn't set out to write a book about envy, so *Envy* was more an instinctive than a conscious choice. I'm not sure how strictly realistic my novels are. Mitch, whom we never see, is less a real person than a doppelgänger for Will. Will is cerebral; Mitch is all body. Mitch's face is disfigured; Will's isn't. Mitch never appears, but he's talked about a lot and he's a very powerful presence.

***BF*: And submerged in water.**

KH: Yes, swimming in the unconscious, if you will. Of course the book has a lot to do with psychoanalysis, and is about betrayal as much as envy. *Betrayal* would have been an adequate title—it's sexy. But it's not quite as sexy and final and sad as *envy*.

***BF*: *Envy* evokes grief. I suppose *betrayal* does, too.**

KH: But *envy* is more active, dangling possibility as if something's still in play, whereas with *betrayal*, the story is over.

***BF*: Losing a child has a destructive impact on Will and Carole's sex life. She won't face him anymore while having sex or allow him to pleasure her. The deprivation feels punitive, as if Carole is telling him that he doesn't deserve to experience joy. He believes she blames him for their son's accident.**

KH: He believes this partly because he's riddled with guilt. He says of his wife, "It's as if I'm just this guy who happens to be attached to this dildo she's using." She's not really present when they have sex. And she's always so serene, so good at repelling any of his observations or attempts to penetrate her on any level other than sexually. As a result, he's always wondering how much of it is in his head and how much of it truly exists.

***BF*: Is he displacing his desire to win back Carole's trust by, paradoxically, fantasizing about his clients? Sex would seem to require a component of vulnerability for him, as if he had to resolve something for someone else.**

KH: There is displacement of his desire for Carole, and also I think sex is a natural response to bereavement. They say people often go home and fuck after funerals. What mortal response does Will have to death, other than using his body to affirm life? Also, he's stuck in that spot where he's not getting the emotional consummation that he wants from sex with his wife, and thus is left in a constant state of desire and neediness. There's a lot more to sex than fucking.

***BF*: If that's all it was, he'd be satisfied with his situation with Carole.**

KH: In that sense, he's sort of like the character Bigelow from my last novel, *The Seal Wife*.

***BF*: That novel's set in 1915 in Anchorage; Bigelow's a weatherman obsessed with a mute Aleutian woman. He proves that yearning to connect with the unapproachable woman is as old as time itself.**

KH: Bigelow was tortured because she made herself so unavailable to him. I think women are very good at shutting men out in a mean way, removing themselves from their bodies. In the eternal power game between the sexes, men are capable of physically brutalizing women, but women are more emotionally devious. They're inclined to punish men in ways that are so passive—so much more about absence than aggression—that it's impossible to fight back.

***BF*: This is your second novel to feature a male protagonist. Why did you decide to tell Will's story, and not Carole's?**

KH: It's too easy for me to be a woman on the page. Being inside a guy's head is totally different, so it's more challenging, and more fun. That's the cerebral answer. The truer answer is that the position of the tormented man trying to break through to a withholding woman is deeply familiar to me, because it is a trope for my relationship with my mother. As a child, the focus of my desire was a cool, emotionally mute woman who always managed to elude both my touch and my understanding. I wanted to know my mother, but I couldn't. So I know what it's like to be rebuffed by a female object of desire.

***BF*: Jennifer is a new client who upends Will's world. He's vulnerable, and this young, smart-as-hell, rock-chick vixen comes in with tales of her raunchy exploits that send him reeling. In a weird way, he desperately needs a catalyst like her.**

KH: Jennifer is delightful because she is amoral and has no sense of shame and gets away with everything. You rarely encounter such a person in a book. When you do, she usually gets punished. But not

Jennifer. She cuts a swath through people's lives and moves on—she is a force of nature! If you've ever been a patient, you realize what's possible in that room, in terms of what you can say, which is anything. It's potentially complicated and very risky in there, and not just for the patient. For those who go for an hour of handholding, it can be the most pedestrian experience. But when it's real, the transactions are astonishing.

BF: What is it about eroticism that you are trying to resolve through your writing? All of your novels are concerned in some way with its power, and the perils.

KH: Whether it is conscious or unconscious, I find myself trying to correct the incredibly vanilla standards of what our culture considers attractive, because I find them to be so lifeless and plastic. What is erotic is often surprising, alive, offbeat, and weird—and very individual. In *The Binding Chair*, an Australian Jewish philanthropist named Arthur Cohen unexpectedly falls for May, the very woman he had intended to save and reform. He is drawn to her bound feet, which he never imagined possible. He sees them unwrapped—people are never really allowed to see them unwrapped—and they're not pretty. But pretty doesn't factor in eroticism. Eroticism is the opposite of pretty, just as a beautiful woman is not a pretty woman, because beauty depends on an edge of ugliness. Eroticism is animal, instinctive.

BF: After Luke's death, Will's father, Henry, takes up photography. Is this his way of grappling with loss, making things constant and immortal by seizing them on film?

KH: Aren't most human endeavors a response to the consciousness of mortality? With photography, on some level you can seize and fix a moment and have it forever. There are other ways to record a moment—you can write about it, or paint it—but a camera seems to promise actually keeping the moment itself. Ultimately photography is no more or less adulterated than other art forms, but it gives the illusion of being more real.

BF: In nearly every one of your novels, the protagonist is either unable to have a child or loses one. *Envy* is the first novel to feature a protagonist with a surviving child. Will and Carole still have their daughter, Samantha.

KH: [*laughs*] Apparently I've reached a point of optimism!

BF: You have three great, healthy kids that you've written about in your essay collection, *Seeking Rapture*, so devoted readers recognize that this fear isn't drawn from your personal experience. What is it about this theme that has you writing about it over and over?

KH: Nothing in my personal reproductive life has been in any way disappointing or traumatic. But I'm scared of happiness, and health, and stability. I'm always aware of how much I can lose. And once you have a child, you can't imagine existing on the other side of losing that child. Is it possible to survive such an event? I drop one of my kids off at school and think, *Today's the field trip to Staten Island. Hmm. Bus. Bridge.* And my mind starts spinning: *What's going to happen?* In all likelihood, nothing. But every day is a leap of faith. Here are these creatures that were once inside your body, then held in your arms, and then you're expected to entrust them to other, seemingly responsible grown-ups. They might do their best, but there's fate. The world acts upon them.

BF: You've written three historical novels. In fact *Envy* is the first present-day novel you've written since *Exposure*. How does the writing process differ?

KH: One process sort of relieves the other. It's both more complicated and simpler to work on a book set in another time and place. We tend to confuse historical fiction with history. But it's far less factual than you might imagine, because a writer uses the past as a canvas onto which she can project her own, necessarily contemporary concerns. A novel set in the present doesn't involve the same kind of research, but you do have to find a way to gain perspective on your own time, which is difficult. Of course, research is something I enjoy because it puts off the act of writing. And it's fun. I don't read many historical novels. One of the problems with a lot of historical fiction is that if it's not a bodice ripper, it's often a novel that's top-heavy with research. If I'm following a character through a building in the pages of a novel, I don't want to know the history of the Otis elevator.

BF: I have to admit that I skim over those long, arduous passages. I really just want to know the people.

KH: When you write something set in the past, you may end up using only 5 percent of the facts you've worked so hard to gather. So if writers tend to overexplain, I think it's because it's painful to do all of that work only to find that 95 percent of it was about getting to a point of adequate self-confidence. Too much information doesn't lend credibility—it actually undermines it. If I were writing about going to the gym, I wouldn't give you a history of the iPod. The iPod would simply be plugged in to my ears. I'd make a quick reference that wouldn't require an explanation. When I do research, I want to get to a place where I feel confident enough to exist in that world without feeling anxious that I don't know what's going on.

BF: A. L. Kennedy, in a recent interview in these pages, said that while writing fiction she could be more emotionally revealing than when writing memoir. You've written four memoirs, and your first novel, *Thicker Than Water*, is very close to the story in your first memoir, *The Kiss*. I recently reread *Thicker Than Water* and found it more intense and disturbing than the memoir.

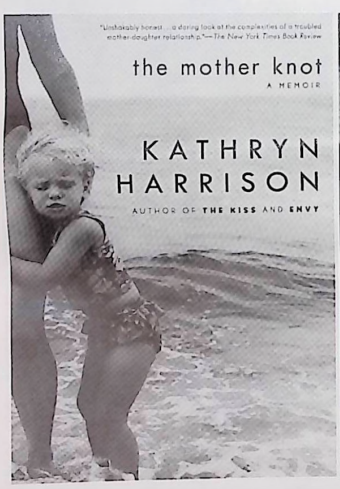
KH: It is both intentionally and unintentionally more revealing than nonfiction. When I described my grandparents in *Thicker Than Water*, for example, I depicted my grandmother as being really tall and my grandfather as a diminutive man. In fact the opposite was true, but in terms of the force of their personalities, my grandmother was the larger figure. On the other hand, one of the motivations for writing *The Kiss* was that I had fictionalized the story. Because *Thicker Than Water* was a typically autobiographical first novel, with aspects changed around and disguised, I felt disappointed in it and in myself: I knew that there was a story that was real and one that needed to be owned. To novelize a story of incest is to participate in the societal imperative to always lie about it, to say it's not happening, or that you made it up. For that reason, I wanted to disown that novel as soon as it was published. *The Kiss* is intentionally stripped-down because I wanted to reveal that archetypal triangle of the parents and the child. The shell-shocked, present-tense narration reveals some of the experience of being in a relationship like that, in which you are in a kind of cottony, emotionally vacant state—it's the only way you get through things like that. In a sense, the books are separate truths that, in the end, complement each other.

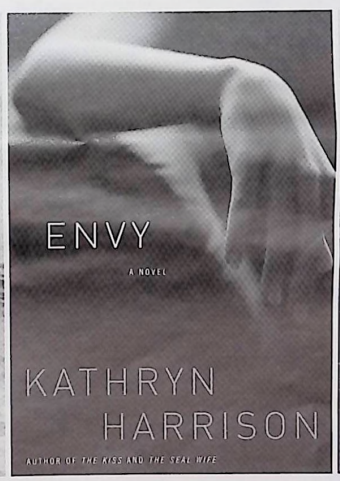
BF: A lot of reviewers were merciless when *The Kiss* came out. Most of the memoir—and *Thicker Than Water* for that matter—evokes the experience of a child being deprived of something as primal as parental love. Some of the reviews bypassed this and made a beeline for the more "sensational" aspects, taking *you* to task for being twenty when your father seduced you, and questioning the veracity of your story and your motive for writing it. They judged you personally and invited readers to do the same.

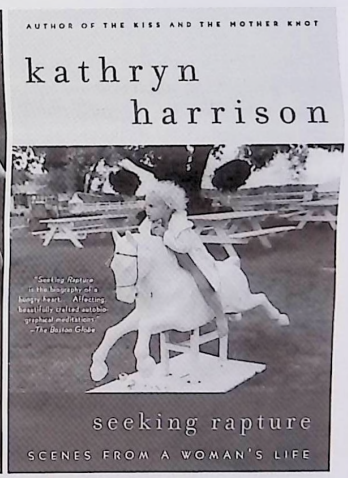
KH: It's the power of taboo. It's almost like an autoimmune response. As you know, certain critics were venomous, mean in a way that has nothing to do with book criticism. But the publication of *The Kiss* was disillusioning in the best sense. It was painful at first, but ultimately useful in that it stripped away naive fantasies that I'd had. Going into publication, I imagined that some people would be angry with me for who I was and what I'd done, and I could accept that because I'd been angry with myself.

BF: Did readers initially presume that someone had molested you as a child?

KH: Maybe. But isn't it reductive, even silly, to limit the age at which it's possible to be abused by a parent? To say, if you're under eighteen you're a kid, and if you're over eighteen, you're not? In relation to your parents, you're always a child. And I was naive about the media. I genuinely believed all journalists were honorable. [*laughs*] It never occurred to me that I'd be quoted out of context in order to distort my meaning. I wasn't prepared for slander, for people to say, "She did it for the money. Random House paid this huge advance." Random House didn't. They accepted the memoir in lieu of a novel that had been under contract for years, without any extra advance. The one thing that infuriated me was being called a liar. How ironic to finally come clean only to be accused of dishonesty. In the *Washington Post*, Jonathan Yardley wrote, nastily, "If, by the way, anything herein actually happened as she claims it did. . . ." He also called the book "slimy," "repellent," "meretricious." The fact that the review—plus an Op-Ed piece!—was so hysterical in its hostility turned out to be a saving grace. I mean, a critic has to have an agenda to take the people who blurbed the book to task: Tobias Wolff, Mary Karr, Robert Coles, and Mary Gordon were all sentenced by Yardley to "perdition eternal." In the end it was laughable. But at the time it wasn't very funny.





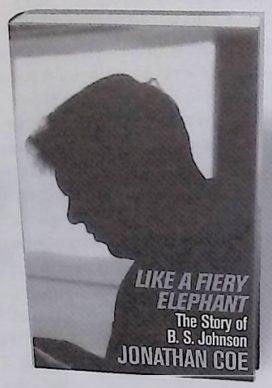


BF: The experience sounds devastating.

KH: You have a choice to either laugh or cry. I cried before, and now it seems funny. I even look forward to certain events, hoping to meet some of these people and say, "What a pleasure to [*laughs*] finally look you in the eye." But, in the end, do I give a fuck what any of these people think about me?

BF: I hope not. But for some more careless reviewers, criticism has become a spectator sport. Too many times, we see a critic veer off the page to ream an author for the facts of his or her life.

KH: This is the point that Andrea Dworkin made before *The Kiss* came out. She said, "It's all very well to say *who cares?* But in fact people publish lies, and other people will read them, and then other people believe what they tell them. Pretty soon there's a whole group of people who believe something false about you. And that is actual damage." Over time, the junk falls away and things reveal themselves. I have faith in that. □



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NEW REFLECTIONS

Adam Kirsch on James Laughlin

BYWAYS
BY JAMES LAUGHLIN, EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION AND NOTES BY PETER GLASSGOLD, PREFACE BY GUY DAVENPORT
NEW YORK: NEW DIRECTIONS. 336 PAGES. $20.

The worst passages of Ezra Pound's life, and some of the best passages of his poetry, were inspired by his quest for the perfect patron. This was not a selfish desire: Pound's own material needs were modest, and he managed to survive on his wife's small income, along with the little he earned from writing. What Pound dreamed of was the kind of patron—and still more, the kind of culture—that would nourish a whole constellation of artists. "Great art," he wrote, "does not depend on the support of riches, but without such aid it will be individual, separate, and spasmodic; it will not group and become a great period."

Yet Pound found it impossible to marshal even enough "riches" to free T. S. Eliot from his bank job, or to keep the sculptor Henri Gaudier-Brzeska from having to scrounge for marble. And as the dream of the perfect patron seemed less and less attainable, it grew in Pound's mind to fantastic dimensions. In the *Cantos*, that dream produced some of his most passionate verse, such as his paeans to the Renaissance tyrant and benefactor Sigismondo Malatesta, who in Canto 8 is shown assuring a painter, "I mean to make due provision, / So that he can work as he likes, / Or waste his time as he likes." In Pound's life, the same hope attached itself, disastrously, to the figure of Mussolini. "Don't knock Mussolini," he told a correspondent in 1932. "He will end with Sigismondo and the men of order, not with the pus-sacks and destroyers."

It came as quite a surprise, then, that when Pound's great patron finally appeared, he turned out to be not a philosopher-king but a college student. James Laughlin, the heir to a Pittsburgh steel fortune, was just twenty years old when he made his pilgrimage to Pound's "Ezuversity," in what was to become one of the legendary encounters in American literary history: "To Rapallo then I came, / That was in 1934, a student / Bored with the academic conventions / Of Harvard, wanting to get to the source, / To learn about poetry from the best / Poet alive." So Laughlin recalls in *Byways*, the new book of verse recollections that is the closest thing to an autobiography ever produced by the longtime publisher of New Directions. This is only one of Laughlin's many recountings, in verse and prose, of that life-changing meeting. But it gains in poignancy, and in psychological ambivalence, by appearing alongside dozens of other fragments of memoir—sketches of Laughlin's childhood, college years, literary friendships, and romantic adventures. For *Byways* reminds us that Laughlin's friendship with Pound was both the making and the unmaking of the young man's career. He came to Rapallo an aspiring poet and went away a publisher: "You said I was / Such a terrible poet, I'd better / Do something useful and become / A publisher, a profession which / You inferred required no talent / And only limited intelligence."

Laughlin's irony does not entirely conceal what must have been a bitter disappointment. Peter Glassgold—the editor who assembled *Byways* out of a mass of published and unpublished fragments composed between 1983 and Laughlin's death in 1997—says in his introduction that "Pound's low estimation of [Laughlin's] poetry wounded him deeply," and notes that Laughlin didn't become a prolific writer of verse until the '80s and '90s, after Pound had died. Did Laughlin suspect self-interest in Pound's advice—that in steering the young millionaire away from writing, Pound was trying to create the kind of patron he had so far failed to find?

Yet *Byways* itself, with its verse that is really no more than serviceable prose, confirms Pound's opinion: There is no doubt that Laughlin accomplished much more as a publisher than he could have as a poet. For Pound's directive, of course, led Laughlin in 1936 to create New Directions, one of the most important publishing houses in American history, and for seven decades the nurse and midwife to avant-garde, experimental, and otherwise challenging writers, from Tennessee Williams to W. G. Sebald.

Even this success, however, could not have entirely erased the bitterness of being relegated to a secondary role in literature and literary history. It seems telling, then, that *Byways* should devote so little space to Laughlin's career at New Directions, as though he wanted to reclaim in his memoirs the literary independence he had ceded in life. The result is an idiosyncratic book, and a less valuable historical resource than the straight autobiography Laughlin might have written. Out of the hundreds of writers he knew and worked with, only four make significant appearances here: Pound, William Carlos Williams, Thomas Merton, and Kenneth Rexroth. The Pound and Merton sections, however, simply return in verse to experiences Laughlin wrote about more extensively in prose (in his books *Pound as Wuz* [1987] and *Random Essays* [1989]). His sketch of Rexroth is amusing but brief, centering on a trick Laughlin played to expose Rexroth's pretense of omniscience: Laughlin dropped the name of a wholly invented French writer, only to watch Rexroth spin out a series of fantastic anecdotes about his close friendship with the man. The Williams section, previously published in 1995 as a short book, is the most detailed, a combination of loving reminiscence and shrewd literary criticism.

What mainly provokes Laughlin to verse, however, is not other people's literature but his own inalienable memories of childhood and sexual adventure. When he writes about his youth, as a pampered scion of Jones and Laughlin Steel, and later as an uncomfortable "boy from the west" at Brahmin Harvard, he often seems to echo Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, with its similar settings and properties:

> Granny is an old wet hen.
> She spends her days lying on the
> Upstairs sitting room sofa, giving
> Orders to the servants, who are a
> Bunch of lazy Irish, except for
> Thomas the butler who sneaks me
> The Sunday funny papers, which are
> Forbidden at home. I read them with
> Thomas in the pantry and he gives
> Me ginger ale.

Laughlin's father was a dashing, charismatic figure who left the family business for a life of sailing, gambling, and French mistresses. Laughlin senior initiated his son into this playboy's existence, which would always coexist with his more strenuous commitment to literature. *Byways* testifies to Laughlin's ingenuous delight in seduction; many sections are devoted to the Southern belle, the Italian teenager, the Jewish girl from Brooklyn, the WASP princess, and other lessons in his erotic education. Erotic and not sentimental: Laughlin's sense of class privilege only becomes obtrusive in his quasi-seigneurial attitude toward his many conquests. Neurotic Liddy, though "she read books / That were above her back- / Ground to please me," could not vault "the barrier of class, / Of cultural background / Between us. I couldn't / Take her out with my class- / Mates from Harvard."

Indeed, given the Leporello's catalogue of lovers in *Byways*, one sometimes wonders how Laughlin had time for the literary enterprise that Pound, with more justice than he probably knew, called "Nude Erections." In the early years especially, Laughlin's authors were sometimes forced to cool their heels and gnash their teeth while their publisher spent time at his ski resort in Alta, Utah. (There is a painful stretch in his published correspondence with Delmore Schwartz involving a lost manuscript that finally turned up under the floorboards of an Alta mail truck.) But Laughlin's refusal to let New Directions usurp his pleasures may have ensured that, in the long run, it too remained a pleasure as well as a responsibility. And Laughlin finally recognized, as he affirmed after an eight-year quarrel with Williams, that "It had been wrong for me to / Spend so much time building / Ski lifts when my important / Work in life was to promote / The books of great poets."

In the long section of *Byways* devoted to his memories of Harvard, Laughlin includes a portrait of a classmate who called himself Lord Melcanth, a monitory emblem of the sterile dilettantism that could so easily have consumed a rich young man's life:

> He described himself as
> A writer but so far as I know he
> Never published anything. He
> Would have been a bore except
> That he was very witty. Give him
> A subject and he could reel off
> An amusing epigram for it.

The contrast with Laughlin, who went on to "publish" so many things, could not be plainer. *Byways* shows that Laughlin's real fortune was not just his wealth but his ability to devote himself to a career equally pleasant and useful—one definition of the good life. □

Adam Kirsch is the book critic for the *New York Sun* and author of *The Wounded Surgeon: Confession and Transformation in Six American Poets*, published last spring by Norton.

LOCAL COLORE

Richard Sieburth

MOSCARDINO

BY ENRICO PEA, TRANSLATED BY EZRA POUND

BROOKLYN, NY: ARCHIPELAGO BOOKS. 71 PAGES. $14.

Born in 1881 in a mountain village in the Apennines, not far from the marble quarries of Carrara, Enrico Pea was just the kind of Odyssean literatus who was bound to appeal to Ezra Pound. After kicking around the province of Lucca in his youth, as a mechanic, farmer, marble cutter, and dockworker, in 1896 Pea set off for Alexandria, where he frequented anarchist circles, befriended the poet Giuseppe Ungaretti, and became an importer of Italian marble and maker of furniture (Pound, himself a carpenter *à ses heures*, would later describe Pea's prose thus: He "writes like a man who could make a good piece of mahogany furniture"). Upon his return to Italy in 1914, Pea settled in the resort town of Viareggio on the Tuscan coast, where, under the patronage of local celebrity Giacomo Puccini and working with such younger writers as Eugenio Montale, he organized outdoor arts festivals intended to bring theater and opera to the *popolo*. Pea's activities as a cultural impresario (which paralleled Pound's in Rapallo, some thirty miles up the coast) were cut short in the early '40s. Suspected of antifascist tendencies, he retreated once again to Lucca and remained there until he died in 1958.

In Italy, Pea's reputation as a writer rests largely on his autobiographical trilogy of novels from the '20s—*Moscardino*, *Il Volto Santo*, and *Il Servitore del Diavolo*—which are often compared to the works of Sienese author Federigo Tozzi, owing to their intensely regionalist focus on rural life and their rich deployment of local dialect. Both authors' work was a refashioning of the tradition of Giovanni Verga, whose earthy Sicilian *verismo* D. H. Lawrence first "Englished" in the '20s. Pea's *Moscardino*, published in modernism's annus mirabilis of 1922, is a far more daringly experimental work. Upon first reading what he called this "strange and wondrous book," Italo Svevo confessed envy of the sheer "power and evidence" of its language. When Pound belatedly discovered the book in 1941, it came as something of a revelation: Here was the Wessex of Thomas Hardy hallucinated into a dreamscape whose fragmented cadences recalled the prose of Joyce, Wyndham Lewis, or Céline. At his microphone on Radio Rome, the American poet excitedly informed his listeners: "This is just announcin' that Italy has a writer, and it is some time since I told anybody that ANY country on earth had a writer."

Despite his nomadic, expatriate existence, Pound remained drawn throughout his career to the poetics of place. In his *Pisan Cantos* (perhaps his greatest celebration of the *locus amoenus*, written only a few miles south of Pea's Viareggio), he mentions Pea in the same breath as James Whitcomb Riley, the American dialect poet and a lifelong favorite of Pound's, as was Joel Chandler Harris. A similar nostalgia for the local informs his early praise for the regionalist poetry of Edgar Lee Masters and Robert Frost, and it extends into his admiration for Mussolini's program of *autarchia*, designed (in theory, at least) to empower regional self-rule, a vestige of Il Duce's (and Pea's) anarcho-syndicalist beginnings.

Regionalism, Gramsci once quipped, is merely the pastoralization of class conflict. Although rooted in the local landscape and idiom of Pea's native Versilia, *Moscardino* is definitely a version of antipastoral—which is to say, it belongs to the same genre of modernist satire to which Pound assigned both Joyce and Lewis. Loosely framed as a Faulknerian chronicle of the decline of a noble family into penury and disarray, Pea's autobiographical novel casts a sharp and vitriolic anticlerical eye on the disintegration of Italian rural life at the turn of the century, as the traditional hierarchies of class and gender were giving way to a kind of generalized delirium. Fittingly, the central figure in the tale is the young protagonist's mad grandfather, who between bouts in the local insane asylum (or "gook house," in Pound's idiolect) runs a household consisting of his mute mother, his two neurasthenic brothers (one of whom ends up hanging himself), and a servant girl from the mountains whom the grandfather has raped and impregnated. A blend of D'Annunzio's fin de siècle gothic and Verga's primal screams, this family tragedy (or is it black comedy?) sometimes sounds eerily like Flannery O'Connor in Pound's English version—although utterly without O'Connor's gonzo Catholic vision of redemption.

Pound's translations are among his most autobiographical works. Undertaken in 1941 when he was increasingly losing his grip (as evidenced all too dramatically by the logorrhea of his wartime radio broadcasts), Pound's English rendering of *Moscardino*, particularly in those passages where the lunatic grandfather reminisces, prepared the way for the great theater of memory he would enact in the *Pisan Cantos* four years later. At the same time, the project served to reengage those fertile regions of madness and delirium in Pound's imagination that, from his early Piere Vidal poems through his versions of Sophocles at St. Elizabeths, remain one of the deepest wellsprings of his work.

"When the mind swings by a grass-blade / an ant's forefoot shall save you," Pound observed in one of the Pisans. At times, when the phantasmagoria of Pea's prose momentarily lifts in order to reveal almost Cézanne-like notations of local landscape, we hear the old *miglior fabbro* turning out sentences as splendid as any in Joyce: "Gulls at rest on the sea-water, in little groups, crowds of them further off, others scattered over a sea fanned by a cool northwest wind. Patternless as a field of daisies sprouting in an unbounded meadow. A sea paler than spring grass feathered by so gentle a breeze, petals, blown off, deflowered." Or (shades of Hardy or Burns?): "Now it is winter and the hummock is green and the rosebush is a bundle of thorns."

Out of print for fifty years, *Moscardino* remains the most overlooked item in the Pound canon. This handsome little volume contains a new introduction by the poet's daughter, Mary de Rachewiltz, as well as Pea's own brief memoir of his encounters with his unexpected American double—the other E. P. □

Richard Sieburth most recently edited Ezra Pound's *Poems and Translations* for the Library of America.

RUSTIC CUBISM: ANNE DANGAR AND THE ART COLONY AT MOLY-SABATA

BY BRUCE ADAMS



CHICAGO: UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS. 284 PAGES. $60.

In 1951, when Australian Anne Dangar died at age sixty-five, a speaker at her interment was moved to declare (*pace* Picasso): "We are attending the funeral of a potter, the greatest potter in France!" Dangar had devoted the last twenty-one years of her life to her pottery, to her "master," the Cubist Albert Gleizes, and to the work they shared with others at Moly-Sabata, the artists' colony on the Rhône, south of Lyons. Dangar's work drew international attention to the colony, yet when the leading Australian modernist Grace Crowley offered a memorial gift of Dangar's work to the state gallery in Sydney, it was refused—just one in a litany of examples typical of Australia's troubled engagement with modernity. It is against the backdrop of this sorry relationship that Bruce Adams has written his remarkable book.

A quasi-bohemian regional modernist, Dangar was invited to join Gleizes's commune, then just beginning, in 1929. (She would later write of this moment: "*Distinctly* I heard the command: 'Go—Albert Gleizes will help you find God.'") At its worst a kind of cult around Gleizes, Moly-Sabata offered an alternative model for collective artistic endeavor, involving painters, poets, potters, musicians, weavers, and writers. Moly-Sabata was of its time yet intensely antimodern, driven as it was by Gleizes's advocacy of a *retour à la terre*. This set of ideas and images came to be contested by both the Left and the Right throughout the '30s, and the tensions they created continued to affect Moly-Sabata into the '40s, when the colony became compromised by its place and role under Vichy rule and was, to some extent, abandoned by its creator.

Adams handles all these matters with patience and delicacy. When combined with the numerous images of Dangar's beautiful pottery, this scholarly yet approachable study amounts to the most complete account to this point of a remarkable figure, as much French as Australian.—A. D. S. DONALDSON

NOTED

BITTER MILK
BY JOHN MCMANUS
NEW YORK: PICADOR. 208 PAGES. $13.

In his two collections, *Stop Breakin Down* (2000) and *Born on a Train* (2003), John McManus writes visceral prose that explodes within the tight boundaries of the short story. These narratives possess a graceful internal logic and feature a wide range of gritty characters rebelling against an indifferent and often brutal world. McManus's first novel, *Bitter Milk*, features similar writing, effortlessly sweeping the reader into the story with its highly detailed and captivating characters.

Bitter Milk focuses on Loren Garland, a nine-year-old boy who suffers from obesity, heart problems, and other ailments. Living on a deteriorating family parcel in the shadow of Chilhowee Mountain in Blount County, Tennessee, Loren is fatherless. His mother, who binds her breasts and wears men's clothing, warns him that "the world is treacherous," disclosing, as she does, a gruesomely detailed dream of their death together by drowning. Not surprisingly Loren is obsessed with death—by cancer, heart attack, bombs, or "murderers who came out past sunset"—and is not unaware of his mother's effect; everything she "had ever done to help him feel safe had only made him more afraid . . . It scared Loren to sense Mother's tension. She hated to be near people, in a body like hers." Nevertheless, the boy is fiercely protective of his mother, and when she disappears, early in the novel, Loren embarks on a journey beyond the confines of his familiar world and begins to develop an identity of his own.

McManus's intricate passages of dialogue and sympathetic narration make for compelling reading. In one instance, Loren spends a day wandering with his cousin Eli, a beautiful, tough boy with a slender back and a wild honesty, whom Loren admires because he "could walk shirtless across open fields without shame." In contrast to such passages, which portray the tender interiority of Loren's life, the narrator, Luther, intrudes only occasionally into the text and thus remains somewhat extraneous to the story. Luther claims to be at odds with Loren's mother, hovering quite literally above Loren and fighting for his independence. Though the conceit is interesting, it is difficult to decipher exactly who Luther is (an imaginary friend or the ghost of a dead twin?), a mystery that does not advance the narrative in any meaningful way. Moreover, Luther's voice serves to reiterate to the reader what is already apparent. It's as if McManus felt he had to enhance an already compelling plot with additional analysis in order to make the novel complete. Nevertheless, he continues to deliver original storytelling. *Bitter Milk* evokes a group of characters who are self-aware but unable to change, and in a vision both disturbing and memorable, the murky depths of the Garland family reflect the malaise and mystery of the land.

—MARTHA KINNEY

NO MAN'S LAND
BY DUONG THU HUONG, TRANSLATED BY NINA MCPHERSON AND PHAN HUY DUONG
NEW YORK: HYPERION. 416 PAGES. $25.

The great tragedy of the Vietnam War, we tell ourselves, was its waste—all those young American lives lost in a lost cause. But not even victory redeems every sacrifice, as Vietnamese novelist Duong Thu Huong shows in her tragic novel *No Man's Land*. In the years following the war, the beautiful Mien is happily married to a prosperous plantation owner until a phantom from the past staggers into their idyllic mountain village. Bon is Mien's first husband, a North Vietnamese veteran; long thought dead, he has returned to take her as "his one piece of happiness," compensation for his grievous suffering during the war. With the eyes of the party upon her, Mien returns to the impoverished Bon, a traumatized shell of a man she no longer loves, thus setting up the kind of romantic triangle plotted to produce maximum pain on all sides. One can tell from the start that this tale won't have a happy ending for everyone, and not just because it begins with "a strange, violent storm"—perilously close to "a dark and stormy night."

Huong is Vietnam's finest novelist, and despite her status as an enemy of the state, she continues to live in Hanoi. A former party member who led a Communist Youth Brigade sent to the front during the war to boost soldiers' morale, she was briefly imprisoned in 1991 for early works like *Beyond Illusions* (1987) and *Novel Without a Name* (1990), deeply personal novels that exposed the betrayal and hypocrisy at the heart of the Vietnamese regime. Politics on this level, however, are curiously absent from the doomed romanticism of *No Man's Land*, though the war casts its long shadow over Bon, who has been left enfeebled and virtually impotent from exposure to Agent Orange. The absence of personal outrage that fueled Huong's earlier works is keenly felt; too often *No Man's Land* becomes mired in prose as florid as Vietnam's climate, and Huong has a curious habit of placing her most dramatic events—a tortured birth, an attempted murder—offstage. But despite these limitations (and those of her translators), Huong endows her characters with life and a Buddhist appreciation for the impermanence of happiness. In her reckoning of love's toll, she reminds us that Vietnam was—and still is—more than just a war.

—BRYAN WALSH

SNAKES AND EARRINGS
BY HITOMI KANEHARA, TRANSLATED BY DAVID KARASHIMA
NEW YORK: DUTTON. 120 PAGES. $18.

Sometimes it isn't the obscure or unusual that most seizes our attention, but the keen observation of everyday real-

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ity. In her debut novel, *Snakes and Earrings*, Japanese author Hitomi Kanehara ingenuously limns the surreal brutality of her country's contemporary youth culture, just as Zadie Smith captured the landscape of "London now" in her first novel, *White Teeth*. Kanehara's female narrator Lui (short for "Louis Vuitton") stands poised as the voice of Japan's postbubble "lost generation," and her candid portrait caused a sensation on the book's Japanese publication in 2003. *Snakes and Earrings* became a best seller and earned the then twenty-year-old Kanehara the distinction of being one of the youngest authors to win the Akutagawa Prize, Japan's premier award for new writers.

When the novel opens, Lui has met the piercing- and tattoo-adorned Ama (short for "Amadeus," he tells her) at a nightclub and becomes entranced by his forked tongue. They have sex that night and from then on are inseparable. Both of them children of consumerism, longing for substance and meaning, embodying the alienation of those who defy Japan's old mores, Ama and Lui begin to create their own separate reality. "All I wanted was to be part of an underground world," Lui admits, and their relationship is just that, buoyed by detached sex play, violence, and self-mutilation, and devoid of any genuine feeling.

Lui's only commitments are to alcohol, sex, and stretching the hole in her pierced tongue until she can split it, as Ama did—a brutal accomplishment with only the illusion of significance. "I was addicted to stretching," Lui explains, and body modification, the "acute pain" it brings, is "the *only feeling* with the power to kick me back to life." Long immersed in this subculture, Ama holds tight to Lui, finding a purpose in caring for her—only Lui remains incapable of giving herself in return. Side by side, the two wayward teens can't help but mirror the yearning and dislocation of a nation struggling to find its place in the midst of continued economic and social upheaval.

To an outsider, Kanehara's description of their harrowing existence is striking for its seeming nonchalance. Straightforward and unapologetic, she never shies away from "dirty" realities, even including repeated references to Lui wiping semen from her body after sex. Though the novel works too hard at its ending, forcing Lui's redemption and realization, *Snakes and Earrings* remains elegantly raw and remarkable in its potent simplicity.

—CHRISTINE THOMAS

CENTURIA: ONE HUNDRED OUROBORIC NOVELS
BY GIORGIO MANGANELLI, TRANSLATED BY HENRY MARTIN KINGSTON
NEW YORK: MCPHERSON & COMPANY. 214 PAGES. $24.

Born in Milan in 1922, Giorgio Manganelli did not emerge into the literary world until the early '60s, when he joined Gruppo '63, the avant-garde literary movement whose best-known members included Italo Calvino and Umberto Eco. In the ensuing thirty years, until his death in 1990, Manganelli published more than two dozen volumes of fiction and nonfiction, and though his work has been translated into ten languages, only two of his novels have appeared in English, the first more than a decade ago. The second is *Centuria*. Originally issued in 1979, *Centuria*, Manganelli's eighth novel, won that year's prestigious Viareggio Prize and is one of the most original volumes of fiction in the past several decades.

Centuria consists of one hundred short "novels" (each originally composed on one sheet of paper), which are united by an "ouroboric," or circular, notion of time—in terms of both immortal existence and the narrower scope of individual human life—as represented by Ouroboros, the mythical serpent devouring his own tail. Manganelli's particular awareness of time has precedents in, among other sources, *The Decameron* and the twelfth-century, anonymously written *Il Novellino*. Manganelli's fictions, however, are highly compressed miniature novels, some of which seem to have the potential to be vastly expanded. They take place in various eras, from before the creation of the world to the future, when a celestial body in the form of "a vast city square" is seen floating around the universe.

Manganelli possesses a broad range of interests, but he really excels as a subtle humorist. In the twenty-seventh story, for instance, he describes a man living in Cornwall who believes, from the position of the clouds, that he should travel to Rome to meet the emperor. He does, but three days later the emperor is assassinated and the man from Cornwall is chosen to succeed him. "But he was not happy. He always wondered what those clouds had meant to say to him. Had he misunderstood? He was thoughtful and despondent. He grew serene the day the court official raised a sword against his throat." In the twenty-eighth tale, the Roman emperor, "excited by a strange and senseless design of the clouds," travels to Cornwall. He settles there but is ignored by the locals until a traveling history professor from Samarkand, Ohio, recognizes him. The emperor then becomes a celebrity: "He now has a watch and eats apple pie; they say that at the next elections he'll be a candidate for the liberals; and he will lose with honor."

Despite the short length of his "novels," Manganelli not only provides a great range of genres—ghost stories, love stories, tall tales, and so on—but also manages to end each story satisfyingly. His economic and essential use of language cuts to the heart of the matter, and, combined with his clever sense of humor, this makes *Centuria* an elegant and evocative book.

—HARVEY PEKAR

OH THE GLORY OF IT ALL
BY SEAN WILSEY
NEW YORK: PENGUIN PRESS. 496 PAGES. $26.

Near the end of his epic new memoir, Sean Wilsey throws down the gauntlet: "I fear the first reviewer who tells me I feel too sorry for myself, I'm too messy, I bounce when I walk, I've taken up too much of your time." Although I can't vouch for the odd bounce in his step, Wilsey has little to fear. Hailing from the Dave Eggers/*McSweeney's* camp (he is an editor at large of that literary journal), Wilsey has jumped on the tell-all bandwagon, taking the baton

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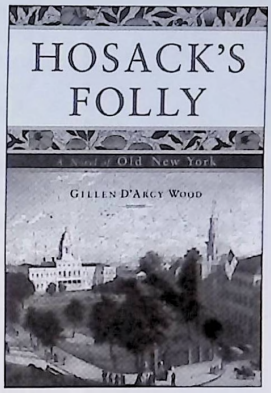
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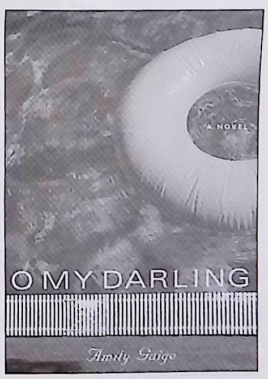
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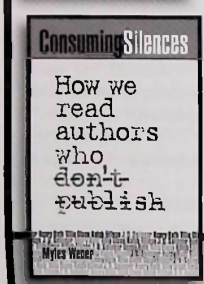
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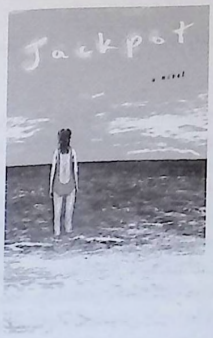


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from his compadre Eggers and media darling Augusten Burroughs to pen a "look at me" (but rarely "poor me") account of his unconventional and damaged life. Wilsey's concerns about his book's reception may seem rather trivial, but coming as they do at the conclusion of nearly five hundred pages, they in fact belie a thoughtful and confident narrative, one that is equally heartbreaking and at times approaches genius with its raw honesty and emotional charge.

"It was *Dallas* and *Dynasty* and Danielle Steel come to life. It was like being trapped in a television show. Having to live and make sense of the world through its rules, scenarios, plotlines, cliff-hangers." Such is Wilsey's explanation of his extravagant, explosive, and destructive upbringing, the story of which is perfectly in tune with our tabloid-obsessed culture. A surfeit of bold-faced names, from world leaders to media personalities, lend the book a sensational thrill (and easy publicity hook). But like any good WASP, Wilsey appears uncomfortable with all the name-dropping and undercuts the glossy facade by being appropriately unimpressed and reflective. The script, then, of Wilsey's first twenty-odd years might read something like this:

Scene 1: You're nine. Dad divorces Mom in a media frenzy and marries Mom's best friend after screwing her on the side for years.

Scene 2: Mom implodes and suggests a suicide pact in which you and she jump off the balcony of your penthouse together.

Scene 3: Mom is resurrected as a globe-trotting peace activist who frolics with heads of state like Mikhail Gorbachev and Helmut Kohl.

Scene 4: Dad disowns you. You run away from or get kicked out of four high schools before finding salvation at a monastery/halfway house/reform school in Italy.

And that's just the beginning. Wilsey's narrative, told against the backdrop of the haute echelons of San Francisco society, is a classic tale of excess and redemption, of a "rich, white, punk fuckup" overcoming the ills caused by his self-obsessed parents. The arc may not be a new one, and Wilsey may get bogged down in the exhaustive details of his many indiscretions, but his attempt to reconcile his past with his well-intentioned and colorful family makes for some very good storytelling. Wilsey has composed an expansive and tragic tour—one that succeeds in being amusing but not smug; sincere but not self-indulgent. It's all too easy these days for literary memoirs to come across as nothing more than articulate whining. But Wilsey ably dodges that fate. *Oh the Glory of It All* comes with an impeccable pedigree, and the good news is that it actually deserves every bit of the attention it will receive.

—JENIFER BERMAN

THE THRILL OF IT ALL: THE STORY OF BRYAN FERRY AND ROXY MUSIC

BY DAVID BUCKLEY

CHICAGO: CHICAGO REVIEW PRESS. 382 PAGES. $18.

Roxy Music's early work was a startling jumble of gender-bending fashion, flashy theatricality, pop balladry, and avant-garde art. Though lumped into the '70s glam rock pantheon, Roxy Music's singularly weird aesthetic, and the flat, imperfect warble of dapper singer Bryan Ferry, resist easy classification. In his thorough if ultimately tepid biography of the band, David Buckley offers the standard narratives. He traces Ferry's unlikely path from working-class coal miner's son to Newcastle art school student to suave sophisticate, and tells the story of the creative and social friction between Ferry and keyboardist Brian Eno, which led to Eno's untimely departure from the group two years after its formation in 1971.

Buckley is effusive in his praise of Ferry and the band in the early '70s, so much so that he mars otherwise well researched passages with ill-considered assertions, like "nowadays, pop is entertainment; in the seventies, it was culture." Buckley is so mired in his—and the band's—rosily nostalgic past that he lacks critical distance. On one of Roxy's best songs, he writes: "An astonishing piece of pop art, 'In Every Dream Home A Heartache' is the sort of grand dramatic gesture that pop music has now largely forgotten how to make." In the first half of the book, which documents this early history, one gets the unsettling feeling that for Buckley the '70s were the pinnacle of artistic achievement in pop music and nothing in the following three decades could possibly compare.



CORBIS

Brian Eno, Los Angeles, ca. 1974. From David Buckley's *The Thrill of It All*.

In Roxy Music's case, the '70s certainly marked the peak of their powers as a trailblazing group. As the decade progressed, the off-kilter artiness that marked early Roxy slowly gave way to an increasingly smoothed-over, Ferry-driven template. It's only in the second half of the book, covering the years 1978 to 2004, that Buckley dares to make incisive critical comments about the band, and on Ferry's often limp, nebulous solo career in the '80s and '90s.

The Thrill of It All makes extensive use of quotes culled from articles about Roxy Music in the British music press. Though Buckley has a good eye for pulling witty and trenchant observations from celebrated critics such as Jon Savage, this technique only serves to underscore the relative plainness of Buckley's own writing. As a history, the book is perfectly competent—but readers seeking an account as original and thought-provoking as the band itself should look elsewhere. An upcoming biography by *Frieze* writer Michael Bracewell, titled *Roxyism*, looks promising.

—GEETA DAYAL

EVERYTHING BAD IS GOOD FOR YOU: HOW TODAY'S POPULAR CULTURE IS ACTUALLY MAKING US SMARTER

BY STEVEN JOHNSON

NEW YORK: RIVERHEAD BOOKS. 238 PAGES. $24.

Although American popular culture has long been described as a breakneck race to the bottom, Steven Johnson has a different story to tell. Johnson, a *Wired* commentator and author of *Mind Wide Open: Your Brain and the Neuroscience of Everyday Life*, convincingly argues for a phenomenon he calls the Sleeper Curve, named after Woody Allen's sci-fi spoof in which scientists of the future are amazed that cream pies and hot fudge were once viewed as unhealthy. According to Johnson, the part of culture that many consider low-brow trash isn't just growing increasingly engaging and demanding, it's actually making us smarter. That's right—those hours you spend in SimCity adjusting the tax rates in the suburbs of your virtual community and those nights you blow off reading the most recent Ian McEwan novel to watch the latest episode of *The Apprentice* aren't just a shameless waste of time. Rather, you're engrossed in an enriching experience that exercises your problem-solving skills and enhances your social intelligence! Gamers who interact with virtual worlds, Johnson observes, actually engage in a data-gathering, hypothesizing, and testing process that mirrors the scientific method. Reality-show viewers, he asserts, participate more actively than viewers of other forms of televised entertainment, reading the motivations and hidden agendas of the onscreen contestants, thereby sharpening their social dexterity and increasing their ability to respond to other people's emotional signals.

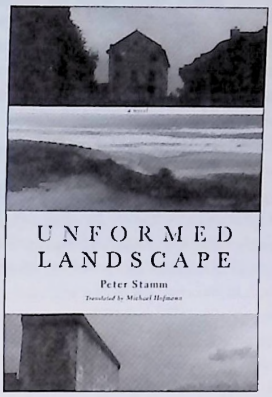
But if Johnson offers a persuasive case for the cognitive benefits of the media we consume as a culture, his unfailingly objective perspective at times seems to have a blind spot that's mirrored by the frustratingly concrete nature of his prose: He misses what gives our culture, even at its trashiest, so much of its richness and depth in the first place. Though the narrative complexity of *The Sopranos* far surpasses that of *Dallas*, as Johnson argues, what's considerably more striking is the former's filmic qualities: the spare editing and subtle crafting of scenes into a whole so thematically tight that each episode serves as its own oddly sublime fable. Elsewhere, Johnson cites evidence that children who play Tetris score higher on visual recognition tests, but he sidesteps the incalculable emotional and psychological benefits of games (now nearly extinct) in which children create something out of nothing: constructing forts out of branches and tires, or inventing elaborate contests involving a deflated kickball and a rusty swingset. Having a wide range of media to sink our teeth into may enrich our problem-solving skills, but what about our creativity? And what about the subtle ways in which the lyrical universes that unfold to us in books give our perspectives an imaginative buoyancy that can't be measured?

Johnson's challenge to the oft-repeated lament that mass culture is dumbing down is as enlightening as it is necessary, yet his primary focus on cognitive gains doesn't feel complete without an acknowledgment of certain slippery, intangible qualities we look for in our culture—emotional weight,

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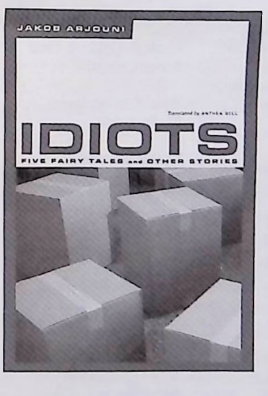
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—HEATHER HAVRILESKY

ART UNDER CONTROL IN NORTH KOREA

BY JANE PORTAL

LONDON: REAKTION BOOKS. 224 PAGES. $35.

Now that old-school totalitarian North Korea has entered contemporary cultural discourse—not only has the country been recognized as an integral member of the "Axis of Evil," but its dictator, Kim Jong Il, has been lampooned on *Saturday Night Live*—an examination of its art suddenly seems timely. Jane Portal, a curator in the Oriental Antiquities Department at London's British Museum, has seized the moment with *Art Under Control in North Korea*, a curious hybrid of international-affairs primer and illustrated art-historical study. As the former, the volume succeeds; as the latter, it is slightly lacking, despite its intriguing albeit obvious thesis: State-sponsored North Korean art borrows heavily from both Soviet and Chinese traditions of propagandistic socialist realism.

Indeed, Portal's early chapters offer a concise summary of international Communist art and its didactic intent, and thanks to her generous sampling of dramatic graphic posters portraying square-jawed workers in dynamic poses, this basic function of North Korean art is roundly established. While one wonders why she doesn't juxtapose them with examples from the former Soviet Union and China to enforce her assertion, Portal makes other, often surprising connections between Communist (and fascist) art and art intended to convey the ideals of democracy and freedom. For example, she argues that many large-scale, heroic statues of Kim Il Sung (Kim Jong Il's father and the first official leader of North Korea's Communist regime) are similar to dramatic monuments in democratic countries, including the United States, for example Mount Rushmore and the Statue of Liberty. Portal's point—ostensibly simplistic but possibly subversive, given her choice of comparisons—seems to be that art is a powerful political tool, whether commissioned in a dictatorship or in a democracy.

Given Portal's background as an art historian, it's surprising that five chapters out of six are devoted to an overview of North Korea's history and politics, with art as illustration rather than focus. Throughout the book, she presents a time line for Kim Il Sung's rise and his promotion of *juche*, or "self-reliance," a concept cribbed directly from both Soviet and Chinese Communist dogma, and constructs a portrait of Kim Jong Il as an insecure man (his "predilection for platform heels," notes Portal, "is thought to be a result of his feeling of inferiority at being shorter than his father") who even went so far as to kidnap a filmmaker whose movies he admires. Within a topical chronology of the country's art, Portal scatters a spectrum of images, ranging from a Mao-like portrait of Kim Il Sung (complete with slicked-back hair and shirt stiflingly buttoned up to his neck) to rarely seen original forms of North Korean art, such as unusually colorful figurative ink paintings on paper (a mix of Asian and Western aesthetics unique to the region). If only all political histories were accompanied by such engaging visual material. One hopes, however, that future studies of North Korean art will engage more directly with images and objects—although one can imagine the bureaucratic challenges of gaining access to material and sources. In the meantime, Portal's offering serves as an accessible introduction.

—REENA JANA

LIKE A ROLLING STONE: BOB DYLAN AT THE CROSSROADS

BY GREIL MARCUS

NEW YORK: PUBLIC AFFAIRS. 283 PAGES. $25.

The easiest way to write the biography of a song is to yank it out of the ground and brush the dust off its roots in order to determine what it sounds like, what it says, and how it compares with other songs (or books or poems or plays or movies) that came before it. But doing so can turn a vibrant composition into a dead, dangling thing that no longer holds much meaning for anyone, a limp specimen with no place to grow, down or up. Greil Marcus's new study of Bob Dylan's "Like a Rolling Stone" is another kind of song biography entirely: not an autopsy, but a reading in which the roots of the song are left alive and thriving. Marcus understands that the pedigree of Dylan's song is so extended and mixed it can never be fully traced anyway, and recognizes that in the case of a piece of music like this one—so simultaneously inclusive and expansive that it's an *event* in itself, one that keeps unfolding forty years after it first hit—that kind of knowing is impossible.

"Like a Rolling Stone" grew from any number of direct and indirect influences: The specters of other pieces of music—from Son House's "My Black Mama" to Hank Williams's "Lost Highway" to Muddy Waters's "Rolling Stone"—breathe in unison with it. And when Marcus describes the recording of the song, in June 1965, with all its false starts and dead ends, we see how perilously close it came to never existing at all: "The singer is trying to find his way into his song, plinking notes on the piano. There's a feeling of uplift, dashed as soon as he begins to sing. His voice sounds as if it's just come back from the dry cleaners three sizes too small." But Marcus is even more interested in the way Dylan's song shaped contemporary culture and pointed the way toward the future. It sprang into being in "that noisy, murderous, idyllic summer of 1965"—the summer of the Watts riots, but also the summer smack-dab in the middle of what is now the most sentimentalized decade of the century—and continued, through the years ahead, to re-form itself in infinite ways, both in Dylan's subsequent readings of it and in various cover versions, grand and ridiculous alike.

To Marcus, "Like a Rolling Stone" is a song that never really ends. When the public first heard it, on the radio in that summer of '65, it took "six minutes to break the limits of what could go on the radio, of what kind of story the radio could tell." That story is still being told; it's a narrative with no direction home and thus plenty of room to grow.

—STEPHANIE ZACHAREK

Bowe continued from page 27

than tell. To list statistics on poverty in Palestine is good reporting; to show, in nearly every panel set there, trashy, decrepit streets, abandoned cars, and tin-roofed shanties, made from cinder blocks with rain leaking in on the scanty makeshift furniture inside, is great documentary history.

But Sacco's work provides nothing so coherent as a history lesson, composed as his images are of vignettes and episodes whose contexts are mostly assumed to be known to the reader (in fact it would have been helpful if he had included more background information in the Bosnia books, for those who hadn't followed or have forgotten the intricate details of that conflict). It is also not intended to be objective, in the impoverished, J-school sense of the word, which creates the illusion of detachment, accuracy, and balance when in fact there are none. For Sacco, *Palestine*, which shows very little of the Israeli point of view, is a drop-in-the-bucket attempt to balance the overwhelmingly pro-Israel bias of the US media. When an Israeli woman in the comic says, "Shouldn't you be seeing our side of the story," Sacco replies honestly: "I've heard nothing but the Israeli side most of my life."

"I try to use what's representative, not necessarily what's extreme," he says. "For example, for stories about torture in *Palestine*, I picked stories I'd heard over and over again." He doesn't leave out unflattering details about those he finds sympathetic for fear that it will make them seem less so. "Palestinians have been historically wronged. That doesn't make them angels. People crave the perfect individual. I'd rather portray the balance."

The painstakingly methodical Sacco prepares intensively before traveling anywhere for the first time, continuing to read and research as much as he can throughout the entire process. He makes repeated visits to his chosen locations, for months at a time (he spent two months in Israel and the occupied territories in 1991–92, and four months in Bosnia in 1995–96), interviewing people, taping them when possible, and taking notes, which he indexes each night. Once back home, he transcribes his tapes, spending months boiling them down into a written script before he finally sits down to draw it. During that process, he says, the script shrinks as he realizes which parts of it can be shown rather than told.

Needless to say, it's a very time-consuming and laborious process. But it has its advantages: "I can make the crane that allows me to hover above a city—I don't have to hire a helicopter to get the picture—and I can take the reader into someone's past. I can ask visual questions that allow me to render it as faithfully as a film director," Sacco told *LA Weekly*. Indeed, in a 2003 *New York Review of Books* article, David Hajdu described Sacco's "shot language," observing that his sequences are "composed and paced . . . like feature movies, particularly films of the studio era . . . Landscapes put the subjects in perspective; figures are often shown at full length and in groups, so we can see their body language, watch their interaction, and examine their relationships; the close-up is used sparingly, for impact."

If Sacco's work can bear comparison to yet another genre, it wouldn't hurt to mention media criticism. After a generation or two of abstruse, academic media deconstruction, Sacco has absorbed what's valuable from such critique and deploys it constructively. In fact one might even view Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart's *Para Leer al Pato Donald* (How to Read Donald Duck) as a forebear of Sacco's work. First published in Chile in 1971, that small book, which features snippets of the Disney comic scattered throughout a discussion of its propagandistic use in Latin America, is one of the parents of Marxist pop-culture media criticism. Sacco's work, particularly on Palestine, represents an evolutionary march from that book straight into the present. Asked in 1994 why he chose occupied Palestine over other important subjects, Sacco told Kathleen E. Bennet: "Having a journalism background, and getting it drummed in about objectivity, you know, and the Truth, and the Facts, and then when I finally started learning about the Palestinian question . . . it seemed something was really strange here. I read some books [about] . . . how the media has manipulated us . . . Noam Chomsky's *Fateful Triangle* [1983], which outlines in detail America's relationship to Israel, and how that affects the Palestinians."

In their introduction (titled "Apology for Duckology"), the authors of *Pato Donald* wrote: "The kind of language we use here . . . is part of an effort to achieve a wider, more massive distribution of the basic ideas contained in this book." Sacco's remarks to the *New York Times* in 2000 echo that goal: "The whole point of my life, or of my career anyway, is to get the general public interested . . . There's a cumulative hope that the more people know, the better the democracy is going to be." His mild expression of that hope belies the very strong feelings he revealed to *Salon* in 2003 when asked what he thought about the American public's awareness of foreign conflicts:

> I think the American population should be sent to The Hague to be judged. . . . It's appalling the amount of ignorance here about world events . . . To me it seems almost criminal that the people who live here . . . if they really knew how other people's lives are affected by American policies, maybe they would pay more attention.

But Sacco doesn't let these fierce emotions sway his portrayal of the occasional moral ambiguities in his pursuit of journalistic game, nor is he mistaken about the work's power to change things. In one of *Palestine*'s early pages, he shows an encounter between himself and a man in Nablus whose trust he has just won. "Palestinian victims all right!" he sardonically shows himself thinking. "The real-life adaptation of all those affidavits I've been reading! The flesh and blood stuff!"

"You write something about us? . . . You tell about us?"

"Of course! Of course! I'm off to fill my notebook! I will alert the world to your suffering! Watch your local comic book store. . . ." □

Marisa Bowe is coeditor of *Gig: Americans Talk About Their Jobs* (Crown, 2000). (See Contributors.)

SELECTIONS FROM THE JOURNALS OF MYRON STOUT EDITED BY TINA DICKEY, INTRODUCTION BY ROBERT STORR



NEW YORK: MIDMARCH ARTS PRESS. 330 PAGES. $28.

All artists have their legendary side, and there is no story of Myron Stout that doesn't begin with tales of the extreme parsimony of his output. For Stout, showing three canvases in just over a decade was the norm. It's no wonder that writing on the Texas-born, Provincetown-based painter has long dipped into the journals he kept assiduously throughout his five-decade career. After years of rumored publication, the appearance of *Selections from the Journals of Myron Stout* has at last corroborated critics' thoughts on the artist's work: The excerpted entries, dating from 1950 through 1966, perforce provide a picture of Stout ruminating on nature, in particular the dunes of the Cape, and on art history, from Giotto and Ucello to Mondrian and Hofmann, as he works as an artist by other means. Call it *The Daily Practice of Painting* minus paint knife and canvas. The very first entry reads, "A painting should present itself as a thing becoming, rather than as having an already established existence—should present itself through a quality of becoming—" This may sound like AbEx flak, but Stout never abandoned the imperative behind the sentiment. *Selections* offers a window onto what it might mean to take such a painterly aphorism and observe it as an ironclad commandment.

—ERIC BANKS

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LETTERS

TRUTH, LIES, AND LECTURE SERIES

TO THE EDITOR:
In his article "Lie, Memory" [Apr/May 2005], Paul Maliszewski spends most of his time retelling Michael Chabon's entertaining tales. He spends far less time explaining why these stories should in some way discredit Chabon.

When I attended Chabon's talk sponsored by Nextbook in Seattle, I knew I was watching a professional storyteller, known primarily for his award-winning short stories and novels, use a live performance to weave an entertaining tale about how writers use their imaginations to explore dark truths. I remember his timing, his smirks, his winks. I also recall Chabon's hyperbolic warm-up to a key point in the tale. It went something like, "I know that you won't believe me, but I assure you that all that I tell you is absolutely true." And then Chabon went on to describe how a lump of clay had come to life before his eyes. I knew that he did not expect me to believe him: I was to take all he said with a healthy dose of skepticism.

Why is Maliszewski trying to "expose" a professional storyteller for telling fictions?

—John Peterson
Palo Alto, CA

TO THE EDITOR:
After reading Paul Maliszewski's piece on Michael Chabon, I leapt to my computer and Googled "Chabon/Nextbook/*Book of Hell*/Adler/Colby," etc., sure that I would find evidence that Maliszewski's article was in on the joke—part of the larger performance, as it were. (The rather uninsightful "Either it's real or it's fiction" point of view does fit nicely into a Borgesian conspiracy.) Alas, it doesn't appear so. Chabon really does exist.

—Curtis Bonney
Seattle

TO THE EDITOR:
Kudos to *Bookforum* and Paul Maliszewski's investigation into Michael Chabon's "Holocaust Hoax." I cannot add anything more except to point out that there is a one-word explanation for Chabon's utter dishonesty: narcissism, which can be defined as a total disregard for the needs and concerns of others. Chabon is a young writer who won the Pulitzer while in his thirties; he clearly imagines that such an early accomplishment gives him license to manipulate the truth according to his own needs. In today's political climate, we need writers more committed to historical truth, not less.

—Stephen Bracco
Brooklyn, NY

TO THE EDITOR:
In his article "Lie, Memory," Paul Maliszewski describes me as a "skeptical, equivocal listener" to the performances Michael Chabon gave in Seattle, Washington, DC, and Fairfax, Virginia, last May, sponsored by Nextbook. Maliszewski treats my skepticism as either a character flaw or the slick response of a cagey spokesman: "If there was a base, Brogan moved quickly to cover it. He would not be fooled; he didn't seem to believe anything very strongly—or he believed everything somewhat loosely." In fact, my skepticism was a perfectly appropriate response to the style and content of Chabon's performance.

Chabon's talk was titled "Golems I Have Known, or, Why My Elder Son's Middle Name Is Napoleon." It begins: "I saw my first golem in 1968, in Flushing, New York, shortly before my fifth birthday." Chabon goes on to detail three encounters with these supernatural beings ("I saw the Golem of Flushing open its eyes"). He introduces these tales with an outlandish claim: "The truth is that golems are real, they are out there now, and they are everywhere." At the same time, he punctuates his story with insistent references to lies, liars, and lying, culminating in his final words: "And, naturally, I'm still telling lies." In other words, Chabon's talk exhibits all the hallmarks of a tall tale, with the author signaling to the audience at every turn that the narrator is not to be completely trusted.

Maliszewski prefers to ignore, minimize, or deliberately misread these signs in the hope of stirring up scandal. He tells us that "Chabon promised a real account," that "Chabon does make many broad claims about truth," that Chabon "was presenting ideas as facts," and that he presented his talk as "an authentic portrait of the artist." He even quotes Chabon's promise "to come forward now and come out with the truth" about the existence of golems to support his argument. This is like invoking *Spinal Tap* to indict the music industry. Similarly, he dismisses Chabon's repeated references to lying as "the fine print at the bottom of a contract." The truth is just the opposite. If anything, Chabon might be criticized for being too obvious in his winks and nods to the audience, but it is clear that he wanted them to share in the fun.

Maliszewski also wants to separate Chabon's fantastic stories about golems from his story about Joseph Adler, but he never mentions that the Adler episode *is* a story about a golem. Chabon tells his audience that he noticed a small, lumpy statue on his only visit to Adler's house, but when the Mayflower movers come to remove Adler's belongings, the statue has transformed itself into a giant (it had grown "as a lie grows"). Adler's own book, his Holocaust memoir/hoax (Chabon's story is even equivocal about this), also includes a story about a golem. At Theresienstadt, Adler claims, he traded two potatoes for a magic tablet said to have the power to reawaken the famous Golem of Prague, a tablet that miraculously finds its way into Chabon's hands later in the story. Now, some might object to the mixing of such fanciful tales

THE DESTRUCTION OF LOWER MANHATTAN BY DANNY LYON



NEW YORK: POWERHOUSE. 160 PAGES. $50.

If you walk along the narrow passages between Broadway and West Street in Lower Manhattan, a petrified slice of New York's past emerges: There are the few remaining low-slung Civil War–era buildings snuggled between the Art Deco–influenced skyscrapers erected in the years following the construction of the American Stock Exchange in 1921. Casting shadows over it all are the shrouded ruins of the International Style Deutsche Bank Building, which largely survived the collapsing Twin Towers next door but awaits its fate of being taken apart, floor by floor, in a process known in the building-destruction trade as "deconstruction." Danny Lyon's *Destruction of Lower Manhattan* unearths what this area, south of Chambers Street, endured during its agonizing initial phase, in 1967, as sixty acres of nineteenth-century cast-iron structures east and west of Broadway were leveled to accommodate urban renewal and the World Trade Center site. Fresh from his work documenting the civil rights movement and the Chicago Outlaws biker club, Lyon, a latter-day Bartleby, presides over the leather district's final rites, as he melancholically pictures hostile hard hats sealing the fate of these once-mighty giants of mercantile New York.

—EB

with references to the Holocaust; others might take exception to fictional accounts of the Holocaust in general. But if this is Maliszewski's concern, why not tackle Chabon's Pulitzer Prize–winning novel, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, rather than the unpublished text of a performance? Readers could then at least judge for themselves.

Maliszewski acknowledges that Chabon's talk follows a long literary tradition, but, as usual, he gets it wrong. He writes: "Chabon isn't just mixing fact and fiction, something all novelists do, going back at least as far as Daniel Defoe; he is creating a fictional memoir and presenting it as real." Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe, Journal of the Plague Year*, and *Moll Flanders* are all fictions masquerading as memoirs, as are *Gulliver's Travels*, *The Three Musketeers*, and a long list of other classic works of fiction. It should be obvious that there is a vast gulf between these novels and Binjamin Wilkomirski's counterfeit Holocaust memoir, *Fragments*, and the works of other frauds or propagandists. These fiction writers are not looking to put one over on the public for personal or political gain; they are simply employing a familiar literary trope, in which the story includes a fiction of its own origins. And like Chabon's talk, these novels often upend their own claims of veracity with broad hints at their true fictional nature. They do so through fabulous tales—talking horses, golems in the basement—and through extravagant "truth claims." In a prefatory letter to *Gulliver's Travels*, for instance, the supposed author writes: "Do these miserable animals presume to think that I am so far degenerated as to defend my veracity? Yahoo as I am, it is well known through all Houyhnhnmland, that by the instructions and example of my illustrious master, I was able in the compass of two years (although I confess to the utmost difficulty) to remove that infernal habit of lying, shuffling, deceiving, and equivocating, so deeply rooted in the very souls of all my species, especially the Europeans." Swift and Chabon make truth claims only to encourage us to question them, whereas frauds like Wilkomirski depend on keeping their lies a secret.

Chabon's performance, in its small way, also participates in a more contemporary exploration of the relationship between history and the imagination. W. G. Sebald's documentary novels, J. M. Coetzee's anti-lectures and third-person memoirs, Simon Schama's historical novellas—these works all experiment with literary form to explore how narrative and the imagination help to shape public and private histories. These authors do not deny the documented past, nor do they conceal their inventions; rather, they explore the necessary, if elusive, role of language, storytelling, and the imagination in realizing any approximation of the lived past. For his part, Chabon merely argues that telling a story—even a far-fetched one—is a legitimate way of talking with his readers about his work as a creative writer. Could anything be less controversial?

Like a prosecutor with a weak case, Maliszewski ultimately resorts to inflated rhetoric. "Liberties with the truth, so casually taken," he proclaims, "also weaken life." But what does this mean? Is he saying that memoir is a nobler art form than fiction? Or that realism is preferable to the fabulous? Either of these propositions might make for a provocative essay, but Maliszewski's point seems to be simply this: Chabon promised us a memoir and instead gave us a yarn. But the question remains, Where was the promise? Chabon's talk was not titled "Michael Chabon: The Early Years," or "Coming of Age in Columbia, Maryland"; it was titled "Golems I Have Known."

In the end, we are left with a clear sense of Maliszewski's outrage but no clear reasons for it beyond petty personal ones. Despite his own experiments with satire, he discovers he is tone-deaf when it comes to Chabon's tale ("I had been fooled"). But instead of committing himself to becoming a more attentive listener, he attacks the source of his embarrassment. At the same time, he dreams of someday exposing a hoax and is convinced that his moment has arrived. By hook or by crook, he is determined to land this fish. But perhaps I am being unfair. Perhaps Maliszewski harbors a deep faith in the existence of golems and ours is just a disagreement between a "skeptic" and a true mystic.

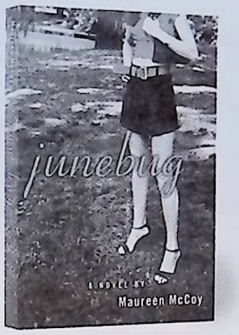
The only thing more suspect than Maliszewski's reading of Chabon's performance is the judgment of *Bookforum*'s editors in publishing it. Chabon's talk could have served as a touchstone for a spirited discussion of Jewish identity, fictional representations of the Holocaust, the relationship between memory and invention, even the state of contemporary fiction. Maliszewski touches on some of these issues but is ultimately more interested in scandalmongering, the scandal here being that Chabon, author of short stories, novels, and a comic book, is—hold on to your hats—a writer of fiction. As an organization devoted to promoting lively conversations about Jewish literature, history, and culture, Nextbook would have welcomed intelligent responses to Chabon's talk, even sharply critical ones. That the editors of *Bookforum* preferred Maliszewski's sensationalism is disheartening; that they published it under the cover line "Michael Chabon's Holocaust Hoax" is disgraceful.

—Matthew Brogan
Program Director, Nextbook
New York

PAUL MALISZEWSKI RESPONDS:

Was Michael Chabon, as I argued in "Lie, Memory," delivering a mostly autobiographical lecture about his formative years? A lecture that combined some clearly fantastic elements that were easy to spot (the golems he says he's known) with one central fiction that was impossible to detect (his brush with a Holocaust fraud)? Or was Chabon, as Matthew Brogan insists, telling a tall tale and inventing for himself a more colorful and fictitious life, because that's just what fiction writers do? When I spoke with Chabon, he never compared his lecture to tales like Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox or Mark Twain's "Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County." He never mentioned tall tales at all. To the complete contrary, Chabon emphasized the sometimes painful, factual truth of what he'd written. The lecture explains how he came to be a writer and how he has wrestled but finally come to feel comfortable with his identity as a Jew. His aunt and uncle, he pointed out, are rendered so honestly that he thought it best to give them new names, fictional shields behind which they

"A deeply touching prayer for all the wild and beautiful misfits on earth."
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Maureen McCoy is a Professor of English at Cornell University. She is the author of three highly praised novels, *Divining Blood*, *Summertime*, and *Walking After Midnight*. Among her many honors are the James Michener Award, Wurlitzer Foundation and Fine Arts Work Center residencies, and the Albert Schweitzer Fellowship in the Humanities, chosen by Toni Morrison.

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can still lead their private lives.

Yet for Brogan, distinctions between genres are tidy and as easy to discern as a red light from a green. Chabon's references to golems are, he says, knowing winks that prove beyond any doubt that the lecture was not to be taken as truth. Unfortunately, every other member of the audience whom I spoke with disagrees. When Chabon told them he once met a children's book author named C. B. Colby, they figured he was telling the truth. When Chabon went on to explain that Colby—a real author, remember; a real man, not some character—was a pseudonym for Joseph Adler, a Holocaust survivor, they believed that as well. And when Chabon revealed that Adler's Holocaust memoir, *The Book of Hell*, turned out to be a fraud, and that Adler was really a Nazi named Viktor Fischer who had disguised himself as a Jew, they were horrified and sickened, but still they believed. Why? Are these people all fools? Is each one tone-deaf and an inattentive listener besides? Perhaps not. They hadn't, after all, believed in golems, and they didn't miss Chabon's winks either. Rather, they trusted that a lecture might have clearly fantastic elements and yet still aspire to tell a truth. We many rubes include in our number Brett Rodgers, a Nextbook fellow who introduced Chabon in Fairfax, Virginia, and Washington, DC, and then moderated the question-and-answer sessions that followed. Rodgers expressed surprise when I told him Chabon's brush with the Holocaust was made up. "I assume it's real," he had said to me. "If not, if he created a whole fictional identity, then he should be stopped."

I don't believe Chabon should be stopped, but I do think what he did is worth writing about and discussing, and I would hope that the care and attention I brought to the subject made my intentions more than clear. Whatever we decide to call Chabon's lecture—magic trick, embellished memoir, or tall tale spiked with bits of truth—matters less than the nature of the trick itself. What interested me was how the intentionally distorted life Chabon invents for Colby creates a more authentically Jewish identity for himself. It's still Chabon's life, and it remains recognizable in its facts, but it's supplemented, beefed up, and made hugely dramatic by his fictional brush with the Holocaust as a child.

I could accept that Chabon's trick was part of "a more contemporary exploration of the relationship between history and the imagination," if I saw any evidence at all that anyone had done any such exploring. Brogan told me he heard from several members of the audience after the lecture, and not one raised questions about its truth. Nor, he said, were they looking to discuss how skillfully Chabon had played upon their beliefs and levitated their many doubts. No, they just wanted to say how much they liked the story. "My guess," Brogan said, "is most people assumed it was true." Chabon muddied the truth of his life with his Holocaust tale, but provoked nobody to ask questions about this fiction in a life of facts. He appropriated the Holocaust for the gravity it exerts and then portrayed it in ways an audience would find comfortable and wholly familiar. That sounds like a failed exploration and, what's more, bad art.

Jonathan Swift and Daniel Defoe embarked on similar explorations. And they disguised their fictions in factual clothing: a traveler's account of faraway lands, the recently discovered journal of a shipwrecked sailor, or a historical record of the Black Plague. But they did so with clear purpose and evident design. They didn't seek to comfort their readers. Nor did they imagine themselves as humble tellers of tall tales. Moreover, they often hid their fictions because they had little choice. Writing fiction was not considered a respectable occupation in their day. Novels were trash, largely, just crude entertainments. Had the term "literary novel" existed, it would have been an oxymoron, if not the butt of jokes. Swift and Defoe disguised their fictions for aesthetic reasons, too. They wanted to raise questions more taxing—and more urgent—than *Is this real or am I just making it all up?* They wanted to accomplish something more than merely invite their readers to "share in the fun."

Gulliver's Travels remains a piece of serious fun. The specifics of Swift's satire may be lost on all but the most specialized readers—who not armed with a Norton critical edition can suss out Swift's feelings about religious tolerance in Holland, or get the jokes he tells at Charles V's expense?—but what remains is a broader comedy, a satire on humankind, hypocrisy, selfishness and cruelty, egotism and the solipsism of intellectuals. That satire still makes great demands on its audience. It doesn't just entertain, nor does it baffle and fool. It asks readers to wonder at how inhumanely they treat each other. It is unsparing, and it never lets a single reader off the hook. "Satire," Swift wrote, "is a sort of glass, wherein beholders do generally discover everybody's face but their own." Tellingly, he wrote this line at the beginning of another satire, *The Battle of the Books*. Swift was being hopeful, at least as much as he ever was. He was trying once more to reach out to readers and demand from them intelligence and imagination and rigor. Writing, after all, needn't be a mirror in which authors discover only themselves looking back and grinning. Is it a cause for scandal, really, to expect as much from an author today? □

DUGOUT BY TERRY ALLEN, INTRODUCTION BY DANA FRIIS-HANSEN, ESSAYS BY DAVID BYRNE, DAVE HICKEY, AND TERRIE SULTAN



AUSTIN: UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS PRESS. 272 PAGES. $30.

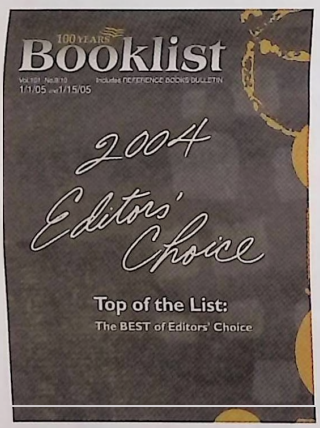
There are plenty of art-world folks who can carry a tune—Stephen Prina, Gilbert & George, Mother Inc.—but Terry Allen has incorporated his own music and performance into his art throughout his four-decade career (who could forget his 1967 crossover trucker hit, "Truckload of Art"?). In his latest multimedia installation, *Dugout*, 1999–2002, Allen crosses a riverboat blues standard, W. C. Handy's "St. Louis Blues," with the story of a young man kicking around baseball's minor leagues in the early part of the last century. The result: an exhibition that limns a mythic America where race, paternity, and music collide. A dugout is of course where ballplayers take refuge when not on the field, but the word is also redolent of shelter and unearthing, of one's destination after rounding the bases and touching home. Allen's *Dugout* gathers these coordinates in a series of tableaux and two- and three-dimensional paintings, which feature segments of the epic poem that unfolds over the course of the exhibition (an accompanying CD features a performance that completes the installation). With passages that remind the viewer in equal parts of Raymond Pettibon, Bruce Nauman, and Anselm Kiefer ("When the game is over, they will be deep with blood, spit, whiskey, tobacco and mud"), *Dugout* delivers a story about deep history that is pitch-perfect. —EB

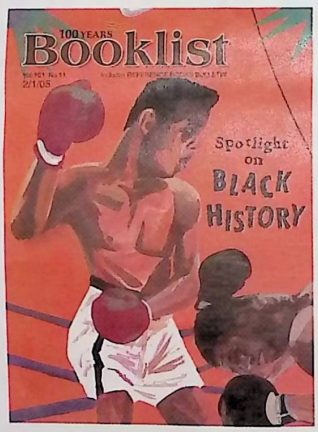
Net Gains
MARA TAPP ON BOOKLIST AT 100

Booklist, a well-kept secret among librarians for the better part of a century, is marking its one hundredth anniversary at this month's Book Expo by reinventing itself for the Internet.

That change—in this day of rapid technological advances, one could hardly call it a leap into the twenty-first century—is but one of many that this compendium of reviews, book-related features, and columns has undergone since it started publishing in 1905. And it's a reaction to the accidental benefit of attracting general readers who got intrigued by *Booklist* when its reviews began popping up on Amazon.com nine years ago. Having tasted the pleasures of these appearances, *Booklist* decided to make the move into cyberspace.

Paper-dependent traditionalists need not fear. The venerable publication that's connected to the Chicago-based American Library Association (ALA) will continue its orthodox print appearance even after *Booklist Online*'s debut, scheduled for late 2005. It seems in no danger of losing its place as a quirky but wonderful, little-known but extremely influential—if not downright canonical—institution that is anything but staid, and quietly shapes reading and book buying around the country.





"Any publication that's been around a hundred years is guaranteed to have changed, and probably pretty dramatically," says Bill Ott, *Booklist*'s editor and publisher since 1988. He adds that "the core of *Booklist* hasn't changed. It's really 'the reader and the book.'"

With that core in mind, *Booklist* runs prepublication reviews, quintessential capsules averaging 175 words, in four areas: adult, youth, media, and reference, as well as related columns and features. Its style and tone are similar to those of the *New Yorker*. Like its competitors in the general market—*Library Journal*, *Publishers Weekly*, and *Kirkus Reviews*—*Booklist* is picky about what it previews. Only eight thousand titles make it into the twenty-two issues each year.

"They have a self-selected universe of books that they write about," explains Art Winslow who, until 2003, served as literary and executive editor of *The Nation*, "so if they don't think much of a book, they ignore it." Those spurned volumes, Winslow jokes, are "the dark matter of the universe." He has no problem with this form of elitism. "It relates to their mission," says Winslow, who is also a former president of the National Book Critics Circle.

That mission, first and foremost, has been to help libraries and those who stock them. Librarians remain the stars in *Booklist*'s universe, making up an estimated 80 percent of the print journal's mid-twenty-thousand subscriber base and creating a three-reader-per-issue pass-along rate. Not surprisingly, they remain its greatest devotees. The nine staff editors write many of the reviews, but librarians write some for a nominal rate.

Booklist is "a lifeline" for most public libraries, explains Betsy Hearne, a professor in the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, who was a *Booklist* reviewer. Librarians like Neal Wyatt, who is responsible for developing the collection in her Virginia public library, rely on *Booklist* to spot books months before publication and alert patrons to that next best seller. She cites the selective reviews and the advice *Booklist* offers on audience cross-appeal and use as the publication's advantage—for example, she says, the suggestion that "a book on 'ER' stories would be good for students and teenagers who are thinking of going into medical careers."

Outside library walls, *Booklist* draws an ardent following among authors who are thrilled when their books get positive or "starred" reviews—the sort that publishers slip into press kits and independent booksellers post in their stores.

"It is surprising how something so important to the identity of a nation as sustaining a literary culture is dependent on such a relatively small group of committed people," says Stuart Dybek, a poet and novelist whose latest books are *I Sailed with Magellan* and *Streets in Their Own Ink*. "*Booklist* has long been one such sustaining publication, and given the daunting task of reviewing the enormous output of books, it performs a heroic task, not because it manages to deal with and sort through the quantity, but because of the quality it has maintained—insisted upon—in doing so."

Susan Hahn discovered *Booklist* as the author of six volumes of poetry, which, early on, drew positive reviews. In her late-night hours writing poetry and working as editor of *TriQuarterly*, the national literary journal connected to Northwestern University Press, she started relying on *Booklist*'s Amazonian presence. "Before I order a book, I scroll down to see what *Booklist* had to say, and if there's not a review it'll give me pause," Hahn says. "I trust them. . . . If they really like a book, they go full throttle. If they only like parts of a book, they discuss those parts. . . . I just find them to be entirely generous of spirit" and "eminently generous to poets and poetry," something that shows, she says, in *Booklist*'s many poetry reviews.

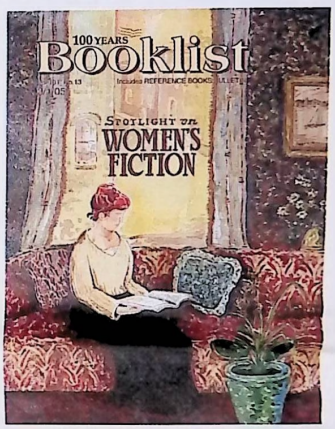
Booklist also has fans in the booksellers' world, where publishers' reps and parent companies increasingly recommend or dictate purchases. Although she doesn't subscribe or read it regularly, Barbara Meade turns to *Booklist* when she's writing calendar blurbs or researching author introductions for her Books & Coffee series at the Washington, DC, bookstore Politics & Prose. "It has very, very high standards," Meade says. "When they do a starred review in *Booklist*, that means much more to me than a starred review in *Publishers Weekly*, which I look on as much more commercial." Both *Publishers Weekly* and *Library Journal*—as well as a few other library-related and media magazines—are published by Reed Business Information US, while *Booklist*'s profits go to funding the nonprofit aspects of the ALA.

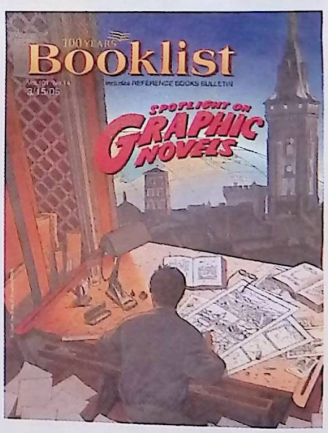
That nonprofit profile is essential and defining. "The good thing about *Booklist* is it's not commercially oriented at all," says Winslow, "whereas *PW* can tend to be. . . . Also, their pieces are signed and . . . you come to know the person and you have faith in their work."

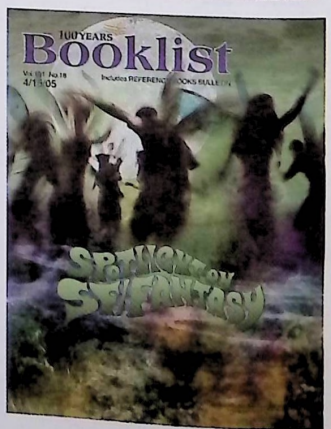
In the beginning, *Booklist* was meant to be more than thoughtful. It was meant to mold young minds—and old ones too. It armed librarians with the tools that would help them convert comic-book readers to lovers of fine literature.

Booklist began as a collection of fifty- to seventy-five-word reviews written by working librarians. Initially funded by a one-hundred-thousand-dollar Carnegie Foundation grant, the publication moved from the East Coast to ALA's Chicago headquarters and hired its first full-time editor in 1913.

Over the decades it has built up a reputation as a dependable—if not necessarily







Bookies looks at innovative programs in scholarly and nonprofit publishing.

hip—bible for librarians. Popular culture only made its way into *Booklist*'s pages in 1979, erupting with a capital *P* when the zaftig Miss Piggy hit the cover riding a motorcycle. From the vantage point of a quarter-century later, Ott describes "that moment as the symbolic opening of the door. . . . Since I've been the editor, we've certainly started to cover pop culture in a way that we never did [before]," he says. "My own opinion is that it's made *Booklist* a lot more fun to read."

Even more than the cover puppet, and the passage of time, Amazon.com just might turn *Booklist* into a household name—assuming your household has a connection to the Internet. Now that *Booklist*'s readers aren't exclusively librarians focused on purchase, Ott says, "We've had to think about the book through the general reader's eyes and that's been helpful." Life on the Internet brings its own surprises—such as angry letters from readers complaining that *Booklist* reviews give away the plot.

Aside from technology, though, a more profound change arises from the diminished moral authority of librarians. "The assumption in the early days—and this assumption was not always wrong—was that it was the public library's responsibility, supported with tax dollars, [to have] what were considered 'best' books," explains Ott. Until the 1960s, librarians saw themselves as advisers of sorts, whose duty it was to create sophisticated readers. The decade and its political and cultural upheavals transformed that. The era's very proper demand for equal access affected libraries and, by extension, *Booklist*. So did the empowerment of special-interest groups. But the intoxicating cocktail of access and special-interest clout includes a dash of volatile and distinctly American anti-intellectualism that has resulted in a dumbing down. Today most librarians wouldn't dream of telling a patron that Stephen King or Captain Underpants is trash and that a reader would be better served by Ray Bradbury or Harry Potter.

"I want to build a collection that is responsive to the patrons' needs," says Wyatt, also a former chair of the ALA's Collection Development Evaluation Section. "The people who created reader's advisories . . . created reading lists to improve character. They were stepping people up from horrid novels to Jane Austen. They were trying to improve people's lives through reading. . . . I don't think any librarians that I know see their role as providing bibliotherapy. . . . My job is not to put books in the library that will improve your character; my job is to put books in the library that you enjoy reading, that offer you a challenging reading experience when you want one, and an easy, fun, thrilling reading experience when you want that."

Still, the question is: Does moral responsibility remain the right or obligation of librarians, and publications like *Booklist* who advise them, especially at a time when many in the book world are averse to making literary judgments? "In most of my reviews I try to avoid that 'thumbs up/thumbs down' mentality and try to convey the sensibility of the book and what I find interesting or uninteresting about it," says Winslow. "I figure the readers can make up their minds based on that."

That's exactly the kind of review Ott seeks. "I want to read reviews by people who are good, close, sensitive, passionate readers," he explains. "I don't want to read a review by somebody who thinks they have something to teach me. . . . That's not to say that we're not going be just as tough-minded as any other reviewer." But the audience must be kept in mind. As Ott observes, "Even the *New York Review of Books* isn't going to last if it doesn't pay attention to what its readers want to read."

It might not hurt *Booklist* to preach to a larger choir, especially in light of the ready-made pulpit provided by Amazon.com. One book-world insider says the nonprofit *Booklist* doesn't market itself as well as it should, especially compared to its commercial competitors. Libraries are a stealth market, and unlike booksellers who can return unsold books for publisher refunds at season's end, they don't return titles once they buy them. Besides, libraries play host to a cross-section of human beings that many commercial, let alone nonprofit, outfits can only dream of. They regularly serve large numbers of immigrants, senior citizens, young families, populations of all income levels, people without access to the Internet, and more.

The latest federal data indicate that public libraries had nearly 1.2 billion visits in 2002 and circulated some 1.8 billion items. Public libraries circulated nearly 683 million children's materials, and more than 51 million children participated in their programs. That same year, an ALA national random-sample survey of about a thousand adults found that people in the 25–34 age group are the most frequent visitors to libraries—going twenty-four times per year, compared with the average of thirteen times.

Such statistics should cheer those at *Booklist* as it seeks to expand its audience through its presence online. Ott expects some changes in the way *Booklist* does reviews, but the biggest change will come from the increased "contact with general book readers," he says, "and that prospect is extremely exciting to all of us." While *Booklist* will offer its online service to its entire subscriber database, the product's high initial price means most buyers will be large groups. Ott promises that "there will be quite a lot of free material there, so the general reader will be able to sample, and we expect to get a lot of traffic."

Incoming ALA president Michael Gorman promises that some things will not change, including *Booklist*'s primary purpose. "Its mission is to promote the best reading," he says. "Public libraries have to serve all cultures," he continues, but their role is "different from the Internet," which simply spews out information. Gorman, who serves as university librarian at California State University in Fresno, has strong opinions on the literary guidance that librarians can provide. "I don't think we should be ashamed of that," he says. The truth is, "people buying books for a library are making choices all the time. . . . It's just that we never want to be thought of as censors. . . . I don't think we discriminate in terms of high culture versus popular culture. . . . It's just this constant promoting of reading and, if you want to use a high-fallutin phrase, 'the life of the mind.'" □

Mara Tapp is a Chicago-based journalist and broadcaster. The pilot of her new program, "Talking Books with Mara Tapp," aired on WFMT in May 2004.

NICOLE RUDICK ON EDITION 7L



The Karl Lagerfeld Diet, with its surefire psychological-preparation tips and eminently accessible gourmet recipes (tuna-and-blackberry mousse, anyone?), was inspired, according to Lagerfeld himself, by the legendary designer's inability to slip his plump physique into the reedy lines of Hedi Slimane's menswear. Now from the man who avers that "fashion is the healthiest motivation for losing weight" comes Edition 7L, a four-year-old imprint of the Steidl publishing house, named after Lagerfeld's bookstore in Paris ("Seven is my favorite number," he explains. "*L* is for *librairie*, *Lille*, and *Lagerfeld*. But *sept elle*, when spoken in French, also means 'It's her'").

It makes sense that 7L would produce stylish notebook-diaries made of red-leather-bound Monadnock Dulcet Smooth paper, as well as lavish celebrations of Slimane, Lou Reed, Odile Gilbert, and *V* magazine. And it's certainly not a stretch for the imprint to delve into the intimate work of Roni Horn, Christopher Wool, and poet Catherine Pozzi. But how did the ponytailed silver fox land on the notion of issuing facsimile editions of rare avant-garde photo-and-text volumes? Even more surprising is that each project—such as a wooden box containing six legendary Japanese photography publications from the '60 and '70s, and a limited edition of Moï Ver's 1931 experimental photo-book *Paris*—is a straight reproduction; that is to say, one of the masters of art-fashion assimilations has allowed the original creation to stand for itself (even when MIT Press issued a handsome reprint of Vladimir Mayakovski's *For the Voice*, the focus was more on scholarly essays than on the book itself). But Lagerfeld's taste is nothing if not pastiche. In 1997, *Vogue* dubbed him the "unparalleled interpreter of the mood of the moment." And just last year his clothing line for budget retailer H&M sold out in one day in Manhattan, London, Milan, Munich, and Stockholm. So perhaps it's not so odd that Lagerfeld has added haute vulgarization to his publishing repertoire.

7L's most recent reprint endeavor is an unlimited edition of Ilya Ehrenburg's *My Paris*. Originally published in 1933 in Moscow by IZOGIZ (the State Publishing Institution for the Visual Arts) and designed by the inimitable El Lissitzky, the book comprises thirty-three short essays and a generous number of black-and-white photographs. Each written chapter provides a vignette of Ehrenburg's Paris—"The Seine," "Old Women," "The Workers," "Sunday," "The Homeless," "The Pissoirs"—in a style that the writer would undoubtedly dub *lateral* (after his Leica, which had a lateral viewfinder, allowing him to photograph "at 90 degrees"). Rather than compose a direct account of his experiences in the French capital, Ehrenburg seems to study his subject with a glancing eye, capturing not so much the details of faces, words, and events as blurred impressions. On dance halls: "A policeman is on duty by the entrance—a jealous lover may have a knife or a gun in his pocket. Dancing stirs the passions, and love is not always mutual." On art: "Paris has many artists and few statisticians. It's far easier to find portraits of people engaged in statistics than statistics about people engaged in art."



Overall, *My Paris* reads less like a factual presentation than a compilation of semijournalistic accounts of the prewar capital (Ehrenburg lived in Paris from 1908 to 1940, returning to the Soviet Union for four years in 1917). His best-known novel, *The Thaw* (1954)—equally hailed and derided—is a flatly written study of nascent post-Stalin Russia. In many ways very much the party dog, Ehrenburg sensed a shift in the wind and, not wanting to tail the pack, hammered out a fictional story whose import was as little concealed as that of Lenin's beloved *What Is to Be Done?* While there is also a certain kind of clipped reporter's phrasing in *My Paris*, it is leavened with an aspect that seems missing from Ehrenburg's novels—a delight in his subject. His Paris is a city lived in its streets, its history made out of doors, in boulevards and alleys, under bridges and along the Seine. In a place that "isn't a museum and . . . isn't a cemetery . . . your sense of time vanishes and you gaze for hours into the distance, thinking that this is one short moment." Perhaps Lagerfeld's affinity for Ehrenburg isn't as unlikely as it seems. □

Nicole Rudick is managing editor of *Bookforum*.

He Said, S/He Said

JONATHAN AMES ON JONATHAN AMES

I met Jonathan Ames in a small café in his Boerum Hill, Brooklyn, neighborhood to discuss *Sexual Metamorphosis: An Anthology of Transsexual Memoirs* (Vintage), which Ames edited and for which he wrote the introduction. He arrived ten minutes late, even though he lives only a block away. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'm congenitally ten minutes late for everything. I really apologize." I told him it was not a problem, that I have the same issue. But what turned out to be a problem was our interview. We began in person in the café, but then things took a bad turn and we had to complete the interview over e-mail. The two parts of our conversation are titled simply Parts 1 and 2. —JONATHAN AMES

PART 1

JONATHAN AMES: Are you a tranny chaser?

JONATHAN AMES: What's a tranny chaser?

JA: Come on. Don't be coy.

JA: Did you say *goy*?

JA: No, coy.

JA: Oh, I thought that maybe you said "Don't be goy" because I wasn't fessing up to something. You know, like I was showing WASPish restraint or something.

JA: No, I said coy, because you've written about transsexuals quite a lot. Like in your novel The Extra Man.

JA: Yeah, but that's a novel. Novels are fiction. Fiction means you make stuff up.

JA: Well, you've also written about transsexuals in your nonfiction essays.

JA: [*silent*]

JA: And now you've edited this book all about transsexuals, so just answer the question: Are you a tranny chaser or not?

JA: Is that tape recorder working?

JA: The red light is on. That means it's working.

JA: Check it. Just to make sure. Sometimes I've been interviewed and the thing doesn't work and we have to start all over and it's kind of, you know, frustrating.

JA: [I check the tape recorder. It's working.] Listen, I'm sorry if I put you on the spot with that first question. I can start with something else.

JA: It's all right. It's a legitimate question.

JA: So you do know what tranny chaser means?

JA: Yes, I know what it means! Do you know what it means?

JA: It means someone who chases trannies. Who likes to have sex with trannies.

JA: [*Stands up.*] You know, I'm not usually good at protecting myself and having boundaries, because of some weird erotic childhood abuse I suffered and enjoyed. So I let people do whatever they want with me. But I'm working on this. So fuck you and have a nice life. [*Walks out. Thirty seconds later, he walks back in.*] I'm really sorry. I almost never curse. That was bad. Let's do this over e-mail, okay? When I write I can be sort of honest. In person, it's too personal. You know?

JA: No problem. I'll e-mail you.

JA: You know my e-mail?

JA: Yeah.

PART 2

Amesjon@aol.com: I didn't get a chance to say it the other day, but I'm sorry about what happened in the café, and I hope we can make this work in e-mail. So, can you tell me how and why you came to put this book together?

Amesjon@aol.com: Before I answer that, let me address what happened in the café. The reason why I got upset about the tranny chaser question is this: The term *tranny chaser* usually refers to someone who likes preop (i.e., preoperative) transsexual prostitutes. But most preop transsexual prostitutes do not want sex-change surgery, and this book is about people who have undergone sex-change surgery. So I felt like you were making this about me and not the book, since the book has nothing to with tranny chasing.

But looking over what I just wrote, I realize that preop transsexual prostitutes shouldn't be called *preops* any more. There's some kind of cultural shift going on. When I first started hanging out with tranny prostitutes in 1992 (to do research for *The Extra Man*), most of the trannies spoke of someday getting the surgery. But nowadays almost none of the girls talk about it. "I like my cock," they say, or, "I like myself the way I am, why should I change?" Stuff like that. They've become more pro-cock or something. It's weird. Also, they refer to themselves as *transies* not *trannies*. So I think the phrase *tranny chaser* is probably outdated. It probably should be *transy chaser*.

Amesjon@aol.com: So are you a transy chaser?

Amesjon@aol.com: No, I'm not a *transy* chaser! Or a *tranny* chaser. In my youth, back in the early '90s, more than twelve years ago, I might have been classified as such. But not now.

Amesjon@aol.com: But you wrote, "nowadays almost none of the girls . . ."—which would seem to imply that you're still in the scene.

Amesjon@aol.com: Is this an interview or a cross-examination? I'm not in the scene anymore! Occasionally, though, out of habit and nostalgia, I dip back in and visit a tranny club. My interest, the titillation I receive, is from being in the presence of something that is "other." And this may run parallel to the girls being more pro-cock. Perhaps they feel less of a need to completely transform and are satisfied with being *other*. They're not female, they're not male; they're *other*. And a sexual *other* in the twenty-first century has somehow become more acceptable, even though the United States is now a theocracy.

Amesjon@aol.com: I like what you wrote in your last e-mail, but can you briefly tell me how and why you put this book together?

Amesjon@aol.com: Okay. In 2001, I was sent the memoir of a transsexual—*The Woman I Was Not Born to Be*, by Aleshia Brevard—to blurb. I read the book and realized that Aleshia had picked me up in 1990 in a bar in Pennsylvania. It was a December-May thing, and I was May. She was in her early fifties and I was twenty-six. We had a few kisses that night and I never saw her again. At the time, in 1990, I thought she was a biological woman. Then I got her memoir eleven years later, which was, obviously, an incredible coincidence. It was like something out of a Paul Auster novel, but perverted. I blurbed the book, and Aleshia and I had a very nice reunion in San Francisco in 2002.



Penn pal: Aleshia Brevard, Los Angeles, 1980.

Anyway, after reading Aleshia's memoir in 2001, I noticed a rash of books that seemed to be about gender: *Stuits Me: The Double Life of Billy Tipton*, by Diane Middlebrook, which is about Tipton, a woman who passed as a man for years, fooling the jazz world and, supposedly, his/her own wives; *As Nature Made Him*, by John Colapinto, which is about a boy who lost his penis in a botched circumcision and was raised as a girl; and *Crossing*, by Deirdre McCloskey, which is the memoir of a University of Illinois economics professor who underwent sex-change surgery.

Also around this time, Jonathan Lethem gave me a copy of *The Vintage Book of Amnesia*, which he had edited, and I thought to myself, I want to put together an anthology, it looks like easy money. So I asked Lethem how much he was paid for the book and he told me a rather high number, which turned out to be all wrong. But I didn't discover that until much later. Thus spurred by visions of money, combined with the confluence of all these gender books, I got the idea in my head for an anthology whose unifying theme would be the changing of one's sex. I was going to include transsexual memoirs, the Middlebrook and Colapinto books, some stuff on hermaphrodites and transvestites, and works of fiction that featured transsexuals. Gore Vidal, Jerzy Kosinski, John Irving, and David Ebershoff all had novels that qualified on this front, and I figured I could self-promote and include a passage from *The Extra Man*.

I was teaching then at Indiana University, so I used the Kinsey Library and Xeroxed about a thousand pages of material and sent it off to Vintage. They made an offer that was one-third of what Lethem had told me he got. I checked with him and he realized he had made a mistake.

I was disappointed but took their offer, and the editor and I decided I should whittle the book down just to the memoirs of transsexuals. Then it was such a pain in the ass to get permissions—I had naively thought Vintage would do this for me—that I didn't do anything with the book for years. I kept waiting to make some money from Hollywood so that I could pay Vintage back the first part of my advance. Then some money from Hollywood did come in, and instead of giving up on the anthology, which I had been privately referring to as the "tranthology," I hired someone and he did everything and now the book is out! So the book is about sex and I did it for money. A classic tale!

Amesjon@aol.com: I think I've got enough now for the article. Thank you!

Amesjon@aol.com: You're welcome! Sorry, again, about the café!

Amesjon@aol.com: I forgive you! □

In this column, writers dilate on their reading enthusiasms of the season.



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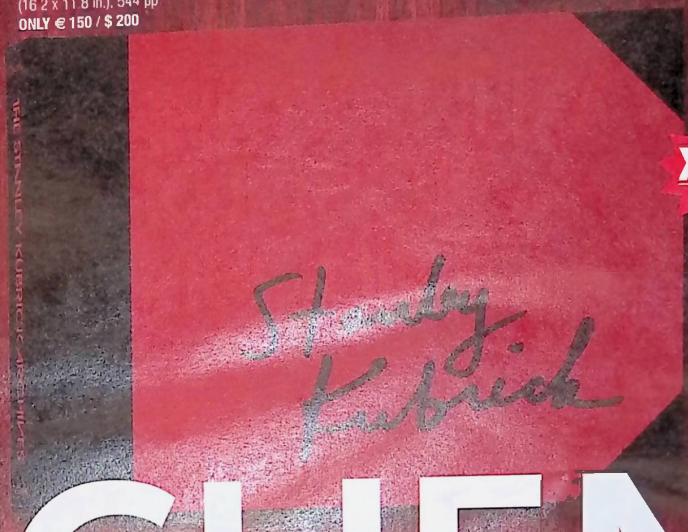
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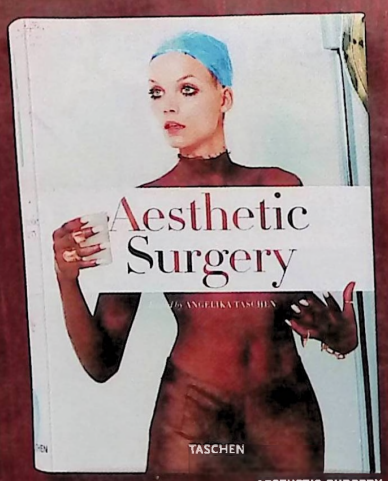
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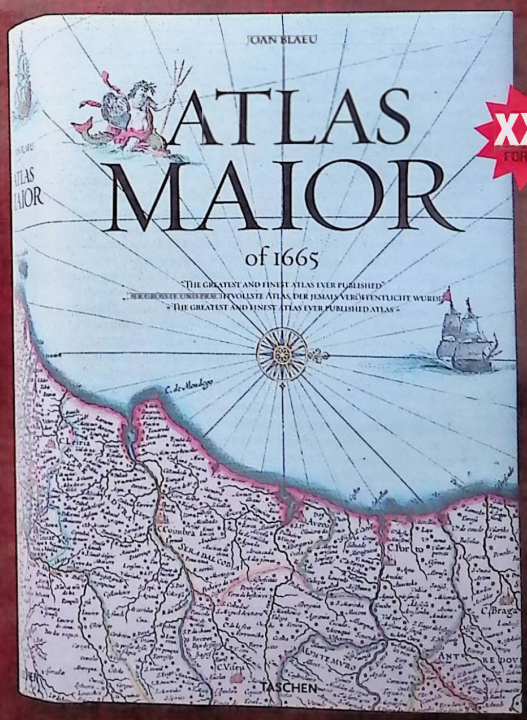
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