

# The BOOKPRESS

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## Shake, Rattle and Roll

*The Ground Beneath Her Feet.*  
Salman Rushdie.  
Henry Holt, April, 1999.  
575 pages, \$26.00 cloth.

### Gail Holst-Warhaft

A genie released once too often from his bottle, he cannot go back. He floats between worlds, a loosed wraith who grants wishes, lets us see what lies beneath, over there, above. The damaged eye of his hero, Ormus Cama (Orpheus-Kama) sees fissures in the earth's crust, slashes in the clouds. A nymphomaniac called Maria enters through some rent in the real and undermines the hero's pure love for Vina/Eurydice, whose hell is man- (and woman-) made. Earthy Goddess Vina, the body and voice of love, has her feet firmly planted on an unreliable surface. Its rifts and cracks will be her downfall as she perishes in a Mexican earthquake. The third member of the triangle, the I (eye?) of the novel is a photojournalist with too many pictures of the dead and dying in his head. "Something in me wants the dreadful, wants to stare down the human race's worst-case scenarios," he tells the woman he loves with the same helpless passion as Ormus Cama.

*The Ground Beneath Her Feet* is a mournful hymn to the West, Rushdie's realization that the East is lost to him. The West is an inevitable disappointment; but in its colorless, odorless, heartless sleaziness, there is an energy, a pelvic-thrusting, pulsing beat that was rhythm and blues, rock 'n' roll, popular song at its hard-driving, lyrical best. And singing its praise, Salman Rushdie proves he is a genie still. His Orpheus tale is a colossal feat of storytelling, full of riddles, sub-plots, outrageous play, and sadness. It is also, like all Orpheus tales, a story of love and death with music as go-between.

It begins, as befits a tale as tricky as this, at the end. Here is the lovely Vina Apsara, at the height of her career as a Diva of Pop, on tour for the first time without her songwriter muse Ormus. She wakes up after a nightmare of human sacrifice in which she is the victim to find herself in bed beside a young Mexican she has picked up backstage and who appears to be dying of an overdose. Distraught and hung-over she lurches out of the hotel room and into the arms of her ever-faithful photographer "Rai" (music itself) who has followed her here against her wishes. Her hair is dyed red. She is forty-four, alone, disoriented ("Disorientation: loss of the East," in case we hadn't picked it up). Rai and Vina are flown in a helicopter to Tequila where the agave plantation owner Don Ángel Cruz—who happens to be a countertenor—is holding a banquet for her. Dark signs mar their arrival. Animals and birds behave oddly. But fear of earthquakes is something the street-wise, tough-talking Vina doesn't want to admit: "Don't try and Richter me, Rai, honey. I been scaled before," she wisecracks.



Jack Sherman

The host begins to sweat with fear. A mariachi band and a carload of rock musicians drink and spar in panic. "Please," says the host, "If you permit it, I will intent, for your diversion, to sing." Naturally, he sings, in a voice of "sidereal sweetness," the "*Trionfi Amore*" from Gluck's *Orpheus and Eurydice*. Vina joins in, singing the parts of Amor and Eurydice and as her song ends, the ground begins to shake. Rai, the photographer who acknowledges himself to be an "event junkie," cannot resist the temptation to snap the calamity taking place around him, the river of tequila drowning the inhabitants of the plantation and the village. A helicopter rescues Vina, while Rai, whose real name is Umeed Merchant (Umeed=Hope) stays below. "Good-bye, Hope," are the last words Vina speaks before her rescuers deliver her to a cliffside about to slide away and hence to the underworld.

Vina's absence, like the absence of her doubles Eurydice and Persephone, darkens the world. Her voice, as much as Ormus's music, is what redeems the unsatisfactory earth. Before he plunges us into the past, the world of their youth, the Bombay that dam-

aged and determined his trio, Rushdie stops playing games with us, almost leaves off the wordgames that he is as addicted to as photojournalist Rai is to catastrophes, and offers us a credo. It is a surprisingly romantic key to this baroque edifice of a novel. "Why do we care about singers?" he asks. "Wherein lies the power of song?... Maybe we are just creatures in search of exultation. We don't have much of it... Song shows us a world that is worthy of our yearnings, it shows us our selves as they might be, if we were worthy of the world." The rents in the world's fabric do not always, we learn, offer us visions of darkness.

"Five mysteries," he continues, "hold the keys to the unseen: the act of love, and the birth of a baby, and the contemplation of great art, and being in the presence of death or disaster, and hearing the human voice lifted in song. These are occasions when the bolts of the universe fly open and we are given a glimpse of what is hidden; an eff of the ineffable. Glory bursts upon us in such hours: the dark glory of earthquakes, the slippery wonder of new life, the radiance of Vina's singing."

Rushdie's novel is a journey towards the eff, or rather a series of parallel journeys in search of what Vina holds within her, Ormus Cama finally unlocks, and the unspiritual Rai worships. It begins in Bombay with the birth of Ormus Cama in 1937, ten years before Rai's (and Rushdie's). His birth is already marked by death. Ormus's larger twin Gayo is stillborn. Despite the fact that she has already given birth to twins known as Cyrus and Virus, no one suspects Ormus's mother, Lady Spenta Cama, is carrying twins. When his mother's "little shrimpy boy" pops out, he immediately makes rapid finger movements that other parents might have recognized as guitar chord progressions, but the Camas are not modern folk. Sir Darius Xerxes Cama is a walking anachronism, a fine classical scholar, lawyer, and cricket-player. All three of his skills will unravel him, one on the day of Ormus's birth as he swipes at a ball that sails into the stands and hits one of his older twins on the head. Virus Cama does not die but never speaks again, a condition that his

continued on page 8

# It Comes With the Territory

Jared Diamond.

*Guns, Germs and Steel: the Fates of Human Societies.*

W. W. Norton, 1997.

480 pages, \$27.50 cloth.

## Steve Adisasmito-Smith

This brilliant and comprehensive work, which won the Pulitzer Prize for non-fiction in 1998, synthesizes discoveries in evolutionary biology and epidemiology with the latest findings in archaeology and linguistics to give a broad survey of the last 13,000 years of human history. Jared Diamond, professor of physiology at the UCLA School of Medicine, most recently authored *The Third Chimpanzee*, an account of human evolution, and is a frequent contributor to magazines such as *Nature* and *Natural History*. In the present book, Diamond is paying a debt, answering a question from a friend who helped with his research in Papua New Guinea over 25 years ago. His friend, Yali, a local politician, asked why the Europeans had so much "cargo" (trade goods, vehicles, weapons) when they arrived, while his people had so little. That question became Diamond's personal entry into the historical problem of the evident inequalities of technology and material goods in past encounters between various cultures. While the immediate causes of the European conquests are generally acknowledged to lie in greater military force, more lethal infectious diseases, and more advanced technology—the guns, germs, and steel of the book's title—the factors that gave rise to these developments are disputed. Some theorists have claimed racial intelligence or cultural superiority, either blatantly or in a covert form, and many have tacitly accepted these answers for lack of a better explanation. Diamond, with admirable clarity, dismantles such theories and convincingly argues that geography and environment, not genetics, combined to give the Europeans their competitive edge. To do so, Diamond reviews developments on each of the continents and the islands of Polynesian since the last ice age, providing a true world history. While necessarily a broad sketch, Diamond's account is nevertheless compelling and deserves to be read by anyone with a serious interest in human history and contact between cultures.

Environmental factors are key players in Diamond's developmental scheme. The physical size and biodiversity of Eurasia contributed to the early domestication of plants and animals for increased food production, which resulted in the rise of elite social groups (such as a professional military) and the proliferation of infectious diseases. Its geographical orientation, with an east-west axis along similar climatic zones, facilitated the rapid spread of technological innovations. In Diamond's view, nature is nurture, not in terms of an absolute geographic determinism, but rather because some environments provided more raw materials and favorable conditions to promote their use. He provides a solid rebuff

to bell-curve theorists, by demonstrating that human ingenuity and intelligence can be found everywhere, but always adapted to the local environment.

In fact, one of the strengths of the book is the wealth of descriptions of interactions between non-European people. The majority of such cases are drawn from New Guinea, where Diamond lived and worked extensively. The New Guinea highlanders developed intensive farming at an early period, but the lowlands of New Guinea were unsuitable for these crops, as were the nearby coasts of Australia, so trade relations with the Australian aborigines remained sparse. One of the most intriguing chapters in the first part of the book presents the expansion of Austronesian peoples in case studies of how descendants from the same culture fared in the radically different environments of various Pacific islands.

The second section of the book chronicles "The Rise of Food Production." As might be expected, Diamond is most cogent when discussing the interaction of biodiversity, food production, geographical environments, and the rise of infectious diseases. Diamond's analysis pioneers a kind of biogeography—the study of the effects of the environment on life forms and the development and dispersion of species in different areas. For example, how did almonds, bitter and poisonous in the wild, come to be domesticated? Humans picked the few mutant wild species that were fit for consumption, which selected for those genetic traits, and deposited them as refuse. In other words, trash piles and latrines became the first gardens.

While drawing on numerous such specific examples, Diamond extends his scope to the broadest trends. Eurasia, which had the greatest landmass compared to the Americas, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Australia, also had the greatest number of plant and animal candidates suitable for domestication. The east-west orientation of Eurasia facilitated the spread of domestication as different groups adopted the varieties under cultivation. Plants adapted to certain latitudes spread fastest among those latitudes where they were exposed to the same amount of sunlight, length of growing seasons, and roughly similar weather conditions. Animal domestication was subject to similar constraints. Diamond also postulates the "Anna Karenina principle:" just as happy marriages are all alike, but unhappy ones are unhappy each in their own way, so the pairings of humans and animals needed several requirements to succeed, but could fail in diverse ways. Several factors, such as the animals' diets, social habits, and temperaments (zebra bites are vicious), combined to inhibit viable domestication.

Geographical barriers created a temporal gradient: similar developments in technology and food production occurred in the Americas as well as in Eurasia (the invention of the wheel and a system of writing), but they spread, developed, and combined at a slower rate due to the greater difficulty of access across the American landscapes. Eurasia, on

the other hand, had a relative ease of dispersal due to more open routes of travel, with few ecological or geographic barriers. This resulted in a head-start for Eurasian societies and a faster rate of development as technological improvements acted as catalysts and as the cultures shared innovations.

Some of Diamond's conceptual reversals are engaging, as when he explains the spread of disease from the microbe's point of view: open sores, sneezing, and coughing, "so inconvenient" to humans, are excellent means for dispersal, exit ramps on the microbial superhighways. His explanation of the evolution of more lethal germs in Eurasia from interspecies infection is insightful. The population density of the herd animals transmitted mutant strains to human vectors, and the greater density of human population kept epidemic diseases in play and filtered out the less successful strains. Thus, when Europeans arrived in the Americas and Australia, they transmitted epidemics rather than catching them. The diseases spread in advance of the people, resulting in a death toll among Native Americans estimated as high as 95 percent.

Diamond becomes less convincing as he deals with more complex cultural phenomena. (In some respects, his description of the transfer of writing and technology sounds like the spread of epidemics.) Although his sketch of the development of writing systems is fairly accurate—there are still many gaps in what is known in this field—he does not convincingly demonstrate the connection between food production, population and the development of writing in some areas, compared to its lack in others. It is not a new observation that abundant resources and leisure time provide the opportunity, and the administrative and mercantile requirements of an increased population, the need, for written records. What requires more analysis is the leap from inventory lists to epics and religious texts that

justify imperialism. While one chapter briefly sketches the collusion of social organization, government, and religion, the book stops short of an adequate discussion of the cultural factors which stimulated the European attempt to colonize the earth.

Though Diamond tries not to assume a necessary teleology in the way historical events unfolded, his careless diction at points gives that impression. Saying that certain geographical areas "had to await" the implantation of European crops and livestock not only jars the ear, but does much to undo his claims that these areas would have developed appropriate food systems or technology through their own initiative if the Europeans had not intervened. Furthermore, from someone who advocates developing human history as a science, the statement, "What use one makes of a historical explanation is a question separate from the explanation itself," is critically naive. Questions that motivate the explanations are not themselves disinterested, and some explanations lend themselves to ideological misuse or post-facto justification of inequities. Such is the case, for example, with the racist theories he refutes.

Any book that tackles a subject of this scope must fall short, as Diamond acknowledges. Still, Diamond provides a clear look at the constellations of environmental factors that have shaped human history over the past 13,000 years. While only a partial answer to Yali's question, Diamond's work is a useful sketch, similar to an archaeological site plan that surveys the ground and traces the structures that must have been in place. *Guns, Germs and Steel* provides a solid, biological basis for beginning to understand the history of intercultural contact.

Steve Adisasmito-Smith is working on his PhD in Comparative Literature.

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Fiction

Robert C.S. Downs

Right now it's late Friday afternoon of Easter weekend and instead of being home in Metuchen I'm here in the basement of this old Cape May Victorian summer rental my wife and I inherited 18 years ago working on an elbow of the 85-year-old cold-water pipe to the kitchen. Helen's in the front hall right above me and has just relayed the news that the phone call was her sister Maureen in Red Bank saying they aren't coming this year because Dennis's partner in the dental practice has had an episode of syncope that's put him in the hospital and left Dennis on call.

When I go upstairs Helen's standing at the open front door, her disappointment clear in how her arms are tightly crossed, her head stern. I stand just behind her for a few moments, my hands black with pipe water and penetrating oil, and look out, too. The light over the ocean is especially pale and two blocks up we hear the waves hit the beach one after another. Helen's long brown hair moves slightly on her shoulders. On the block ours is the only car. Up toward Madison we see a single figure, a young woman wearing a yellow dress and white sweater. We watch as she looks at each house she passes, then sees our car and starts across the street toward us. Just then Blake and Billie Cranemore, who are lawyers from Manhattan and about ten years older, turn into the driveway of their ranch across the street. They've replaced last year's red BMW with a light blue one. Billie waves as soon as she gets out and as we go down to meet them I see the young woman change her mind and go back to the other side. On the sidewalk Billie says Blake had a brainstorm at lunch and here they are going birding. Over Blake's shoulder I see the young woman slow and look over the BMW. Then Blake asks how our jobs are—I teach ten-through-twelve English and Helen's a librarian—and when I say fine Billie interrupts the small talk by asking if we're going to rent again this summer to that black family from Connecticut. I stare at her as she turns to Helen and says they rented the last two weeks in June and must have had ten people in the place. Then she says the name, spells it, and asks me to find out from the realtor if they're going to be back. "My understanding," I say, "is that they are African-Americans."

"Whatever," Billie answers.  
Helen tells them they have the right to call the police if any tenant is a nuisance. Blake answers it wasn't that bad, just real loud some nights. It seems Billie will never let the matter go, and she presses me again for a promise to see if they've put a deposit on the last two weeks in June. Helen says we'll find out only to bring the conversation to an end. Blake, sensing the same need to smooth things over, asks us for a drink tomorrow afternoon, and Helen says yes as if all we've been talking about is the weather. On the porch I turn and look back at them going into

their house, and then I see the young woman has turned the corner and is now half way up to Beach Avenue.

At five the next afternoon, Blake meets us at the door, drink in hand, and quietly says he's awful sorry for the way Billie acted yesterday but you know how she is, she speaks her mind. As we go in I put a hand on his upper arm and he smiles and asks if gin and tonics are okay. Just as Blake goes into the kitchen Billie comes out, she, too, with a drink. I tell her she's got nothing to worry about in June, the tenants aren't coming back, and she says, "Well, that's good." Then there's a long pause and to fill the awkward space between us she asks if Helen and I are going to church tomorrow. I answer that

out, in the palm a pool of dark blood. Quietly, he explains that in cutting the lime he's run the end of the knife into his hand. He looks down at it as we get to him, and for a long moment we watch the blood rise in the center. Even though Billie and Helen press paper towels on it, and I hold his wrist as hard as I can, the bleeding is only halved. Blake is remarkably calm, but he's very pale and his mouth is so dry that when he says he'll be all right it's like his tongue's too big.

At the hospital up in Cape May Court House, Billie creates so much chaos in the emergency room that a nurse asks Helen to keep her quiet. The three of us sit in soft vinyl chairs in the lounge, Helen in the middle, Billie staring at the frosted glass doors

down next to me: a semi carrying mail rear-ended them at the last toll-booth on the Garden State, not a direct hit, but enough to shoot the bus forward a good fifty yards and hurt the two older men sitting in the back seat. The young man, however, has not been hurt. He is, though, understandably tense for a while until the nurses sort out those in need of immediate care. Then I ask him if he's from around here and he shakes his head and tells me the bus was the choir from Calvary Baptist in Newark on their way to the sunrise service in Cape May. He says he's never been down this way. He's wearing a shiny blue and white basketball jacket and carrying a pocket Bible. I ask if he's in high school and, when he nods, if he plays basketball. "Some," he answers.

"College, then maybe take a shot at the pros?" I ask.

"I want to be a voice teacher," he tells me. I say I'm Jack Henderson, extend my hand and mention I'm a teacher. He shakes my hand with only his fingers but seems not to hear me. Rather, his eyes go over the room as though all along he's been keeping track of those injured and when they go in and out for care. He watches so closely it's as if everyone is his relative. When he's satisfied everything is all right he sits back in his chair and opens the Bible.

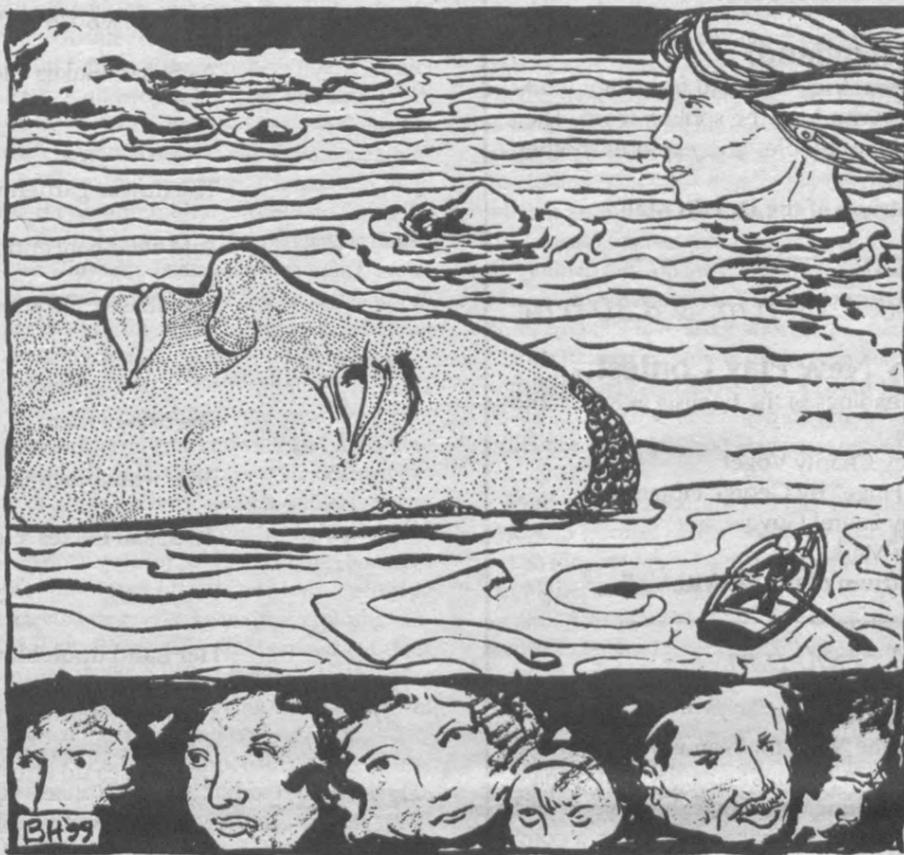
It's then that he puts a hand over his eyes and softly begins to cry. I ask if he's hurt and when he shakes his head I tell him he's probably in shock, that it hits like that and the best thing to do is just let it out. He slides his hand from his forehead and looks hard at me, his eyes large. "What's wrong with you, mister?" he says and gets up from the chair and goes across the room and out the door. Bewildered, I turn to Helen, who's heard everything and asks what happened. "Nothing," I answer. "Not a thing."

About twenty minutes later as we all go out to the parking lot, Blake's hand bandaged and Billie carrying a prescription, it's dusk. The high yellow lights around the whole area make a ghostly statement against the burned sky. I see the young man leaning against the side of the school bus, arms folded, the Bible in his right hand, his eyes on me all the way to the car. Even as we drive out, and I glance to the side, he's still looking.

After Billie fills the prescription we decide to go to one of the small restaurants on the outdoor mall downtown, but the first three we come to aren't open for the season yet and we end up in a booth at the Ugly Mug with an NBA game above one end of the bar and a NASCAR race over the other. Blake looks very pale and tired and says his hand already hurts. He says he wants a martini but Billie talks him into light beer and we order a pitcher. Billie buries her head in the menu. I tell her and Blake that if they're looking for something really good they ought to try the chili, that six weeks ago when I was here alone painting the downstairs I thought it was so good I went back into the kitchen and told the

continued on page 11

# The Right To Sing



Barry Hoffman

every Easter we've been here we've gone to the sunrise service at Convention Hall, then headed right home. Billie laughs and says that's way too early for them, that she and Blake'll probably go to the 10:45 at St. Peter's-by-the-Sea, and afterwards have lunch at the Lobster House. She asks if I've ever had their Bloody Marys and I answer no. "Just right," she says. Then Billie declares that she and Blake are life-long Episcopalians and point blank asks what we are. I tell her Helen's Presbyterian but that I've never really had a religion. "But you go?" she asks.

"For the singing," I answer.  
Helen says my voice is excellent and I blush as she adds that it's the kind that in church can rise right over everyone else's.

At that moment Blake swears in the kitchen and calls out for Billie. "Oh, what now?" Billie says, eyes rolling. After a long moment Blake appears in the doorway with one hand

where they've taken Blake. Finally, she gets up and goes straight through them. "You're never going to change a Billie Cranemore," Helen says, then picks up a *Better Homes and Gardens*.

Right then all hell breaks loose. First there's the sirens outside as three ambulances and two police cars race into the emergency parking area, following them a small yellow school bus and two more police cars. The ambulances contain two older black men on gurneys, both of whom are conscious, and they go right into the same area Blake did. Then almost right away there's a procession of black people who get out of the bus and come through the sliding doors into the waiting room. There are about twenty in all and some of them are hurt, but not very seriously. Their cuts, bruises and whiplashes are consistent with what happened, which I find out from a young man in his late teens who sits

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## At The Bookery

Sunday, March 7, 2:00 p.m.

## Once When I Was Young, Long Ago...\*

## Revisiting Our Childhoods

Stories by: Harriet Bley, Yvonne Fisher, Kathy Kramer, Susan Lytle, Jane Sprague, Kit Wainer, Marty Waters and Irene Zahava.

This event will take place in the Women's Community Building on the corner of Cayuga & Seneca Sts. Join us afterwards for a reception in the new Women's Community Building Library.

\*The title of this event is an excerpt from the writing of Grace Paley.

Sunday, March 14, 2:00 p.m.

## Mothering Day (England)

Poets Georgia A. Popoff and Mary Russo Demetrick will read from their works to honor mothers, children, and all humans who love the spoken word. Their poetry borrows from immigrant stories and family lore, and explores motherhood, lust, gardening, spirituality, and ethnicity.

This event will take place in the atrium of the DeWitt Mall.

Friday &amp; Saturday, March 19-20, 7:00 p.m. &amp; 8:30 p.m.

## Kitchen Theatre Company New Play Contest

The Bookery is pleased to host four staged readings of the finalists in KTC's 2nd Annual New Play Contest.

3/19, 7:00 p.m. "Saturday Night" by Charity Vogel  
 3/19, 8:30 p.m. "God's Pants Too Huge" by George Holets  
 3/20, 7:00 p.m. "Falling Awake" by Laurel Guy  
 3/20, 8:30 p.m. "Pontiac Hotel" by Mark Cole

This event will take place in the atrium of the DeWitt Mall.

Sunday, March 21, 2:00 p.m.

## Caleb S. Rossiter

Caleb Rossiter will discuss the lessons from the Vietnam War and the anti-war movement that are relevant to today's topics in national security and foreign policy. His book, *The Chimes of Freedom Flashing*, combines the memoir of a teenage participant in the anti-war movement in the Southern Tier with a comprehensive history of the national anti-war movement.

This event will take place in the Women's Community Building.

Sunday, March 21, 2:00 p.m.

## Peter W. Nathanielsz, MD PhD

Join us for a fascinating discussion of Dr. Nathanielsz' new book, *Life in the Womb*. In it, he asserts that the conditions under which we develop in the womb determine our susceptibility to heart disease, strokes, diabetes, obesity, and many other conditions in later life. Peter Nathanielsz is the James Law Professor of Reproductive Medicine at the College of Veterinary Medicine at Cornell University.

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## Susan's Figure

As Susan makes a lovely figure, so  
 She is what all our figuring attends,  
 Our senses do attest (that beauty know).

We see her silhouetted in the glow  
 Of morning windows where the sunlight bends,  
 As Susan makes a lovely figure, so.

The flower garden yields, where once was snow  
 And clear conception, so white that it blinds  
 Our senses. Do attest that beauty. Know.

She brings them in, and in the vase they go.  
 Brief icons, each is as it too reminds:  
 As Susan makes a lovely, figure so.

Her hand upon blown glass, her voice's flow  
 Through shadows, make like scents the heart defends.  
 Our senses do attest that beauty, know.

But she is not alone for eyes or show  
 Or for the days so recklessly she spends:  
 As Susan makes a lovely figure, so  
 Our senses do. Attest that beauty. Know.

—Joe Aimone

Joe Aimone fled Southern California after completing his doctorate in English at UCLA.

He is hiding out in the neon shadows of Reno, Nevada, teaching at a community college.

## FREEDOM SONG

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# Poison Pen Pals

*Ex-Friends: Falling Out With Allen Ginsberg, Lionel and Diana Trilling, Lillian Hellman, Hannah Arendt and Norman Mailer.*

Norman Podhoretz.  
The Free Press, 1999.  
256 pages, \$25.00 cloth.

## Edward T. Chase

The buzz over Norman Podhoretz's new book, *Ex-Friends*, may almost match the decibel level raised over *Making It*, his 1968 memoir. That book celebrated his triumphalist arrival in the '60s as a rising star among the New York *literati*. Most reviewers, many his erstwhile colleagues, criticized it brutally as embarrassingly self-aggrandizing. Since then, Podhoretz has enjoyed fame as advisor to President Reagan, and as an intellectual spokesman for conservatism second only to William F. Buckley, Jr. As an ideologue on the right, he has been a pervasive presence on the pundit, seminar, and op-ed circuits. (He enjoys implying that it was his creed that won us the Cold War. Please.)

*Ex-Friends* will engender controversy anew. It is a very readable book, a gossipy chronicle of the shifting *Weltanschauung* of the New York Intellectuals from the '30s into the '90s. It is also earnest and solemn, useful if skewed, and frequently irritating. Podhoretz fancies he is the Chief of Staff in an ideological war ("war" being a term he uses often and with relish) against liberalism in all its aspects, a war which underlies his personal breakups with his six ex-chums. This has rendered Podhoretz *persona non grata* in the broadest literary and cultural circles, no doubt about that. But he can take consolation in the loyalty of fierce neo-conservatives like Irving Kristol, Kristol's wife Gertrude Himmelfarb, and their son Bill.

His arguments against his six ex-friends are not implausible, if his facts are right, but at times they sound silly. A heavy hand when it comes to humor, he writes, "...like William F. Buckley, Jr., I would rather be ruled by the first two thousand names in the Boston phone book than by the combined faculties of Harvard and MIT." But what is actually off-putting are not so much his judgements but the underlying premises of his "war."

Podhoretz's first target is "master poet of the Beat Generation," Allen Ginsberg. They knew each other for more than fifty years, first meeting as undergraduates at Columbia. It was an off-and-on relationship for a while, and Podhoretz praised *Howl*, but in time it turned sour for good. Podhoretz found the Beats, including Kerouac, increasingly insufferable. He linked the Beats' ethos with "violence and criminality, main-line drug addiction, and madness." He writes of this counterculture, "I concluded with a ringing declaration of war." He interpreted as evidence of the corruption of liberalism the widespread praise and affection heaped on Ginsberg at his death by such as David Remnick in *The*

*New Yorker*, John Leonard in *The Nation*, David Gates in *Newsweek*, and Henry Allen in *The Washington Post*.

No doubt Ginsberg's more extravagant antics, his hysterical declarations against "Amerika," his championing of violence, sexual licentiousness, and drugs, played powerfully into Norman's hands. But what comes across above all in this chapter are (1) a scarcely-disguised homophobia and, (2) most disturbing, Podhoretz's insistent attempt to lump the Beats' radical New Left ethos with liberalism. It is this overkill and distortion that infuriates mainline liberals and old-line humanists. Making essential distinctions is not the strong suit of warriors; "war" is a crude platform from which to respect critical differences. The Beats, the radical counterculture, were manifest illiberals and they disintegrated fairly soon. I recall the awful image of then-staunch liberal Daniel Bell, of all people, breaking into tears when the police had to be called in at the Columbia student riots. This was not a consequence of liberalism, but its enemy, the mindless wing of the counterculture, hellbent for self-destruction. As for the homophobia, to demonize Ginsberg, Podhoretz (reminding one of independent prosecutor Starr) quotes in full his most luridly explicit poems celebrating anal intercourse.

Turning next to the Trillings, Podhoretz writes that Lionel was "the most intelligent person I have ever known," and for a time Lionel apparently reciprocated, judging Norman his best-ever Columbia student. But as Podhoretz edged closer to his rigid post-'60s neo-conservatism, and the Trillings hewed to the traditional liberal positions, each side detected betrayals. Diana was typically outspoken. Eventually she insisted (to their mutual friends) that Podhoretz, in *Breaking Ranks*, had lied in saying that Lionel had advised him not to publish *Making It*.

Who knows? Who cares? Surely the breakup was inevitable: Try to imagine Lionel and Diana Trilling sharing Podhoretz's (1) backing of the Vietnam War and (2) fervent support for Ronald Reagan, who blamed trees for causing acid rain (prompting naughty Berkeley students to greet Reagan with a sign on a campus tree saying "Cut me down before I kill again,") and believed in fantasies about the wondrous efficacy of his Star Wars technologies.

As for Lillian Hellman, legions found, to *not* fall out eventually with her would take some doing. Still, Podhoretz remained a close friend for a decade. He is almost touching here in the candor with which he admits his vulnerability, as a 27-year-old *arriviste*, to the 52-year-old Hellman's glamour. However, her sins as an undisguised Stalinist were stentorian, impossible for Podhoretz to stomach (impossible for most liberals, as well). As the ferociously rigorous Sidney Hook points out, Hellman remained silent about, or even defended, the Moscow purge trials; forced famine and deportation in the Ukraine; the Nazi-Soviet pact; the invasions of Poland and

Finland; the destruction of the Baltic States; the Katyn Massacre; etc., etc. Who could fault Podhoretz in this instance?

The Hannah Arendt fallout was equally inevitable, and it is fair to say that Podhoretz's argument here is impressive evidence of his analytic power and the solidity of his writing skills. Initially he was overwhelmed by Arendt's brilliance, as so many intellectuals were. What a remarkable person indeed she was, an independent, searching mind—yet how dramatically illustrative of how brilliance and originality can sometimes beget intellectual turbulence from which errors emerge. Podhoretz, overwhelmed by Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism*, admired her unreservedly until her reports on the Eichmann trial, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, began in *The New Yorker*. But he could not tolerate her anti-Americanism, her embrace of Mary McCarthy's pro-Vietcong line, her *legerdemain* in depicting Eichmann not as the complete anti-Semite he was but simply a loyal Nazi underling—this despite his infamous admission, "I will jump into my grave laughing because the fact that I have the death of five million Jews on my conscience gives me extraordinary satisfaction." Podhoretz barely notes Arendt's love affair with the pro-Nazi Martin Heidegger. No matter. He concludes with the observation that once again he had "overrated the role of intellectual activity of brilliance in general and Hannah Arendt in particular."

Podhoretz's section "A Foul Weather Friend to Norman Mailer" is the longest. He acknowledges Mailer's distinctive powers. On Mailer's "The White Negro" Podhoretz writes, "I was fascinated by the sheer intellectual and moral brazenness it displayed, but I was also disturbed by it." Elsewhere he writes, "I had come to admire the power and boldness of his writing" and "He was absolutely determined to do everything for himself, to invent the world anew, and because I thought this admirable and courageous, I was careful not to judge him too quickly."

An early turnoff was Podhoretz's perception that Mailer was susceptible to what he interpreted as a fascistic-like ideology of "primitive vitalism and a willingness to look upon cruelty and blood-letting with complacency, if not downright enthusiasm." He associates this with Mailer's obsession with boxing and hints that this originated not from Mailer's early worship of Hemingway but rather from his fear, as a Brooklyn street boy, of being a sissy. Podhoretz, apparently after questioning Norman's boyhood friends, writes, "Mailer would spend the rest of his life overcoming the stigma of this reputation as a 'nice Jewish boy' by doing as an adult all the hooliganism things he had failed to do in childhood and adolescence." They remained friendly literary rivals, Mailer trying to lure Podhoretz into trying pot and a joint "sexual orgy" of some kind. No soap. Podhoretz was present the night when Mailer stabbed his

wife Adele with a pen-knife at a party, and he agreed as his friend to help Mailer get jail as opposed to asylum commitment, which Mailer dreaded most (neither happened).

Podhoretz felt betrayed when Mailer reviewed *Making It* harshly; according to Podhoretz, Mailer had earlier told him he liked the book very much. Their fallout intensified when, allegedly at his friend Jackie Kennedy's request, Podhoretz declined to invite Mailer to a star-studded dinner party he gave in Jackie's honor. Mailer later wrote of this "betrayal" and added that he was especially hurt because William Styron, then his "dire rival" had been invited to the party.

Petty stuff, but it was the profoundly differing political perspectives that destined their breach—Podhoretz's conservatism stiffening, Mailer ever the leftist. Podhoretz ends this chapter disputing Mailer's contention that the Soviet Union's internal weakness cost it the Cold War, insisting instead on the efficacy of Ronald Reagan's policies.

*Ex-Friends*, it can be said, is a most diverting, anecdotally rich lowdown on the history of the literary world of the New York Intellectuals—"The Family," as Podhoretz terms it—by an insider with a special ax to grind. It falters because Podhoretz mischaracterizes liberalism, fallaciously equating it with the radical New Left counterculture. Furthermore, Podhoretz has a failure of historical imagination, never expressing the faintest hint that the impulse towards socialism (crudely lumped by him with Stalinism), an impulse felt by millions over generations, has sprung from an ideal of social justice, not tyranny. And thirdly, it is exasperating to find that Podhoretz has little understanding of economics, no appreciation of the actual dynamics of the price-market system the neo-conservatives deify, never observing that for all the market's acknowledged centrality to capitalism's triumphs, the State remains the crucial last resort in preventing and assuaging the market's undeniable and inevitable external social costs. The charge here is not the absence in the book of any expressed sense of compassion for the disadvantaged, it is the absence of any recognition of a market economy's social shortfalls.

Finally, Podhoretz, after ignoring the *New York Review of Books* throughout, ends his book with a gratuitous attack on it. In "Requiem for a Lost World," he decries the loss of the *Partisan Review* and *Commentary* as the New York "Family's" intellectual centers, and dismisses the *New York Review of Books*, now arguably the nation's best and most intellectually respected journal, as merely a "spokesman for the radical movement of the 1960s." Podhoretz, formidably well-read, is far too acute to believe in this hopelessly inadequate false judgement. Sad.

Edward Chase is the former editor-in-chief of Times Books and senior editor at Scribner. He is a frequent contributor to The Bookpress.

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—Bel Mooney, *The Times*

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## Reading

*The Essential Tales of Chekhov.*  
 Edited by Richard Ford.  
 Translated by Constance Garnett.  
 Ecco Press, 1998.  
 337 pages, \$27.50 cloth.

*The Undiscovered Chekhov: 38 New Stories.*  
 Edited & translated by Peter Constantine.  
 Seven Stories Press, 1998.  
 200 pages, \$24.00 cloth.

## Paul Winner

In college I took Intro to World Theater, and was part of the annual wave of freshmen who get introduced to Anton Chekhov. It was an awkward meeting. The class instructor picked five students and made them divvy up speaking parts from *Uncle Vanya*. They read Act I, aloud, for close to two hours. It was awful. One student got it into his head that Doctor Astrov should speak with a waggish and dippy German accent, like Schultz, the fat sergeant from "Hogan's Heroes," which was funny for ten minutes. All those immaculate Chekhovian portraits of yearning and misspent lives flew over our heads like a gust of hot wind. No one could sum up the plot. No one cared. Over in the Arts and Sciences building, Chekhov's short fiction fared even worse. Our tweedy Lit professor read a story out loud, sitting cross-legged on his desk, obviously moved by what he read to us; still, everyone fell asleep. The professor went about seducing himself and deepened his plaintive, witty view of life while the class sunk in their seats and drifted into visions of vodka, snow, and cartoon Cossacks.

One year later I was assigned "The Lady with the Dog" in a class called Fundamentals of Fiction. It was a writing workshop, one of those breezy afternoon seminars where novice writers are handled as carefully as pieces of ceramic art. I was pretty good. I'd gotten "The Chrysanthemums" and "The Rocking-Horse Winner" and "Hills Like White Elephants" and blathered over structure and dialogue like someone who knew what he talked about. I read Chekhov's story and returned the following week.

"Didn't like it," I said.

The professor's eyes deadened. "Read it again."

It's natural to approach any major writer with some pre-conceived notions. As readers, we might quietly spend the rest of our adult lives catching up — reuniting with the canon of works we were supposed to have memorized years ago — and recall dim, shadowy caricatures. In particular, the art of the short story is often a fuzzy school memory, an example of literature's provenance. Reading Poe we remember the high collar, eyes black as pearl, the consumptive face of a madman; in Hawthorne, a prim anti-moralist; in Jack London, the hardy landloper in the Yukon. Each of them had a handle. But for me Chekhov would forever be the oddball, the disappearing Russian.

It's something of a relief to find the American novelist Richard Ford, in his humble introduction to *The Essential Tales*, performing a noble service for readers and writers alike by fessing up that he didn't get Chekhov either. In college, Ford writes, he was left with the faint knowledge that Chekhov was supposed to be two things: Russian and Great. Ford admits it took years to sense the strength behind tales like "The Lady with the Dog," because, until maturity, he found Chekhov's work simply baffling. It seemed to produce an austere gray light, like pictures of saints, as evidence of its alleged greatness. The stories were far too removed from life. Nothing ever happened, really. All the characters stayed exactly who they were. And what characters! To be fair, it was not Chekhov's fault to be born during the period in history that gave the world its cartoon-picture of Russians:

"Damn you, Pavel Pavelovich!"

"To hell with you, Boris Boriselovich!"

And so on. The critical shorthand "Chekhovian" implies an icon of those peculiar, distant people in the late nineteenth century who went about employing an extended use of the word "tiresome." Readers by now recognize a Chekhovian protagonist: sharply bearded, strained at the eye, over-educated or underwhelmed by life. He is lethargic and drunk. He's wearing good shoes but no overcoat as he stumbles down the ice-packed avenues of Petersburg and recalls the faint and trilling notes of a peasant song he'd heard hours before.

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These two recent collections of Chekhov's short fiction reveal a good deal more than caricatures. When I returned to his short fiction, I did not see those dreary melodramas from my freshman year. Instead I recognized (a little older now, maybe wiser) the shimmer of a new approach to a form I thought I understood. Chekhov's work, I learned, proved to wield enormous influence over the writing of a century in which he played no part.

Anton Pavlovich Chekhov died in July of 1908 of a pulmonary hemorrhage in Badenweiler, Germany, among strangers, far from home. Eight decades after his death, Raymond Carver penned a tribute to the man he'd come to know, through years of loving imitation, as *The Master*. It was a short story entitled "Errand," published in *The New Yorker*. It re-imagined the last hours in Chekhov's life in finely shaped detail: beads of worry on the attending doctor's brow, the regal bearing of Chekhov's wife Olga Knipper, and most of all, the movements of a young valet. The story narrows on the boy who has come to Chekhov's room at the hotel to collect three spent bottles of champagne. He clicks his heels, crisply bows and waits for instructions from a grieving Mrs. Chekhov, all the while growing more and more uneasy, sure now that something in the room is terribly wrong. The story's final image is of the young man who has, for the moment, remembered himself and his place, discreetly retrieving a champagne cork from the elegantly carpeted floor.

It was a story of pitch-perfect imitation. Carver himself would succumb to an early death, from cancer, the very same year and the story occupies a central emotional status with admirers of both men. Carver wrote it while riding the end-crest of the wave of "Dirty Realism" that produced an ostensible renaissance in the art of short fiction. Its celebrated practitioners — Carver, Ann Beattie, Joy Williams, Tobias Wolff, and Richard Ford — allowed a debt to Chekhov at a time when fiction (and the delicate constitution of its short forms) reeled from the shock effects of post-realism, post-modernism, and post-everything else imaginable. Politics supposedly played an enormous role in the breakdown and deconstruction of popular fiction writing. Literature seemed forced to both answer and keep up with abrupt social changes by commenting on the action, all the while conducting a parallel commentary on the very nature of writing itself.

But the writers of this wave seemed in retreat from those critical questions. "Errand" publicly acknowledged Chekhov's influence on their art and its politics of language. Perhaps it was a harmony of eras, Chekhov's dying Russia and the "morning after" in America, that made the thematic and structural similarities stick. But inside writerly concerns like focus, character, and structure, it seemed Chekhov had carved out for himself a final word. Instead of being the disappearing Russian, he left a legacy of imitators that addressed wider politics the way Chekhov himself might have liked: quietly, humbly, and in private. The art of the short story appeared,

for a time at least, to remember its patron saint.

Unfortunately, this is often all we know of Chekhov. Esoteric mentions of literary influence and our personal memories of his absolute impenetrability are the twin stars that guide most responses. What a pleasure, then, to pick up *The Essential Tales of Chekhov* and *The Undiscovered Chekhov*, two new collections of "the Master's" short fiction. Reading him (I was heartened to remember) is often difficult, for the expectations associated with the notion of "story" are still flummoxed by Chekhov's groundbreaking style and structure. But the time is worth it. Chekhov has always been the sort of writer you return to.

After college I sat down and read, like Ford, "The Lady with the Dog," and was swiftly knocked over the head with its sensibilities and grace. I also experienced, like Ford, the sharp pang of sensing Chekhov's footprints in the work of other, more recent writers who had been so obviously influenced by him. Ford admits as much, too: Carver, Welty, Cheever, Hemingway, Babel; all following Anton Chekhov's tracks in the snow. You can discern the early traces of 20th century short fiction in nearly all of Chekhov's classics, yes, but that alone doesn't make reading him worthwhile. What makes it a pleasure is the casual, almost insinuating manner that characters at work and play in these stories reflect our shared secrets. It's the way the poor worker in "Champagne" understands, on New Year's Eve, how quickly the reveries will pass and leave him alone again with his bafflement over life and love. The vodka does not lead him, for instance, to leave town, pick a fight with a stranger, beat his children, or ship off on an inward journey to spiritual muck, but simply leads where vodka might lead anyone: to an ephemeral awareness of beauty and failure, a moment of clarity to be slept off by morning.

It's the way the girl in "After the Theatre" sees a glimpse of her future by noticing how interesting it would be to love "as a

fool," to love when the object of that love is indifferent. "Something beautiful, touching, and poetical" about it, she says, before returning from the theater a modestly changed girl. The change takes place off-stage, but we sympathetically anticipate and understand it just the same.

It's the way Gurov in "The Lady with the Dog" reacts to his lover's overblown feelings — "Let her have her cry; I'll just sit down and wait" — before assuring her with his kindest words that all will be right, somehow, while the reader senses that Gurov knows full well things are just starting to bloom all wrong.

These are enormous clues, Richard Ford remarks, of where in life "to search more assiduously; what not to overlook; what's the origin of this sort of human calamity, that sort of joy and pleasure; how can we live nearer to the latter, further off from the former?" In the work of a lifetime, Chekhov's politics were confined to this. Those laments of boredom and sadness you might recall were not expressions of finality, as one could find in other works of the period. Chekhov was instead a writer of great hope. He articulated a new approach to the art of peering in the corner and under the pince-nez for traces of human beings.

In both of these collections, we are witness to the creation of the Chekhov we've come to recognize. Beginning with *The Undiscovered Chekhov* we find young Anton pushing himself to survive as a writer before he'd made any money as a physician. Grandson of a serf, poverty-stricken and abandoned by his father, Chekhov eased the penury of his youth by writing for low-rent weeklies. It was a painful but inspired apprenticeship. His famous line, directed toward the other Russian greats of the 19th century (whom Chekhov nonetheless admired) said as much: "What writers belonging to the upper class have received from nature for nothing, plebeians acquire at the cost of their youth." *The Undiscovered Chekhov* is born of this period in his life. It's filled with scraps of doggerel, jokey snapshots, and ideas that were measured for qual-



The young Anton Chekhov

# Chekhov Again

ity in rubles. Chekhov began his career by writing for cash. You get a sense this freed the young medical student from having to address his surroundings the way other "writers," whether by nature or vocation, felt bound to do.

The concepts behind the stories are simple, almost childlike. "On the Train" is about the bustle of a commuter car; different characters pop up like new ideas, fret for a moment, and fade away. Similarly, "Sarah Bernhardt Comes to Town" is told in successive telegrams, each one a punchline delivered by Muscovites and their fashionable fawning over the famous actress who's just arrived in town. "Village Doctors" describes a medical waiting room at a manic pitch of cartoon absurdity. All the stories have a certain thorny mark about the prose and appear presciently modernist. They are public journals of a writer searching for both his subject and style. Reviewers have rightly pounced on Chekhov's marvelous eye for detail in these early fictions, seeing links between what concerned him as a novice to what concerned him as a fully-grown man. But the charm, the wit—and yes, a wonderful pretentiousness—arising from unfettered youth are in fact what burn brightest. The Good Doctor, solemn biographer of a doomed century, hadn't even finished school by this point. As a result, young Anton comes across as a witty little rake.

Richard Ford graciously keeps a few early portraits on hand in *The Essential Tales*. Arranged chronologically, these twenty stories deepen and build in scope as they chart Chekhov's imaginative life. You can feel the book swell like a human heart as it goes from the warm, open silliness of the early tales to the later established classics. The masterworks are mostly accounted for ("Peasants" "Gooseberries" "The Kiss") and it's worthwhile to observe their combined effect. When grouped together the characters populate a new world, Chekhov's world, confessing their burdens to one another in silence like furtive prayers.

When Tolstoy accused Chekhov of lacking a solid political (and even literary) point of view, Chekhov shrugged and agreed with Count Leo. "Tolstoy," he later wrote, "assumes that all of us will live on in a principle (such as reason or love) the essence and goals of which are a mystery to us ... I have no use for that ... I don't understand it, and [he] was astonished I didn't."

The grand epoch of Russian Literature—the 19th century—would produce a handful of masterpieces, works to endure, writers to last, novels to mark the breaking point between classical and modernist writing. Tolstoy and his epic sermons. Dostoevsky and his jittery anger. What Chekhov did, in his own subtle way, was forever enhance the manner in which a "story" could be conveyed. Why this life, this woman, this man, this moment; Chekhov

loosened the strictures on imagination by stating yes, certain moments are worth seeing, and seeing in the clearest and most generous way a writer knows. It didn't matter what message the writer felt moved to shout toward the masses. Nor did it matter who the story was about. Peasants, noblemen, masters and servants, fathers and daughters, writers, actors, beggars, bores. Each was foremost, in Chekhov's eyes, a human being. Each person burned with a flame that deserved to be examined under the craft of a compassionate writer. Without Chekhov, 20th-century fiction would have been a great deal poorer. For this, he is owed the deference of a pioneer. "Though no church has seen fit to canonize him," wrote William Maxwell, "he was nevertheless a saint."

At the very least, Chekhov was a man of supreme equilibrium at a time when it was in precious short supply. As Lillian Hellman wrote in her 1955 introduction to Chekhov's personal letters:

... While many of his contemporaries were jabbering out the dark days and boozing away the white nights, turning revolutionary for Christmas and police spy for Easter ... wasting futile talent in revolt against anything and everything with little thought and no selection, Chekhov was a man of a sense, a man of balance.

This sense of balance is hard to comprehend at the wrong age. In college—both the writing workshop and those immortal in-class productions of Intro to World Theater—I was caught up in popular voices of tumult and social dissent. I embraced those cranky geniuses who employed "story" to rein in the larger picture. But when returning to the short work of Anton Chekhov I found a recognizable belief in the moment, not the message.

When the drunkard husband in "Champagne" sees the rest of his life in a single flash, he understands that life is, for him, to be found elsewhere. He'll go on and live, he laughs, saying "Now what further evil can happen to me?" The story ends there, in the simplest of language, without judgment from its creator. If there is a message within the moment, perhaps it is that the distance between character and reader is illusory after all. We're in this together, Chekhov implies, and we'll go on living. "Oh Uncle," I remember one character saying at the curtain of *Uncle Vanya*, "all we can do is live ... that is all ... and one day, we shall rest."

**Paul Winner** lives and works in Ithaca. He tries his hand at short stories, taking his cue from Chekhov and, in his own words, "Fails like hell." He's still at work on his first collection.

## SARAH BERNHARDT COMES TO TOWN

### TELEGRAM

Have been drinking to Sarah's health all week! Enchanting! She actually dies standing up! Our actors can't touch the Parisians! Sitting there, you feel you're in Paradise! Regards to Mankya.  
Petrov

### TELEGRAM

Lieutenant Egorov. Come, you can have my ticket—I'm not going again. It's just rubbish. Nothing special. A waste of money.

### FROM DR. KLOPSON, M.D., TO DR. VERFLUCHTERSCHWEIN, M.D.

Dear friend. Last night I saw S.B. Her chest—paralytic and flat. Skeletal and muscular structure—unsatisfactory. Neck—so long and thin that both the venae jugulares and even the arteriae carotides are clearly visible. Her musculi sternocleido-mastoidei are barely noticeable. Sitting in second row orchestra I could detect clear signs of anemia. No cough. On stage she was all wrapped up, which led me to deduce that she must be feverish. My diagnosis: anemia and atrophie musculorum. What is quite amazing is that her lachrymal glands react to voluntary stimuli: Tears flowed from her eyes, and her nose showed signs of hyperemia whenever she was called upon to weep.

### FROM NADIA N. TO KATYA H.

Dear Katya. Last night I went to the theater and saw Sera Burnyard. Oh Katya, how many diamonds that woman has! All night I cried at the thought that I'll never ever own such a heap of diamonds. (I'll tell you later all about her dress). Oh how I'd love to be Sera Burnyard! They were drinking real champagne on stage! But what was strange Katya I speak excellent French but I didn't get a word they were saying. Their French was funny. I had to sit in the gallery! That monster of mine couldn't get me a better ticket. The monster! Now I regret I was so cold to S. on Monday, he could have got orchestra seats. S. will do anything for a kiss. Just to spite that monster, tomorrow I'll have S. get both you and me a ticket.  
Your N.

### FROM A NEWSPAPER EDITOR TO A REPORTER

Ivan Mikhailovitch! This is an abomination! Every evening you traipse down to the theater with a press ticket, and I have yet to see a single line about the show! What are you waiting for? Right now Sarah Bernhardt is the hottest—and we need to cover her now. For God's sake, get a move on!

Answer: I don't quite know what to write. Should I praise her? Let's see what everyone else writes—time's on our side.  
Yours, K.

P.S. I'll be at the office today, get my pay ready. If you want the press tickets back, send someone over.

### LETTER SENT BY MISS N. TO THE SAME REPORTER

You are a darling, Ivan Mikhailovitch! Thank you for the ticket! I have feasted my eyes on Sarah, and I absolutely insist that you praise her to the skies. Can you check with your office to see if my sister can also get a press ticket? I'll be most grateful to you.  
Your N.

Answer: It can be done... but there will be a slight fee. The fee is minimal: permission to visit you on Saturday.

### TO THE NEWSPAPER EDITOR FROM HIS WIFE

If you don't send me a ticket for Sarah Bernhardt tonight, don't bother coming home. It's quite obvious your reporters are more important to you than your own wife. I want to go to the theater!

### FROM THE NEWSPAPER EDITOR TO HIS WIFE

Please, dear! Be reasonable! As it is, this whole Sarah Bernhardt business is driving me to distraction!

### FROM AN USHER'S NOTEBOOK

Let in four. Fourteen rubles.  
Let in five. Fifteen r.  
Let in three and one madame. Fifteen rubles.

Thank God I didn't go to the theater and that I sold that ticket I had. I heard Sarah Bernhardt played in French. I wouldn't have understood a word...  
Major Kovalyov

Dear Mitya! I beg of you! Can you ask your wife, tactfully, to enthuse more quietly about Sarah Bernhardt's dresses when she's with us in the box? At the last performance she was whispering so loud that I couldn't hear a word of what was being said on stage. Please ask her, but tactfully. I'd be most obliged.  
Your U.

### FROM THE SLAVOPHILE K. TO HIS SON

My dear son. I opened my eyes and saw omens of depravity all around! Thousands of Russian Orthodox Christians heralding a union with the people—thronging to the theater to lay their gold at the feet of that Jewess... Liberals, Conservatives...!

### A NOTE

Darling! When it comes to Sarah Bernhardt, as the saying goes: you can dip a frog in honey but it doesn't mean I'll eat it.  
Sobakevitch

—Anton Chekhov  
from *The Undiscovered Chekhov: Thirty-Eight New Stories*.  
Seven Stories Press

# the funnies

Lennon is an artist of the first rank. — *The Chicago Tribune*



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# Shake, Rattle and Roll

continued from page 1

father blames on the loud music blaring in the grandstands that prevented his son from hearing his father's warning cry. Virus retreats into silence. His father, disgusted by the Independence Movement, retreats from law into comparative mythology. Eventually he will be horrified to learn that the study of Aryan mythology has been warped by the Nazis and he will retreat from his passionate studies. His British friend and fellow-scholar of comparative mythology, William Methwold, will expose him as a fraud who never obtained a law degree at Cambridge and bought himself a practice. Darius Cama will die, pickled in drink, at the hands of his son Cyrus, Cyrus the Pillowman, turned monster by his jealousy of his beautiful young brother Ormus and by the viciousness of the boarding school where he is incarcerated by his unloving mother.

It is a sad, lunatic household, from which music, at Darius's orders, has been banned. This, of course, doesn't stop the future Orpheus, who claims to be hearing songs sung to him by his dead brother Gayomart in his dreams. At a listening booth in a record shop in Bombay, where he has been taken by the girl who hopes to marry him, he meets destiny in the shape of Vina. Vina, born Nissy Shetty in Virginia, "down a nothing track snaking east from 295. Corn on both sides of her and goats in the back," daughter of a Greek-American mother and an Indian father who abandoned his daughters and changed sexual preferences. Maybe, Vina thinks later, her mother knew she was possessed of a gift, the gift of song. Why else did she murder her husband and children with a knife and hang herself in the goat shed when Nissy was out of the way? Goats, goat-song, the birth of tragedy—and Vina just embarking on her own. She is shipped off to distant relatives in the Finger Lakes region of New York, in the town of Chickaboom. The Egiptus family who care for her in her exile are not kind. She moves from one exile to the next, this time in Bombay. Again she is thrust on unwilling, unkind relatives, the family Doodhwala. It is here that, at twelve years of age, she is won by Ormus in a game of cards, and here that Ormus agrees for the first time, not to touch her—not until she is sixteen and they are properly married. In the meantime she is adopted by Rai's family.

Rai's family takes longer to disintegrate than Ormus's or Vina's. Vivvy and Ameer Merchant are shy, happy lovers of each other and their city, but they are set on a collision course and their marriage dissolves as the old Bombay is engulfed in the new. A romantic gambler who stakes his all on the Orpheum, a white elephant of a cinema, Vivvy is helpless against his wife's construction company which joins forces with Vina's erstwhile caretaker Piloo Doodhwala in a development scheme that will wipe out the city all three of the protagonists loved in their way and replace it with an architectural nightmare imported from the West. West conquers East and East moves to conquer West. The collapse of the Ameer family and the burning down of the Villa Thracia where Rai grew up sends first Vina, then Rai and Ormus on their irreversible journeys to the West.

The journeys begin in tragedy, in goat songs. Mrs. Ghandi's electoral fraud mirrors Piloo Doodhwala's goat fraud. A hundred million fictitious goats are the capital of a scam organized by Vina's former guardian. Their absence is concealed by a little protection money paid here, a little hush money there. Tipped off by a pretty journalist, Rai goes to investigate, to take pictures of the non-existent goats. Naturally, he is captured by their guardians and almost shares the fate of the last photographer who tried to expose Piloo's racket. Under the rotting corpse of his predecessor, Rai waits for death. But when his captors delay their kill and drink themselves into a stupor, he manages to free himself. With no camera and no film, he has

failed in his bid for fame. Then he remembers a trick he learned in his dangerous trade and screws the shoe-heel of the suspended corpse. There, sure enough, is a roll of exposed film. When he crawls away and gets back to Bombay, Rai has the evidence he needs to nail Piloo. The exposé only adds to Piloo's popularity, but it helps Rai up to fame and out of India.

Ormus's chance comes in the mid-60s when his mother, realizing she faces ruin in the East, flies to the arms of her husband's exposer, William Methwold. On the plane Ormus meets Mull Standish, an elegant, gay entrepreneur whose empire is a series of pirate radio stations on board rusty ships anchored off the British coast. Never truly landing in the West of his dreams, Ormus is marooned on Radio Freddie, an un-seaworthy tub manned by Standish's two drunken



sons. Nothing is fine on board except the music. Off-duty for a while, Standish's sons take Ormus to their mother, a witchy clothes designer appropriately named Antoinette Corinth, who dispenses various brews to her sons. Ormus is at a low point. "This England addled by mysticism, mesmerized by the miraculous, in love with alien gods, has begun to horrify him." With Vina still missing and a headful of the latest rock music, Ormus begins to compose his first great hits. Before he can enjoy success, life clobbers him again. This time it is a near-fatal car accident in which one of Standish's two sons is killed, the other brain-damaged, and Ormus sent into a "sleep" that lasts for three years.

The sound of Ormus singing one of the hits recorded before his accident brings Vina running from a Bombay hotel room to his side. As soon as she whispers his name he wakes: "I was the one who fetched him out of the underworld," she boasts, "like that Hindu goddess, what's her name, Mousie." "Rati," Rai corrects the woman who is now his lover, too. Rescued from the dead in a new twist of the Orpheus story, Ormus now has one colorless eyeball. "He looked down the tunnel and the light poured into his eye. One-eyed death at the tunnel's end glaring at Ormus Cama." It is through this colorless eye that Ormus sees that there are rips in the universe. Eventually, he will wear a patch over it to shut out the visions of the terrifying other world.

Vina is the one who comes out as Ormus retreats. She tells all, reveals all, becomes an idol for feminists, is true to Ormus after a fashion. As the reunited couple head for New York, they are in for another blow. Just as Mull Standish delayed Ormus's entrance into England, keeping him moored on a grubby ship, the Indian entrepreneur Yul Singh whisks the lovers off from New York to—where else?—the Finger Lakes of Vina's childhood. (We understand by now that this is a novel of infinite postponement, of the delay of happiness, and we grow as impatient with it as Vina does.) The lovers are prisoners in a mansion on Lake Chickasauga, where a

nymphomaniac Nordic beauty called Ifredis and her lover Otto Wing cavort so loudly that it puts the ideal lovers off sex. Thoughts of marriage come to Ormus instead, but when he asks his question, angry Vina puts him on hold again, agreeing to marry him in ten years' time.

For Ormus this means voluntary celibacy. Not so for Vina. New York, full of barely disguised celebrities, is where Vina thrives, as a singer and a lover. As Rai says: "It occurred to me that in the field of love and desire Vina was just behaving like a man; showing herself capable, like most men, of loving wholeheartedly and simultaneously—halfheartedly—betraying that love without guilt, without any sense of contradiction . . . We, Ormus and I, we were her women: he the loyal wife standing by her philandering husband, settling for him in

sort of reverse conquest of West by East, or West by imported West, since their weapons are western popular music. But even this hope for a brief triumph of love and music over difference and isolation is teasingly put on hold. By the time it triumphs, there has been such a build-up that it's hard to believe. One of the problems is that we're talking about music and that's always a waste of words. So much hangs on the absent sound of a silent voice, of Vina singing Ormus's music. Like Piloo Doodhwala's non-existent goats, the music is both central and absent. All that's there are the words, the lyrics, and, as Rushdie admits, they sound "spavined:"

Everything you thought you knew: it's not true. And everything you knew you said, was all in your head . . . Everything you think you see: it can't be. There's just me. Darling there's just me . . .

At the heart of *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* lies the conundrum that Orpheus is singing some international popular music of the 1970s or '80s that's supposed to be worth dying for, or living for. His characters move from the real world of Bombay, a world so wonderfully drawn that we believe in every smell and wrinkle of it, to the world of doped-up London disk jockeys and the cool glitter of Andy Warhol's New York. One world may be doomed, but it is peopled by characters we come to know and sympathize with. The other is a world of shades. To cross from one to the other, the love of Orpheus and Eurydice, Ormus and Vina, must be credible; the song that holds the door open has to have a siren's charm. Instead, the singer and the tale flounder in Manhattan. The ground beneath Ormus-Orpheus's feet, perhaps beneath Rushdie's own, seems not so much unstable as insubstantial. Ormus's life is a series of separations: from his dead twin at birth; from his mother, who refuses him love; from his father, who refuses him music; from his one love, Vina, who is either absent or sexually unfaithful; from the musical scene, as he waits, moored off the British coast; from the New York scene, when he's stuck in an overheated mansion upstairs. Even when he finds Vina, fame and fortune, he loses his love to his naively romantic desire to marry her, and his hearing to over-amplification. His isolation, like Rushdie's own forced withdrawal from the world, is perfectly symbolized by the glass box in which he appears onstage in order to protect his fragile ears. The divine Vina cavorts beside it, and the divided lovers drive their fans wild.

Rushdie's genie still grants our wishes. He can tell a tale better than almost anyone writing today. His command of language is breathtaking. His engagement with the terrible and ridiculous, with mismatches and irreconcilable estrangements of our times, is as passionate as ever. But there is something flawed in this song of Orpheus. Rushdie's three lovers are less interesting than their parents. Vina and Ormus Cama are so beautiful, so talented, so godly, that even when they play guitar riffs, swear like rap singers and screw like rabbits, they aren't believable. What we can hear of the music through the thicket of superlatives doesn't sound too convincing either. And the camera man who looks on death for a living—Mr. Hope? We end by wishing that his longing for Vina could persuade us half as much as his father's sad devotion to his mother.

This is a book of two worlds. One is so perfectly grounded it never seems to falter; the other seems to suffer from a desire to reach out to the ineffable, to describe transcendent love, the perfect song of Orpheus. It's a tall task, even for a genie.

Gail Holst-Warhaft is a poet, a translator of Modern Greek, and a frequent contributor to *The Bookpress*.

spite of his roving eye, his wanderlust; and I, the simultaneously wanton and long-suffering mistress, taking what I could get."

Even in death it is Vina who triumphs, becomes a Diva, a legend. It is she who is as much Orpheus as Ormus; she is Rati, the Indian goddess, rescuer not rescued. Her voice is music itself. The two heroes of the story find some satisfaction in Mira (Mira on the Wall) a look-alike, sing-alike of Vina. Life goes on. Music goes on, but the magic is gone. It is as hard to believe the I-who-sees-too-much finding peace and happiness with his new little family in a New York penthouse as it is to believe the drug-addled Ormus settling for four walls filled with images of a projected, substitute Vina. Something has gone wrong with the script here. *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* is, as our genie constantly reminds us, unstable. By this time we have seen its fault-lines and we aren't too sure that a compromise is possible. "Love is a beach towel spread over shifting sands," we are told somewhere in the middle of the story, but all we see of love has been disastrous, fated as the attempt of East to meet West, or West, East.

This great baroque tale is, above all, one of disorientation. Rushdie has always been the genie who told us tales of the East, exotic and endless as Haroun's *Sea of Stories*. And we have listened, open-mouthed, as we do to all great singers of tales. His novels, from *Midnight's Children* on, have been about doomed twins and double vision: India and Pakistan, East and West, colonizer and colonized, Ormus Cama and his dead twin Gayomart, Ormus's bi-colored eyes, the two Bombays of Vivvy Merchant and the developers. In this new tale nothing hangs together, or the very attempt to make things hang together exacerbates the differences. Darius Cama's attempt to join the English aristocrat Methwold in a study of Aryan mythology ends in the realization that such studies are being used as the underpinnings of an evil ideology. Western romance with Eastern wisdom leads to an invasion of India by hemp-dazed hippies. Ormus and Vina seem poised to achieve a

# Clarifying Light

*West Wind: Poems and Prose Poems.*  
Mary Oliver.  
Houghton Mifflin, 1997.  
63 pages, \$21 cloth, \$13 paper.

## Edward Dougherty

In her collection of essays, *Blue Pastures*, Mary Oliver writes about her debt to Walt Whitman: "But first and foremost I learned from Whitman that the poem is a temple—or a green field—a place to enter, and in which to feel. Only in a secondary way is it an intellectual thing—an artifact, a moment of seemly and robust wordiness—wonderful as that part is. I learned that the poem was made not just to exist, but to speak—to be company." When I read my poems in public, I usually include others' work, often a piece by Mary Oliver because of this quality. Her work provides "a place to enter, and in which to feel."

Her poetry is a place teeming with life, and this latest collection is no exception—owls and butterflies, pilot snakes and foxes, sand dabs and maple trees, poetry and love, death and the blue ocean. Even the phrasing is charged with energy, with life-force: roses in the wind have "honeyed seizures;" the fox is admired noting "the flounce of his teeth;" even abstractions move in bodies, like ambition who says, Listen...why don't you get going? "nervously shifting her weight from one boot to another."

When I read a single Mary Oliver poem aloud, listeners sense a part of themselves waking up, feeling. This is even more true when one reads a whole collection. Robyn Selman put it this way when reviewing *New and Selected Poems* "one can't help noticing the day when one reads Mary Oliver..." We begin by sensing what is on the page but often, having been tuned by her words, we regain an intuition of our own lives. Such a transfer is rare in today's poetry.

Her work has been called "sentimental," "romantic," but also "impersonal," and "visionary." By her own admission, she puts her allegiance with Whitman and the power of poetry to deal emotionally with life. Tolstoy said that "art argues in a way that the rational mind does not comprehend;" this could also be said of Mary Oliver's poems. Because they approach through feeling—and because of the current trend towards more syntactically complex poems—her poems stand accused of "sentimentality." And yet, at poetry reading after reading, her direct, evocative poems involve listeners in wonderful and rewarding ways. Then, in the recursive deepening of private reading, that first motion felt at a fresh listening is rewarded with philosophical musings on the most weighty spiritual issues, death, reverence and wonder, and the purpose of being alive in the world.

Oliver said in an interview that the poems from *Twelve Moons* through *House of Light*

form "a unit." *New and Selected Poems* gathers them all up, like an autumn harvest bundle. Then came the insightful *Poetry Handbook* and essays in *Blue Pastures*. While the poems in her next book, *White Pine*, include some formal innovations, the overall structure of the volume, framed by the four seasons, feels repetitious of *Twelve Moons*.

*West Wind*, on the other hand, is Mary Oliver at her finest. The dazzling language and attention to detail I've come to expect in her work is here, as is the apparent leisure of the speaker which makes entering her poems seem so easy. The precision of line, image, and rhythm continue and are enhanced by the innovations from *White Pine*.

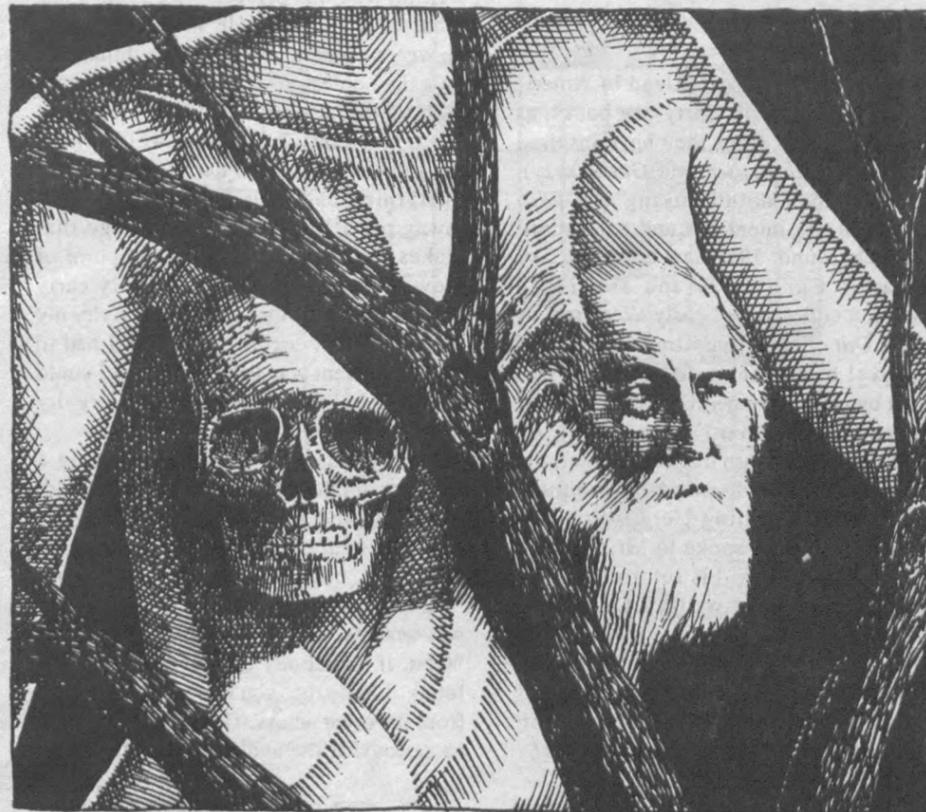
"Today is a day like any other: twentyfour hours, a little sunshine, a little rain," Oliver writes in "Black Oaks." But in these poems, daily events are seen with piercing clarity. It is death, the attentive angel in nature, the one we fear and hide from most, who hauls everything out of "mere incidence into/ the lush of meaning" ("At Round Pond"). That phrase, "the lush of meaning"! I still marvel at such lively language.

One prose poem late in the book, about a cricket that comes indoors for "the most prized gift of the gods: warmth," is a deft portrait of us all. With warmth and food enough, the cricket "got used to hope....It thought: how sufficient are these empty rooms!...and drew a little music from its dark thighs. As though the twilight underneath the refrigerator were the world. As though the winter would never come."

This comes from Part Two of "West Wind," the thirteen-section title poem, which is a mixture of prose and verse. Oliver moves in and out of her usual themes smoothly but with the added layer of a love-relationship. In the clarifying light a close friendship with death brings, small gestures and daily wonders draw our attention, evoke our gratitude, and help shape our priorities. This idea moves under and through the series so that the final lines of the last section ring with certainty, not sentimentality: "I am thinking of you./ I am always thinking of you."

Readers of Mary Oliver will find in this collection the culmination of a poet deeply devoted to her craft. Her voice is sure and inviting, a guide through this temple of poems. She leads us through them and the world in them, to the back-gate in the longer final poem, "Have You Ever Tried to Enter the Long Black Branches." There she offers us, again, our own lives when she writes: "Well, there is time left—/ fields everywhere invite you into them."

**Edward Dougherty lives and works in Elmira, NY. His poems have appeared in Poetry East, Cream City Review, West Branch, Mississippi Valley Review, and many other periodicals.**



Don Karr

### At Round Pond

owl  
make your little appearance now

owl dark bird bird of gloom  
messenger reminder

of death  
that can't be stopped

argued with leashed put out  
like a red fire but

burns as it will  
owl

I have not seen you now for  
too long a time don't

hide away but come flowing and clacking  
the slap of your wings

your death's head oh rise  
out of the thick and shaggy pines when you

look down with your  
golden eyes how everything

trembles  
then settles

from mere incidence into  
the lush of meaning.

—Mary Oliver (In *West Wind: Poems and Prose Poems*)

NOTE FOUND IN A BOTTLE

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# An Interview With Elmore Leonard

## Jason Cons

Elmore Leonard is the Dean of American crime fiction. His thirty-one books, as well as the many films they have inspired (such as *Jackie Brown* and *Get Shorty*), glamorize the smooth-talking anti-hero with honorable intentions and a questionable background. 1998 saw the release of Leonard's *Cuba Libre* and *The Tonto Woman*, a collection of early Westerns, as well as *Out of Sight*, the film adaptation of his novel by the same title, which was hailed by critics as one of the best films of the year. Mr. Leonard's new novel, *Be Cool*, marks the return of Chili Palmer, the erstwhile loan-shark-cum-film-producer hero of the bestselling *Get Shorty*. *The Bookpress* recently spoke to Mr. Leonard about his new book, his return to Westerns, and the art of writing fast-paced crime fiction.

**Bookpress:** You have a huge body of work. How do you keep producing fresh narratives? What techniques do you use?

**Elmore Leonard:** Well, I learned—going way, way back—through Ernest Hemingway. I read *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and would just open the book anywhere for inspiration. I felt that book was a Western of sorts, taking place in the mountains with horses and guns and so on.

I could concentrate on Hemingway's construction and description, his economy of language. I didn't share his attitude about life in general. I thought he took himself too seriously, you know. I see more humor and absurdity in everyday life and your style comes out of who you are. Do you have a sense of humor? Are you optimistic? The sound of these opinions will be in your writing. I had to find other authors to learn from. People like Vonnegut or a guy named Richard Bissel who was writing stories set on the Mississippi in the 1950s. Bissel had a nice way to describe these guys working on tow-boats.

I can learn from almost anybody. Raymond Carver, I've learned a few things from. To me, though, it's a question of not showing myself and being relaxed in the writing. Not trying to "write," but trying to immerse myself in the story, trying to get into characters' heads so that they are the ones doing the scene. If Chili Palmer is in a scene, it's going to be written from his point of view. The scene takes on his sound.

**BP:** This is why your books change perspective so often?

**EL:** Yes. I've got a guy in my new book, a sequel to *Get Shorty*, who is the antagonist, a guy named Raji. He's a manager, a heavy. But he doesn't appear to be heavy, because when I'm working with him, I'm

writing from his perspective and he's just a hustler, you know? He's a street hustler, he wears a certain outfit, and he thinks that he's the coolest guy in L.A. So his scenes take on that sound. Sound, to me, is the most important. The classic way to write is through the omniscient narrator. He knows everything and he is telling you what's going on. It's his use of language that makes the book readable, if his point of view is interesting. I learned very early that if I wrote in that traditional style, my work would be mediocre at best. I had to find a different way to write, where I could make the thing come alive on a very dry level.

I want humor, but I'm not writing a comedy. I said that to Barry Sonnenfeld, who directed the film version of *Get Shorty*. I said, "I don't write comedy." He said, "No, but it's a funny book." What made the picture work was that everyone was serious. When we first spoke, I said, "God, if somebody delivers a line that's funny, I hope that you don't get a reaction from the other actors. The actors should all be serious. If the audience gets it, fine. If

To me, though, it's a question of not showing myself and being relaxed in the writing. Not trying to "write," but trying to get into characters' heads so that they are the ones doing the scene.

they don't, so what, let it go by. But keep it serious."

**BP:** You return to Chili Palmer in your new book.

**EL:** Yes. It's called *Be Cool*. Chili is looking for a movie idea and he gets an ad from a dating service. So he calls them up and starts talking to a girl who works there. He finds out that her life is music and that she's in a group that she would love to get out of. The group does Spice Girls covers.

But her manager won't let her go. He threatens her. Chili goes to see them perform at the martini lounge in L.A. and talks to her. The whole thing hinges on a record deal. So Chili says, "You want me to talk to him?" And that's the beginning. I had a good time writing it, but it required an awful lot of research.

**BP:** Into the music industry?

**EL:** Yes. I'm older than rock-n-roll, you know. But things have been working out well. I had Aerosmith over to my house, and I've gotten to meet all kinds of people in the record business.

**BP:** *Cuba Libre* marked your return to Westerns after a thirty-year hiatus. What made you go back?

**EL:** I just wanted a change of pace. I'd been fascinated by the Spanish-American War ever since 1957, when I borrowed a pictorial book about it from a friend. At that time, I was writing Westerns and I thought, "Well, how about this. You just drop a cowboy in Cuba and you've got it." But I put it off and finally, when I did decide to do it, it required a lot more work than I thought it would. All the information is available; that wasn't a problem. I didn't want to get too heavily involved in history. I just wanted to set my story against the backdrop of a war in those times in Cuba.

**BP:** Did switching back to Westerns after doing crime stories for so long offer you more freedoms or limitations?

**EL:** More limitations. I had to be more careful with my language. I can just swing with the way people talk now, but how did they talk a hundred years ago? I don't know, probably not much different than how we talk now, but I think that their vocabulary was much more limited. I think

that we have more figures of speech than in the old days.

Then you have to be careful what kind of slang you use. I wasn't sure what kind of obscenities were used. Our obscenities are all old, but how were they used then? Was "fucking" an adjective in popular speech. You can't find these things out by reading O. Henry or *The Red Badge of Courage*. You've got to just kind of fool with it and hope that it works. With the contemporary stories, you just sail. You say what you like. That's a lot more fun.

**BP:** So *Cuba Libre* wasn't as much fun to write?

**EL:** Well, it was harder, but I had fun on a different scale. I had fun with the characters who were a little more—what's a good word?—"innocent" than the characters in the contemporary stories. They are at a time in American history when big things are all of a sudden happening, but they still have a strange sense of patriotism and fighting for the flag.

**BP:** One way in which *Cuba Libre* differs from your other recent works is that you often rely on film to help develop your plot. In *Out of Sight*, for example, there are a lot of references to the films *Repo Man* and *Three Days of the Condor* that develop the relationship between Jack Foley and Karen Sisco and inform Foley's perception of himself. You didn't have that language of film to use in *Cuba Libre*. Do you rely more on literature such as *The Red Badge of Courage* as an alternative?

**EL:** Well, Neely Tucker, who is the newspaper journalist, thinks in that style. He quotes Rich Harding Davis and Stephen Crane and talks about how he thinks Crane has a brilliant new style. He talks about "The Open Boat" which isn't to me... you know, I read it and was like, "Oh my god!" You can't learn anything from the writing, I mean I couldn't. But I could put that style in Neely Tucker's head, so that when he is watching something happen, such as the shooting in the bar of the Inglaterra Hotel, he is already forming his words in that way. I didn't want to get into it myself, though. I'd rather use a simple narrative style.

**BP:** Many people are more familiar with the film versions of your work than with

the books themselves. Do you have any creative input into these adaptations?

**EL:** Not unless I write the screenplays, and I've quit doing that. It's no fun, it's work. If you just worked for a good director that you liked, that would be different, but when you start out, you sell to a production company. Then you are writing for executives, and rewriting, and rewriting. And they are throwing in all their ideas and if you want to get paid, you have to incorporate them. I was doing it because I liked movies, but also to support book writing. By the '80s, my books were selling well enough so that I didn't have to do it anymore. Besides, none of the scripts I wrote turned out any good anyway.

**BP:** What about with Quentin Tarentino [whose film *Jackie Brown* was an adaptation of Leonard's *Rum Punch*]?

**EL:** Well, he didn't ask my advice. He called me a couple of years ago with the idea that he was going to do *Rum Punch*. He wanted to do *Killshot* but decided on *Rum*

*Punch* because it had such a wonderful role for a woman. He didn't mention Pam Greer at the time, even though I know he had her in mind. The only one he mentioned was Robert Forester whom I hadn't seen in film since *Medium Cool* in 1969. We talked about it a bit. He said that he was reading the book again, more slowly than he had ever read a book before, and was making notes about music and casting.

I told him to take the material and run with it. It had to be his movie, not an adaptation of my book. I think that it is very close in plot. He gave the characters a little more to say, since his movies are even talkier than my books. He took his time with the characters. He set up scenes to show you who they are before he even gets into the plot. I liked it a lot.

**BP:** I understand that the Coen brothers [*Fargo* and *The Big Lebowski*] are working on a script for *Cuba Libre*.

**EL:** Yes. It's a little bit different, but they focus on the things in the book that I particularly liked, things I don't think an action director would notice. For example, Palace Wayland, the police chief, and Rudi Calvo. There are scenes where Calvo describes how Tyler [the hero] goes on a shopping trip. He talks about the things that he bought and discusses them at length. "Where did he get his hat?" "Oh yeah, that's the place," and so on. Also, in the end, it's Rudi Calvo [a minor character], that shoots Tavalera [the villain]. He just walks in, plugs him, and walks out. This, you know, is not the normal end of an action movie. The hero and the bad guy should face off and shoot at each other.

**BP:** You use that technique in a number of your books. The plot races towards a showdown but in the end, it twists away to an unconventional and unpredictable conclusion.

**EL:** In all the Westerns that I wrote, thirty-one stories and eight books, I never, never had the two guys facing each other in the street and somebody counts to three and they draw their guns. That's ridiculous. It never happened. So the Coen brothers go for my kind of an ending, but it's not the ending that a studio would want.

Jason Cons is an editor at Bookpress and a writer living in Ithaca.



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# The Right To Sing

*continued from page 3*

cook it was out of this world. I say he told me it's made by the prep cook at least four days ahead. It surprises me that Billie slaps the menu shut and says that's for her. Blake and Helen order well-done hamburgers.

When the chili turns out to be pretty bad—the kidney beans are crunchy enough that Billie and I can just about hear each other chew—I ask the waitress if the prep cook made it. She tells me the woman was fired a month ago and the cook now does all the chili in the microwave. I apologize to Billie who shrugs and says it's got a good Mexican kick to it. "More southwestern," I say, to which she answers I could be right, she has a hard time making distinctions like that. Blake's burger is a small disaster because it's thick enough with tomatoes, onions, pickles and lettuce that it requires both hands to pick it up. Instead, he gets his right hand around it and props the burger up with the left, then tries to take too large a bite and the insides slip out and hang there until he puts it back on his plate. Billie, without a word, reaches over and cuts the burger in quarters. Blake eats just one of them before he winces, looks at his bandaged hand, and says the damn thing's really hurting. When he turns it over I see where blood from the wound has made a small circle right in the middle of the bandages. Billie takes one of the pills from the prescription and gives it to him. While he swallows it with water she picks up his half-full beer glass and empties it into mine. Then she says she thinks we'd better go and I say, after a glance at Helen, that we'll probably walk back along the ocean. Billie says they'll see us in June, and for God's sake no more loud tenants in the house, okay? As the front door swings closed on them I turn to Helen and say, "This chili is absolutely terrible."

Along the boardwalk a nasty southeast wind off the ocean makes things unpleasant and we walk with arms folded and heads down against it until we get to Convention Hall. Inside, lights are on and we see several florist trucks and men carrying in flowers for the service in the morning. Then from inside we hear the choir rehearsing and quietly I join in with a couple of lines. Helen smiles at me and then we both agree that the wind's got us and turn away to cross Beach Avenue to get away from it.

On our way home nearly all the houses we pass are still shut for the winter, each with some vast emptiness to it that seems unnatural, as though the owners have been dead for generations. As we cross Madison less than a block from our house, and I'm saying I wouldn't miss singing all those great hymns for anything, we both see that sitting boldly on the top step of our stairs is the young woman in the yellow dress from yesterday. When I tell Helen this she says she saw her, too. "Maybe she needs help," I say as we approach.

Even though Helen and I stand at the bottom of the stairs in full view she keeps her gaze above our heads, as though she can see through the houses and motels all the way to the ocean. It's only when Helen asks if we can be of some assistance that she lowers her eyes and looks at us for a long moment. Then she tells us she's looking for work, and before I can ask what kind she says she can do just about anything from yard work to inside painting to cooking, that she's even got a few clients for whom she opens and closes houses for the season, checks them in the winter, does it all. Then she looks away again as if she hears a distant important message. Helen says we're leaving early tomorrow and won't be back

until June and we're really not in need of her services. But she is persistent, even edgy, in her request, and Helen says again, this time quite firmly, that there's nothing for her here. The woman suddenly seems to me terribly hurt, and I move toward her and put a foot on the first stair, my hand on the railing, and ask her what references she might have. She says that last Labor Day weekend she catered the Wilberforce cocktail party next door, did weekly cleaning and cooking for the Kronenberger sisters at the end of the block before they died some years ago, and for the last two years, until she was let go, was the prep cook at the Ugly Mug. When I say, "You make the world's greatest chili," she looks at me and nods and says she sure does. When I ask if she'd give me the recipe she stiffens, says it was her mother's and her grandmother's and no one but her daughter is ever getting it. When I say I'd be willing to buy it from her she says, "I'm just looking for work, sir," and comes down the steps to stand in front of me. "Thanks just the same," she says, and turns to walk off into the darkness.

In the morning as we drive down to Convention Hall the sky is a faint purple and long low clouds hang above the beach, the sort of thin lazy fog that one shot of sunlight will break up. In the darkness the people entering are shadowy and not quite human, but inside the hall where the rows of wooden folding chairs have been set up, the stage arranged with all the flowers, there is warm yellow light everywhere. The curtains along the high windows on the east side are pulled shut, to be opened one after another just as the sun rises over the ocean.

It's not until half way through the second hymn, just as the first curtain is snapped from its window and the light pours over the white-robed singers that I see, as if my eyes are made to go there, that the young black man and the young woman from last night are side by side in the center. Each seems to possess some important human quality I can not name. Searching, I watch carefully, their faces full of light, and then in the free and powerful way they let go I understand that what they have is humility. It has earned them the right to sing, to exalt.

After the service we start right home, the sun low and bright along the water, and as we leave town and go over the bridge Helen comments on how lovely the service was. Then as we settle onto the Garden State she turns with the question I've been waiting for since the middle of that second hymn. "Why'd you stop?" she asks. "Why'd you sit down like that?"

**Robert C.S. Downs** has published five novels, and his short fiction has appeared in Sun Dog, Interim, Cimarron Review, The Ledge, Other Voices, and other publications. He is a Guggenheim Fellow, and the winner of an NAACP Image Award.

Answers to last month's Crossword:

M	E	S	H	T	A	S	S	E	P	A	S	A		
A	C	H	E	A	S	H	E	R	A	G	E	S		
R	H	O	M	A	T	I	N	E	L	E	T	I	C	E
S	O	W	E	W	E	S	R	I	A	T	A			
			C	R	A	W	S	P	I	N				
L	A	G	O	O	N	C	H	E	V	A	U	X		
A	R	A	M	S	H	A	R	T	N	E	T			
D	O	U	B	L	E	K	A	P	P	A	C	I	N	O
S	A	G	E	L	I	T	E	L	O	I	S			
R	E	G	A	L	E	S	A	R	E	N	A	S		
			A	D	I	S	I	G	H	E				
A	N	G	L	I	O	T	H	E	N	F	I	C		
L	E	M	O	N	M	E	R	I	N	G	U	E	P	I
V	I	E	R	E	M	E	N	D	S	T	A	T		
A	N	N	I	E	A	R	T	I	S	E	I	A		

Crossword by Adam Perl

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14				15					16			
17				18					19			
20				21					22			
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26	27	28				29				30	31	
32						33				34	35	
36				37	38					39		
40				41						42		
	43		44					45	46			
			47					48				
49	50	51				52				53	54	55
56					57	58				59		
60					61					62		
63					64					65		

Across

- Anne had a thousand
- Castle protector's
- Villain who did hanky-panky
- On the briny
- Musical hit of the 80's
- A dog or his food
- Hal's creator
- Pile
- Inter
- Inlay
- Ending for team or spin
- Tunnel
- It's often licked
- Bar offering
- Canadian club member
- Kind of cabinet
- "I've got it!"
- Warwickshire town
- Sign at a sellout
- Irritates
- Comedian Foxx
- Slow tempo
- "Amen!"
- Anticipatory celebrations
- Logical beginning
- "Easy"
- Genetic materials, for short
- He makes a lot of calls
- It's just a stage
- Pretty good
- Kind of surgeon
- Citizen of Hollywood fame
- Mouth off
- Bismarck and namesakes
- Therefore

Down

- Inception
- Large land mass
- Bark
- Mine of film
- He wrote "Das Lied von der Erde"
- Studio sign
- 50's heartthrob Paul
- No-win situation
- French pronoun
- Wings, e.g.
- Ishmael's boss
- Reason for an "R"
- Had markers out
- Fill
- Being
- Portico
- For the
- Mixture
- Gershwin heroine
- Special edition
- Stage part
- Blender setting
- Overhangs
- 70's TV spin-off
- Certain sidearms
- Singer Williams
- Times section
- Penalty
- Woody's boy
- Condescends
- Some spuds
- Majesty
- Opening
- Teller alternatives
- Queens arena
- Pod dwellers
- Numbers follower, for short
- Jazz center
- Computer list
- Veep's boss
- Lennon's partner
- Stake
- Play part

## BRUNCH



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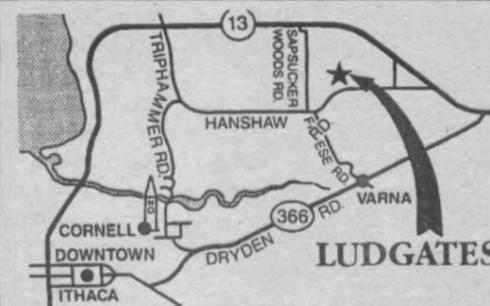
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# Comic Relief

*The Funnies.*  
J. Robert Lennon.  
Riverhead, 1999.  
301 pages, \$23.95 cloth.

## Emily Fawcett

Carl Mix, a famous cartoonist, dies suddenly of a heart attack in his studio at the beginning of J. Robert Lennon's new novel, *The Funnies*. Carl's middle son Tim, to his surprise and chagrin, does not inherit any money, only the rights to his father's comic strip with the proviso that he continue drawing it in a manner satisfactory to the publisher. He's thirty-one years old, an installation artist losing faith in his work and losing momentum in his relationship with his live-in girlfriend. He makes a living working at odd jobs, since he's never sold any of his art. At his father's cremation ceremony Tim muses: "My siblings had taken on the responsibilities of marriage and independence, risen above their petty resentments to become real people . . . Only I had proved myself weak and shallow, just like Dad." In *The Funnies* he tells the story of what happens after his father's death, with an eye for the particularly wacky and ironic details.

Carl Mix's comic strip is a single frame daily comic featuring an ideal, suburban family—one modeled on his own. These perfectly happy-go-lucky, insipid versions of his children and wife could not, of course, be farther from reality. The five siblings, now adults, harbor bitter resentments toward their father, and each other, that date back to childhood. Their mother, going senile at 58 from alcoholism, a disease their father shared, diverges farthest, perhaps, from her comic strip self—a sleek and sexy housewife. Besides Tim's natural disgust for a comic strip which symbolizes everything his childhood was not, the "Family Funnies" conflicts with his own, however uneasily held, aesthetic values, which dictate that art should be made for its own sake, and should reflect something true about the world (his installations consist of found objects like garbage cans and old tires).

Tim catches sight of one of his father's cartoons in an auto repair shop when his girlfriend's car breaks down on the way to the funeral and feels, "a kind of existential loginess mixed with an acute disappointment in the world." But despite his personal and professional objections to his father's comic strip, he agrees to take on the project in the shaky hopes of making some kind of success out of his life. Unfortunately he has no cartooning experience, and the syndicate who published his father's work would rather find someone else to continue the "Family Funnies." His father has left Tim three grueling months of lessons with the talented teacher Brad Wurster, and Tim's progress toward proficient cartooning technique provides the outward structure of the novel. Like Tim, the reader is as afraid of what will happen to Tim if he does manage to take over the strip as of what will happen if he doesn't.

*The Funnies* is set, for the most part, in New Jersey, that state which seems to stand for everything most unlikable about the east coast, and which could not be more different than the setting for Lennon's first novel, *The Light of Falling Stars*. The wilderness and somber grandeur of the landscape surrounding the small Montana town in *The Light of Falling Stars* seem to complement the grief after the plane crash that happens there. By contrast, the old New Jersey mill town where Tim grew up in *The Funnies*, and the surrounding strip-mall no-man's land act rather as an enjoyable source of comic relief. Tim tells the reader that "Friday night in Riverbank meant ice cream and miniature golf, two things that, despite my best efforts to hate them during my college-era anti-hometown period, I still loved with unnatural passion." His favorite haunt is the mini golf course/ice cream joint called "Custard's Last Stand," featuring thirty-foot plaster statues of Custer, his brother, and the American Indian who killed him. Tim's hometown holds an annual "FunnyFest," that features people costumed as characters from the "Family

Funnies", and ends with the mayor's annual plunge into the Delaware. The ridiculousness of this same mayor's campaign to change the town's name to a choice of "Funnyville," "Mixville," "Familytown" or "Funnytown," in honor of Tim's father, just accentuates the utter tackiness of Riverbank, New Jersey.

In an interview with Lennon, I asked him about his portrayal of the state where he grew up. He answered that, for one thing, he wanted to emphasize the sense of contradiction in the book between the funny, innocuous comic strip and the real, unhappy Mix family by having his characters "enacting incredibly

make no decisions about whether to get it repaired or junked without consulting her, it comes to represent the difficulty of untangling his life from hers.

Describing the delicate way relationships fail is one of Lennon's singular talents. When Tim calls Amanda from his father's house after the funeral but before he's decided to move out he sums up the dullness of their relationship, and their mutual avoidance of any of its problems: "It was a very easy conversation, like all of ours were. One of us said something and the other said something. It was comforting; we could have done it all day." He goes



Ruben Bolling

painful dramas in such a ridiculous place as Mixville/Riverbank New Jersey." Lennon added that, in comparison to Montana, where you can be driving along, make a wrong turn, and end up literally nowhere, with the New Jersey setting he wanted to suggest the possibility of "a different kind of alienation, an inability to get lost, which for an introspective person, can be very difficult." When Susan, Tim's editor, gives him a ride home from New York City, and they pass, unbeknownst to Susan, the garage where Tim's girlfriend's car has been towed. Tim watches it go by outside the window. Somehow it seems that every road in New Jersey leads to every other one, and there's no escaping those things one would like most to avoid.

Despite a difference in tone, *The Funnies* resembles Lennon's earlier novel in some interesting respects. With his exceptionally low sense of self-esteem, Tim exhibits an uncanny similarity to Paul, one of the main characters in *The Light of Falling Stars*. Paul, like Tim, is in his early thirties, can't hold down a job for a reasonable period of time and can't seem to get a handle on his relationship with his wife. Both are simultaneously aware of their own inadequacy and somehow unable to do anything about it. In both novels, too, the failure of mechanical objects seems to stand for the failure of a relationship, as if that relationship has become an impersonal force outside either party's control which may stop working of its own accord. A plane crash opens *The Light of Falling Stars*, a random event that happens to occur above Paul's house simultaneously with a turning point in his marriage. In *The Funnies*, when Tim decides to try drawing his father's comic strip he ends up using his father's studio and so moving into his father's house with his younger brother Pierce, and this process precipitates his final breakup with his girlfriend Amanda. Unfortunately he's taken their car to the funeral, and when it breaks down, he leaves it in a repair shop part-way there. Since the car is technically Amanda's, and he can

back to visit her once before he finally decides to move out for good, and for a moment things seem to go well between them, "For the first time in days, I felt like I was somewhere I belonged. We made rare and surprising love." In the morning he realizes somehow that this is just a temporary reprieve: "There was a smell the two of us made living in the same place, and it was here now, where we'd slept. I could remember what her life smelled like without me: coffee, paint and houseplants, with a whiff of bleach from somewhere . . . And I noticed this because the night before, the place smelled like her again, just her. I might have been gone a year, for all my nose knew." Later, after he's moved out on her, and even though he knows that in the long run that was the right thing to do, he experiences a moment of sadness and regret, "My mouth clogged up with pancake and I swallowed hard, suddenly lonely. I thought about my frequent breakfasts out with Amanda, and the great time we invariably had at them. I wondered what she was having for lunch: probably nothing."

Another of the more compelling and interesting parts of the novel is the unexpectedly good relationship that develops between Tim and his schizophrenic brother Pierce, an unpredictable but intelligent and perceptive character. When Paul helps him get dressed before going to the reading of their father's will. Pierce loses his nerve out of fear of his father's legacy and Tim relates: "I took the cigarette out of his mouth and stubbed it in the ashtray. Then I did the same with mine. . . . I bent over his feet and started pulling the jeans onto him. Finally, he said, 'Oh fer Chrissake,' swung his legs off the bed like they were a couple of prosthetics, and pulled the jeans on himself." Later Tim says: "I noticed that the clothes I had picked out for Pierce were almost identical to the ones I had earlier pulled from my own bag." Although everyone else in the family disapproves of their sloppy appearance we feel that Tim has done his best for Pierce, something he can't manage with his girlfriend Amanda. Pierce's girlfriend completes the trio.

She's a young woman who lives alone in the pine barrens of New Jersey, dabbles in the occult, senses "auras," and yet already has the common sense and ability to act in a caring way towards other people that Tim is beginning to acquire.

What frustrates the reader in *The Funnies* is the lack of depth given to the real family drama that Tim tells us so often is the painful underside of the perfect life led by the Mix family's cartoon counterparts. While living at home with Pierce and taking his cartooning classes, Tim tries to reconcile himself with various members of his family, and starts on a project to bring his mother back from her nursing home. We discover that, although the family members all live in New York, New Jersey, or Pennsylvania, they hardly ever meet, and that Rose, the rebellious oldest daughter, has cut off virtually all contact with the family. Until the funeral Tim has never even met his youngest sister Bitty's husband. Later, we learn that Bobby, the fastidious oldest son, is bringing up his daughter in a mean, controlling way. But Tim gives us too many generalizations about unhappy dinner scenes and failed childhood outings, and the "petty resentments and kneejerk equivocations" which mark their present relationships. We aren't privy to enough real dialogue between them, or shown enough scenes from the past, to believe in their bitterness. Tim tells us that, "much of the stuff that Rose couldn't stand about our family was over and done with before Bitty was born," but we are given no specific notion of the feelings or emotions of the people involved. The central contradiction in *The Funnies* rests on the difference between the comic strip family and the real one, but Tim doesn't convince the reader fully enough of the present and past unhappiness of the other characters to give the novel the power it might have had. In the end, we are left with the stereotypical idea of a suburban family with an idyllic surface and troubled depths. The particular pleasure of reading Lennon's earlier novel lay in the way he invested himself so deeply in the lives of each of his characters, and the surprising, original way those characters expressed themselves. The disappointment of *The Funnies* is the narrator's tendency to generalize in lieu of closely observing the unique characteristics of the Mix family.

That said, there are penetrating and insightful moments in Tim's narration. At his father's funeral, when Tim catches sight of his two sisters in the crowd on the lawn, he reacts the way a person might recognize an old and almost forgotten acquaintance: "I recognized two women standing near the bird-bath. They were my sisters." At times, the characters' cartoon counterparts shadow them in an ironic way: Rose, the oldest sister, appears in her father's cartoons as "skinny, standoffish, pony tailed," and remains aloof even at the funeral: "Her face was slack and wary, distrustful of the rote bereavement around her, and she was leaning back slightly, keeping her distance." Of Bitty, the only one who seems mildly cheerful about life at all, Tim tells us "even in her black funeral dress she carried the festive scent of the senior prom." And in an interesting, almost pitiful moment near the beginning of the novel, when Tim first learns of his father's death, he turns the triteness of his father's strip back on the memory of his Dad, "I knew exactly how my father would draw himself dead . . . with wings, and a harp, and of course those blank eyeglasses that obscured all expression."

But despite his painful memories and his aesthetic reservations, Tim persists with his cartooning lessons. In my interview with Lennon he spoke of Tim as "right on the borderline between keeping and losing his integrity." *The Funnies* is, after all, a novel about what is "good," as opposed to "compromised" art. Tim may never arrive at the answer to that problem, but in his own way, he comes close by achieving the discipline of his craft.

Emily Fawcett is a writer living in Ithaca.