

The BOOKPRESS

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FREE



Illustration: Jack Sherman

Lead Belly in New York

S.K. List

As a long-haired teenager in black turtleneck and tights, guitar in hand, I learned who Lead Belly was early in the '60s. I even knew fairly early on that he was really *Huddie Ledbetter*, although only recently have I found out that the pronunciation of his name rhymes with "Judy." (In spite of widespread inconsistency, I've also learned to stick with the older spelling of his nickname, as two words.) Certainly, like many other music fans, I accepted and respected his status as a folk legend all along. But it has taken a number of conversations with Ithaca's Sean Killeen, and some digging, to move Lead Belly out of the "Oh, yeah" pocket of my mind.* Although Lead Belly's life experience is what gives his music weight, I doubt if I had ever considered his "career." It was news to me that that career got off the ground in New York, particularly in the colleges of upstate New York. But how, in the less than opportune circumstances of the 1930s, did a poverty-stricken, middle-aged black convict escape the chains, both literal and figurative, that bound him to the ground in his native Louisiana? And how did he gain access to those sheltered, privileged white enclaves of education?

If nothing else signified that Lead Belly was an extraordinary individual, this cultural leap would do so. The exciting and satisfying thing is that the more layers of his story are peeled back, the more his special status is confirmed. It's remarkable to discover that, at least for a while, Lead Belly was the instant celebrity of his day. He emerged in the corner of the public eye at the start of 1935, in New York City, and, in short order, almost everybody wanted a look at him.

While it is widely remembered that "Goodnight, Irene" was his most famous song and became a 1950 hit record for the Weavers just months after he died, it is less common knowledge that Lead Belly himself was a hit from the start. Hardly six months after he walked out the door

see *Lead Belly*, page 2

*While the responsibility for any conclusions, assessments, or errors is mine, I want to acknowledge at the outset my debt to Sean Killeen. Killeen is the guiding spirit and prime mover of the Lead Belly Society (see accompanying story, page 20), editor of the quarterly *Lead Belly Letter*, and currently writing a biography of this prototypic and protean musician. He has generously and enthusiastically helped me at every turn as I have approached this subject, and willingly shared some of the fascinating materials he has unearthed. Most of all, he has made it fun.

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Lead Belly

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of the Louisiana state penitentiary, he was making headlines in the *New York Herald Tribune*. In their 1992 biography, *The Life and Legend of Leadbelly*, Charles Wolfe and Kip Lornell call the *Tribune's* January 3, 1935 article possibly the most important coverage in his career, at least promotionally. Predictably, the paper emphasized the most lurid elements of Lead Belly's story. From a deck of four headlines, the second is the one most quoted: "Sweet Singer of the Swamplands Here To Do a Few Tunes Between Homicides." The article described him as "a walking, singing, fighting album of Negro ballads," an indefatigable Lothario with an ear-to-ear knife scar that "bears witness to his dreadful charm."

The following days saw Lead Belly being interviewed for *Time* magazine (headline: "Murderous Minstrel") and the "March of Time" movie newsreel, courted by record companies, theatrical producers, and radio networks, and signed up for concert dates. His Shreveport bride, Martha Promise, arrived at Pennsylvania Station amid a flurry of reporters and flashbulbs; the same conditions attended their January 21 wedding, which was solemnized in a Connecticut cottage by the minister of a nearby AME Zion church. Within a year, to capitalize upon the public's interest, Macmillan rushed into publication with what today might look like a "quickie" biography — except that the book was produced by Texans John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax. It was titled *Negro Folk Songs As Sung by Lead Belly*, with this amplifying information: "'King of the Twelve-String Guitar Players of the World,' Long-Time Convict in the Penitentiaries of Texas and Louisiana."

Father and son, the Lomaxes were already the authors of *American Ballads and Folk Songs*, pioneers of song collecting and field recording, and folk culture archivists at the Library of Congress itself. John Lomax was also the engineer of Lead Belly's public debut. One of the singer's claims to fame was that he had sung his way free of a 30-year jail sentence for murder with a song-plea to Texas governor Pat Neff. Once in the Louisiana pen, he had produced a similar song, first submitting it to Huey Long, later customizing it to address Long's successor O.K. Allen. The details are cloudy, indicating that his behavior in jail may have earned him some "good time," but the song exists, it was delivered to the governor, and, one way or another, in August 1934 Lead Belly walked free.

Searching for authentic African-American work songs and savvy enough to mine the prisons and other forgotten corners of Southern states, John Lomax had come upon Lead Belly a year earlier. Impressed, he came back to record his songs a second

time in July 1934. While some stories suggest Lead Belly was pardoned into Lomax's care, the reality appears to be less official. In any case, following his release, Lead Belly quickly connected with Lomax (who was then 66) and took up a role as his chauffeur and retainer as they visited other prisons over the next few months. More important, Lead Belly acted as a sort of "interpreter," helping the archivist coax good musical material out of other black convicts.

The story of this alliance is recounted in detail by Lomax in *Negro Folk Songs*. It is fascinating—for the landmark work Lomax was doing, for the characterizations of Lead Belly and his quoted remarks, and for its delineation, both explicit and implicit, of the individual relationship between Lomax and Lead Belly, as well as of the broader relationship across class and racial lines. As much as Lomax stands apart from the white culture of the 1930s, he also embodies it. For all his appreciation of vanishing black folk culture and his efforts at preserving it, Lomax conjures up no one so much as Elvis Presley's questionable manager Tom Parker, complete with the courtesy title of "Colonel." In fact, Lead Belly called Lomax "Boss" and his teenage son Alan, "Little Boss."

The first third of the Lomax book, called "The 'Worldly Nigger,'" is Lead Belly's life story, much of it purportedly in his own words off the Lomaxes' tapes and taken down in dialect, from his birth through April 1935. Repeatedly, in this section, Lomax expresses his anxiety at traveling with a convicted killer. But the power dynamic between them was complex and unsettled. Particularly striking is the story of the conversation in which Lomax agreed to take Lead Belly on. He asks the singer if he has a gun.

"No, suh, boss, but I'se got a knife."

"Let me see it."

He handed me his knife, which I opened and balanced on my hand. It had a long, narrow blade, sharpened to a razor edge.

"Lead Belly," I said, "down in Austin I have a home and a lovely lady for my wife; also a very dear daughter...I hope to live a long while for their sakes. If you sometime — when we are driving along a lonely road — decide that you are going to take my money and car, you need not stick this knife into me. Just tell me and I'll hand you my money, get out of the car, and let you drive on."

"Boss," he said, as if deeply moved, "boss, I don't think you oughta talk dat way to me. Boss, dis is de way I feels about you: Ef you got in a fight wid a man an' he start to shoot you, I'd jump in between an' ketch de bullet myself an' not let it tech you. Boss, please, suh, lemme go wid you; I'll keep your car clean an' drive jes' like you tell me. I'll wait on

you day an' night. An', boss, you'll never have to tie yo' shoes again ef you'll lemme do it."

This story was told and retold, in numerous variations. It was even acted out by Lomax and Lead Belly in squirmingly scripted caricature for the *March of Time* newsreel. But if we could hear Lead Belly's side of this story, even with identical quotations, I suspect we might be left with a different feeling. Lomax acknowledges that Lead Belly did work tirelessly for him, but in return, he measured out a meager financial allowance, even taking money made when Lead Belly passed the hat. And, as often as possible, he dictated most of Lead Belly's activities. But as much as he wanted to work and to see New York, Lead Belly was his own man. He had loved women and fathered children. Almost 50 years old and possessed of iron self-esteem, he had lived a life of rigorous challenge and hard testing. He had survived the chain gang and the lash, prison escapes and packs of trailing hounds, grinding poverty and grubbing farm labor. He had survived as a black man unwilling to mold his attitude to the boundaries of white expectations. Furthermore, he had the ego and initiative, not to mention the repeated audience endorsement, of a born performer. His interaction with John Lomax was anything but easy-going.

In time, the pair proceeded northward and Lomax began to introduce Lead Belly to a new audience. Their first stop was in Philadelphia, at the annual meeting of the Modern Language Association (MLA) of America, hosted that year by Swarthmore. For the group's yearly smoker on December 30, Lomax was scheduled to speak about folk songs (as he had done at the 1909 MLA meeting, held in Ithaca at Cornell University). His presentation of the real thing in Lead Belly took the academics by storm and paved the way for later college appearances. The sensational reception there, and at subsequent smaller, private performances, led Lomax to believe he was handling a valuable property as, indeed, he was.

Out of all this and the big-city publicity, Lomax booked a March tour through upstate New York and New England. A tentative date at Hamilton College had fallen through when the president read the *Tribune* story and pronounced Lead Belly "disreputable." But, driving to Albany in a 1934 Ford V-8, Lomax and Lead Belly began their trip with a private recital, hosted by Professor Harold Thompson, a prodigious folklorist who also taught for many years at Cornell and was a founder of the New York Folklore Society.

Imagine the journey. Lomax wrote that they traveled "over the ice-covered roads." Upstate readers know what central New

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York is like in March, and this was well before construction of the Thruway. After a day's travel, they arrived in Rochester on March 4. Before their scheduled concert and with Lomax's permission, Lead Belly took off exploring in the car. When he was very late in returning, Lomax went to the police to report the car missing. So much for the element of trust.

"We will have your car and Negro directly," the police promised Lomax. In fact, Lead Belly was gone for hours. Nevertheless, his performance, as recalled by the man who reviewed it for the University of Rochester student paper, was a success.

On March 6, Lead Belly played in the Norton Union at the University of Buffalo, with Lomax calling it "the most important engagement we have on this trip." On March 7, Lomax discussed ballads at a morning assembly for Buffalo State Teachers College and Lead Belly sang two songs; and on March 9, they appeared at the University Club of Buffalo, but with Lead Belly in poor voice. All the time they were in Buffalo, he and Lomax bickered about Lead Belly's lifestyle of staying out late drinking and chasing women. "The blame," wrote Lomax, "would be rightly laid at my door should Lead Belly in his wild night life kill someone." For his part, Lead Belly was insulted and resentful at Lomax interfering in his personal life, especially when he was the trip's money-maker. But on the way back to Albany, via Cherry Valley, they made up somewhat.

At the Albany State Teachers College, Lead Belly wowed a crowd of 1,500. He played two other concerts in Albany, one at a men's club and one in the morning at the

See *Lead Belly*, page 19

The Society of the Spectacle

Guy Debord

Few works of political and cultural theory have been as enduringly provocative as Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*. From its publication amid the social upheavals of the 1960s up to the present, the volatile theses of this book have decisively transformed debates on the shape of modernity, capitalism, and everyday life in the late twentieth century.

Now finally available in a superb English translation approved by the author, Debord's text remains as crucial as ever for the understanding of contemporary effects of power, which are increasingly inseparable from the new virtual worlds of our rapidly changing image/information culture.

Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith

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Contributors:

Gunilla Feigenbaum, Chris Furst, Harvey Fireside,

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Illustration: Milly Acharya

Smoke Signals

CIGARETTES ARE SUBLIME
Richard Klein
Duke Univ. Press, 240 pages, \$21.95

Steven Stern

I am a smoker. This fact determines where I am allowed to live, how I budget my tiny paycheck, where I can sit in restaurants, and often, who my friends are. It also determines, as I am frequently reminded, when and how I will probably die. Is it too much to say that my "identity" as a smoker might be one of the most important elements of how I define

myself and how I am defined by the world? At a time when so many theoretical works are warning against the "essentializing" of identity—of treating membership in a group as a natural, inherent quality of self—am I hopelessly retrograde in wanting to proclaim my addiction as something that clings to everything I do, as the smell of stale tobacco clings to everything I wear? If my own confessions do not make a convincing enough case for "smokerhood" as a valid category of identity, a look at any American newspaper might serve the same purpose. The personal ads, those haikus of self-definition, confirm that, after the

Big Three of identity—gender, race, and sexual preference—smoking or non- is the most universally referenced marker of selfhood.

Perhaps there is something unavoidably disingenuous in these remarks, but perhaps that is the result of the way smoking is seen in America today, when anti-smoking propaganda lies heavy in the air. With so many good reasons not to smoke, how can I claim an identity based on a substance that seems a frivolous vice at best, and a public menace at worst? The difficulty is not simply that smoking, as the surgeon general informs me, "causes lung cancer, heart disease, emphysema, and may com-

plicate pregnancy [as if pregnancy wasn't already complicated enough!]." It is that cigarettes, unlike other "bad" substances, seem so pointless. While there is a certain drama attached to the abuse of heroin, cocaine, or even alcohol, the "high" of smoking seems ridiculously disproportionate to the risks involved. Cigarettes are not only dangerous, they are gratuitously so.

It is not difficult to imagine, then, how I reacted to a book that has as its premise the conviction that, "cigarettes, though harmful to health, are a great and beautiful civilizing tool and one of America's proudest contributions to the world." Richard Klein's *Cigarettes Are Sublime* would seem to be just what I need to help me articulate my oppression; wrapped in the swirling blue and white of the Gitanes logo, it looks like the huge cigarette pack of my dreams. How could any smoker resist a book that demonizes not the addict, but the puritanical culture which "imposes its hysterical visions and enforces its guilty constraints on society, all the while enlarging the power of surveillance and the reach of censorship to achieve a general restriction of freedom."

Yet despite its openly polemical nature, *Cigarettes Are Sublime* is much more than a "smoker's rights" tract. It is, rather, a meditation on the many paradoxes which cigarettes embody and enact, paradoxes which are emblemized in the very physiology of smoking: nicotine is perhaps the only substance that produces both alertness and relaxation. Part cultural history, part literary criticism, part philosophy, Klein's book offers nothing as positivistic as a credo, an ethics, or even a psychology of smokers. It could be argued that the book is not about smokers at all; it is an openly fetishistic ode to cigarettes themselves, to their "dark beauty" and seductive power. Proceeding through readings of texts ranging from Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* to Bizet's *Carmen* to the novelization of Oliver Stone's *Platoon*, Klein manages to "speak only about cigarettes—about everything from the perspective of cigarettes."

If Klein himself makes no claims for an identity politics based on smoking, it might be said that the very presence of his book forces one to admit that such a politics is already in place. Reading *Cigarettes Are Sublime* seems to initiate what could be called "the *maitre d'effect*": it calls on you to declare, if not where you stand, at least where you would like to be seated. In the recent issue of the *New York Review of Books* where Klein's book is discussed, the reviewer, John Banville, is identified in the contributors notes as "Literary Editor of the *Irish Times* and a non-smoker." On the other side of the dining room, Colson Whitehead in the *Village Voice* waxes autobiographical about his own embattled smoker-identity, and claims that Klein "charges to our rescue like the Marlboro man with tenure."

This view of Klein as "our" hero is problematic, most notably because he himself claims to have left the fold; he has quit, he says, "definitively." By this he means, I think, not simply "for real, this time" (a familiar refrain for any addict), but that he has quit through a process of definition, through analyzing the charms and benefits of what J.M. Barrie called "the Lady Nicotine." *Cigarettes Are Sublime* is intended as a way of working through Klein's own habit, and hopes to have a similar effect upon the reader. It is another of the many paradoxes of Klein's book that it attempts to discourage smoking by not aiming
see Smoke Signals, page 15

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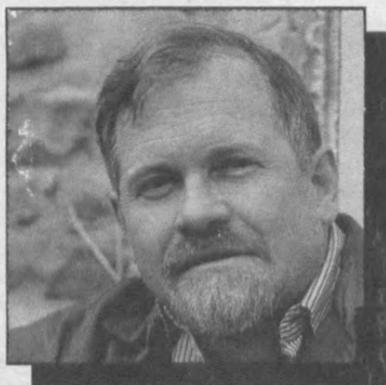
Off Campus

At The Bookery

The Bookery continues its 1994 lecture series.
In the lecture space in Bookery II

Book Signing

Saturday, April 9, 3-5pm



Robert Morgan,

Professor of English at Cornell, will sign copies of his new novel *The Hinterlands: A Mountain Tale in Three parts*, a story of a family of pioneers and roadbuilders. Unfolding in the voices of three generations of Appalachian mountaineers, it vividly brings to life the earliest days of America when finding a way through its wilderness was the most daunting challenge of all.

Sunday, April 10, 4pm

Howard Botwinick

will give a talk drawn from his new book *Persistent Inequalities: Wage Disparity under Capitalist Competition*. He will present a dissenter's view of the dark sides of capitalist competition and the "free" labor market, emphasizing the critical role of unions in the contemporary period. Botwinick is Associate Professor of Economics at SUNY Cortland.



Sunday, April 17, 4pm



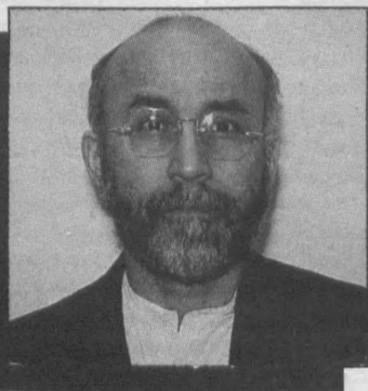
Alice Brand

will give a talk drawn from her new book entitled *Presence of Mind: Writing and the Domain Beyond the Cognitive*. With contributions from some of the most respected thinkers in contemporary composition studies, the book treats meditation, body wisdom and felt sense, imagery, emotion, attitude, values, motivation, the unconscious, intuition, inspiration, insight, archetypes, and healing. Brand is a professor of English at SUNY Brockport.

Kelvin Santiago-Valles

will talk about his new book *"Subject People" and Colonial Discourses: Economic Transformation and Social Disorder in Puerto Rico, 1898-1947*, analyzing the ways in which colonial operations have structured subaltern expressions and examining the growing role of educated "natives" (including independence advocates). At issue are the gender and race practices that enabled US colonialist enterprises in Puerto Rico and elsewhere as part of a major shift in the world capitalist market and in geopolitical hegemony within the Caribbean. Santiago-Valles is Associate Professor of Sociology at SUNY Binghamton.

Sunday, April 24, 4pm



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Illustration: Carla DeMello

Bugging the Court

MAY IT PLEASE THE COURT

Peter Irons and Stephanie Guitton, Eds.
The New Press, 376 pages, 6 tapes, \$75

Harvey Fireside

Is that student intently plugged into his Walkman listening to "2 Live Crew?" Don't be too sure. He might be listening to "The Supreme Court."

No, it hasn't yet made the Top Twenty, but as the cover tells us, we have the real thing, "available to the public for the first time": recordings and transcripts of twenty-three "landmark cases," as they were argued before the highest bench in the land.

This expensive package is brought to us by Peter Irons, a law professor at the University of California, San Diego, and Stephanie Guitton, a student at Berkeley. Their coup made the news a few months ago, when it was revealed that they had broken their agreement with the US National Archives not to market the products of their research.

Only a few scholars had known that since 1956 all the so-called oral arguments before the Court had been recorded on tape. They were accessible to the select few on the understanding that their contents wouldn't be disseminated. Irons and Guitton flouted that accord, much to the Court's chagrin, and their copied tapes have recently been the basis of a series on National Public Radio.

Why shouldn't the justices rejoice that the public can actually become conversant with their recondit proceedings? After all, a small number of spectators have always been admitted to the august chambers, though stripped of cameras and recording devices. What's all the fuss about?

We can surmise that the Supreme Court justices, like other judges, rely on the aura of mystery that pervades our courtrooms. Their black robes and elevated seats allow them to act as priests of old dispensing justice. If we heard them openly arguing with each other or needling the lawyers who appear before them, it might destroy our illusion that they have an Olympian hookup to the Founding Fathers.

The officials who tried to abort this publishing venture shouldn't have bothered. Hearing the likes of Hugo Black, William Douglas, and Thurgood Marshall parry and thrust makes constitutional law come alive as it never did in my textbooks. It certainly adds a new dimension to history to eaves-

drop on Leon Jaworski fighting for access to President Nixon's tapes on the Watergate affair. It's a kick to hear a jittery Sarah Weddington fumble her arguments for women's rights to abortion, then compose herself when she is given a second chance to convince the court to rule for the right of privacy in *Roe v. Wade*.

Irons and Guitton have done a public service by providing us with ringside seats in these jousts of the legal titans. The iconoclasm comes naturally to Irons, who started off as a draft resister during the Vietnam War, arguing that he had the right to be a conscientious objector without affirming his belief in a "supreme being." The judge didn't take kindly to that novel argument from a nonlawyer and sentenced Irons to three years in federal prison. Afterwards, Irons graduated from Harvard Law School and eventually had his conviction for draft evasion vacated.

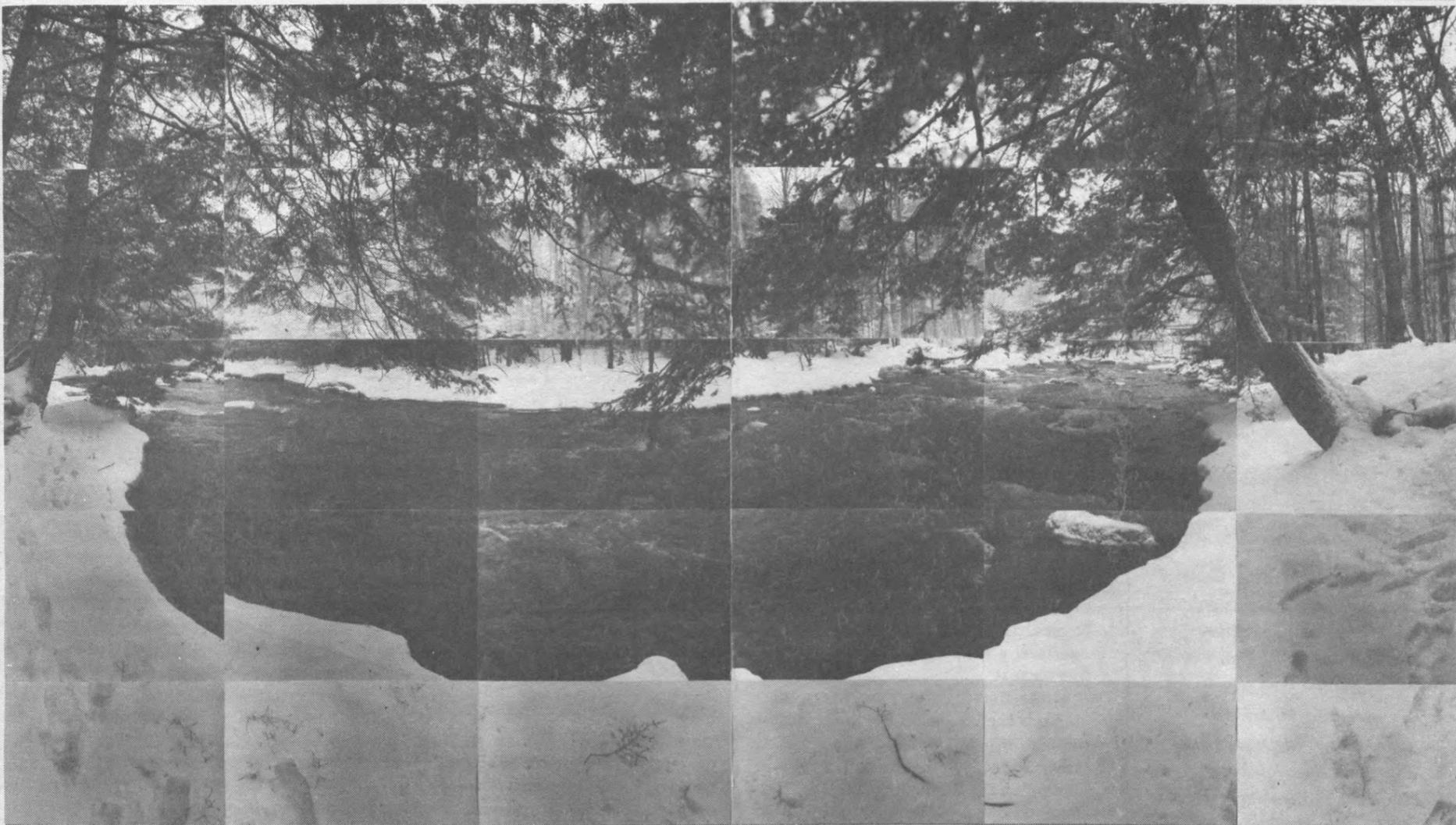
This isn't Irons' first publication. Fueled by righteous indignation, he published *The Courage of Their Convictions*, a fascinating account of other protestors who took their cases to the Supreme Court, together with interviews that let them recapture how they felt. Another book, *Justice at War*, let Irons document the shameful story of the World War II internment of Japanese-Americans, some of whom later became his clients in efforts to clear their records.

When the Archives and Court officials permitted him access to the confidential tapes, they should have realized that Irons had made a career out of thumbing his nose at authority. He was the least likely person to maintain scholarly decorum.

Without undercutting his achievement in letting us share the front-row seat at the Supreme Court, we might still quibble about the degree of bias in the selections that Irons made.

The cases included in this collection are heavily weighted in favor of the Warren Court, in line with the editors' predilection for its expansive definition of our civil liberties. Though Chief Justice Burger had three more years on the bench than Warren, there are two fewer selections from his time—and the cases are more of a mixed bag, showing some retrenchment as well as a few advances, notably into the area of privacy rights. While there are eleven cases from Warren's era and nine from Burger's, only three are drawn from the contemporary Rehnquist court, and none of them shows

see *Bugging the Court*, page 18



Photocomposite: Andrew Pogson

Fluid Dynamics

MATERIALISM

Jorie Graham
Ecco Press, 146 pages, \$22

Jon Griffin

The quiet of Jorie Graham's reading in Ithaca last fall surprised me. Since the publication of *The End of Beauty* (1987) she has been our most bardic poet—something of Blake and Shelley and Whitman (and much else) driven through a postmodern sensibility. *Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts* (1980), good as it is, seems static by comparison. *Erosion* (1983) is a much more accomplished volume which, for all its attention to paintings and the imagination liberated in frames, anticipates her later concerns about transitions, blurs in the boundaries of things, the world of process where "there is no/ entrance./ only entering" ("At Luca Signorelli's Resurrection of the Body").

The End of Beauty announces a dramatic broadening of scope in Graham's verse. Some corner has been turned, and strange vistas open up in time and voice and consciousness. She is minutely alert to the "hurry" of things, and to their "delays," interstices of suspension, indecision, or resolve. Several of the poems proceed in a sort of freeze-frame to examine pivotal moments and the consciousnesses attending them. In *Region of Unlikeness* (1991) complexities of time and mind proliferate, where seemingly disparate events fold or "coil" over each other, with surprising and often compelling juxtapositions. In both these books Graham's style, too, has opened up. The line has lengthened, and what feels like a wind, which is her voice and the rhythm of her thoughts, moves through the verse—exuberant, tentative, skeptical. While Graham is quite aware of the slipperiness of words and things (one of her main subjects), she never seems to doubt that a poem is the right place to examine it.

With *Materialism* Graham takes her bardic role even further into regions of uncertainty, meditating on the self in relation to itself, to its fluid immediate circumstances, and to its equally fluid but more mediated circumstances in history, literature, and philosophy. The site for many of these meditations is an indistinct border,

whether between leaf and leaf, sound and wind, night and day, interior and exterior, self and other, or between voices—and always between the mind and the objects of its attention. Graham is fascinated with points-between, the slippage at the margins of things. She's also attentive to the *thingness* of things. Her title refers not only to materialism of the bourgeois sort (though that's certainly included), but to materiality as such, and many of the poems consider things or desires or states of affairs along a continuum between the immaterially light and the oppressively heavy.

Graham began *Region of Unlikeness* with ten epigraphs, ranging from Augustine to Melville. She continues the practice here with five, from Bacon, Plato (twice), Emerson, and Whitman, and extends it to become an integral part of the book, inserting 14 passages among her 22 poems in such a way that the poems and passages severally comment on each other, or argue with each other, or confirm or undermine in various directions. She has, on the whole, chosen serious company: Bacon, Plato, Wittgenstein, Dante, Benjamin, Brecht, and Whorf, among others (and within "The Break of Day," Marx, Heidegger, Flaubert, and Frazer). While this is not a signal instance of wearing one's learning lightly, it is true that Graham has been at home among these types since her first book. Most of the passages bear on the question of materiality, though the positions of, say, Plato, Bacon, and Jonathan Edwards offer widely different lenses through which to view the poems. The method could easily have resulted in cacophony, but Graham has selected well, and the effect is rather that of circulating through a room of overheard monologues, each of which touches on one's own preoccupation.

For instance, early in the book we get a lengthy excerpt from Bacon's *Novum Organum*, in which he delineates eighteen "motions of bodies"—essentially, the ways stuff behaves. There is a motion of resistance, a motion of connection, of liberty, continuity, and so on. Bacon, as always, is fascinating and plausible, but coming after such poems as "Notes on the Reality of the Self" and "Steering Wheel" (in which things ripple, dance, bob, click, hover and generally don't pose for examination), there

is something humorous in his attempt to fix and order, which results in a riot of indeterminacy, a sense of the sheer rowdiness of things. Later we read "Annunciation with a Bullet in It," a poem that is partly an adaptation of an Auschwitz memoir:

*Six months, four of us are still alive,
there is a sudden selection.
Rachel, our little sister, will not possibly be
able to make it
She is all too ready.
It cannot happen.
Mengele is selecting a little distance away.
Frantically we try to make Rachel healthier
looking...*

Following this is another passage from Bacon, this one describing small experiments based on his earlier observations. Now these innocuous forays into the material, juxtaposed with the image of Mengele, take on a disturbing, even menacing, aspect:

*We took a metal bell...and immersed it in a
basin of water...
We took a glass egg, with a small hole at
one end; we drew out the air by violent
suction at this hole, and then closed the
hole with the finger, immersed the egg in
water, and then removed the finger...
We took a leaden globe...*

One could not, of course, number "all this pointing and indicating, crisscrossing of fire—/ warp and woof of urgent illuminations" ("The Break of Day"). The method succeeds very well in setting up a steady stream of correspondences among the pieces in the book. Graham has assembled a daunting chorus and settled challengingly within it.

Materialism features five poems named "Notes on the Reality of the Self," and that title could apply to the whole book, in the sense that the recording and creating consciousness in its various performances is always at least part of each poem's concerns. "Notes" (i) records a river bank in spring and the speaker's efforts to capture some sure sense of it. But everything shifts, reconfigures instant by instant. Each flurry of data combines into something apprehensible, and almost simultaneously diffuses again into the next possibilities:

*Last year's leaves, coming unstuck from
shore,
rippling suddenly again with the illusion,
and carried, twirling, shiny again and fat,
towards the quick throes of another tenta-
tive
conclusion, bobbing, circling...
Expression pouring forth, all content
no meaning.
The force of it and the thingness of it
identical.
Spit forth, licked up, snapped where the
force
exceeds the weight, clickings, pockets...*

Here the self's reality seems nothing independent of its shifting, sensual circumstances—a perpetual negotiation between the informing mind and the rich barrage it moves in. Graham has written elsewhere that "the crisp and honest description of the outer world schools one for the encounter with one's inner reality." But in an outer world where, after a briefest stillness, "the instabilities" paradoxically "regroup" ("Notes" ii), one's schooling is likely to be in uncertainty, or in momentary and competing certainties. So "Notes" (i) stops with a series of interrupted conclusions, some grand, some comical, yet with a conviction that the dissolution of an instant's knowledge doesn't invalidate the instant or the knowledge:

*The nature of goodness the mind exhales.
I see myself. I am a widening angle of
and nevertheless and this performance
has rapidly—
nailing each point and then each next right
point, inter-
locking, correct, correct again, each right-
ness snapping loose,
floating, hook in the air, swirling, seed-
down,
quick—the evidence of the visual hence-
forth—and henceforth, loosening—*

At times this sense of things as interacting with such fantastic complexity (and of the mind minding it all) almost threatens their integrity. In "Steering Wheel," the speaker is preparing to back out of her driveway when she notices, in the rear view
see Fluid Dynamics, page 14

An American Icon

READING NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC
Catherine A. Lutz and Jane Collins
Univ. of Chicago Press, 309 pages, \$19.95

Jody Greene

A two-page advertising spread appeared recently in *The New York Times Magazine*: Four virtually identical images depict a near-naked black adolescent, his body smeared with clay and his gaze averted, sitting on the ground in an open terrain of scrubby grassland. Behind him, we can see other boys in similar postures that might be interpreted as exhaustion, boredom, resignation, or repose. But devoid of any referent beyond the painted bodies which fill the frames, the portraits defy any attempt to construct a temporal, national, or narrative context.

A tiny line of print, barely recognizable as a caption, hangs above the largest picture, offering some of the relevant information: "Xhosa youths break from hunting on the South African veld." For those who notice it, the caption also reveals that these aestheticized, "timeless" images are taken from a book called "The Twilight of Apartheid." But even without that information, the style of the photographs is immediately recognizable as the standard ethno-photographic fare of *National Geographic* magazine.

Mass-market advertising is not a hallmark of *National Geographic*, perhaps because such marketing may seem inappropriate for a scientific and educational journal. Moreover, as the periodical with the third-largest circulation in the nation, the magazine hardly needs to search for subscribers: ten million Americans

about another culture while simultaneously—and perhaps more profoundly—teaching us about our own.

Lutz and Collins are careful to point out that, notwithstanding the "fundamentally critical perspective" which their book claims to bring to the magazine's representational practices, they are not interested in offering a corrective to the *Geographic* version of the non-Western



world. Their book starts "not from the proposition that there is a 'real' third world out there that better documentation could find, but from the understanding that identity formation draws on images of the other." If the book attempts any sort of correction at all, it tries to redress the imbalances of ethnographic history by focusing its own anthropological gaze back onto Western culture in general and American ethnographic institutions in particular. By examining the way in which Americans have not only encountered but have constructed "others" over the past century, the authors hope to give an account of American self-understanding during and since the period of global decolonization.

Using *National Geographic's* ethnographic photography as their primary example of this process of identity-formation through "othering," the authors read these photographs as images designed for pleasure and edification that also provide clues to processes of cultural understanding and self-understanding. They justify limiting the scope of their analysis to the photographs on the evidence of surveys which suggest that 53% of *Geographic* "readers" do not read the articles.

Lutz and Collins analyze 600 randomly selected photographs from articles on non-Western subjects which appeared in the magazine between 1950 and 1986. Studying the context of each photograph, they use such criteria as age, race, gender, and national origin of those pictured, activity level, dress (or lack thereof), and facial expression. They also examine the structure of the images with attention to camera angle, photographic technique, and the direction of the "gazes" of the subjects. Their study yields interesting, if somewhat predictable, conclusions about the way in which *National Geographic* images idealize, exoticize, dehistoricize, and sexualize non-Western subjects.

The authors make similar judgments on the basis of 55 interviews conducted with paid volunteers in Binghamton, New York, and Oahu, Hawaii. Participants (all of whom were white) were shown 20 pictures of people in non-Western settings which appeared in the magazine between 1977 and 1986. The ambivalent and even contradictory responses—a combination of tolerance and intolerance, fascination and repulsion, identification and differentiation—appear to reflect deeply conflicted attitudes toward other

racess and cultures. However, the minute sample group and the author's questionable decision to display the photos without captions cast doubt on the broad generalizations they seek to derive from their experiment. After all, deprived of any context for the photos they are shown, it's hardly surprising that most of the subjects exhibit ambivalence and that their replies are littered with such locutions as "I don't know" and "it seems like."

The most striking ambivalence in *Reading National Geographic*, however, remains that of Lutz and Collins themselves. As self-described white, middle-class anthropologists who developed an interest in non-Western cultures in part through their own childhood encounters with *National Geographic*, they still believe it possible to maintain a "fundamentally critical perspective" in their work. Yet their methodology often seems to mimic the *National Geographic Society's* own by refusing to display any excessively "unpleasant" or "unduly critical" information about the magazine and what they refer to as its "machinery of desire."

A clear example of this dialectic of identification and differentiation appears in the chapter on "The Color of Sex" which examines sexual and racial codes in *National Geographic* photography, in particular the long tradition of bare-breasted women (all of them, until very recently, dark-skinned). Lutz and Collins argue that

the still heavily white male photographic and editorial staff at the *Geographic* appears relatively unaffected by feminist critiques of the use of women's bodies or the critique of colonial looking-relations.

In this instance, Lutz and Collins permit themselves to critique the magazine because, as women and feminists, they refuse to be implicated in its sexist practices.

The authors' failure more consistently to turn such a critical eye on *National Geographic's* racial codes and conventions remains the book's greatest disappointment. Anthropologists and sociologists like Lutz and Collins, determined to explode the pretensions to critical objectivity displayed by their predecessors in the social sciences, have argued for the necessity of rigorously articulating the positionality of the observer, the ethnographer, and the cultural critic. Such necessary attention to position, (through shared racial, national, sexual, or class attributes) however, ought not preclude the possibility of radical critique. In the end, one cannot avoid the feeling that *Reading National Geographic* is a much blander book than the authors set out to write.

Jody Greene is a graduate student at Cornell University.



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It's a Wonderful Life

HOME FIRES: AN INTIMATE PORTRAIT OF ONE MIDDLE-CLASS FAMILY IN POSTWAR AMERICA

Donald Katz
Harper-Collins, 624 pages
\$25 cloth, \$14 paper

Paulette Hackman

Great literature provides readers with "a vivid and continuous dream," said novelist John Gardner. To maintain the reader's reverie, total fidelity to the writer's vision is essential and a seamless narrative must avoid mistakes of detail or lapses in truth. Though Gardner's remarks were directed to the art of creating fiction, this standard of judgment was recalled when I read Donald Katz' *Home Fires: An Intimate Portrait of One Middleclass Family in Postwar America*, a work of literary non fiction on a grand scale.

history," *Home Fires* delivers substantial material for a sociology course. But in structure and scope—its narrative dramatizing the pathos and celebration in more than four decades of family life—and in the fully literary portrayal of characters, *Home Fires* reads as a close cousin to the Great American Novel.

Explaining what drew his attention to the Gordon family, Katz writes in his introduction: "The Gordon family seethed, and soon Gordon children began to careen out into the changing culture, touching an uncanny array of experiences in Greenwich Village, Harlem, Mississippi, London, San Francisco, Berkeley, Ann Arbor, Woodstock, Altamont."

Three daughters, Susan, Lorraine, and Sheila, would present their parents, Sam and Eve, with grandchildren named Shuna, Shiva, Gopal, and Magdalena, some of whose formative years would be spent in ashrams or observing a parent's battle with drug addiction.

Ricky, the youngest in the family, gay, and headed for a career in the arts, would face the challenge of forging a bond with a father who'd perhaps envisioned handing down his electrical contracting business to an only son.

In a voice one part Dreiser and one part social historian, Katz juxtaposes the family timeline with a prodigious overview of American popular culture. Seen through this social lens—which shows us the national trends and traumas, the celebrity psychologists and gurus, the music and consumer fads, the advice offered by women's magazines which insinuated itself into the psyche of housewives—the Gordon story reveals the potent forces which wove different and often clashing designs into the fabric of family life from 1945 to the 1990s.

Praised in *The New York Times* as "a wise and respectful story, names and traumas apparently un-retouched," *Home Fires* was chosen as a *Times* "notable book" of the year. Though it sold fewer copies than Katz' first book, *The Big Store: Inside the Crisis and Revolution at Sears*, this 615-page family saga attracted widespread media attention, most recently as a possible HBO series.

During a brief pause between snow storms this winter, I visited Don Katz in Montclair, NJ. I had come to discuss the methodologies, challenges, and issues specific to creating *Home Fires* and, in general, to working in the genre of literary nonfiction. How did Katz work with the family to reconstruct events? How was dialogue recreated? What checks did he use to ensure the accuracy of memory? And in the course of interviewing the Gordons and those their lives connected with, how did he tap into the inner lives that informed some events as distant as 50 years

ago? With an obvious talent for the narrative form, what has influenced his choice to work in the genre of literary nonfiction? What is his reaction to critics who have accused journalists, particularly those with creative styles, of exploitation or misrepresentation?

What follows are edited excerpts from our conversation along with brief selections from the text of *Home Fires*.

1963

One night at dinner with Sam, Eve, and the rest of the family, when Susan was still new to Marxist thought, she explained that her father, who was listening attentively, was "typical of bourgeois capitalists" in that he lived by exploiting his working-class labor force.

At this, Sam put down his fork. "In what ways do I...exploit these people, Susan?" ...

"Well, you obviously exploit Bernie Denodio," Susan said. Bernie was one of the senior men on Sam's crew.

Even Lorraine, whose dinner table bellicosity sometimes surpassed Susan's onslaughts, sat back in awe. Eve, Lorraine, Sheila, and Ricky all turned wide eyes to Sam, like spectators watching a tennis match in slow motion.

"I exploit Bernie? Sam said. (It came out "Boynee"—his Lower East Side accent overtook him in combative moments.) "I exploit Bernie Denodio? ...Bernie Denodio who just bought a sixteen-thousand-dollar house I signed the note for, with a down payment from money he took home from my jobs. ...That Bernie? THAT BERNIE!"

PH: How do you recreate conversations?

DK: I obviously rely first on everybody's memories, just trying to get free associations going, and then use a combination of new information from other subjects to help people recall. I tend to re-ask questions that are important in several-month intervals. There are people who have unbelievable memories which you can test against mechanical records. I had access to tapes and videos and all of the letters.

As far as getting dialogue going, it's a combination of a lot of things, but one of them is understanding over long periods of conversation how people talk. Just understanding their meter, their words, their usages, and making that an aspect of verisimilitude as opposed to actual fact. If you know the nature of a conversation, you can create it so that, to each party, there's veracity because it sounds like the person's voice.

PH: How do you know, though, which is the authentic memory?

DK: Well, you want more than one source to test things that you know were probably true. If you have photographs you know how things looked in the rooms they were in. It's just an accretion process. Within a family there are problems with cross-referencing because you find there are different kinds of histories and five different kinds of truths. There is a consensual truth which comes from family stories that get told over and over so that everybody has the same version—even though it's often not factually true. And you get the "Roshomon" stories which are interesting in that the same event is experienced in different ways and remembered differently. And then there are things which don't jibe, and those I threw out.

PH: In researching the social history, there must have been times when the Gordons would say things that would then lead you to look into other events, or other times when you must have read something and bounced it off them.

see *It's a Wonderful Life*, page 16

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Feminism Made Easy

**THE MORNING AFTER:
SEX FEAR AND FEMINISM ON CAMPUS**
Katie Roiphe
Little, Brown, 180 pages, \$19.95

Juliet Williams

As a feminist, I have had a sick feeling for the past year, a kind of queasiness really, but I think I finally have a diagnosis—*The Morning After* sickness. It turns out that a lot of us have come down with symptoms of overexposure to Katie Roiphe's crusade against "rape crisis feminism." The headaches began with a *New York Times* editorial, and only got worse when the book finally appeared on the market. After Roiphe launched a tour of the television talk show circuit this fall, I realized this would be hard to shake. Perhaps the most irksome aspect of the whole experience was that while I was mainly repulsed by Roiphe's message, I was also curious. After all, Katie Roiphe and I had been classmates in college. We weren't friends, but we knew each other well enough to nod in polite recognition when passing on the way to class. Only later would I learn about the contempt and condescension the nod disguised. Roiphe's tirade against college feminism began as antipathy toward the particular band of undergraduate feminists I called my friends. As an eager, repeat participant in the Take Back the Night march, though not myself a rape survivor, and as a peer educator in an AIDS awareness program, I was Roiphe's worst nightmare. I had good reason to suspect that I would not like the book, but in the end the personal and political tugs were too much to resist. I had to read it.

Advertised as a serious work of cultural and political commentary, *The Morning After* is in fact nothing more than several redundant vignettes. The diminutive proportions of the work are the effect of scanty research, theoretical laziness, and sound-bite sentences. Roiphe's main claim is that the liberating fruits of the sexual revolution were spoiled by the new wave of feminists who rose to power on college campuses in the mid-'80s. Rape crisis feminists politicized sexual violence by projecting an image of women as fragile and vulnerable, eschewing liberation for victimization as the feminist rallying cry. According to Roiphe, the new feminism is built on hyperbole and outright lies. There is no rape crisis, she explains. Date rape is not a problem on campus. Sexual harassment is not a problem on campus. AIDS is not a problem on campus. The real problem on campus are the feminists.

Roiphe's argument is woven through a bitter recounting of her own experience of frustration with campus feminism. From her narrative, it is immediately evident that Roiphe has never liked politics much. She yearns nostalgically for her high-school days, when the feminism was easy: "I didn't spend much time thinking about feminism. It was something assumed, something deep in my foundations." This is the kind of feminism Roiphe has always liked, the kind you don't have to think about, the kind that

doesn't mean getting angry, organizing, demonstrating, educating—having to *do* something. For Roiphe, feminism was always more a mindset than a movement. I think back on my own past and wonder how I became a feminist, when it became a part of me. I arrived at college battle-weary from a three-year struggle to integrate girls into a public high school in Philadelphia, which was proudly clinging to its one-hundred-fifty-year legacy of all-male education. As the first girl in my class of three hundred boys, I had spent three years fighting insults and catcalls on a daily basis. My classmates staged a student walk-out to protest girls in school. Teachers tried to bar me from chemistry and algebra because they objected to the idea of having girls in their classrooms. It never made sense to me to conceive of feminism apart from action.

By the time Roiphe settled into college, she was forced to think more about feminism, but she remained aloof from activism. Roiphe's description of mid-'80s Harvard undergraduate feminism is narrated from the standpoint of an outsider looking in. She remembers well the time she perched in her dorm room window and watched the annual Take Back the Night march pass by. The young Roiphe stood comfortably above the fray, and her "foundations" told her that there was something very, very wrong with all those righteous feminists down there. She was struck by the raw, angry enthusiasm of the participants. She thought it was strange. As Roiphe tells it, campus culture was dominated by rape crisis hysterics. She describes a student body bristling with concern over the issues of sexual violence and date rape. Don't believe the hype. Harvard feminism was always distinguished not so much by its degree of activism and commitment, but rather by its brooding, but-what-does-feminism-really-mean? streak. To me, it always seemed much more Harvard than feminist.

Nonetheless, Roiphe argues that Harvard feminists, and feminists generally, don't think hard enough. More pedantry than cultural criticism, Roiphe's argument is framed as an exposé of the logical errors and rhetorical excesses of the feminist movement. Roiphe sees in campus feminism a politics mired in hypocrisy. Her favorite example is the idea of speaking out against silence. Mesmerized by the obvious, she observes: "Once you're talking about being voiceless, you're already talking." True enough, but so what? There is a lot of feminist talk out there, but Roiphe's is the voice that gets heard. Of course, Roiphe has a vested interest in blurring the distinction between talking and being heard, for she wants to make credible her own claim of victimization at the hands of the overbearing PC feminist cultural complex. Roiphe may not have felt that she could talk freely with her peers about her views, but then again, she didn't have to in order to be heard. She could publish a book. Like so many purveyors of the PC backlash, Roiphe falsely imputes a hegemonic status to positions only struggling for mainstream legitimacy. Her own meteoric rise to media stardom eloquently testifies to the

disingenuity of her claims.

Roiphe's main point is to complain, not to offer solutions. However, she clearly has her own ideas about what feminism should look like. In answer to that eminently political question "what is to be done?" Roiphe steadfastly resolves, "nothing." The implication of Roiphe's rant is that support groups, education campaigns, and political demonstrations intended to empower women victimized by sexual assault are ultimately self-defeating, for these services violate the "assumptions of basic competence, free will, and strength of character" women deserve. She offers us instead a bit of pseudo-feminist doublespeak: we empower women by denying their oppression, because to acknowledge it is to admit weakness. At one point, she proclaims in exasperation: "If there is any transforming to be done, it is to transform everyday experience back into everyday experience." Roiphe persistently excoriates the rape crisis feminists for reverting to old-fashioned norms, while her prescription is to turn back the clock.

Apparently, the only recent political movement of which Roiphe approves is the so-called "sexual revolution." Roiphe frequently decries her bad luck, confined to infancy during the high point of sexual liberation in this country. As Roiphe sees it, she has finally grown up, but the culture has regressed. "Now instead of liberation and libido, the emphasis is on trauma and disease. Now the idea of random encounters, of joyful, loveless sex, raises eyebrows. The possibility of adventure is clouded by the specter of illness. It's a difficult backdrop for conducting one's youth." While Roiphe detects some signs that the sexual revolution may not have been entirely lost, overall she finds the trends disappointing. She explains: "There's no doubt that some people are running around thinking only about pleasure and whom they're going to go home with after a party. But that is not the whole story. Many are more concerned with getting ahead and getting a nice car than getting drunk and getting laid." In Roiphe's mind, the hullabaloo about date rape on campus is fueled by women who refuse to let a bad night remain simply that. Roiphe thinks that the charge of date rape is a cop-out, utilized by those too afraid to take responsibility for the risks and ambiguities that the pursuit of really great sex entails. Sexual revolutionary dogma notwithstanding, for Roiphe the stiff upper lip is key; those who cry "rape!" the morning after shouldn't have agreed to play the game in the first place.

Roiphe contends that the fragile feminist is a product of a misinformation campaign that starts early in a girl's life. She recounts the true story of a friend of hers who was dragged unexpectedly into the work of indoctrination. As she explains, the friend was giving a tour of the campus to his younger sister who had come to visit for the weekend. The young girl asked what all the blue lights were for, and the older brother hesitated. In the end, he solemnly performed his duty. He told her all about the dan-

gers and risks that wait for women in the night. Roiphe explains, "In the long process of learning what those lights are really for, she'll learn vulnerability and lurking dangers in the bushes. She'll learn to be afraid walking around at night. Maybe she'll even learn, as the pamphlet says, to 'be on your guard with every man.'" Maybe. But there are other possibilities too. Maybe she will refuse to let go of her image of a safe and comforting world, maybe she will learn to recognize the power of solidarity with women and men aligned against danger, maybe she will gather with others under the security of the blue lights and demonstrate against violence. Maybe she will convert her fear into action, not dull submission.

Roiphe's reductionist approach is not limited to her treatment of feminism. She avoids confrontation with difficult questions by viewing all politics in terms of sex. Hence for Roiphe, rape and AIDS are treated as functional equivalents, both exaggerated epidemics which ultimately serve the same purpose: to make her sex life a lot less fun. "AIDS may not brush directly against our lives, it may not get us to use condoms or avoid mysterious strangers but it does suggest, somewhere in the recesses of the ego, if not the id, the possibility of sexually transmitted death." Resentful of the fear AIDS has introduced into what she believes would be otherwise unencumbered sexual encounters, Roiphe declares: "However tangible or diffuse, the sense of danger hovers over our experience, inevitably affecting our bedrooms, and our politics, and our mornings after." Roiphe is callous and irresponsible in her discussion of AIDS, at least in part because she performs on AIDS the same maneuver she has applied to rape and sexual harassment, which is to view it exclusively as a question of sex, as *she* experiences it. Roiphe's severely limited understanding of the impact of the AIDS crisis is of a piece with her elision of the enormous role that gay and lesbian politics have played in the campus debates she considers.

It is tempting to conclude that Roiphe is not a real feminist. She believes she is advocating for a higher feminism, one not mired in the retro prudery of days gone by. And while diversity and disagreement within feminism are both necessary and desirable, Roiphe's deeply antipolitical orientation tests even the most magnanimous feminists. Hers is a profoundly challenging orientation for a movement that has gained valuable momentum from the judgment that "the personal is political." Roiphe's purpose is to privatize just those areas of activity feminists have fought so hard to bring into public view, to remove from public discourse just those expressions of vulnerability and intimidation that can yield empowerment when shared with others. Roiphe would have us not merely divided, but atomized, making the conquering easy. No thanks.

Juliet Williams is a graduate student in the Department of Government at Cornell University.

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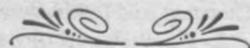
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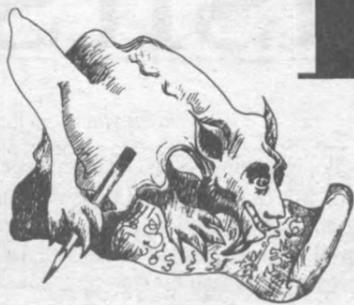
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AMNESIA

Douglas Cooper
Hyperion, 227 pages, \$19.95

Our narrator sits in his office. He is an archival librarian, a man who works with plans. He is going to be married in less than four hours. Then a stranger, Izzy Darlow, walks in and tells a story that will not only make the man miss his wedding but change his life. This fairy tale beginning sets the tone for the novel and serves as a sign post that we have entered the world of the Brothers Grimm or E. T. A. Hoffman, a disturbing world of shadowy ravines and unearthly visitors. But the story that Cooper invokes most often in his first novel is Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Izzy tells the fragmented story of his family: Izzy's brother Aaron performs experiments on dead animals, trying to create a machine that will unlock the secrets of reanimation; his brother Josh spends his nights walking a magic circle around the city of Toronto, chanting to himself, and then he locks himself in his room to write with uncanny accuracy of the family's future catastrophe. In a scene reminiscent of the birth of Frankenstein's monster, Izzy touches the two poles of Aaron's machine and receives a tremendous shock. Afterward he feels something inside trying to claw its way out. He runs away to the ravine and collapses; something has been born out of Izzy, but it will take the rest of the novel for him and the narrator to understand what it is.

For the fairy tale to work in a novel, the seemingly simple words must have the density and fierce potential of uranium. In order to unleash its destructive energies, the story must reach the right pitch, the correct blend of elements for detonation. This novel is not in the megaton range. Incomplete development keeps it from being as unsettling as it could be, but its monsters are memorable.

—Chris Furst

LIFE AFTER GOD

Douglas Coupland
Pocket Books, 360 pages, \$17

The diminutive size of this hardcover (6" x 4"), combined with the unusually large type, modest line drawings, and Coupland's storytelling technique of linking flat anticlimactic episodes, make this collection of eight stories look a bit like "Meditations for Generation X-ers Who'd Rather Not Read Too Much." And who else to write the pseudo-psychological credo for American twentysomethings than a thirtysomething German-born Canadian? Which is not to say that disaffectedness cannot be a multicultural event; but it tends to limit the level of discourse to Mars Bar epiphanies like "I think that if cats were double the size they are now, they'd probably be illegal" and "I figured the inauguration must have meant something important to me to cut through the fog." Yes, but *what?*

What is frustrating about reading this book is that beneath these humorless costume-jewels of wisdom that sound disturbingly like Saturday Night Live's "Deep Thoughts" (the irony here being that "Deep Thoughts" parodies the blameless pop psychology of the very generation Coupland so loves to skewer in his occasional commentaries for *The New York Times*), one can sense real generational concerns, particularly the nuclear theat. For those of us born in

the '60s, the possibility of instant annihilation hung like an ugly ochre awning over the house of our childhood, and Coupland shows how this anxiety remains with us as adults, the Cold War's "end" notwithstanding. Still, the patience needed by the reader to overcome a contrived indifference most of us post-boomers are sick of being tagged with might be better spent creating a countermyth to Coupland's, one which recognizes that snapping lazily at the heels of those who've come before you is still a form of coattail-riding, and hardly a substitute for a real generational vision.

—Jeff Schwaner

UNDER A HOODOO MOON

Dr. John (Mac Rebennack)
with Jack Rummel
St. Martin's Press, 264 pages, \$19.95

Dr. John uses his satchel of gris-gris magic as he brings us along a night trip through the thick gumbo of New Orleans music. Not just one musician's history, not simply another rock autobiography, it is a who's who of New Orleans music from the forties to the present. He introduces us to such great musicians as Professor Longhair, Harold Battiste, Art Blakey, James Booker, Doc Pomus, Red Tyler, Fathead Newman, and Allen Toussaint, and discusses what makes their styles unique. Much of the book is an elegy for the vanished paradise of nightclubs that fostered these versatile talents. The good doctor investigates voodoo chants, Afro-Cuban percussion, big band, cool jazz, Dixieland, bebop, R&B, Mardi Gras songs, swamp boogie, rock, pop, and funk—the recipe for his own energetic reinterpretation of New Orleans sound. Along the way he shows the obstacles he had to surmount to get his music heard, from dishonest and faint-hearted record executives to his own battle with heroin. Recommended.

—C.F.

VISITING MRS. NABOKOV AND OTHER EXCURSIONS

Martin Amis
Harmony Books, 274 pages, \$20

Martin Amis' new book is an uneven collection of profiles, reminiscences, interviews, think-pieces, political reportage, and travel articles. As with any miscellany, some pieces work better than others, and among the best of the lot, his profiles of literary figures range from an assessment of V.S. Pritchett's oeuvre at the age of 91 to a description of a bibulous lunch with the omnilingual and energetic Anthony Burgess. He also observes the publicity machine of pop culture at work in "Madonna." Flown to the US for a first glance at her book *Sex*, Amis observes that it is "no more than the desperate confection of an ageing scandal-addict." One of the most interesting pieces for American readers is his article "Phantom of the Opera," which explores the 1988 Republican convention in New Orleans, moving from voodoo shops to voodoo economics. His analysis of Reagan's effect on the country points to our "constant and riveting vulnerability to illusion." In choosing Reagan, who impersonated the average American with great success, we showed once again the need to fall for shows of sincerity. "The clear truth that this average American [Reagan] is a vain and shifty prodigal is not something that average Americans are raring to face up to." To the American press, used to lining up to shout

questions over the roar of the president's helicopter, this kind of observation is called savage. Years of the bland diet of television (where, the networks remind us, most Americans get their news) have habituated us to avoid candor, so that Amis' comparatively mild observations on our foibles seem like hallmarks of honesty. Honest they are, but this is not savage indignation. Amis is the distant heir of Evelyn Waugh's satiric style, but his savagery is diluted. In this collection, he retracts his claws.

—C.F.

SEPARATION

Dan Franck
Knopf, 227 pages, \$19

For some time now the defenders of French culture have been making angry protectionist noises about the immoral export of lowly American culture into France, and with the publication of *Separation* by French novelist and screenwriter Dan Franck (his first novel to be translated into English), we have a declaration of war by the French culture guard. It takes the worst notions and statistics of contemporary America—our infamous divorce rate, the popular idea that we are inevitably traumatized by our parents' mistakes, our obsession with brand names, and our notorious capacity to extend adolescence well into middle-age—and relentlessly regurgitates them in Paris. Into this mélange has been thrown a healthy dose of hatred for American feminism and its outgrowth, the concept of the sensitive man. Readers of *Separation* may erroneously think that it is literature. Everything about its style shrieks "literary." It is written in a minimalist prose, laden with aprioristic constructions that say nothing ("He feels as though he is emptying himself, but it is only a feeling.") and constructed in brief, cinematic scenes, sometimes four to a page. In order for such a style to be effective a writer's prose must be extraordinary. Franck's isn't.

The novel is about a marriage breaking up when the woman begins to have an affair. As if their parents had named them after their monogrammed towel sets, the feuding couple are known as He and She, and their friends by letter initials. This labelling of characters by their gender pronouns is a particularly grating form of artsiness. There is a lot of fighting over the children, and then a divorce, with much consulting of friends and valium-swallowing in between.

The problem they share is that they are each more wedded to the vision of what they are supposed to want than to each other: "She wanted a husband and two children—it was an image he needed, though at the same time it frightened him." Neither He nor She ever learns the distinction between a lifestyle and the life it represents, what we buy from who we are. When the end comes, not a moment too soon, she takes off not just her wedding ring, that most visible symbol of holy matrimony, but "three gold bands from Van Cleef & Arpels" (and her "Cartier watch," to boot). One begins to wonder whether Franck is being subsidized for such brazen endorsements.

The author's meaning is obvious, of course, that in the world of *Separation* all things purchased have names, but no living creature merits one. But, *Separation* lacks a crucial separation between the narrator and the characters, some sign of dramatic irony, a signal from the author of a greater intelligence than that of his characters. When the author gives no clues of his intention to make meaning, or of an awareness of how to marry form to content, one can only con-



clude that he may be in the same deep rut as the generation about which he writes, a generation for whom meaning arises only accidentally out of the chaos of living.

—Amy Zalman

MIDNIGHT IN THE GARDEN OF GOOD AND EVIL

John Berendt
Random House, 388 pages, \$23

This novel-like nonfiction account of manslaughter and manners in a historic southern city is the type of book that is supposed to be representative of mainstream publishing but is all too rare: an eminently readable story that will appeal to a broad range of readers without the necessary marketing accoutrements; a book that makes you think without telling you what to think; a story honest in its fascinations and flaws, narrated by an intelligent if not objective spectator. With a nonfiction bestseller list full of self-help books and commercial manifestations of cultural or political agendas, *Midnight* is a season-saving title.

Jim Williams, a nouveau-riche antiques dealer and the host of the best Christmas party in Savannah, Georgia, has a pile of index cards with the names of his fellow citizens. Sometime in the fall each card falls into one of two piles, IN or OUT, and to those who've fallen IN the party invitations soon go out. So on the night of May 2, 1981, when he shot his handyman Danny Hansford in his study, the ensuing investigation of Jim Williams twisted the social life of Savannah like a tornado; the sound of calendar pages turning could be heard all over town like a flock of frightened birds. John Berendt, an *Esquire* columnist and resident of New York City who'd taken to spending a few months in Savannah every year, and who in his curious perambulations had made friends in places both high and low in this historic town, found himself particularly qualified to be our tour guide through the unprecedented four murder trials needed to settle the matter, dragging us through graveyards with voodoo queens, Georgia football games with Uga IV (pronounced ugh-uh), the venerable bulldog mascot whose predecessors are buried in a corner of his namesake's football field, and bus tours of historic houses hosted by a squatter who keeps close track of which realtors are on vacation six months of the year. Berendt's tour is fast-paced and compelling, though there is a sly northern urbanity pervasive throughout the book that casts an incidental glare on many of the goings-on (as if Manhattan were any less old, new, quirky, perverse, historic, dangerous, and unwittingly humorous.) So I called Bookland Inc. of Savannah to see what the hometown reaction to Berendt's version might be. One bookseller named Kim told me people must love it because it was the best-selling book in the store, and try as I might I couldn't get her to say anything noteworthy about Yankee prejudices or northern exposure. People love a good story, and *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* is hard to put down once picked up, whether it's Spanish moss or April icicles hanging from your tree.

—J.S.

Illustrations: Mary Hood

Appalachian Transits

THE MOUNTAINS WON'T REMEMBER US
Robert Morgan
Peachtree Publishers, 250 pages, \$16

THE HINTERLANDS
Robert Morgan
Algonquin Books, 356 pages, \$21.95

Paul Sawyer

Robert Morgan is the author of nine volumes of poetry and a collection of essays and interviews. Five years ago he took up fiction, publishing three volumes so far—two collections of stories and *The Hinterlands*, a triad of novellas subtitled “a mountain tale in three parts.” In all of his work, Morgan erases the boundary between the human and the natural subject. “Earth” is for him the “ground” or support of human life—its institutions and artifacts, its ways of building, coping, surviving, rearing, and dying—as well as the region of nonhuman existence that stands opposite human knowledge and will, eluding and outlasting it. By extension, “earth” and “ground” are a metaphor of a writer’s (or this writer’s) supreme ethical concern, a duty (so to speak) to take human life straight, and to record it in its dailiness and actuality.

As a poet of nature and of material culture, he writes of ranges and rivers, of whippoor-wills, orchards, and lightning bugs, but also of slop buckets and manure piles, dank cellars and toolsheds re-opened after fifty years—richly detailed visual meditations through which one intuits the lineaments of a complex human community. In his fiction, Morgan constructs a social history which is also geology—a record of the endurance and decay of the earth.

The Mountains Won't Remember Us—a collection of ten stories and a novella—takes place in the ridges and valleys that ripple eastward out of the Carolinas towards Virginia and Tennessee, the region known locally as “the mountains” and nationally as “Appalachia.” The first three stories are set in the wilderness before the Civil War, and the last five are roughly contemporary—a stretch of about one hundred fifty years. The cycle of changes the stories record begins with the building of a stone bridge across a gap in the mountains, promoting commerce but also bringing in wealthy vacationers from the coast. Ten years after the Civil War, the railroad comes in, promising a new era of prosperity and a new influx of vacationers.

By the late 20th century, of course, this “underdeveloped” region has become overdeveloped. Mechanized civilization, ameliorating the harsher forms of destitution, danger, and isolation, does so by a succession of assaults both on the earth and on the ways of life it nurtured. Roads are clogged with traffic, the soil has been bulldozed into shopping malls; people drift through jobs, nestle in mobile homes, and compete for parking space with Cadillacs from Miami. In the seventh story, a woman discovers that the old homestead has been flooded with red mud because the developer next door has razed the surface of the hill; in the ninth story, a man swindled out of his land discovers that the new owner is illegally burying chemical waste near a riverbed.

As the time of the stories moves gradually forward, the narrators tend to age. The first three are young men or boys faced with heroic (or comic-heroic) challenges, while the tenth is barely surviving at eighty-five, and the last one lives mainly in her memories. But the cumulative effect is not elegiac. There are no giants in the earth here—the one truly brutal story, in fact, concerns a retaliatory raid made by early settlers on a camp of sleeping Indians. And yet a way of life is on the point of vanishing, and with it the oral modes of memory that helped sus-



Jacket Illustration for *The Hinterlands*: Lynne Buschman

tain it. By showing us that older culture in the process of passing (like the narrators) from youth through various stages of endurance and decay, Morgan gives us neither a nostalgic dirge nor a record of futility, but something more satisfying—a complex and moving meditation on memory and forgetting and on continuity and rupture.

The focus of these stories is always on the lives of individuals, which stand out against glimpses of historical change. To achieve this focus, Morgan tells all his stories in first person and often favors the form of a “memory loop”: an ongoing event which is interrupted, often at a suspenseful moment, by a movement of retrospection that circles forward to the original event. This shape combines dramatic urgency with the more casual movements of memory, circling both through time and opening out as metaphor.

In the story called “Frog’s Level,” a woman surprises her husband in a shopping mall with another woman, confirming an old suspicion that he has always been both worthless and a cheat. The wife and husband embark on a savagely comic chase, she in her old Mustang, he in a red 4x4 truck. The landscape of the chase—thick with traffic, diesel fumes, asphalt, tacky developments—also contains half-buried markers of her own past (the old, rutted orchard road where she finally loses him runs near the lookout they used to visit when courting), but also of her family’s past and the past of the region. Nevertheless, this story is less about memory than repudiation: by focusing her energy on hunting her husband down and, after that, on destroying the mobile home where they have been sheltered, she breaks blindly but triumphantly loose from a lifetime of drift and deception.

Another story that combines discursive drift with intensity of focus—it is also the shortest in the book—achieves its power with that least promising of subjects, an old man and his dog. At eighty-five, the narrator of “Mack” often cries in his chair because of the pain in his chest and the weakness in his limbs. He has lapsed from any closeness to his wife or to other humans, instead focusing all the interest and joy left him on a miniature collie. Their favorite activity is playing

in a field down beside a stream, but to get there they must cross a busy highway. Unfortunately, the old man has a tendency to lose his bearings halfway across, and he and the dog have nearly been hit several times. Near the end of the story, they have another close call:

There are horns blaring and cars on all sides of me, but I can’t see in what direction to go. If I could just sink down under it and let the traffic go on above my head it would be OK. And the noises I hear, beyond the horns and engines, are the thresh of the river, and a jet plane straight above, and water dripping through rocks in the ground far below. And there is a crisp sound, which is the crackle stars make on a cold clear night

“Pop, you can cross now.” It is the man in the red car, leaning out his window. He motions for me to go ahead.

All this rushing, flowing, struggling, and sinking, along with the old man’s mystic intimations of cosmic harmonies, subtly suggests other, more allegorical rivers and crossings—Bunyan’s River of Death, or perhaps the Jordan—although what the narrator finds on the other side is only the Promised Land of his own front yard, and the dog alive and well.

It would be an easy thing to write pityingly or bleakly about such a subject. Morgan does not pity the old man; instead he enters him for the moment, imagining him from within and surrounding him with a narrative space rich in emotional intensity and metaphorical force. At the same time, Morgan is able to link up that space with scenes and images in the other stories, creating the kind of metaphorical cross-texture one associates with poetry. For example, in the first story, “Poinsett’s Bridge,” the narrator, a young stone mason who has just helped finish the bridge, is robbed of all his earnings on the very day the turnpike is opened—only to discover, as he lurches homeward penniless and bloodied, an object shining in the dust: his mason’s hammer, the tool of his trade. At that moment, he finds himself suddenly surrounded by life—flocks of geese and pigs, and the drovers herding them, and

a peddler in a shiny buggy, all of them pouring as if from a “flood gate.” It is the flood of the coming prosperity, a hundred fifty years removed from the flood of traffic in “Mack,” the prosperity which the young mason has helped to bring and which, along with the hammer, signifies that he is blessed with inner riches and that all will be well with him.

The deepest effort of Morgan’s narrative imagination is the power to give voice. Morgan’s narrators most nearly resemble the speakers of oral interviews because of their mixture of anecdote and reminiscence and their self-explanations, interjections, and pithy moral reflections. “Mack” performs the sleight-of-hand of blending oral interview and stream-of-consciousness. This effect is carried even farther in “Martha Sue,” spoken by a still-youthful woman who is recounting the fifteen years of her marriage. As a young man, her husband was a dreamer and book-lover, determined to build a homestead on a fertile corner of the ancestral land. Four children are born and the farm flourishes; but along the way, Ben gives himself over to a charismatic form of religion that embarrasses and alienates Martha Sue. Eventually, we understand that the present tense of her narration corresponds to her last moments on earth; on her deathbed, she is too ill to speak to her family the words she has not formulated even to herself; it is her thoughts we “overhear.” What has Martha Sue gained from her struggles? What “comfort” can there be in this death? What has been the center of this life? Her story lacks triumph, tragedy, or piercing revelations—only these casual lines:

I want to say men and women are so different it’s hard to believe they are the same race at all. Him and me has not been perfect mates. If it hadn’t been the holiness, it would have been something else. But being almost strangers we still brought comfort to one another at times.

Martha Sue’s story introduces the themes explored by Morgan’s female narrators (there are six of them) in both this volume and in *The Hinterlands*. The experiences of Morgan’s women “sum up” even less easily than those of the men. More often than not, the men are the dreamers and the women are realists who awaken only slowly to the cost of yielding to male dreams. Recognition, when it comes, reveals their essential powerlessness and a sense of hopes diverted or subtly betrayed—if betrayed by men, then not so much by their perfidy as by their fecklessness or their inscrutable otherness.

These and other themes achieve consummate expression in the eponymous novella that concludes *The Mountains Won't Remember Us*. Sharon, the narrator, is in a nursing home recovering from an amputation and taking her first painful steps on an artificial leg. This is the contemporary situation that serves as the frame for a memory loop extending backwards over nearly fifty years. She has been thinking a great deal about Troy, her first fiancé—an Air Force engineer in World War II who died when his B-17 crashed near a British airfield. Since then she has been married twice, first disastrously, and then happily but briefly. Her grown sons have fallen into trouble with the law and she no longer hears from them. Now widowed, she has renewed an old curiosity about Troy’s death. She has discovered that, although he was officially listed as a mechanic, Troy had in fact been flying secret missions. At the end of her account she has learned all about Troy that she will know, and she is about to be discharged from the nursing home.

At this point, Morgan brings in a third-person narrator to reveal the wartime experiences Sharon can never know. We learn firsthand about the preparations for Allied raids

An Interview with Robert Morgan

Marti Garrison

Robert Morgan grew up in the mountains of western North Carolina on a small farm. A professor of English at Cornell since 1973, he has published nine volumes of poetry and has received the James G. Hanes Poetry Prize, the North Carolina Literature Award, and a Guggenheim Fellowship. The Hinterlands is his first novel, and follows hard on his collection of short stories, The Mountains Won't Remember Us.

MG: *The Hinterlands* is your first novel. How does it differ from the stories you previously wrote?

RM: In the process of writing *The Hinterlands* I also discovered how much I enjoy writing comedy. It was a surprise. The Irish poet Patrick Kavanaugh says somewhere that tragedy is only half-completed comedy. And while I was working on the book I began to think that was true. If you put events in a wide enough perspective they tend to become comic. I found out that comedy comes from looking at trying, often terrible, events in a certain way. You tilt the point of view slightly and everything becomes funny. It has to do with the introduction of some little absurdity, or some touch of exaggeration that lets the reader see the humor. Each of these stories is based on stories I heard as a child: the "Trace" is based on a folktale, the second on a story of a man who did indeed survey a road with a sow (he married the sister of an ancestor of mine); and the last one is based on Appalachian folktales about panthers chasing people who threw off their clothes piece by piece to distract the panther.

MG: How do you know when you're hearing the true voices of your characters?

RM: Writing autobiographical fiction is very different from writing about things you could never have done. When you have got it right, you feel a thrilling kinship with the characters.

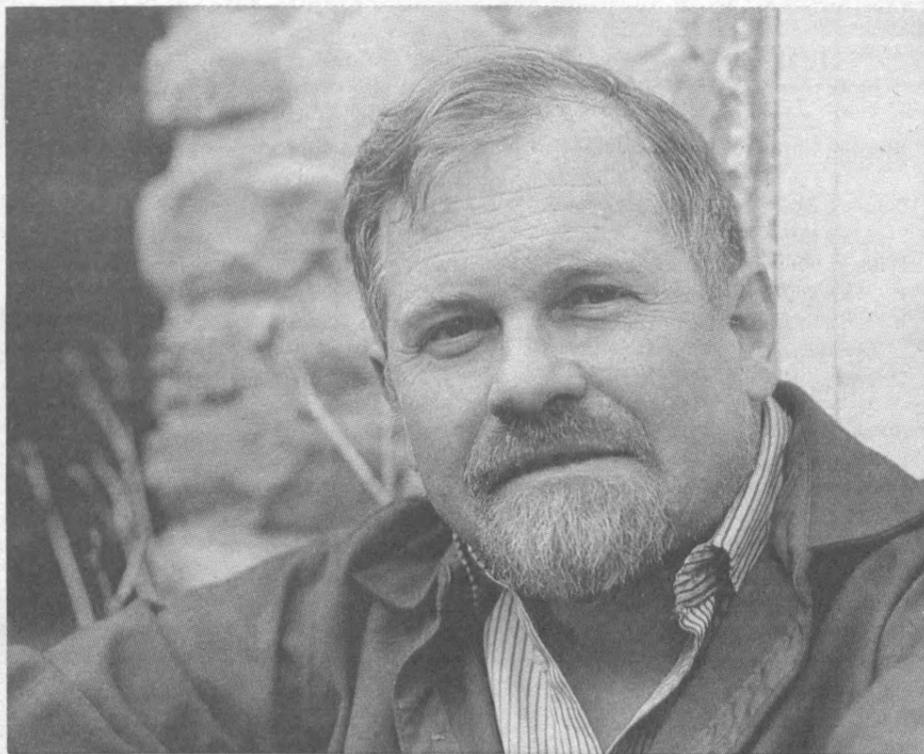
Many of the writers in contemporary America I feel closest to are women writers and minority writers, partly because there are so many good women and minority writers, but also because I identify with their sense of being outsiders. They are telling stories that haven't been told before about parts of society that haven't been written about. No matter how painful the material, they make us enjoy it. One of the paradoxes of tragedy is that we are entertained by awful things happening. We feel like we understand. If the character is in conflict, trying to deal with adversity, then we are interested, however horrible the detail.

MG: It's the catharsis of experiencing something you don't literally have to experience.

RM: Right. We do have a basic sympathy for others, and maybe it makes us feel more able to deal with our own problems if we see someone worse off. I think Eudora Welty said, "nobody ever invented an emotion." When you are writing about emotion, and much of fiction is about emotion, you base it on your own experience and the testimony of other people.

MG: Hearing her name makes me think of something I have read about dialect, that we think we are reading her characters speaking in dialect, but actually how they sound to us is based on word choice and length and rhythm of the sentence to give an impression of dialect. Do you agree with that?

RM: She has been my model for this. She knows how to suggest dialect. Her dialogue is absolutely clear to the reader; she gives a sense of the diction and cadence of regional speech, but the story is very clear. If it were



Robert Morgan

Photo: Dede Hatch

really in dialect, it would be very hard to read. My ideal is to give a sense of the flavor of dialect. The greatest danger in using dialect is in being patronizing, in seeming to look down on the characters. You certainly don't want that to happen in a realistic story. Too much dialect will distance the reader from what is happening.

MG: What has been the influence of the oral storytelling tradition on *The Hinterlands*?

RM: It was very liberating to let these characters tell their own story. They wrote it for me and I looked forward to it every day. A good story and character are a gift; you just hope you have sense enough to recognize and follow them. There is something about a novel that is almost passive, in that the writer follows it. A short story is written more intensely, more quickly, more like a poem. A novel has a lot more freedom, with many little sidetrips. I can incorporate more things that interest me, such as history, botany, history of science, religion, documents. I can also take many different points of view. I grew up with a father who was an amateur historian who talked a lot about the Revolution, the Civil War, family stories. It seems that I am working out in fiction all these themes that were given to me. In some ways, we don't choose subjects for our writing. They are given to us. They were there all the time; we just haven't noticed. The special thing about fiction is detail, what Phillip Larkin calls its "spread." You can write a short story or poem about real human emotion, but in a longer work of fiction, you can get this tremendous focus on people's lives. It's extended; it's deepened. It has a thoroughness of working itself out.

A lot of the people I grew up with had wisdom that I didn't see at the time. In memory I can see how much wiser they were than I realized then. Of course that's a part of growing older, and it's one of the things that helps a writer—to look back and to recognize things we were simply too ignorant to understand when we were growing up. Memory is extremely important. We already have all our material with us. It's a matter of excavating it. I think the experience of art is often what Frost said: reminding us of what we forgot we know.

MG: Has your poetry had an influence on your fiction?

RM: An enormous effect. I would not do the same kind of fiction had I not written poetry. The characters in the stories have poetic perceptions, the same sorts of knowledge and values that are in the poems. I can't

imagine being the fiction writer I am without having written the poems earlier.

MG: Brooks and Warren in *Understanding Fiction* say how little Chekhov gives away but how much he reveals, at just the right time. Could you talk about that technique in your writing?

RM: I love that comment about Chekhov. I think it means that he maintains tension partly by telling us only what we need to know at each point in the story. He gives significant detail and dialogue, while maintaining the impression of utter naturalness. Measuring out information at just the right pace heightens the unfolding of a story. And Chekhov's stories are about characters, people, not plots. He focuses on the aspects of a character relevant for the story and leaves all the rest out. That is the implicitness so important to short fiction. He changed the short story forever toward naturalness and implicitness. His stories are not only about people more than events, but often about ordinary people, and the telling is so simple it seems effortless. He is one of the writers from whom we can still learn the most.

In my own writing I am still learning how to leave out everything but the most relevant details and dialogue. And mystery and ambiguity can be very effective in the unfolding of the story. Editing is like sculpture; you take away all but is what essential. One of the things young writers find most difficult to learn is that the naturalness of a story is the result of art. A story is total artifice, and not a transcription of life. But if it is well done it seems completely real.

MG: How about the influence of your upbringing on your writing: religion, music, colors of the mountains, people, and speech patterns?

RM: One legacy of my upbringing is that I have always felt an outsider to the academic and literary worlds. After more than twenty years at Cornell I still feel at times a visitor whose stay may be very temporary. But this sense of displacement actually can be useful to a writer. It enables you to see things from a certain angle. You take fewer things for granted than you might otherwise. I have no doubt I have been able to write about the Southern mountains and my family more clearly because I have been away from them. Someday I plan to write stories about upstate New York and about academia, but that may be easier to do if I have gone elsewhere.

Marti Garrison is a writer who lives in Ithaca.

over Gemany; the mixture Troy felt of exhaustion, terror, and exhilaration; the nocturnal scavenging for machine parts; the cold, the mud, and the darkness—especially the darkness, since British days are cloudy and short, and most of the work must be done under cover of night. Hardest of all is that the radar scanner is unreliable. "Most of the time you'll have to do your best with screen patterns that are partly ambiguous," an officer explains. On a practice mission over Scotland, Troy can only make out "wavy, frothy lines" on the screen, and then a "confusing mass of lines and specks." Instead of the castle they are aiming for, they hit a mountain. But the bombing of Schweinfurt is a success, and as Troy flies back to England—the flight he will never complete—he is already "asleep behind his oxygen mask." Suddenly we are back in the nursing home, on the night before Sharon's release. A figure appears at the door, unspeaking. Scanning its face, Sharon sees only shadow, yet she knows it is Troy—and the feeling that wells up in her is anger: "You left me on my own," she says. "You left me and I didn't know what to do."

As Sharon stares into the darkness that bears Troy's shape, her anger impels a flood of realizations that bear upon the reader as well—realizations about Troy's probable feelings for her fifty years ago, his family's attitude to her, and (above all) her own responses—devastating knowledge that she can finally face and cast off, like an old limb. It is a moment of shattering power. *You left me and I didn't know what to do.* Combined with the image of the airman's shadowed face, and the darkness of the radar scanner, these words recall for the reader moments and motifs throughout the book that cohere into a single, powerful theme of forging one's way without help, through mountain passes and highways, across rivers and years, sometimes losing oneself and sometimes saving oneself.

At the end of "The Mountains Won't Remember Us" Sharon says: "I think what a privilege forgetting is. The fields where we work, and the mountains we look at, even the people coming after us, won't remember us at all, and it's better that way." In his stories, Morgan's account of human experience is austere even in its comforts. Human time is not progressive but a record of struggles and lapses, where oblivion is as necessary to survival as preservation, and where even the mountains endure at the cost of decay.

The Hinterlands continues themes found in the stories but achieves a very different effect and design. It is a book about personal survival and the survival of memory, and the people in it who act, speak, and remember are all (unlike the last) giants in the earth. Each part of the three-part "tale" is told by one member of a family to members of a later generation in a kind of apostolic succession, and all three parts describe the completion of heroic tasks which, once again, concern roads and journeys. "The Trace" begins in 1775, before there are roads to connect the mountains and valleys; "The Road," set in 1815, tells how Solomon Richards surveyed the area for the first thoroughfare through the mountains; "The Turnpike," set in 1845, tells how Solomon's son David opened up Cedar Mountain to traffic. The field of human hopes and endeavors, as the tale presents it, is not society but the system of nature, which includes as a subset the communities recently formed by humans. This is of course a feature of literature that Northrop Frye attributed to romance, and indeed *The Hinterlands* contains elements of romance; but it would be more exact to call it a living exploration of the modes and themes of oral tradition reconceived in the context of print.

"The Trace" reduces to almost parabolic simplicity the general dilemma of the see *Appalachian Transits*, page 17

Stranger Things Happen

AND THE STARS WERE SHINING
John Ashbery
Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 100 pages, \$18

Jeff Schwaner

Strange Things Happen at Night

*Once the bosses and their beagles have
passed through
Without thinking too much about it,
We must double up, or die.
It's not everyday you get to bicycle past
the ribbons
Or grades, as many as can be made to last*

*the recession. In any case there are two too
many of us here.
And that might be a practical if remote
solution.
Your boyfriend sips bark tea.
Or is it? I mean, many suppers in the
seven modes*

*prepare to go out into the city of your
dreams.
Later, the adjustment will be made.
Perhaps the driving rain impedes it,
but this isn't about living, is it?*

*Now, look up. At first they cannot see you.
If ever I was going to turn up your volume
The number should've turned up by now.
For some event thought imminent, not
lost,
of people, watch the grand hotels.*

I wanted to put the above lines, written by John Ashbery and included in his new collection of poems *And The Stars Were Shining*, at the head of this review so that the flavor of Ashbery's unique verse would be the first to hit the reader's palate, so that the ideas and comments which follow will be secondary and (hopefully) complementary to the experience of reading one of our country's strongest, and strangest, stylists.

Ashbery may be a brand name in contemporary poetry, but it's certainly not in every household; it's not crystal-clear or pine-scented and it doesn't kill germs dead, though it sometimes carries the waft of anti-septic and seems borne out of an assembly line deep in the heartland. It's opaque and plainly wrapped, but for all that vaguely international. What do we do with it?

We digress: there once lived a graduate student from France named Yvon, who would periodically bound onto the threshold of my dorm room, never actually entering, and proceed to relay to me his version of the day's events, speaking a delightful hybrid English that seemed to my ears his attempt to draw from a memory marked in more than one language, his urge to speak

easily and colloquially diverted by a looping French syntax, untranslatable idiom and sudden bursts of energetically formal address. I hear his voice now, and I saw its echo then in the open pages of the book I was holding. The book was *Houseboat Days* and I found some of my most lucid moments reading Ashbery came immediately following Yvon's departure for the dining hall, the rhythm of his clauses, lopsided rhetoric and even the tone of his voice rebounding off the page and convincing me with an affable ambivalence, a blueprint of delicate impressions that almost threatened to create something sound but never got some final okay from the boss, and settled finally in apposition to what might have materialized.

Much of what I've always liked in Ashbery's verse is to be found in his new book, mostly in single lines or small units within a poem, like

*Listen, wiseguy—but the next instant,
traffic drowns us
like a field of hay.*

It's too easy to simply note the tools involved—quotation, direct address, idiom and cliché, hokey or seemingly nonsensical pairings of words and images—and likewise it's too easy to say it's supposed to make no sense, or to merely jar us out of traditional ways of reading. Other media do that much better and to greater effect: television, tax forms, real life, etc. These words we're used to, "listen" and "instant", bring the sound of time into the comparison: the speed and noise of sudden, oncoming traffic, and the magnified, deafening rustle of what slowly, inexorably surrounds us, perhaps something we didn't notice until now, so used to traveling over the speed limit, until a wrong turn in the conversation brought us to this space we'd been unknowingly cultivating.

It is often the case that explication of this sort seems impossible. But it's still possible to get a sense of the poem, something like a sense of what the poem would mean to us if we'd written it, allowing Ashbery's gentle rhetoric to nudge us to the poem's end. I have a feeling that Ashbery does this so well that it's become in many later poems his primary poetic unit; that is, that the poem's single purpose becomes creating this smooth structure of apparent reasonableness that in the end has only the charm of the familiar to recommend it. Imagine watching a foreign film *sans* subtitles in which nothing happens, but the characters all seem amiable and on occasion wink or shrug as if to the camera to let you know you're included, part of it all. But of course you're not, and you realize this when the credits roll and you understand suddenly the film was in English after all. This is not

unenjoyable the first few times, but it soon becomes tiring and a little insulting.

Reviewers who've been substantially insulted include John Haines (in the *Hudson Review*) and Sven Birkerts (in *Sulfur*). If they sound more like plaintiffs in a civil suit than book reviewers, it is because reading Ashbery and trying to judge his place or value (even on a personal level) seems to raise broad questions about poetry in general, the relation of the writer and reader to the poem, the importance of intention and cultural context. Easy enough for Harold Bloom to call *And The Stars* "one of John Ashbery's strongest collections;" not so easy to extrapolate and discuss what might be weakest, what may in fact, a hundred years from now, make even his better work brittle where it used to be delicate, boring where it used to be beautiful and jarring.

Such concerns (or complaints) have fallen roughly into two categories. But before they're discussed, it might be worth reading another poem:

The Lozenge

*That it was a relief to him, my lord
who sequestered me, with hints, with
egrets,
always others' egrets, you knew
already. Two bailiffs were heaved
from the trail, like a guardian knot.
That, you knew too,*

*Is hardly in this lozenge.
Some crocus lint hampers
the airy sky in the mirage,
makes it froth, implicit, long
for these immaculate circumstances.*

*Then it's back to the old school, its pagers,
brothels soon to come. It could have been
settled
way back when so smoothly. But then there
would have been no slob,
no leg to hang a dog on
of gaze the filmiest.*

*You, I suppose, were haunted this way
because we all are haunted this way.
Thus the stogie never gets sugar-coated,
exudes like a clarinet off these walls.*

*If there were others, they never came to see
what the story was all about. In fact there
is
no story, nothing to spy a hand along,
the old postcards and elf mutilations
the only way: smash and parry,
no quarter.*

Complaints regarding Ashbery's work are usually either complaints of reputation or complaints of facility. Both Haines and Birkerts, at least, suggested that the poet's reputation had taken the place of his vision, that his reputation for opacity and paradox protect him from criticism of lines and whole poems that are simply just bad writing. It's probably true that no postmodern poet has had his "intention", in this case his "subversive" use of flat language and pronouns that shift without referents, given as much critical slack within which to work as Ashbery has. Vernon Shetley's essay in *After the Death of Poetry* is a fine example of how such a critical viewpoint can be rigorously and successfully applied; but it's also probably true that no other American poet could get so much mileage out of stanzas like this:

*Men's thoughts are continually drawn
behind
the apron of her success,
or to the tank top of her access.*

The complaint of facility acknowledges the indecipherability of the poems as well as the prolific nature of the poet and makes the determination that the poems must be

easy to write, and not worth so much of our time. Why scratch your head over a poem if you're sure the poet himself didn't? This complaint doesn't really have a philosophical or evidential leg to limp about on, but curiously enough is accepted in a casual way by those you'd expect to be most offended by it. Some of the most ardent fans of Clark Coolidge, for example, the *Sulfur* editor and poet who helped commandeer a counterattack on the Birkerts review, routinely refer to Coolidge's collected works, entitled *Solution Passage*, as *Pollution Sausage* precisely because of the acreage laid waste by a single decade's writing. The common (and reasonable) response to such charges when levied against Ashbery is: if an Ashbery poem is so easy to write, why don't you write one? Since Birkerts and Haines weren't interested, we haven't had the chance to examine the flip-side of the question, which is whether a faux Ashbery could be identified amidst a gaggle of the real thing.

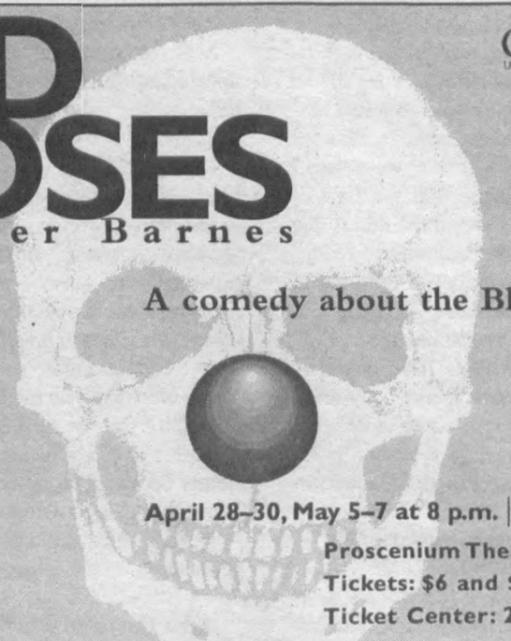
Although *And The Stars Were Shining* has a handful of near-astonishing poems—"Spotlight on America," "Well, Yes, Actually," "Dinosaur Country" and a few others—and though I felt parts of the book's second half, including the title poem, displayed a moving and sometimes plaintive sadness and remorse—"Miserere! Instead I am browsed on by endless students"—most of the poems felt hollowed-out to me, lacking the psychological sustenance his earlier work gave (and still gives) me. They quacked the quack, alright, and they waved their necks and spread their tail-feathers, but they felt wooden.

Finally: this review may amount to a cautionary tale for those well-versed in Ashbery who have not yet found suitable grounds for assessing his relative merits or shortcomings. I have shuffled and repositioned the lines of "Strange Things Happen At Night," not randomly but quickly (in less than a minute), to show how a typical line often functions as a neutral piece of syntax which need have no connection to the lines above or below it. Some might argue that this technique is a strength, even a wonder, but to me that poem, and at least fifteen others I tinkered with as I read, is a complex but uninteresting puzzle, like a Rubik's Cube whose squares are all painted white. Poems like these have no chance of losing, so the victory is not so impressive, despite my admiration for the invention of its mechanics. (The actual order of the lines is 2,10,14,11,8/ 16,12,6,3/ 17,4,18,17/ 15,13,9,5,1.)

The poem "The Lozenge" is a more honest *faux*. I experimented with the theory that the poem in its entirety is a single unit of pleasing sounds, regardless (for the most part) of the actual words used. Based on "The Lounge," it duplicates almost entirely the rhythm of the original, down to almost every vowel sound, replacing idiom with idiom, cliché with cliché. A few lines and phrases from the original were kept if I found them too plain to imitate ("It could have been settled," for instance.)

In a way I've done nothing to the poems that hasn't already been attributed to Ashbery at one time or another; and I was careful not to directly attribute to Ashbery any of the lines or structure that were not indeed his. The implications of this experiment for me are obvious and outlined in this essay. John Ashbery is certainly a great poet for our time; but with a readership that is uncritical of him to a fault, this poet who's shown us that there's more in the cracks than on the pavement might slip untouched through the space between the present and the future. And even should this be his intention, we might all be poorer for it.

Jeff Schwaner regularly deconstructs submarine sandwiches at Gus's Deli in Ithaca.



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THE BREAD OF TIME:

TOWARD AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Philip Levine

Alfred A. Knopf, 296 pages, \$23

John Bowers

In these autobiographical essays Philip Levine revisits many of the scenes and recapitulates many of the themes already familiar to readers of his poetry. Here is the Detroit of his youth in the late '40s and early '50s, Palo Alto in the late '50s, and the Barcelona of Franco's Spain in the mid '60s. Here are the family portraits, the vignettes of working class life, and Levine's retelling of events from the history of Spanish anarchism. This time around, however, the narrative is fleshed out with many new and charming anecdotes, notable both for their human interest and observant detail.

One characteristically delightful story, midway through the book, provides a good illustration of Levine's narrative technique. It concerns Sr. Juan Rusinol, "a tall, long-faced Catalan gentleman" whom Levine engages to give him Spanish lessons at the rate of 100 pesetas an hour, or \$1.67 US. It turns out (of course!) that Sr. Rusinol is a poet in his native Catalan language and the Spanish lessons quickly become "what was probably the first course ever offered in the village of Castelldefels on the subject of modern American poetry, taught by one young American poet to one not-quite-so-young Catalan poet." Quickly discovering that Sr. Rusinol is drawn to the work of Robinson Jeffers, Levine gently attempts to explain why most modern readers prefer Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams, neither of whom he has heard of. Somehow Rusinol manages to come up with a copy of the New Directions selection of Williams' verse, but Levine has a hard time persuading him that the stuff is really poetry, Rusinol finally concluding one day: "perhaps your Williams is like our good Machado, for in our Machado there is something that only we Spaniards can hear, some nuance that crosses no border." Sr. Rusinol in turn initiates Levine into the mysteries of Spanish poetry, with particular emphasis on his most beloved poet, "el buen Machado." The story proceeds, interspersed with anecdotal digressions, among them an account of his dealings with Hardie St. Martin, editor of an anthology of modern Spanish poetry translated mainly by American poets, a visit to a doctor with his son Mark who has received a nasty cut on his chin, an encounter with two Guardias in a bar in a fishing village, and finally a trip in a rainstorm through the province where Machado lived. One day Sr. Rusinol unexpectedly informs Levine that he has to go away because of "a duty I must perform." He tells Levine: "I will miss our discussions of your poets and ours, but in truth I do not think you require any more lessons. You speak Spanish now with great facility." After hugging him in the traditional Spanish *abrazo* and bequeathing him his copy of *Spanish Made Simple* "as a memento of these hours," Sr. Rusinol "saw me downstairs and out into the soft evening air. I never saw him again." The tale concludes with further reflections on the poetry of Machado and reprints a number of fine translations, done at a later time in collaboration with José Elgorriaga: the poetic residue of his encounter with Sr. Rusinol.

Most of Levine's stories, like this one, revolve directly or indirectly around the subject of poetry. He makes forays off the main path, but always returns to the topic of central concern: "striving to account for how I became the particular person and poet I am." Of central importance to his account are the two set pieces celebrating and detailing the influence of his teachers John Berryman and Yvor Winters. Berryman, in particular, he singles out as "my one great personal mentor." There follows an account of the classes he took with Berryman at the Iowa Writers' Workshop in 1953-54, beginning, by way of comparison, with a highly critical account of Robert Lowell's seminar. Low-

ell, who was actually the big draw that year, was, Levine says, visibly bored by most of the writing his students produced, played favorites, dismissed almost all contemporary poets aside from the very few he admired, and on one occasion (almost unforgivably, in Levine's opinion) attempted to overwhelm the class with one of his own poems. Berryman, in contrast, was interested in a variety of different kinds of work, treated everyone equally and impartially, imparted to his students an appreciation of a wide range of poets, both past and present, and never attempted to promote his own work. Eloquently defending him against tales of drunkenness, madness, and personal unreliability, Levine says that "living in isolation and loneliness in one of the bleakest towns of our difficult Midwest, John Berryman never failed his obligations as a teacher," that "he brought to our writing and the writing of the past such a sense of dedication and wonder that he awakened a dozen rising poets from their winter slumbers so that they might themselves dedicate their lives to poetry." Berryman, he says, "was the most brilliant, intense, articulate man I've ever met, at times even the kindest and most gentle, and for some reason he brought to our writing a depth of care and insight we did not know existed.... He gave all he had to us and asked no special thanks. He did it for the love of poetry." There is no reason to doubt the sincerity of Levine's feeling or the essential veracity of the particular incidents he relates. Regardless of how Berryman may have struck others, or acted towards them, at other periods of his life, it is evident that to Levine he was in fact that rarest of rarities, a true mentor.

Similarly, in the case of Yvor Winters, seen by many, despite his brilliance, as something of a crank on account of the extremity of his views, the narrowness of his critical canon, and his uncompromising critical judgements, Levine is at great pains to portray Winters' human side and to explain the moral basis of certain of his critical views, though even he is not always completely comfortable with Winters' picaresques, noting that "there were curious omissions in his preparation for criticism and inconsistencies in his views." One anecdote that provides insight into Winters' character is the following: in a discussion concerning Winters' notorious preference of T. Sturge Moore to Yeats, Winters finally remarks, after admitting that Moore had his limits, that Yeats "was the greatest stylist of the century." Levine continues: "He took in my stunned response. 'I'm not deaf, boy, I can hear how marvelous the writing is. I hate what it's doing.' His duty was not to be seduced by the enemy." Earlier he remarks: "According to Winters, all who wrote poetry flirted with madness and self-destruction: the more powerful the imagination, the greater the danger. To survive one practiced a heroic vigilance. All the days I knew him he lived that vigilance."

What is particularly intriguing about his relationship with these two men is the apparent contradiction between Levine's choice of mentors and his own poetic practice. Both Berryman and Winters, by his own account, were deeply committed to traditional verse forms and to accentual syllabic prosody, the latter dogmatically, the former less so, yet Levine himself has largely rejected both traditional forms and prosody, experimenting early on with syllabic verse, and later abandoning even that in favor of his own particular brand of free verse. Helen Vendler, in a highly critical, but I think essentially fair evaluation of Levine as a poet (*New York Review of Books*, December 17, 1981) remarks that for him "realism is the only credible base for verse.... Often Levine seems to me simply a memoir-writer in prose who chops up his reminiscent paragraphs into short lines." She then proceeds to transcribe certain of his lines into a prose paragraph, demonstrating quite convincingly that the writing is "not notably improved by being cut into...short lines." She also observes that there is a strong vein of sentimentality in Levine's poetry, remarking of one particular poem with a promising beginning that its ending "combines the false lachrymose, and

the false vatic, and the false unctuous all at once...." She continues: "I am not convinced that Levine's observations and reminiscences belong in lyric poems.... Perhaps if he didn't think he was writing "poems" he could leave off his romantic organ tones and be truer to his earthy stubbornness."

Suppose that Vendler is correct and that Levine's true vocation lies in the direction of realism and prose. This would explain why the present volume is the success that it is. It is precisely the attraction of these essays that they are, with only a few exceptions, unsentimental and realistic.

Returning to Levine's choice of mentors, how are we to account for the fact that he was inspired by two men for whom poetry was without question the most highly valued form of literary expression? Here it must be recalled that Levine, besides being a realist, is a moralist. In his best writing, such as his widely praised polemic "They Feed the Lion," there is a strong element of moral outrage: outrage at the conditions in which certain segments of society are forced to live, outrage at the unfairness of capitalist society, outrage at the evils of fascism, outrage at racism, injustice, and social inequality. Now one of the most striking characteristics of Berryman and Winters, according to Levine's own account, is that both believed in the absolute and irreducible moral value of poetry. I suspect that for Berryman it was more the simple act of writing good poetry that possessed moral value, rather than any specific content, while for Winters the moral value of poetry was coupled with strong and specific beliefs about the message that poetry ought to be delivering. Hence Winters' decisive rejection of poets, even powerful poets, who failed to deliver the correct message. In any case, it is obvious why these poets would be attractive to a young writer like Levine, whose work had tended from the beginning toward moral urgency. Having selected these two figures as his mentors, it is only natural that he would then try to embody his convictions in the form most favored by them, namely, lyric poetry. The apparent contradic-

tion mentioned earlier can now be explained: on the one hand, Levine is drawn to lyric poetry by the powerful example of mentors like Berryman and Winters, for whom poetry embodies the highest moral value; on the other hand, his natural bent is toward realism, which is more effectively conveyed in prose than in poetry.

Certainly a full and fair evaluation of Levine's poetic career along these lines would require more extensive discussion than is possible here. However, the success of *The Bread of Time*—for I think it is a success: funny, interesting, honest, and accurately observed—can be seen as a welcome step forward in his evolution as a writer. He is a natural storyteller. His account of Mr. Chase, the nouveau riche philistine by whom he was hired to ensure that "Little Kenny" would somehow manage to get to seventh grade, and of the patrician Mrs. Chase, is acutely observed, very funny, and wonderfully human. The story of his visits to the grave of the Spanish anarchists Guardia, Durruti, and Ascaso, the first at a time when Franco was still in power, the second many years later, interspersed with sketches of the anarchist movement in Republican Spain, is amusing and ironic, while at the same time conveying effectively Levine's genuine commitment to the ideals of social justice and political freedom. And along the way there is a whole cast of minor characters, such as the philosopher Jon Tanel, who eluded the draft by explaining to the doctor at the induction center in all seriousness that his first duty was not to the nation but to Kantian aesthetics!

The Bread of Time is, in my opinion, Levine's best work to date and represents the logical conclusion of the direction in which his work has been developing for many years. There is a deep and unintended irony in the fact that this book, which celebrates a life devoted to poetry, reveals so clearly that its author's greatest talent may well be for realistic narrative prose.

John Bowers is a professor in the Linguistics Department at Cornell University.

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Fluid Dynamics

continued from page 5

mirror, some leaves tossing in a little whirlwind, some trees behind that, the music on her radio, a hat blowing by. The attempt to register this congeries nearly dissolves it, and the speaker has to end with a breathless reassurance:

*—me now slowly backing up
the dusty driveway into the law
composed of updraft, downdraft, weight of
these dried*

*mid-winter leaves,
light figured-in too, I'm sure, the weight of
light,
and angle of vision, dust, gravity, solitude,
and the part of the law which is the world's
waiting,
and the part of the law which is my wait-
ing,
and then the part which is my impatience—
now; now?—
though there are, there really are,
things in the world, you must believe me.*

"Notes" (iv), which is subtitled "Stanislavsky," extends the idea of self as the conscious performance of a character called the self. Beginning in abstraction, the speaker has nothing to work with but the forms, or formal devices, of possible selves:

*Next we combined some beats, duples,
triplets—
these heightened the tremulousness—
this in turn created new moods, corre-
sponding emotions—
We varied the strength and kind of
accent—*

This is both not enough and too much. There is nothing to hook to: "I lost track." The speaker may not even have a gender until he finds his "material": "Then my attention was drawn to a simple morning-coat./ It was made of some remarkable material I had never/ seen before." Thus begins the dizzying emergence of an "I" disjunct from the "T" that starts the poem:

*And yet I felt
the moment of my first investiture
was the moment I began to represent
myself—
the moment I began to live—by degrees—
second by
second—unrelentingly—Oh mind what
you're doing!—
do you want to be covered or do you want
to be seen?—*

But in this perilous reality, protection and exposure are inseparable, and the material existence of the self a bittersweet state, as suggested by a deeply ambivalent pun:

*And the garment—how it becomes you!—
starry
with the eyes of
others
weeping—*

The ambivalence of matter and desire recurs often in these poems. In "Manifest Destiny," a Civil War bullet shows teeth marks where a man has clenched it during an amputation. His scream is an echo of Leda's. The peach orchard at Shiloh rains blossoms that echo the smoke of battle. A peach bitten in the 18th century echoes the bullet bitten a hundred years later. And "Manifest Destiny" directly echoes several passages in "Event Horizon," linking the Civil War with Tiananmen Square, and both of them with Troy, or all wars fought from desire for possession of riches or territory or people—materialism at its most stained.

child's welfare, reveals its kinship to the materialism that motivates conquest. "The Dream of the Unified Field" meditates not on physics, but perhaps on Mark Strand's

"Keeping Things Whole": "In a field/ I am the absence/ of field...Wherever I am/ I am what is missing." The speaker has dropped her daughter at a friend's and stops on the way home to watch a field. A single crow among an explosion of starlings catches her attention. Its cry is "black, shiny, twirling on its single stem./ rooting, one foot on the earth..." The still point? The other? Something, in any case, to be known, but "something that cannot/ become known." She remembers an incident from her childhood and that same sense of frustrated desire for knowledge. Addressing her daughter, she asks, "... what should I know/ to save you that I do not know?" The answer may be the snow-stormed field she is standing in: "I close my eyes and... try to make it mine. An inside/ thing." But the attempt quickly reveals its limitations. What was vivid, scintillant, and vital in the external field becomes, in the mind, mapped, organized, and heavy with history:

*outside, the talk-talk of the birds—outside,
strings and their roots, leaves inside the
limbs,
in some spots the skin breaking—
but inside, no more exploding, no more
smoldering, no more,
inside, a splinter colony, new world, posses-
sion
gripping down to form,
wilderness brought deep into my clearing...*

This kind of possessive knowledge turns out to be a type of imperialism, parallel to that of Columbus, whose diaries are quoted and close the poem with an ominous image of materialism. A young Native woman is examined, and "you could see/ this woman was wearing a little piece of/ gold on her nose, which was a sign there was/ gold/ on that land."

At fifteen pages and seventeen sections, "The Break of Day" is the longest and most ambitious poem in the book. In its broad outlines it's clear enough: it is an origins story intercut with passages from Plato, *Madame Bovary*, *The Golden Bough*, Heidegger and Marx. "Story" may be too strong a word. The poem's plot, such as it is, comprises the soul entering the material world, unity becoming multiplicity, silence becoming noise and speech, darkness fracturing into the visible, consciousness entering time.

The first two sections run in parallel columns, and are apparently meant to be heard as on separate channels of headphones. The "left" channel is a voice (perhaps the author: we're addressed as "friend, reader") expressing confusion, urgency, dizziness. Someone, or thing (or perhaps nothing) is being looked for, and the search seems to occur in the interior of the self. The sensation is "like a length of/ cloth, unfolding" over and over. (A shroud unwinding? A rope being lowered? Many things about this place are dubious.) The "right" channel is Socrates expounding the myth of the cave, and its "strange prisoners" may be a comment on the situation of the voice next door. At least one intended effect of this stereo progress is a rending of attention, both aural and visual, since the next section invites us to silence and darkness: "Shh... / Close your eyes. Close them./ It's not even dawn yet." This pre-dawn state (pre-natal, -conscious, -creation, -material, -multiplicity), in which the rent "fabric" of day and consciousness is "mended," is what the rest of the poem undoes with increasing and scattering complexity.

Emma Bovary appears here as one whose desire for love has transformed into a soul-shooting materialism. In one darkly humorous passage (while Socrates, in a parallel column, describes the confusions of the cave), one of her meetings with Leon is spliced onto a dismal interview with the merchant Lheureux. Heidegger, Frazer, and

Marx appear in more theoretical capacities, wondering about the reason for being, noting the magical and malevolent uses to which hair and fingernails have been put, and observing the "meta-/ physical subtleties" of commodities.

Between and beyond these passages, the speaker (and the reader) gradually emerge from the dark and silence. When eyes again open, there is no light:

*no luminosity and yet a sheen
which you could say is your listening
sprinkling over the green dark—
but not materially...*

But soon, and of necessity, things start and multiply. "The whole cannot exist without the parts." Noises start: a birdsong, then many birds. As the dark lifts, humans crowd in, a "mob of suitors, cherubs, gypsies, sophists," and "the ultimate orchard of voices, thronging, one added every second," all heavy with material concerns. How did we get here? The path seems innocent enough, but (something) goes wrong: "You see, there are NO MISTAKES BUT/ there is this passage-through where the notion of error/ APPLIES..." The speaker, like an Adam just being created, wants to know what desires are not already stained:

*What am I to
want?
What is it cannot be judged?
What is it
is corporeal but still concealed?
Does not involve error?*

There is a recovery of sorts near the end of the poem, with sunlight and dust on everything, time and drama beginning, nature quickening, and gestures of friendship made, but the dust, the materiality, prevails, and the speaker is left with the same pleading question: "what am I/ supposed/ to take, what?" As if in answer, the poem's concluding image is of Lheureux handing Emma Bovary some material.

I have compressed (and ignored) a great deal of "The Break of Day" in order to suggest its general movement. It is a challenging and disorienting poem, but its rewards outweigh its confusions, and it seems to me an overall success—especially if one can resist the old-fashioned urge to understand, which may be one more possessive, materialistic desire.

"The Surface" ends *Materialism* near where it begins, with a meditation by the river, which through its several appearances in the book has accumulated significances beyond itself. It now is just itself, its constant patterning and repatterning a sort of forgiveness, "the guaranteed freshness of the world repeating/ itself" ("Relativity"):

*The river still ribboning, twisting up,
into its re-
arrangements, chill enlightenments,
tight-knotted
quickenings
and loosenings—whispered messages
dissolving
the messengers—
the river still glinting-up into its handfuls,
heapings,
glassy
forgettings under the river of
my attention—*

Graham's attention in this book to the ever-shifting negotiations between the self and the world has resulted in a series of striking, if sometimes perplexing, performances, carried off with an energy, intelligence and vision one associates with few other contemporary poets.

Jon Griffin is a professor in the English Department at Ithaca College.

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Smoke Signals

continued from page 3

to discourage, but rather by celebrating: "Perhaps one stops smoking only when one starts to love cigarettes, becoming so enamored of their charms and so grateful for their benefits that one at last begins to grasp how much is lost by giving them up."

Rarely do books of criticism express as much love for the objects of their critique as *Cigarettes Are Sublime*, and equally rarely—perhaps not since Roland Barthes—has love been given the status of a critical methodology. This is a work which manages to be deeply, intensely personal—as an account of an ended love affair should be—without being autobiographical in the least. We learn almost nothing about Richard Klein "himself" from his book: simply that he once smoked, and does no longer. This paradox is another effect of the endlessly paradoxical cigarette itself, which, as Klein notes, "is analogous to what linguists call a shifter, like the word I; this device for expressing the irreducible particularity of my innermost self is universally available to every speaker and is thus the least particular thing in the world."

Klein's project attempts to unravel these paradoxes of the cigarette, "to discover the nature of the advantages and the conditions of the satisfactions that cigarettes deliver." This project is itself necessarily a paradoxical one (once you unravel a cigarette, it is no longer a cigarette), as both the "advantages" and the "satisfactions" of smoking are essentially contradictory, and stem precisely from the disadvantages and dissatisfactions that cigarettes create. For me this constellation of contradictions recalls a moment in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Grey*, when the still-innocent Dorian, attempting to reflect on the seductive charms of his mentor, Lord Henry Wotton, exclaims, "'Harry, you are dreadful! I don't know why I like you so much.'" Lord Henry makes no direct response to Dorian's query, but rather offers a cigarette, and comments on its seductive charms: "A cigarette is the perfect type of a perfect pleasure. It is exquisite, and it leaves one unsatisfied. What more can one want?" For Klein, the nature of the cigarette lies in the intersection of those two paradoxical questions: how can one like what is dreadful, and how can one want more than wanting more?

The fallacy of anti-smoking movements which place their faith in warnings and education is the assumption that once you know how "dreadful" cigarettes are, you will decide you no longer like them. What this logic ignores is the fact that smokers smoke *because* cigarettes are dreadful. As Klein notes, "the surgeon general's warning on every pack of American cigarettes actually serves to advertise their charms and promote their use." Smokers do not have to be told that cigarettes are poison; it is impossible not to be aware, to be painfully aware, of the physical harm they do. And that harm is not simply a "side effect," it is the primary

condition of the pleasure of smoking. It is for this reason that cigarettes are sublime. They are a perfect example of Kant's definition of sublimity—a "negative pleasure," an aesthetic feeling that is distinct from the merely beautiful, by being necessarily accompanied by a moment of pain.

If cigarettes are sublime, they are also ridiculous—frivolous things, pleasures which are ultimately unsatisfying, objects which serve no purpose beyond their own consumption. In this they are linked to the nineteenth-century figure of the dandy, the aesthete who lives only for beauty. Klein himself adopts this aesthetic stance strategically, couching his ode to the cigarette in hyperbole, the rhetorical figure which elevates the inessential, exaggerates the truth to produce a new truth. This strategy produces wonderful passages like the following:

Cigarettes are fiery batons with which you can summon the future and conduct it, slim, white facilitators of anticipatory thinking and imaginative hypothesis, instruments of ecstatic projection away from the present to a future time in which the present for a moment no longer exists.

The absurd pleasure of this language is an analog to the absurd pleasure of the cigarette: it is inflated, overblown, "full of hot air." Yet the lesson learned from the aesthete's celebration of frivolity is not itself a frivolous one; it is, as Wilde reminds us, that "Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril."

This lesson is seen most clearly in Klein's examination of Italo Svevo's 1923 novel *The Confessions of Zeno*. Svevo's narrator is a man who spends his entire life trying to quit smoking, until he realizes that quitting smoking is his life, and that smoking and quitting are the same thing. With that realization, he *does* quit, "definitively." Zeno's cure is effected by a therapy he dubs "fumo-analysis." This technique is invented and elaborated in opposition to the Freudian procedure, which produces in him nothing but frustration. In defiance of his psychoanalyst's wish to treat his addiction as the symptom of a "deeper" neurosis, Svevo's protagonist renounces the "talking cure" in favor of his own writing cure. In writing his own history, Zeno calls forth a series of memories; unlike the memories of psychoanalysis, they are conscious, rather than repressed, pleasurable rather than traumatic, and all have to do with cigarettes, rather than childhood sexual events. Fumo-analysis, unlike its Freudian counterpart, believes that a cigarette is just a cigarette, but that saying that does not exhaust what one can say about a cigarette.

The fumo-analytic cure is successful because it works *through* cigarettes by refusing to see *through* them. Svevo's novel, which not only depicts but enacts the paradoxical logic of the cigarette, is the ultimate smoker's book. As Klein notes in a passage that can eas-

ily be taken to refer to his own work:

If you are not holding a cigarette in your hand [as you read], you are probably missing the point, misjudging the relation of this self-history to the possibility of the cure it represents, and therefore misunderstanding the aim of the narrative, probably finding it foolish or naive.

If *The Confessions of Zeno* offers as an example of fumo-analytic clinical practice, Klein's reading of *Casablanca*—a film which is patently in love with the beauty of cigarettes—could be called an experiment in fumo-analytic criticism. Like Zeno, Klein situates his method in opposition to psychoanalysis, here represented in a rather facile way by a pop Freudian study called *The Movies on Your Mind* by Harvey Greenberg, MD.. For Greenberg, *Casablanca* is, unsurprisingly, structured by Oedipal themes, by castration fears and "latent" homosexuality. The choice that Humphrey Bogart's Rick makes at the end of the film, to forsake Ingrid Bergman for Claude Rains, is produced as evidence that what the film depicts is the failure of a secure model of heterosexuality. But Klein offers another reading of this moment—one that, by resisting the peril of looking beneath the surface, emphasizes the success of the film. Not just a commercial and aesthetic success, *Casablanca* can perhaps be seen as a very real political success. It was screened in the White House (America's own *casa blanca*) on New Year's Eve, 1943, for Franklin Roosevelt and a few guests. Ten days later, Roosevelt flew to the *real* *Casablanca* to meet with Winston Churchill. In that meeting he withdrew the support that up until then the US had offered to Vichy France, and shifted it to the French National Committee of Charles de Gaulle. It was, as Bogart says to Rains, "the beginning of a beautiful friendship."

Dr. Greenberg does not mention the politics of the film. Nor does he mention the cigarettes that fill every scene and punctuate every gesture. For Klein, these two absences are related. If Greenberg were to refer to the ever-present cigarettes, Klein suggests, it would be to dismiss them as "phallic symbols," as merely compensatory substitutes for an insecure masculinity. To say this would be analogous to saying that the film's politics are "really" about the bond between two men and the fear of women. These positions, while inarguable on one level, manage to say everything while saying nothing. Of *course* the cigarettes are substitutes, but saying that prevents you from talking about the very real work these substitutes accomplish. If cigarettes produce the illusion of courage and defiance, this illusion often succeeds, creating real courage and real defiance in situations when these feelings are most urgently required.

Thus, to complain that Klein's book fetishizes cigarettes is both to miss the point, and to identify, precisely, what the point is. A

fetish is an object that is valued more than it should, objectively, be valued; hyperbole is therefore the perfect figure to represent it. For Freud, the fetish—a shoe, a fur piece, whatever—is always a substitute for a penis: he knows what's really important. The fetishist knows this too, however, but doesn't much care—what the fetish "stands for" does not explain away his love. Where the serious psychoanalytic critic looks beneath the surface of the fetish, the playful fumo-analytic critic—aesthete and fetishist—can talk about what the fetish really *does*.

Perhaps the ultimate paradox of *Cigarettes Are Sublime* is found in the acknowledgments, in which Klein claims that his "debt to Jacques Derrida...is everywhere visible in these pages." Yet that debt is "visible" precisely by never being named: this is a work of deconstruction which refuses to use the word. But those familiar with deconstructive theory will recognize that Klein's paradoxes of the cigarette follow the contours of those complex terms which Derrida uses to designate writing: the *pharmakon*—the poison that is also the cure; and the *supplement*—the necessary addition to what is already self-sufficient. Fumo-analysis is deconstruction, and Derrida's critique of psychoanalysis is identical to Klein's—that it requires one to "blind oneself to the very tissue of the 'symptom'." For Klein, that tissue is quite literally the white paper which delineates the identity of the cigarette. That the reader of *Cigarettes Are Sublime* can understand and enjoy the book without the appropriate critical background, serves to show that this background is itself supplementary: while essential, it is never necessary.

In trying to sum up my feelings about Klein's book, I cannot help but fall back on the fantasy of smoker-identity I have created for myself. On some level, I feel that I can only respond to this work "as a smoker," that I cannot achieve the distance required to comment objectively. I can't help but wonder if non-smokers will "miss the point," if the insights and the pleasures of *Cigarettes Are Sublime* will be, necessarily, either censored or tolerated, but always decidedly "second-hand." Can the polemic of the book ever be truly effective? Is Jacques Derrida a match for C. Everett Koop? In terms of actual policy-making, probably not, and it is likely that most people feel this is a good thing. Yet this book succeeds, I believe, in opening up a space for new perspectives and new understandings. The power of a deconstructive reading of cigarettes is that it shows how debates about smoking are always debates about language. If I say "I need a cigarette," and a non-smoking friend says "no you don't," we are both making true statements because the "proper" meaning of the word *need* is, and must remain, endlessly contested, endlessly deferred.

Steven Stern is a writer who lives in Ithaca.



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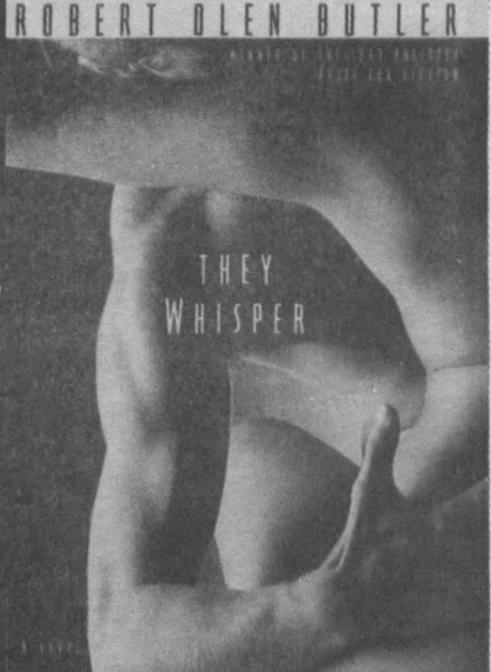
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It's a Wonderful Life

continued from page 7

DK: It was interesting because there were two potential big seams in the narrative that I was concerned about. The first was where I come into my own sentient experience—when I come to life as the writer and know about all these events in America. I was a little worried that there would be a seam between things that were impersonal history for me and things that were experiential.

PH: Could you give me an example?

DK: Well, all the material from the late '60s and '70s was poignant and colorful—essential American events to me. The Rosenbergs, though, were not something I knew about except in books. So I needed to make sure in the closeness of the telling and the way the reader experienced it that my voice didn't break there. And the other potential seam was where I'm actually in the Gordon's lives as an eyewitness for the last four years of the story. I was in and out a lot during that period. I took Susan back to Berkeley and we were in Minnesota together, and I was at the Ashram and spent time with the Swami. So that again was a challenge to write.

1945

Sam easily balanced his heavy barracks bag on his shoulder with one hand. He kept patting his front pocket with the other, as if to reassure himself that he was not only home alive three months short of his twenty-seventh birthday but home flush with a stake, thanks to the uncanny consistency with which a pair of dice kept coming to rest between the exposed girders of a lower deck of the Liberty Ship. He was wearing twelve hundred dollars in that front pocket, more than he'd made through an entire childhood of hard work and the beginning of his apprenticeship as an electrician.

PH: Let me ask you about the first chapter which really starts the book off as a novel—that whole scene of Sam coming home from the war. How did you build that picture of everything that was in the air at that time?

DK: Sam was very clear about the war and had very strong memories of that particular day. What I recreate through him is an extreme distillation of major detailed memories of what happened. Also, I went back to a lot of things. I went up to the house itself in the Bronx.

PH: With him?

DK: No, but I brought back pictures. I found out what the Liberty ship looked like and that helped him connect with memories of friends on the boat and the taxi ride home. It came pretty easily and it all seemed to fit in with the facts. The newspapers of that time told stories of soldiers coming home. Don't forget that the big junctures in a person's life—the day someone you loved died—are indelible. There's extreme clarity in the things that come back to you as if

every second is clear—and that doesn't go away.

1951

Over the course of a decade, over 1.5 million residents of New York City would leave for the surrounding suburbs, and to hear her in-laws tell it, not one of them sought the contemporary dream house more avidly than Eve Gordon.

1952

Throughout the late spring and summer, young fathers drove their families out to Harbor Isle on weekends. They would all clamber up great mounds of friable earth and lay out picnic blankets. They'd look down into several hundred huge holes and watch men and machines build their island town atop the sand.

...."It's like everyone who's gonna live here is the same," Sam enthused on the way home one Sunday night. "Hundreds of families, and it's like we all have the same kind of life."

DK: At lectures often I read a page or two from 1951 or 1952 where they watch the town being built and everyone comes to meet other families—and about the assumptions they had. I loved finding out what these people thought.

PH: How did you reconstruct that period?

DK: That was easy since many of the Harbor Isle pioneers, as they called themselves, were still available. But there was also the *Harbor Isle Beacon* which was the newspaper that the original group put out—this wonderful home-gossipy kind of thing that was started up the day that they moved in. I knew when Sam finished the patio and put the fence up because it was all in the *Beacon*.

PH: How did you propose this project and build the kind of trust whereby people just handed over letters? Letters to me are very, very private.

DK: Yeah, it's funny. People at my publishing house say, what is it? First you get this corporate guy who never gives interviews but who opens up about Sears, one of the most closed corporations of them all. And then this family comes along.

I don't know how to say this—I don't have a lot of shit going on. I'm basically a writer because I'm fascinated by language. I don't have a lot of psychological pain and problems and issues going on, and I think maybe people can sense that.

PH: But what difference would that make?

DK: It does make a difference because there's an edge to a lot of people who want to



Don Katz

Photo: Burnman W. Arndt

ask questions. The Joe Journalist newspaper interview, if you listen to it, is a very aggressive phenomenon. It's not really thoughtful. Usually the questions don't follow from conversation. They're from a list, they're from an agenda, they're from the expediences of one's daily life. That's never been my take on it. I guess because I'm basically a novel reader and not a nonfiction buff, I know that if I'm going for some psychological complexity and narrative design and storytelling, and I also want to mirror history, I've got to do a tremendous amount of work. I'm really willing to dedicate myself to understanding what makes these peoples' lives tick.

In the case of the Gordons, they did have *The Big Store* to look at, so they had a record of what I do. And I wrote them a long, long letter—a little treatise of what I thought this could be. And I argued that nobody's ever done something like this and it was impossible to find in a large group the "experience well" that they seemed to have collected into a single family.

So they read these letters and they thought about it and we talked about it. I tried to make them very aware that fifteen minutes of fame was probably a good possibility if I pulled off what I thought I could pull off.

PH: Fame in the positive sense or the negative sense?

DK: I didn't say. I said this is the kind of thing that will cause you to have publicity. And I told them that I thought using real

names was important because I wanted this to be something you could look at and know it was real. And also I knew that if you tried to fictionalize this particular story, it would seem kind of absurd.

Also, I agreed in writing to show them the manuscript first and they signed the agreement not to pursue any claims if I told their stories. They would get to look at the manuscript but they were only allowed to comment on the factual context. That was the deal. And it created a very trying and emotionally-wrought period when I finished the first draft. But because I got to see their reactions, another phase of writing began which actually added a lot to the book.

[With a few reservations, almost all members of the family gave the 1300-page draft an enthusiastic go-ahead.]

1979

Shuna's closest friend among the "regular" non-African kids at her current school, P.S. 183, was Sarah. After school one afternoon, Shuna and Sarah got into a big fight near the concrete baseball field in St. Catherine's Park. They said mean things to each other, and they both started to cry. As Shuna was leaving the crowded park, she heard Sarah screaming, "Go ahead, Shuna! Go on home where your mom has big bags of Quaaludes!" Kids stopped playing and stared.

DK: Susan was very upset after reading the draft. Almost everything I conveyed about her drug years was built from other sources because many things from her didn't seem to mesh and therefore wouldn't work. Her perception of events was entirely different than eight people who were at the same events—whether they were Africans or members of her family. The perspective on Susan's drug period is largely drawn through the people she affected. Besides, I found her daughter Shuna's perspective very compelling and accurate because other sources confirmed much of her account. But Susan wasn't ready to see it from this perspective. When you're in recovery, the whole thing is about storytelling. But it's about your story. You control your story, and you get up at the meeting and tell your story over and over again and there's never going to be anybody in there who says, "But that's not what your mother said."

PH: So what she found was all new?

DK: Well, she thought I betrayed her in some way when in fact I just wrote what years of interviews and research reflected as true. So we had a lot of hammering out to do where I basically went through the draft as if I were dealing with a lawyer, and I ended up having to say, write your own book. And she did.

PH: What are your thoughts about charges by critics like Janet Malcolm who accuse journalists of making off with peoples' lives—appropriating them to suit their own agendas? Did you ever feel like you were exploiting the family?

DK: I probably had fears that Susan felt that way, but I never felt that way. I feared for the repercussions of the publicity. But I also had a sense that there was a healing capacity to this project. Because when you look at the numbers of people affected by things that afflicted this family—call it the sirens or call it the times—I thought many would relate to this story. And that's exactly what's happened. People make pilgrimages to Sam and Eve's.

Recapitulating your life is a very powerful process. Whether you do it in the psychologist's office or with someone asking you questions with a tape recorder, you learn



WALT IN WONDERLAND

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things. And that's the way to open up and reconnect bonds that have been frayed over time. But I was perfectly willing to write the story if it had been much less happy, and it was much less happy when I started.

PH: Do you think Malcolm raises an issue though?

DK: Suppose your idea of what's true is undermined by your work, and it's not true—or it's less true than you thought—and you don't write that it's less true. That would be wrong. But actually testing the hypothesis by asking 100 people questions—it's not exploiting anybody. I think that if you're actually willing to take on the whole load—to recreate something that has a beginning and an end and even has a moral purpose—then it seems to me you're standing apart from most of the nonfiction experiences in the culture. I read work by people that makes me think, here is somebody trying to be smart at someone else's expense—and I hate it. It's a fine line.

PH: Why do you think there's a growing interest right now in literary nonfiction?

DK: Do you think there is? In my generation, there are very few household names in literary nonfiction. I think that writers who are trying to deal with what's going on and recreate it with an emotional tenor, like they did during the Vietnam War, have heated things up. They are willing to take themselves as moral presences and maybe not subscribe to some neutrality which lies.

I can be quite creative within the context of nonfiction, even though it comes out of a relatively bland tradition. The idea of the magazine journalism that I learned to do 19 years ago [writing for *Rolling Stone*, *New Republic* and later for *Esquire*] was that you invest yourself in the subject and you watch and wait and you cogitate and you talk and give up and you go back and you wait for something to reveal itself. And if it's a miniature drama or the truth of somebody's personality, in the case of a profile, it doesn't have to be a huge thing, but it has to be something that has a shape. It got harder and harder to do this in magazines, which is one reason I realized books were the next step.

1990 and Beyond

Young parents might ask questions, but the model of a good family was not a simple thing. It moved in great circles, endlessly recreated through constant trial and error, a thing made of the clarity of certain experiences and the dreamy obscurity of others. There was so much Sam and Eve would have liked to know and do at various points in their family lives. A willingness to make adjustments, they would advise, was essential. The only constants were commitment and effort, the will to feel everything as real, and the immutable determination to stay in love.

DK: I had this moment when I realized at the end of writing *Home Fires* what was going on with me for parts of my entire career. Looking back, what I basically did for *Rolling Stone* was go to the most harrowing battle zones and do reportage there, whether it be in Ethiopia, Northern Ireland, Angola, Lebanon—places where there was shooting and dying. It was very dangerous to do the stories. And then I switched radically and did this book on a large bucolic national corporation. And some people were shocked about that. And then this story about the family, which puzzled all the people who thought I was a business writer.

My father died when I was 20. He was a hero in World War II, and he was an entrepreneur from the south side of Chicago who built up a business and made himself rich and moved the family to the suburbs in the '50s.

And so what was I doing in this book? I was actually answering all of the questions I probably would have asked my father.

Paulette Hackman is a writer living in Binghamton.



Etching: Susan Titus

Appalachian Transits

continued from page 11

women in *The Mountains Won't Forget Us*. Petal Richards elopes with her young man, ironically named "Realus," in order to set up housekeeping on his homestead, located somewhere in "the West." The homestead flourishes, but out of a peculiar reclusiveness and distrust, Realus prevents Petal from visiting other settlements. After many years, Petal discovers by accident the secret of her husband's caution: they had actually journeyed only a few miles from her home. In the meantime, Petal has survived a series of riveting episodes—hairbreadth escapes, sudden calamities, and feats of desperate ingenuity that give the writing a quality of fevered intensity. The most haunting of these episodes is the birth of Petal's first child. Just before the child is due, Realus journeys to find a midwife; the child comes early—in the middle of the night, during a snowstorm—and Petal, completely alone, struggles to keep the fireplace burning so that the panther that is clawing the clay chimney away does not burst downwards into the cabin. The courage that enables her to survive panthers and Indian raids and to cut down and bury a putrefying corpse while her children play in the cabin is a moral as well as a physical courage, enabling her finally to face her gravest challenge—the task of reconciliation and forgiveness. It is an act of empowerment available to few of the women in *The Mountains Won't Remember Us*.

"The Road," is an even more original experiment in genre and language, tipped just far enough in the direction of romance to be a new beginning in Morgan's work. Gritty and stinging; raucous, exuberant, headlong, and foul; underlain by a strangely ethereal calm. The "road" is, of course, the *cammin* of human existence, except Morgan's hero plunges through it holding on to a sow's tail, during a single day that seems to stretch out to the whole length of youth.

Solomon wants to survey the Saluda Gap in order to build the first road through it, and he overhears someone say that a half-starved pig will find the direct route down any mountain. He and his pig Sue make their survey alone, Sue tracking the way and Solomon blazing trees with his hatchet. They make a good team, a study in the comple-

mentarity of species. Caught in a thunderstorm, she farts and grunts, while he muses on human insubstantiality:

Out in that storm I felt I was just an impulse, a desire to make a road, and to marry your Grandma. I was just an idea with a little fat stuck to it.

In this partnership of animal and spirit—it is also a mock-heroic version of Mack and his aged master—Sancho leads the Don. Once out of the wood, they stumble on a lead mine, thunderous, hissing, and stinking, whose naked, half-starved laborers try to butcher Sue—till they escape again, carrying a ginseng root shaped like a man's genitals which Solomon eats for nourishment. At last, in the best tradition of heroic romance, Solomon stops to help someone in need (a child who has been bitten by a copperhead), only to discover that he has inadvertently reached the end.

Solomon's son David, the hero of "The Turnpike," is another of Morgan's craftsman-heroes, a hewer of rock who charts with a compass and relishes the textures of soil and struggles through a summer of mudslides until he has staked out a turnpike on Cedar Mountain. Solomon has bequeathed to his son passion, persistence, and a trade, but perhaps his greatest gift is narrative freedom. We are not surprised when David interrupts the story of an encounter with a three-footed panther in order to give the details of his struggle with the mountain ("But you want to hear about the painter?" he asks his daughter. "I'm coming back to that"). Eventually he does, and again we are not surprised that a book that contains a scene as harrowing as the death of a child from fever, or as beautiful as a young man and a hog wandering through an apple orchard (unpicked) that is "old as the Garden of Eden" should end with a rollicking escapade—Davy Crockett crossed with Faulkner. It is as though Morgan has woven into a single braid the genres and imaginative possibilities of oral tradition, making of them something rich and strange. In doing this, Morgan's novellas also stage a creative encounter with Faulkner—not the romantic Faulkner, but the ribald spinner of yarns. In

Morgan's folkloric world, any high-flier can find himself ass-upwards in a cabbage patch. The western pilgrimage that ends but a few miles from home; the trailblazer who achieves his dream by gripping a sow's tail; the road builder who has to strip himself naked in order to elude the jaws of a beast—each in their own way, the three parts of Morgan's mountain tale utter the guffaw that lies at the heart of myth.

The workings of Morgan's fiction suggest a writer who can temporarily annihilate himself, bringing a character to life by giving him or her a voice. His great achievement in *The Mountains Won't Remember Us* and *The Hinterlands* is to attain emotional and thematic complexity entirely through language that could be plausibly spoken by the poor and the unlettered. To have done this required years of listening to others, understanding the forms of insight and eloquence of which daily speech is capable. For the reader of these books, the surge of feeling comes from hearing anew the "ordinary stuff" of human words.

Paul Sawyer is a professor in the English Department at Cornell University.

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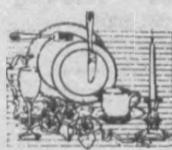
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- Teddy's Music & Books
- The Acropolis Restaurant
- Vern Stein Gallery

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- Hicks & McCarthy
- RIT (various locations)
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- Java Joe's
- Kinko's
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- Cayuga Community College
- Finger Lakes Photography
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Bugging the Court

continued from page 4

the major-league caliber of modern classics like *Gideon*, *Miranda*, *Roe*, or even *Bakke*.

Each case is presented with a brief introduction and the text of the decision, but the highlight here is the oral argument, when the Court allots something like a half hour to each party for a summary. After a few minutes, the justices tend to break in with their impromptu questions. Of course, this is a somewhat distorted view of the Court's procedure. It doesn't inform readers and listeners that each justice has before him the transcript of the case in the lower courts as well as a stack of written briefs from the parties and the "amici," or so-called friends of the court who also want to be heard.

All that printed matter is replete with references to analogous cases, or precedents, from which the Supreme Court is loath to depart. The lawyers who hold forth are aware that they are merely offering a gloss on the briefs, so their oral arguments are streamlined, stripped of the essential legal baggage. In the Irons-Guitton version, each case appears to be a new ball game, instead of what it really is: just another inning in a never-ending contest to decide the contemporary impact of a constitutional passage written over 200 years ago.

For example, don't be fooled by thinking that the *Tinker* decision in 1969 protecting the rights of public school students to wear black armbands protesting the Vietnam War was the last word. Nineteen years after Abe Fortas proclaimed that students had not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of expression... at the schoolhouse gate," Byron White held for a new majority in the *Hazelwood* case that school officials could censor student newspapers. A brief reference in the text alerts us to the judicial changing of minds, but it doesn't indicate the pervasiveness of this shift against the First Amendment rights of minors.

In the same vein, the *Subversive Activities Control Board* decision (1956) is scarcely the last word on how the Court abetted the McCarthyite witch hunts against members of the Communist Party. Where the justices in this case dodged the obvious breaches of the First and Fifth Amendments, in later cases such as *Yates* (1957) and *Scales* (1961), they explicitly rejected constitutional protection of Communists because of Cold War hysteria.

We court buffs can think of many favorite decisions that were omitted by Irons and Guitton. For example, why didn't they include *Mapp v. Ohio* with its strictures against illegal searches, *Donaldson* and its pronouncement on the right of mental patients, or the *Progressive* case allowing limitation of press freedom in the name of national security?

But these are relatively minor cavils in what must be a tribute to a major breakthrough: the demystification of the country's highest court, as composed of ordinary mortals who have their biases and prejudices, yet who have generally done their homework before they listen to the lawyers' arguments.

There is still that matter of the \$75 price tag, together with the warning that you can be prosecuted for making copies of these tapes. You could always run off a bootleg edition and let Irons sue you—you might even get a sympathetic hearing from the Supreme Court.

Harvey Fireside teaches politics at Ithaca College; with Betsy Fuller he has co-authored a young adult book on Brown v. Board of Education, to be published soon.

Lead Belly in New York

Continued from page 2

Albany Female Academy, where Harold Thompson's daughter Katy, 12, was a student. Katy told biographers Wolfe and Lornell, "He did a marvelous concert...I remember looking down at the little kids who sat in the front rows in small chairs and they all got up and started to dance...and he was thrilled to pieces."

The last dates of the tour were in New England, to capacity crowds. The Poetry Society of Cambridge sponsored a March 13 afternoon concert in Harvard's Emerson Hall. Robert Davis, who attended that performance as a student, has recalled to Sean Killeen that Lomax "treated Lead Belly almost as if he were an animal." In the evening, Lead Belly thrilled the Crimson audience at Leverett House. A week later, the trip concluded with a March 20 performance at the Providence Art Club.

The tensions on this tour were the acid test for Lomax and Lead Belly, though. When it was over, they broke permanently. Lead Belly and his wife returned to Louisiana briefly, but soon came back to New York for good. John Lomax continued to value Lead Belly's music, and not only for the boost it had given his own status as a scholar. For his part, Lead Belly did not forget Lomax's help in getting his professional career moving. He also remained friends with Lomax's son, Alan.

Toward the end of his life, almost as if closing a book, Lead Belly returned to the upstate circuit. In summer 1946, he played at Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville. In October of that year, he performed at the Mark Twain Hotel in Elmira for the joint annual meeting of the New York Folklore Society (now headquartered in Ithaca) and the Cooperstown-based New York State Historical Association. Lead Belly drove up to the concert with Alan Lomax and L. Frank Warner, a noted singer, banjo player, and folklorist.

On March 21, 1947, Lead Belly and Alan Lomax appeared in concert at Cornell's Willard Straight Theater, where Cornell Cinema shows its movies today; he was paid \$200. The next morning, he joined Harold Thompson's nine o'clock English and Folklore class in the Temple of Zeus, in Goldwin Smith Hall. Killeen has talked to a score of people who were students in attendance then and the strength of the experience has stayed with them.

"[Lead Belly] was a dynamic performer," Killeen says. "You could hear the excitement in their voices"—even as they harked back to a concert they attended almost 50 years before.

Lead Belly brought his music to more than 30 schools, all over the country. Killeen has uncovered 1949 correspondence between Lead Belly and Robert Smith, who was attending Drew University in New Jersey on the GI Bill, about a possible concert appearance. Smith remembers Lead Belly as "being surrounded by matronly Black ladies who seemed to be keeping an eye on him," and as "small, with a sharp Indianish face rather than Negroid, and he had piercing blue eyes." However, writing to Killeen, he ended his note with a question: "Did he have blue eyes?" (Answer: No.) It is worth looking at this exchange of letters because it is likely to be typical of Lead Belly's arrangements for his college dates.

Dear Sir [Smith wrote on March 3],

My wife and I were very impressed by your performance at the Jazz Band Ball some weeks ago. Since that evening, we have been wondering if it would be possible to have you play and sing for a group of us here at Brothers College, Drew University. Both of us are graduating this term and are in agreement

that if we were able to present your performance in the way of a gift to the rest of the school that some service to the art which you represent would result.

However, and as always, we have absolutely no idea what the cost would be for your performance. Therefore, would you be so kind as to advise us in this regard? As to the time, a Sunday afternoon would be most agreeable for us although we would welcome your suggestions.

Lead Belly replied on March 10:

Dear mr. Smith i would

Be glad to do so that night they paid me \$75 dollars so if that is to much i dont no what to say so any day you say will Be good for me i am fixing to go to France Soon But i Hope that we can get to gather my Phone no is gramice [Gramercy] 7-4192

Call me i can tell what we can do think you very much and mrs. smith
So Long H Ledbetter

Smith never raised the \$75, and Lead Belly never played at Drew. In April 1949, before his May trip to Paris, Lead Belly played two concerts at Alfred University in Alfred, New York. One of Sean Killeen's best "finds" on the Lead Belly trail to date is William Gallow of Spencer, who was studying at Alfred then, also on the GI Bill, and handling all the lighting for celebrity appearances. His detailed memories of Lead Belly were reported in the Summer 1993 issue of *The Lead Belly Letter*.

Among his recollections, Gallow remembered, "He was a pretty nice guy to work with...the crowd loved him...he had

them eating out of the palm of his hand...He sang from the heart. He sang with a depth of conviction...In doing the lighting for 30 or 40 professional groups, I only had two of them who ever took the time to talk to me. One was José Límon, a modern dancer, and the other was Lead Belly...He was extremely independent...He knew people, he knew how to present himself."

Such information will ultimately be incorporated in Killeen's book, which has a working title of "Lead Belly: The Music, The Man, The Myth." Surprisingly, with the interest in popular culture and the increase in African-American studies of all kinds, there is still plenty of room for such a study. John Lomax's 1936 book is riveting, but one-dimensional in its perspective. According to Wolfe and Lornell, Lead Belly himself very much disliked that book and hired legal help to block its publication. No wonder. In it, he is painted as a gifted artist but sexually insatiable and irresponsible, difficult, erratic, childlike, dim-witted, inconsistent, and ungrateful. Furthermore, because the book's second section of musical transcriptions of 49 of his tunes and lyrics ("The Sinful Songs") was "captured" within the book's copyright, they legally no longer belonged to him but to Lomax. The biographical part winds up in an aggrieved tsk-tsk tone and remarks, as Lead Belly and his wife depart New York City for Shreveport, "What the future holds for these two Negroes, only time will tell. Poor Martha! Poor Lead Belly!"

As for Wolfe and Lornell, they hew closely to the Lomax line, especially in the

see *Lead Belly*, page 20

Letter to the Editor:

Fine Times at the Roycroft Inn

To the Editor:

Michael Serino's story on Elbert Hubbard and the Roycrofters (*Bookpress*, February, 1994) was of special interest to me. I was brought up in a reading household in the village of Hamburg, some fifteen miles west of East Aurora, and recall seeing book covers being worked on at the Roycroft Press across the street from the Inn in East Aurora. That would have been about 1929; I was thirteen.

What Mr. Serino's story doesn't convey is only suggested in the photo of the entrance to the Inn. It is a very large frame building with wide, welcoming verandas. Sturdy and handsome, it reflects the American pleasure in and mastery of building with wood.

Dinner at "The Roycroft" was widely appealing.

For many of us who lived in the region the downstairs saloon bar was especially attractive in the war years when civilian soldiers on leave would meet with their girls for noisy gregarious evenings. I don't remember that we wondered about what Old Elbert might have thought of our use of his hall. My recollection at least is that they seemed "fine times," then.

When the war was over, no veteran I knew ever went back, but I pass the end of the street several times a year and think: if they ever re-open the Inn, I just might.

—Jerry Gross
Ithaca

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Lead Belly in New York

continued from page 19

crucial 1934-35 period. Their book is peppered with small editing and typographical errors, and lacks the depth Lead Belly's rich story and complex character demand. Digging into his history, we find a figure so substantive that the players in the considerable hubbub which surrounded him, especially at the start of his professional performing life, recede into gray shadows while he comes forward into full-color focus. It is difficult to integrate the violence and volatility of his youth with the dignity and development of his artistry, but that dichotomy is part of his fascination. Interviewed for one of the Lead Belly Society's video documentaries, historian Shelby Foote has observed that Lead Belly is an American hero on the order of Paul Bunyan or John Henry. Certainly, in that mythic trio, he was the most real.

Sean Killeen has listened to Lead Belly's music for 30 years. He has traveled in Lead Belly country, talked to dozens of people about him, including fellow musicians and members of the Ledbetter family, delved into prison, court, tax, and census records, uncovered senior citizens who heard him play when they were undergraduates, and persuaded informants to share memories, diary notes, and letters. He has his work cut out for him. But I, for one, can't wait to read the results of his labors.

A long-time Ithaca journalist, S.K. List is editor and co-publisher of Ithaca Child, the Paper for Parents. Her work has recently appeared in The New York Times.



Lead Belly's wedding to Martha Promise, Jan. 20, 1935. Alan Lomax stands behind Lead Belly. John Lomax stands at right behind the minister.

Photo: Courtesy of the Lead Belly Society

The Lead Belly Society

The Lead Belly Society, which publishes the quarterly *Lead Belly Letter*, was founded by Sean Killeen with the announced intention "to Appreciate and Celebrate Lead Belly Music." The first issue of the *Letter*, which came out in late 1990, included short pieces about the 12-string guitar, Lead Belly's instrument of choice; a description of his appearances on the college circuit in the 1930s; and a detailed chronology of two years in his turbulent life. Subsequent issues have examined Lead Belly's musical education, his guitar stylings, his relationships with women, his stretch as a convict, films of his performances, and his appearances in Europe. Each issue of the *Letter* is sent out to over 2,000 readers worldwide and Killeen says new subscribers are signing up every day.

Killeen first discovered Lead Belly at Penn State. "Ken Rosen, now a poet teaching in Maine, had a 10-inch, 33-rpm record; I heard that and it struck a chord," he says. "When I visited friends in New York City, I'd stop at Sam

Goody's, and I just started picking up Lead Belly's various records and listening to them. I recently listened to the very first record that I got in 1961, and I heard something I hadn't heard before."

In the first issue of his *Letter*, Killeen wrote, "[Lead Belly] continues to consistently hold my interest, command my respect and challenge my comprehension of his niche in American music."

Killeen has spent his adult life all over the world, teaching, working, and living in Turkey, Germany, Ireland, and Iran. All the way, he says, he dragged his Lead Belly collection along: "These records were a way to help sustain some American culture. For me, it was a good dose of Americana and kept the home fires burning."

After all that time, what made the Lead Belly Society and the *Letter* finally surface? "What motivated me, really, was that a few years ago, I thought it would be fun to read a critical work on Lead Belly," Killeen explains. He checked the

extensive Cornell library system "and there was nothing there. I was surprised that nobody anywhere had even cranked out a thesis. There was a fictionalized thing, done in 1970, by a couple of professional writers—by that, I mean guys who write on any subject. But that book and other pieces clouded more than they revealed. So I began to systematically research Lead Belly—which also means digging into the last hundred years of American social history."

Killeen says, "To write a definitive biography that is fair to the man and respectful of his enormous contribution to American culture, I've had to acquire facts and remove the barnacles of exaggerated stereotyping and blather that time and intent have added. The Lead Belly Society (PO Box 6679, Ithaca), with its blue-ribbon advisory board, was established to help signify that Lead Belly was a substantial artist, a credible and worthy concern. The *Lead Belly Letter*, which functions as a means to interchange ideas and test anecdotes, is setting the record straight with each issue."

—S. K. List

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PICASSO

and the Weeping Women
The Years of Marie-Thérèse Walter
& Dora Maar

Judi Freeman
Published in Association with the
Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Picasso's tempestuous relationships with three women—Olga Koklova, his estranged first wife; his accommodating mistress, Marie-Thérèse Walter, who bore him a daughter; and Dora Maar, the intellectual surrealist photographer—together with his response to the European tragedies of war, were the sources of the potent and harrowing motif of the weeping woman in his portraits of 1937. The way in which these women were woven into his art provides a fascinating insight into Picasso's personal life and inspiration.

Picasso and the Weeping Women is the catalog for the first exhibition devoted to this subject, which originates at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in February 1994 and travels for three months each to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Art Institute of Chicago.

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