

# The BOOKPRESS

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## BATTLE OF THE BOOKS

Erin Coughlin

Are books like other commodities, merely to be traded for maximum profit? Or do books, as vehicles for ideas and imaginative expression, impose their own requirements on the marketplace apart from the financial satisfaction of investors? The survival of independent bookstores throughout the country will be decided by how we answer these questions.

In recent years, the combination of big box chain bookstores and online booksellers, such as Amazon, has been the death knell for many independent booksellers across the nation. *Book Passage News and Reviews* reported that between 1991 and 1997 trade book sales of the major chains rose 58.5%, while the sales of independents dropped by 27.3%. Since 1991, the year that Barnes and Noble began opening big box stores outside of malls, membership in the American Booksellers Association, which represents independents, has dropped from 5,200 to 3,300.

What exactly is driving the independent booksellers out of business? While each store that closes has its own individual tale of woe, there are some common themes that emerge from the way the book industry functions to unfairly favor the chain stores. Distributors and publishing companies offer higher discounts for large-volume orders. Therefore, when Barnes and Noble, for example, orders for their entire chain from a publisher, they receive more favorable terms than the smaller independent stores. If that were the only advantage enjoyed by the chains there would be little cause for complaint from the independents. However, the American Booksellers Association (ABA) alleges that the two largest bookstore chains have crossed the line and ventured into illegal business practices.

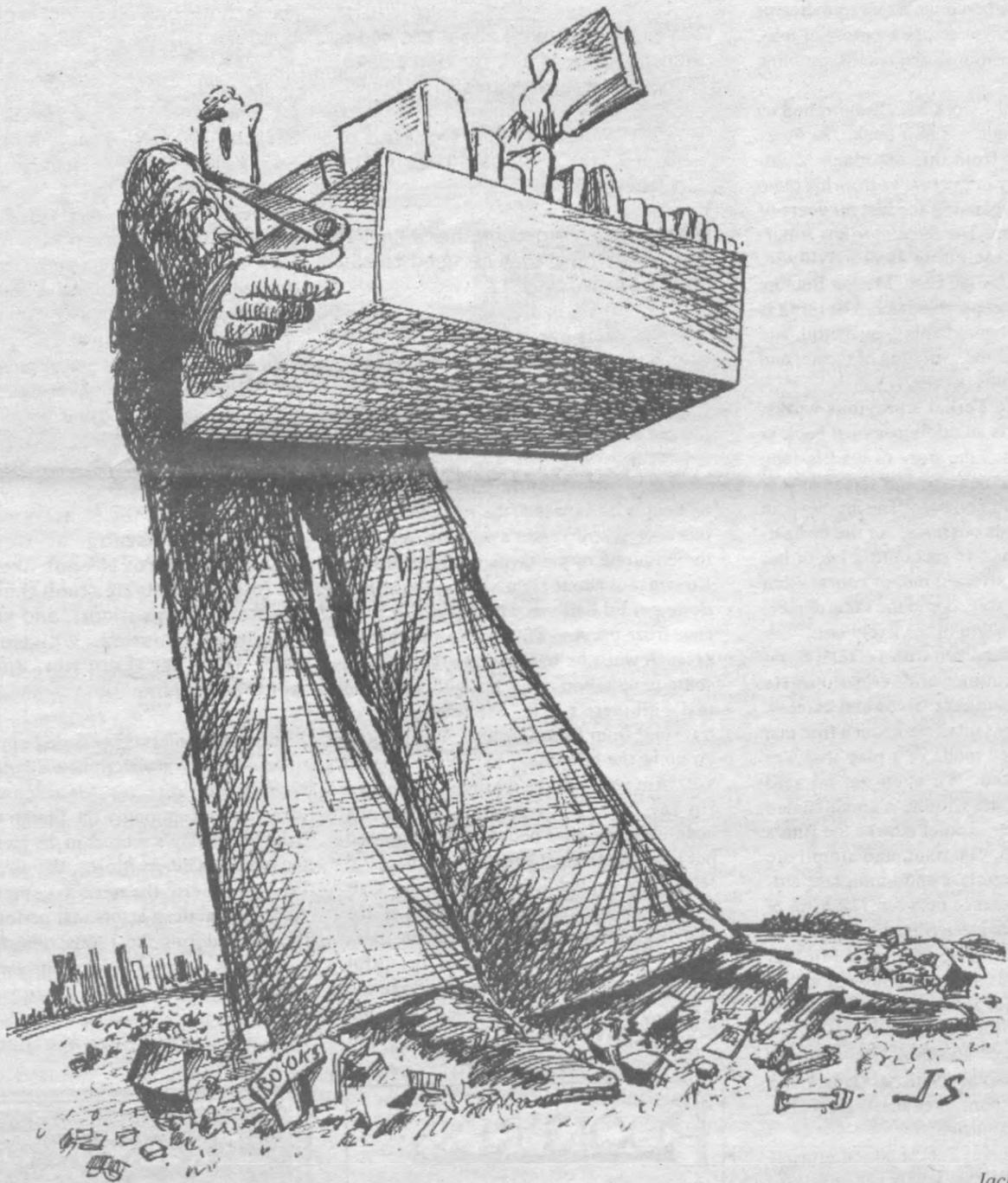
On March 18, 1998, the ABA and twenty-six independent bookstores brought suit against Barnes and Noble and Borders, asserting that the chains have violated provisions of both the federal Robinson-Patman Act and two California state statutes. The Robinson-Patman Act, enacted in 1936 to protect small independent stores that could not obtain the special concessions that national chains could demand, makes it illegal for a retailer to use its size to demand advantages beyond volume discounts which—at least theoretically—are available to all. The California Unfair Trade Practices Act, which affects the eight California-based bookseller plaintiffs in the case, was designed to prohibit the practice of granting to large chains unearned discounts that tend to destroy competition and injure a smaller competitor.

The lawsuit alleges that the chains secretly received significantly better terms and promotional allowances than independent bookstores. Among the illegal terms alleged in the suit are extra discounts (off-schedule discounts, shared markdowns, extra discounts on small orders, special terms for new stores or expansions and for “nonreturnable” purchases), better payment terms, more favorable allowances for returns, arrangements by which publishers, in effect, subsidize titles

sold at discount by the chains, and a whole range of various co-op and “promotional” advantages not provided to independents. In January 1999, a San Francisco court found that the case has merit and has reviewed and approved the progress that has occurred to

in the areas of credit and payment terms. The suit ended in a settlement whereby Penguin agreed to pay \$25 million dollars to be dispersed by the ABA to its member independent bookstores on the basis of their percentage of Penguin purchases during the period

discount policies is that they drive up the list price set by publishers. In February 1999, *Publishers Weekly* reported, “A new, hard-bound novel now costs upward of \$25.00 compared to \$19.95 just a few years ago. Publishers have inflated book prices with the



Jack Sherman

this point. The trial is scheduled for May 2000.

This lawsuit follows hard on the heels of a victory for the ABA in a similar investigation of illegal discounts offered by Penguin Putnam Inc. In February 1997, Penguin's parent company in England, Pearson PLC, admitted that favored retail bookstore customers of Penguin Books USA, namely Borders and Barnes and Noble, had been receiving undisclosed “cash discounts” over and above the normal discount schedules. The “cash discounts” were carried on Penguin's books as receivables but were not intended to be collected from the favored customers, despite a court order in late 1995 which specifically prohibited Penguin from discriminating against independent bookstores

the unfair practices were in effect.

Exploiting their considerable financial resources and the extended payment terms they squeeze from publishers, the chains routinely order in much larger quantities than they can hope to sell. This enables them to create the impression of huge inventories and often makes it more difficult for independent stores to obtain timely delivery of “hot” titles. At the end of the prime selling period, the chains simply return their overstock to the publishers, who are then forced to deal with the problem of staggering quantities of unsold books.

The purpose of such tactics is obvious: come into a community, drive the competition out of business and then raise prices. Another negative consequence of the chains'

knowledge that superstores will simply discount them to below \$20.00 anyway.”

Additionally, the larger chains have a policy of collecting payment from publishing houses for display “real estate” in the superstores, a method that no independent bookstore can employ. Often the books prominently displayed on tables and aisle ends at Borders and Barnes and Noble are placed not according to their merit or popularity, but rather by what amounts to a bidding war among the various larger publishing houses. Companies such as Amazon have extended this practice to the Web. In February this year, they disclosed that publishers are paying up to \$10,000 per title to have their books featured on some of the most coveted Internet sites.

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# Candid Camera

## The Spectator: Talk About Movies and Plays with Those Who Make Them

By Studs Terkel.

The New Press, 1999.

364 pages. \$26.95

### Jason Cons

When someone's telling a story, I shut up. When I'm doing an interview, I don't shut up.

—Studs Terkel

Studs Terkel can get people to talk about anything. Throughout his long career in both books and radio he has chronicled some of the most turbulent periods in American history (the Depression, World War II, the '60s) and some of the most complex and debated issues in American life (work, race, the American Dream). For *Hard Times: an Oral History of the Depression*, rather than probing academic historians, Terkel talked to survivors, people who lived through that most desperate period of the 20th century; for *Working: People Talk about What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do*, he gathered the hopes and dreams of men and women across a variety of jobs, classes, and positions. The results are often inspirational.

While Terkel's work has always relied on "ordinary" people, his new book, *The Spectator*, departs from this approach. Composed primarily of interviews from his radio show archive spanning the last 50 years of theater and film, *The Spectator* has a star-studded cast, including James Baldwin, Arthur Miller, Lillian Gish, Marlon Brando, and others of comparable fame. The result is one of the most entertaining, insightful, and eclectic looks at the evolution of theater and film to appear this decade.

Compared to Terkel's previous works, *The Spectator* is an oddly personal book in that it is as much the story of his life-long love affair with the stage and screen as it is a collection of interviews. "The journeyman carpenter," Studs observes, "or the dedicated schoolteacher, in recounting his or her life and work, affected me, of course—but not in the same way, nor to the same degree, as those in the world of the lively arts."

The book is peppered with Terkel's flashbacks, first sightings, and reflections. He elaborates his subjects' lives and careers, and occasionally fantasizes about a film that might have been made or a play that was never performed. We even get an acid review of Michael Cimino's much lauded *The Deer Hunter*. Terkel attacks the film's implicit racism, classism, and simplistic view of working-class and immigrant cultures. "The difference between *The Birth of a Nation* and *The Deer Hunter* is the difference between D. W. Griffith and Michael Cimino. One was a genius who was also a racist. The other is simply a cheap-shot artist." Of the film's often celebrated, prolonged portrait of an ethnic wedding, he writes, "It is as though National Geographic were offering a portrait of the Watusi people. All detail, no insight."

In his past works, Terkel edited himself out of the interviews wherever possible, giving the false impression that he simply sat down with his subject and a tape-recorder and said, "go!" In *The Spectator*, Terkel prompts and sometimes goads his subjects into expressing themselves. Whenever he says something, it is calculated to elicit a response, and the interview technique is revealed as more a process of point and counterpoint than of question and answer.

This is not to say that Terkel's style is an argumentative one. He often charms and shocks his subjects with his intimate knowledge and understanding of their work. He surprises the Indian filmmaker Satyajit Ray by making reference to *Kanchenjunga*, one of Ray's early and difficult to find films. When he remembers the name of the boy in *The Bicycle Thief*, the director Vittorio De

Sica responds, "I am so enthusiastic over you because you remember the name of my characters." Terkel's subjects open up to him, engage his observations, debate his points, and tell the stories we want to hear.

Part of the fun of *The Spectator* is that Terkel's own excitement often shines through. Caught up in the infectious personalities of his subjects, he is as entertained as we are. Take this piece of dialogue from an interview with the aging Jimmy Cagney, on the comeback trail with Milos Forman's adaptation of E.L. Doctrow's *Ragtime*:

—Some of the things I said in the movies were things people around me said. "Whattya hear, whattya say?" That was one of the lines I put in. There was a gal in the neighborhood, I think she was a hooker—I never found out, really—and she came out with that one day. One of her boyfriends used to use it, so I dropped it in.

—You could drop in your own phrases?

—Well, I knew more about the hoods than the writers did, for God's sake. They were country boys.

—What about "That's the kind of hairpin I am?" You said that in *The Strawberry Blond*.

—That was my grandfather's line. It was something that he used to say as a kid in Norway.

In this exchange, the only piece in the book that resembles a traditional interview, you can almost hear Terkel slide into Cagney's cool '40s-gangster lilt and feel his joy and nervous excitement in talking to this aging icon.

Aside from providing insight into the technique of a master, the real pleasure of this book is still Terkel's subjects. We learn the etiquette of pie throwing from Buster Keaton: "...about eight years ago, Milton Berle got Ed Sullivan with a pie. The audience froze up. And Milton didn't get another laugh while he was on stage. There's just some people you don't hit with a pie and that's all there's to it;" the finer points of traveling from Ruth Gordon: "When you'd go up to the hotel desk to register, they'd ask, 'Are you with the theatrical company.' I'd say, 'No, I'm traveling with Arnex hose'... Arnex hose people were supposed not to steal towels;" and the best places to settle from Arnold Schwarzenegger: "California is to me a dreamland... It has all the money in the world there, show business there, wonderful weather there, beautiful country, ocean is there. Snow skiing in the winter, you can go in the desert the same day. You have beautiful-looking people

there. They all have a tan."

In one of the most interesting interviews, Ian McKellen describes Shakespearean acting as a process of translation. To convincingly portray a character from Shakespeare, McKellen seeks out his ethical equivalent in modern society. The actor, avoiding the easy choice of Richard Nixon, suggests that Lord and Lady Macbeth are like the early Kennedys, whose ambition leads them to destruction. To play Coriolanus, McKellen looks to John McEnroe (this interview was conducted in 1986.)

He doesn't kill people he slaughters them. Or did at the time we were rehearsing for Coriolanus. He appears in public in front of thousands of people. He clearly enjoys that. But he despises the people he's entertaining. That's rather like Coriolanus: he wants to be out there. He wants to be a star. But there's something in him that says, "I hate you all for making me a star because if I'm a real star I don't need your approval because I know how good I am." I think that's behind all McEnroe's outbursts.

One of the highlights of *The Spectator* is the section titled "Bert and Sam: Brecht and Beckett." Though Terkel, unfortunately, never had the chance to interview either of the great dramatists, this section tackles a number of directors, actors, and visionaries who knew them and attempted to bring their work to American and European audiences. Brecht, the hard-headed realist, anticipated misunderstanding and antagonism from his audience. The actress and singer Lotte Lenya, wife of Brecht's compositional partner, Kurt Weill, tells of the master's strategy for dealing with a hostile crowd:

Brecht said, 'I don't think this will go over right away in a highbrow festival like this.' So he supplied us with whistles. Whistling in Germany means disapproval—not like here. He foresaw that. He stood there with his stogie in his mouth and said, 'If you hear whistles, whistle right back. Don't let them win. We must win that evening.'

In several interviews Terkel chronicles different early productions of *Waiting for Godot*, from director Alan Schneider's lukewarm reception by the literati of New York to the play's success in the civil rights movement. Gilbert Moses, the director of Free Southern theater, a company of African-American actors that performed in the South during the 1960s, describes his audience's sense of recognition on seeing Pozzo and Lucky:

Our audience knew a great deal

about waiting. They had been waiting all their lives. They actually knew what it meant to be Lucky, the slave of Pozzo. When they saw Lucky with the rope around his neck, they understood immediately that that rope had two ends.

Rick Cluchey, an ex-convict and theater director describes seeing *Waiting for Godot* performed by a group of actors while in prison:

All around me the convicts were laughing! The laughter of recognition? Of course! We knew about waiting. We knew what it meant to wait for something; waiting had become an essential part of existence behind the grim walls of San Quentin.

If the book has a weakness, it is that Terkel allows some of his subjects—especially authors and critics—to use the interview as a theoretical sounding board. At times, dialogues descend into rather glib discussions about the role of theater in 20th-century America, or the function of art in society. While such discussions are, of course, essential to an understanding of culture and aesthetics, the interview may not be the best place for their elaboration. Complicated ideas are sometimes glossed over in exchange for observations that run dangerously close to clichés, and certain authors, such as Tennessee Williams, seem unable to provide any fresh insight into their work.

But this is a minor cavil, and *The Spectator* remains an entertaining and stimulating book. Each one of Terkel's guests has a revealing story to tell about the workings of theater and film. August Wilson's remembrance of discovering the blues shows us the importance of music in his plays. Alan Schneider's recollections of getting drunk with Samuel Beckett reveal the author's reclusive yet surprisingly humorous personality. Agnes DeMille's reflections on the production of *Oklahoma* explain the unlikely introduction of modern dance into the Broadway musical. Ravi Shankar's story of producing the music for *Pather Panchali* is a look at the connection between South Indian classical improvisation and Satyajit Ray's unique style of filmmaking. Vittorio De Sica's description of making *The Bicycle Thief* reveals the transition from a proletarian aesthetic to celebrity film. *The Spectator* provides an opportunity to observe a master at work and to hear first-hand from some of the most interesting people in 20th-century show business.

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# Taking Leave

Joe Miceli

For the last 15 years I've been confined to a nine-by-seven cage of solid steel bars, squeezed between walls I can touch with my fingertips if I stretch my arms. On my right is my bed. Its mattress is as flat as a pancake, and next to a ceramic toilet which is covered with a wooden board to keep the stench out.

I was in bed, on the verge of falling asleep when my cell gate cracked. Any time it opened was a welcome relief. I jumped up, stepped out on the gallery and called to the officer at the control booth a hundred feet away.

"The chaplain wants to see you. Get dressed," he said. I laced my boots, snatched my jacket, and hurried outside. A call from the cleric's office usually meant bad news. As I whizzed past my neighbors crib I heard him say, "Is everything all right Joe?"

"I hope so," I said. "I think I'm going to make an emergency phone call."

Ten days earlier I had written to my counselor, a man named Randazzo, requesting an emergency call. I usually found Randazzo sitting at his desk behind a stack of inmates' folders. In between puffs of his cigarette, sips of coffee, and hurried scribbling, he'd shove my evaluation in front of me to sign, rush me out, and then call and wave his next customer in. Inmates were his meal ticket. The rules said I couldn't dial my grandmother's hospital room directly. Only he could.

As I hurried across the snow-covered yard, groups of prisoners huddled together against the freezing wind. Blacks, whites, and Latinos bundled in multi-colored hoods, hats, gloves and mittens. Some were familiar, but most just faces in a vast sea of lonely insignificance. A few walked endless laps around the yard, others stared at one of four TVs. Most were lost in self-imposed distractions, doing the best they could to kill time the only way they knew how.

At the wire gate leading to the guidance unit, I shoved my pass into the tiny slot of the guard's wooden shack. The officer scrutinized it like a suspicious cashier looking at a counterfeit fifty-dollar bill. Then, dismissing me like a foreigner at a border crossing, he said, "Go ahead." Relieved, I sprinted towards the building. At last, I was going to speak with my grandmother, a tough 80-year-old lady who could curse you out in a minute if you got her angry. We had not spoken in several weeks, because my father, who had just completed a ten-year federal sentence, had disconnected the three-way service at Nan's house as a condition of his parole. When I spoke with my father he said, "Your grandmother's in the hospital, but should be back in three days."

Although her health was deteriorating, I never expected such a sudden decline. I remembered our last conversation when she had cried and complained about her swollen legs.

"Nan, you got to try and walk around, stretch your legs and get some exercise," I pleaded.

"I do. You don't understand. My legs are no good anymore. Last week I went to the bank and fell down on the sidewalk."

I tried to ease her pain by talking about the good old days, when we lived on 98th street, and when Grandpa was alive. I pictured myself in her kitchen, watching her open the oven to peek at the golden brown loaves of Sicilian bread she baked for me and my grandfather. Back then, one of my favorite treats was a hot round loaf of homemade bread stuffed with chicken roll and washed down with a tall glass of milk. Those were great times, and now, here I was clinging to them the same way my grandmother was.

"You and Grandpa were crazy about my bread. You remember Gramps liked to

smother his with butter and dunk it in his coffee?"

"Yep, and we played cards. You taught me how to play scuba with an Italian deck."

"Your grandfather loved to play scuba with me."

But even as we spoke about the happy times, she still cried bitterly. Her greatest

"Did my grandmother pass away?"

He looked at me with sorrowful eyes. His gaze locked with mine, hoping I'd discover the truth he was unable to speak. Somehow I believe he understood my sadness.

Two days later, at 6:00 A.M. I was awakened by a young officer named Rizzo. He was thin, had short cropped

slid to the edge of my seat.

"Did you see that?" Officer Warren asked.

I peered out the side window, through beads of raindrops scurrying across the glass, and saw the deer sprawled on the perimeter of the roadway. I strained forward in my seat, my shackles and restraints dug deep into my flesh. The deer's tongue dangled from her soft furry jaw, and her mouth was slightly open as she exhaled nervous panting puffs of steam.

"It's still alive!" I exclaimed.

"Yeah, but she don't look good," Officer Warren said. I wanted to see her sprint back into the woods. Instead she lay motionless, as still as the fog hanging over the valley, as stiff as the trees.

We continued driving past huge cliffs of black rocks, some with waterfalls rolling over them. Soon the clouds lifted and endless stretches of trees whirred by me in a spectacular blur of red, green and gold. On the radio, Bruce Springsteen had just finished singing "Dancing In The Dark."

By mid-afternoon, trees were replaced by apartment houses and commercial brick buildings with an assortment of bubble shaped, multi-colored bright bold letters. Some of the structures were boarded up. Finally we exited Lexington Avenue, passed the piers of Manhattan, crossed the Brooklyn Bridge, and emerged on Atlantic Avenue. The city was vaguely familiar, dreamlike.

I imagined myself in the old days, leaning on the arm rest of my black 1983 Ninety-Eight Oldsmobile, gliding by avenues just like these. I'd be listening to music with a thick joint burning in the ashtray. Inhaling the smoke of the sweet sticky weed, its pungent aroma drifting through a crack in the moon roof in swirling plumes. Once I had had it all.

On Atlantic Avenue there were rows of stores and bodegas and people buzzing everywhere. Beautiful women wearing tight pants, platform shoes, and leather jackets strolled by swinging shopping bags. They swayed their hips in sync with the seductive rhythm and style that spelled attitude with a capital A in the barrio. There were furniture shops with sofas outside, a black homeless man begging, and an amputee in a wheel chair hurrying across the street.

When we pulled up in front of the funeral home, Officer Warren said, "Hold on, I have to check it out."

Two minutes later he appeared and nodded to his partner. Then with Rizzo's assistance, I carefully climbed out of the van. "Wait," Rizzo said, stopping me in mid-stride. "Let's take the belly chain and cuffs off first."

I backed up to the vehicle and stood between the center doors that were wide open. He inserted a key into the master lock and with a quick practiced twist snapped it open. He reached around my back, unwrapped the chain and then removed the handcuffs. I stretched and rubbed my wrists. They were swollen and red, and had deep creases in them. Followed by Rizzo, I limped inside the lobby taking slow even steps to avoid tripping on the tether still attached to my ankles.

My brother Buddy appeared. He was tall and broad and impeccably dressed in a fine black suit. I could tell he was shocked and glad to see me. We shook hands and kissed. Then my uncle, whom I hadn't seen in fifteen years, sauntered in. He looked much older, seemed shorter, and was as round as a wine barrel. He paused for a second, studying me the same way I pondered him. Fifteen years was a long time.

"Joey," he said in his distinctive Sicilian brogue.

I wrapped my arms around him. "It's good to see you uncle Charlie."

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fear was that she'd be forced to live in an old age home.

"I want to die in my own house. I don't want to live with strangers."

"Nan, I promise nobody's going to stick you in a home. Don't worry, when I get out I'll take care of you."

"Did you talk to the lawyer?"

"Yes, they're still working very hard."

"I hope to God you come home before I go."

"I will Nan, you just take care of yourself." Although I was able to reassure her, my feelings of guilt lingered in my mind like the taste of spoiled milk.

When I arrived at the Chaplain's office an officer said, "The Imam wants to see you." The Imam? I said to myself. Randazzo must've made arrangements with him for me to call my grandmother. Inside the small room four Muslims were busy filling tiny bottles with scented oils. The room smelled like jasmine, musk, and coconut incense, penetrating and pungent, like the fragrance of head shops in the sixties. Imam Khalffa was talking on the telephone. He removed the receiver from his ear, and cupped the mouthpiece. In a soft voice he told the men to leave the room.

As they filed passed me, he continued talking on the phone while I impatiently scanned the room. Although his desk was cluttered with bottles and papers, my eyes were drawn to one particular document that seemed out of place. On it I noticed my name written in bold letters above my grandmother's. It was a business letter from the Francisco Funeral Home.

The Imam hung up the phone and I asked, "What's going on?"

"Your brother Buddy called. He needs to speak with you."

black hair, and a voice that spoke with the soothing calm of a priest in a confessional booth. Perhaps he also knew what it felt like to experience the loss of a loved one. I was grateful.

When we crossed the yard it was windy, dark and pouring rain. Inside the administration building, a burly Irishman with blonde hair and rosy cheeks approached me and said, "My name is Officer Warren, I'm sorry to hear about your grandmother." I put on the garments given to me by the prison for the trip; blue jeans, a white shirt, and a tan jacket. I wore my own sneakers. I glanced at myself in the mirror and was disgusted by my reflection.

At last, we climbed into a specially equipped van with a thick plexiglass partition separating me from the officers, who carried .38 caliber pistols strapped to their hips in black leather holsters. My legs were shackled by a 12-inch dog chain, secured tightly at each ankle. I was also handcuffed with a belly chain. This was fastened to my cuffs with a master lock. To eat I had to bend forward and strain my neck to peck at a sandwich clasped in my fingers.

I had not been outside the stone walls of the prison for 15 years. We drove past mountains, trees, and farms with black and white cows grazing leisurely on the grass. I felt like I was part of a surreal three-dimensional photograph. Soon we entered a valley that was covered in thick and deep fog. It consumed us like the smoke in woods after a smoldering forest fire.

Suddenly a deer darted from the mist. It leapt onto the highway and into the front end of the pickup truck that was ahead of us. The driver didn't have a chance to swerve. I whipped my neck around and

# Off Campus at THE BOOKERY

This presentation is part of our ongoing series of readings and talks in the Women's Community Building.

**Sunday, December 5, 2:00 pm**  
**Ann McCutchan**  
and music by  
**Lisa Leong & Friends**

Please join us for an afternoon of music, reading and discussion! Ann McCutchan will read from her new book *The Muse that Sings: Composers Talk About the Creative Process*, which takes a unique behind-the-scenes look at both 20th century music and the nuts and bolts of creative work. In the book, 25 of America's leading composers—from Adams to Zorn—talk candidly about their craft, their motivations, their difficulties, and how they proceed from musical idea to finished composition.



The ensemble, Lisa Leong & Friends, will perform music by composers in the book, including Steven Reich's Clapping Music, John Zorn's Hockey, and William Bolcom's Three Piano Rags.

Ann McCutchan is an award-winning fine arts writer who is currently a post-doctoral fellow in the Knight Writing Program at Cornell University.

**Sunday, December 12 at 2:00 pm**  
**Robert Morgan**

Robert Morgan will be reading selections from his acclaimed new book, *Gap Creek*. A South Carolina's couples tumultuous first year of marriage at the turn of the century is the provocative subject of the novel.



Morgan will also be reading from his new collection of short stories, *The Balm of Gilead Tree*. This collection is set in the mountains of North Carolina and deals with the issues of poverty, disenfranchisement, and the eternal struggle of man against nature.

Robert Morgan teaches English and Creative Writing at Cornell University. He has published several respected novels and collections of poetry.

## This Black Land

When the aircraft at last  
having paused in Paris but transpanning  
an entire fourteen hours coursing  
from midnight New York toward sunset in the East  
approaches the Nile, we can see  
on a map projected at the cabin front  
an electric mote blinking  
how well we are doing, and can see  
out the window the actual sun  
actually red, simply spherical beside us  
setting from the sky just as we do,  
our silver wings emblazoned  
with the falcon head of Ra-Harakhte  
the red insignia of EgyptAir—  
it's then, right there  
the Alexandrians among us rush  
to starboard portholes, tears in their eyes,  
so long have they been from home  
in many places but their home,  
though all I spot distant, wavering  
unlit at the green perimeter of delta  
is gray buildings the color of the desert.  
And Cairo the same, actually, at this hour  
descending in a spiral whose slant  
disconcerts, my only reference surrounding  
desert, and I lose the sun, look for the pyramids  
or the river, something to hold in view:  
all of it sand, and then miles of buildings  
made from sand, and then closer  
the scale of the streets, the trifling cars,  
a donkey slowly walking far from the center  
of the city, but little else moves, and barely a lamp  
has been lit, it just now being sundown  
during Ramadan, when suddenly we land,  
step out from our fantastic ship,  
step from its sheath, feet upon the Black Land.  
No one kisses the ground, but I hear sobbing,  
exactly whom I cannot say  
among the crowd of Egyptians,  
American tourists, the French, all of us  
enveloped by the je ne sai quoi,  
a trite ejaculation, but familiar  
in the absence of what is acceptable  
politely to express such emotions  
as wonder or the discomfort of awe.  
The huge aircraft beside us grows more and more still,  
grows darker in the warm air,  
emanates fumes of jet fuel,  
a peculiar comfort—perhaps after all it is  
an animal friend or alive in another way.  
In Kemi this might be so. "I feel as if I'm home,"  
says a woman crying, one of our party. And though  
I don't understand, yet I do bow my head  
beneath a crescent moon whose tips are raised  
completely upward like I've never seen,  
the very horns that crown the goddess Isis,  
Mother of the Sun, She of Many Names  
through whom descending to this Black Land  
comes such light still that one might know  
directly the course of the heart.

PETER FORTUNATO

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# Seeds of Change

## Farmboy

By John B. Babcock.

Edited by John Marcham.

DeWitt Historical Society of Tompkins County, 1999.

224 pages. Soft cover. \$21.95.

## James McConkey

The visual attractiveness of the Finger Lakes region—its gorges, hills, and woods as well as its lakes—is abetted by changes wrought in the landscape by 19th-century farmers. They opened up the vistas by clearing portions of the omnipresent forest for their fields, using the timber they felled for their houses and barns and livestock fences as well as for heat. As a long-term resident in one of those early 19th-century Greek Revival farmhouses, I am appreciative of the work of farmers in enhancing the landscapes I see from my windows: the groomed fields that during snowless periods of winter are as green with young wheat as any lawn in spring; that in late summer are reddened by ripening wheat or made golden by the ripening oats. Like anybody else not actively engaged in agriculture—my family rents out our farmlands, not to make money but simply to cover the taxes—farming affords me, I admit, chiefly an aesthetic pleasure.

As John Babcock says in his engagingly modest account of his early life on a Tompkins County farm, farmers in our region have never taken up agriculture in order to become wealthy, but primarily because they enjoy independence and the rural life itself. For them, esthetic rewards may be secondary to practical necessity, but I do know that the farmers near me take pleasure in the appearance of their fields. The growing season in the Northeast is shorter than in many other regions of America, and (unlike Iowa, say) the topsoil here is generally a thin and rocky layer above the predominant clay. But a 70-year-old neighbor of mine who is among the ever-diminishing number of full-time farmers in Tompkins County told me recently he couldn't imagine a lovelier and more spiritually rewarding place to live and farm than this place he chose long ago, on the high plateau to the north of Connecticut Hill; and in the years he has spent tending the fields that include our own, he has increased rather than diminished the depth and fertility of the soil.

*Farmboy* drew me to a recognition of

what agriculture has done in maintaining the kind of landscape that pleases us all. But for some time now agriculture has been in retreat in this region and elsewhere in the East. Portions of the old family farms are now often worked by part-time farmers; the income from the land is only a supplement to the paychecks from urban employment. Present-day economic conditions make it difficult (often impossible) to hire farmhands; full-time farmers must purchase labor-saving but almost prohibitively expensive machinery. Beyond that, the burgeoning population and multiplying numbers of automobiles and roads have resulted in the movement of families (including my own) into the countryside. Rural property becomes ever more expensive to purchase, and the taxes upon it rise; to provide for their own retirement, farmers are apt to sell

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quently traveled that I popped sun-generated tar bubbles [with my] foot." And in John Babcock's day, of course, Sunnygables was, while far more impressive than most of its kind, a family farmhouse surrounded by hundreds of acres of some of the most productive soil near Ithaca, with structures for cattle, sheep, horses, pigs and chickens as well as hay and silage. One particularly vivid chapter recounts what he witnessed in the valley the morning after the deluge that brought the devastating 1935 flood; another, equally vivid and perhaps subjectively more disturbing to him, describes his initial participation in the slaughter of domestic animals.

John Babcock became a farm writer for radio and television, and ultimately the chief operating officer for Roy Park's growing chain of media enterprises. As he acknowledges, his own

tilizer that H.E. Babcock extolled no doubt today is a contributing factor in the environmental degradation of Cayuga Lake.

Like most farmers and agricultural leaders, H.E. seems to have had a conservative political ideology, and yet he was an important figure in the revolution that came to agriculture. He used his growing national influence to help persuade President Roosevelt to renounce the gold standard, which in his view had not only disadvantaged American farmers, but helped to create the Depression. The Depression brought farming in this region to its first decline: countless farmers, unable to pay even the interest on their mortgages, lost their lands. H.E. encouraged those who survived to augment their tillable lands by going into debt to purchase the vacant farms; and he promoted the use of trucks and tractors and other labor-saving equipment. An innovator himself, he worked with industry and such large retailers as Sears to improve their farming products. Changes included, for example, the replacement of steel-shod wheels with rubber tires—at first used tires, available at low cost to farmers in local junk yards.

So the story that John Babcock tells is one that extends far beyond his own childhood experiences. It includes the transformation of agriculture, which ultimately became part of the transformation of an entire society. Today, Agway seems less a cooperative for farmers than a place for suburban householders to buy seeds and plants and chain saws and pet feed and garden tractors.

*Farmboy* is an engrossing book, both for what it tells of an earlier era and for what it foreshadows. It is handsomely published, with many informative photographs. For some years, Gould Colman, the former Cornell archivist who now is a member of the Ithaca School Board, has been compiling and editing a book based on interviews with members of several generations of family farmers, some of them far less fortunate than the family John Babcock was born into. When it is published, it will make a fine supplement to Babcock's story, particularly for the evidence it will provide concerning the weakening of family ties once so crucial in the generational continuance of individual farms in this region and throughout America.

James McConkey is the author of several novels and memoirs.



Photograph of Sunnygables reproduced by kind permission of Historic Ithaca, Inc.

out to developers. Their former fields of corn or wheat become divided into lots either for expensive homes in subdivisions or for a random scattering of manufactured homes and trailers.

Whatever the financial problems, agriculture was less imperiled in John Babcock's youth. Born in 1922, he grew up in the farmhouse his father bought near Lick Brook in the Inlet Valley and named "Sunnygables." (Purchased in 1968 by Michael Turback, it became a restaurant, Turback's of Ithaca; almost completely destroyed by fire in 1987, it had become such a famous landmark that Turback, using photographs and architectural drawings, faithfully restored it.) One of the busiest highways in this region now passes close to that restoration; but in Babcock's youth, the road was farther from the house and used mainly by local residents. Within the city limits, it became Meadow Street, which then, Babcock writes, "was a narrow, hog-backed country road, so infre-

involvement in agriculture is limited; but his father's historically important role is part of his story. H.E. (Ed) Babcock, the first professor of farm marketing at Cornell, eventually became chairman of the Board of Trustees at the university, serving in that post from 1939 until 1947. He was even more influential in the farm cooperative movement, an attempt by farmers throughout America to resist their exploitation by corporate and private feed dealers. From its first organizational meeting onward, H.E. was instrumental in the development and growth of the Grange League Federation (GLF), now Agway. As a GLF executive, he pioneered the labeling of nutritional values on every bag of animal feed, and later he was a leader in the effort to assure a comparable listing on food products for human consumption. His lifelong concern with nutrition led to his major role in the establishment of the Graduate School of Nutrition at Cornell. However, the high-phosphorus fer-

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# On the Tip

The following essay was written for a 1998 conference on *Social Remembering* which explored memory as a possible bridge linking the various disciplines in the humanities. Participants were asked to respond to the presentation of a participant in another field, connecting those responses to their personal research or writing as well as to the current nature of the discipline they represent. The various papers will be brought together in a forthcoming book. In his essay, McConkey is responding to the presentation of Marcia Johnson, a cognitive psychologist at Princeton.

## James McConkey

Personal memory has been my chief resource as a writer ever since one wintry night in Ithaca, New York about forty years ago. I've read that a conversion experience is common among autobiographical writers, and I don't think it too fanciful to say that such an experience happened to me that night. It was early in the Cold War; both Russia and the United States possessed nuclear weapons, and it seemed likely that one or the other, if not both, might end civilization, at least as we've come to know it. I won't go into the details that marked that alteration in me, except to say that in looking out the window of my darkened study at a landscape illuminated only by starlight on the snow, I saw the mound of snow on a bird's nest in the backyard maple, and knew in a way I never had before the value of everything I had pretty much taken for granted: everything in the phenomenal world, including that empty bird's nest, was interconnected and sacred.

This was a subjective evaluation, and surely others have felt something like it in those moments when life is in precarious balance; but how had I come to know it? I can only conjecture that memory supplied the revelation; what I do know is that at once my memory was filled with supporting images from the past, most of which in other contexts would have seemed quite ordinary, as well as emotions toward them that told me how valuable they were. Without thought of publication, simply for my own self, I began that night the account that was to be the beginning of a lifetime of concern with personal memory, and which ultimately resulted in one book (or three, dependent upon how one looks at it), *Crossroads* (1968); *Court of Memory* (1986), which includes the first book; and *Stories from My Life with the Other Animals* (1993). "Court of memory," a phrase I picked up from St. Augustine, is in my mind the phrase that encompasses all three. As autobiography, it's fairly unusual (at least I know of no other quite like it) in that it was written not from one fixed present moment—I was not looking back upon a career or a life that more or less was completed—but at a whole series of them, from my late thirties onward, each segment connecting the present moment with those elements of an ever-growing past that my memory associated with it. It gives for me the arc of human experience as I have lived it, but I would not—and most likely could not—have published it if I hadn't considered myself representational rather than unique.

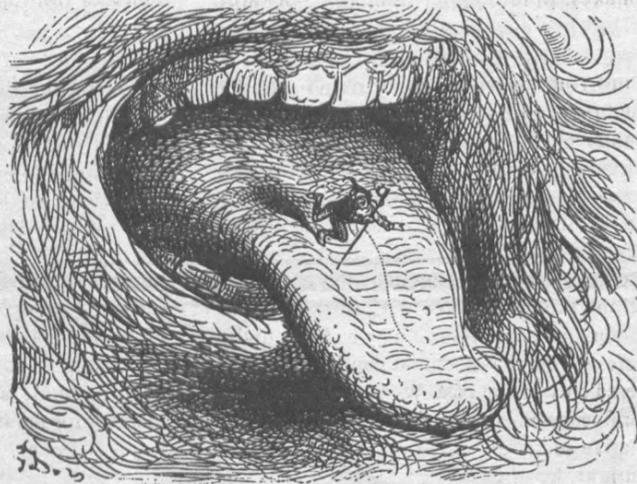
Memory has been the thread linking everything I have written, whether novels or books about other authors, or essays on topics distinct from myself. My growing insight into the workings of memory, gained from all sorts of imaginative literature as well as works by current neuroscientists and other specialists into the nature of the human mind, permitted me to be persuaded by an editor at Oxford University Press to edit an anthology, *The Anatomy of Memory* (1996), and twice to come out of retirement to offer a multidisciplinary course I devised, called "Mind and Memory: Explorations of Creativity in the Arts and Sciences." It is an undergraduate

course, but a crucial component of it is a weekly series of public lectures by some of Cornell's most distinguished scientists and artists who speak of memory—collective as well as experiential—in connection with their own explorations and discoveries in science and art. Those lectures have attracted large audiences, in part because others—including colleagues—are interested in what scientists and artists are thinking as they go about their work; and also because they give an insight, difficult to get elsewhere in these days of division and specialization, into what lies at the very center, or heart, of what a university is or should be. In my mind the ideal undergraduate curriculum would include an introductory course into the nature and uses (as well as misuses) of memory as a foundation for everything else the students will learn.

Now directed by Diane Ackerman, "Mind and Memory" has become an annual spring course; in the two years I offered it, the lecturers included three psychologists as well as a neurobiologist interested in the evolution of human behavior, a subject of interest to psychologists as well as many others. Ulric Neisser, one of the founders of the field of cognitive psychology, gave his lecture just days before Marcia Johnson sent me the papers she intended to use as the basis for her presentation. Neisser spoke on "True and False Memories." His emphasis was on the so-called "flashbulb memories," the ones occasioned by a crisis—Pearl Harbor, the assassination of John Kennedy, the Challenger explosion, the major earthquake in California that disrupted a World Series game. With the help of colleagues elsewhere in the country, he tested the memories of students, mainly freshmen, the day after the Challenger disaster, and the day after the earthquake, asking them to record such matters as where they were when they heard the news, what they said or did, and the reactions of others. Then he retested the same students three years later. These students still had vivid memories of details surrounding each event, but in the intervening years their imaginations had so abetted those memories, or later events had so altered them, that they were remembering details that according to their earlier words never had happened.

It occurred to me, in listening to Neisser, that my own experience of conversion—the moment in my darkened study in 1959 that told me that the phenomenal world was both sacred and interconnected (in other words, that a unity exists, however normally unavailable to our conscious minds)—was like a "flashbulb memory" in that it was precipitated by a crisis and that it was accompanied by a vivid recall of the environment in which it took place. The only differences were that for me the crisis had not actually occurred—it was simply imminent, a threat—and the "flashbulb" that illuminated it was more metaphysical than real. It had transformed the world as it had transformed my life and determined not only my writing career but the direction of my teaching.

Among the papers that Marcia sent me was one called "Fact, Fantasy, and Public Policy" that fit my own inclinations, for it was informal, autobiographical, and sometimes quite funny. In it, she discusses—if not a "flashbulb"—a "lightbulb" of her own, the one that sent her off on her own professional path. (How do we distinguish "flashbulb" from "lightbulb" memories? Maybe the former apply to surprising or chaotic events external to us, the latter to revelations—insights or intuitions—that occur within. I would guess that my own



revelation can be seen, according to such a distinction, more as a "lightbulb" than a "flashbulb.")

Marcia's lightbulb was occasioned by a drawing in an introductory psychology book of a figure, one ambiguous enough to be seen by some viewers as a duck, by others as a rabbit. It struck her that "the possibilities for experience were determined by the mind as well as the world." This view was compatible with the times, for she was at Berkeley during the chaotic and ambiguous sixties, but it leads to the frightening question that later she would ask, "If even what we see depends on what we already know, and if what we remember depends upon how we interpreted what we saw, and includes the not-necessarily-true inferences we drew, what then is the relation between what we perceive and remember to reality?" So a "lightbulb" determined Marcia's career, as an earlier one determined mine; she has been led by hers to examine the various kinds of "reality checks" that society at large and specific professions impose upon us, as well as those kinds of reality checks that can be used by each of us to determine whether a particular memory is based on experience—on perceptual evidence, inaccurate as it may be—or is wholly a product of our imagination or dreaming self.

It is a simple truism that all of the creative arts impose imagination upon experience; but of those arts, only literature expresses imagination's value in words. Supposedly, the author's imagination reflects values that are meaningful to the rest of us. Does the subjectivity of our perceptions—which, as Marcia Johnson points out, are so capable of giving us misleading or untrue insights—have a redeeming feature, then? Does imagination impart to what we see an intangible dimension that is a necessary part of our conception of reality? A good physical scientist would never answer "yes" to such a question. But as a writer, I would answer "yes": paradoxical as it may seem, the human world, and even the phenomenal world in which it is contained, would appear to me as devoid of meaningful substance were it not for my imposition of some quality upon what I perceive. I've had a number of later lightbulbs that depended on my first. One of them occurred in a moment of near-despair. It told me that my own sense of "reality," of whatever gives substance to human affairs, is a moral construction, requiring some possibility of goodness whatever our



propensity toward greed, cruelty, and violence: without that human possibility, the world would seem phantasmagorical.

The question of the subjectivity of the arts—of the role that imagination plays—is such a vast one that I can't begin to discuss it adequately. I will limit myself to some comments about the two major movements in literature in the twentieth century. These tendencies—modernism and postmodernism—are also reflected in the other arts, and for that matter outside them. In the most encompassing sense, limited only by its reference to Western civilization, modernism is applied to the growing emphasis on the individual, to the movement which replaced medievalism many hundreds of years ago; much of postmodern theory, as I will soon indicate, contradicts such an emphasis. In literature itself, though, modernism is usually used to characterize that kind of writing in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries which distinguished itself from both naturalism and realism. In our century, modernism and postmodernism refer to literary positions that have much in common, including a dissatisfaction with conventional forms. Individual writers of our own postmodern day, including some very good ones, frequently reflect both modernist and postmodernist attitudes, just as earlier writers like Nathanael West foreshadow postmodernism itself.

What I see are two competing interpretations of reality, one inner and the other outer. The first—modernism—goes inward, for it is alienated by the material considerations of the exterior world; it goes inward in pursuit of spiritual essences, of enduring values that transcend the randomness, the apparent pointlessness, of daily existence. The latter—postmodernism—goes outward, frequently delighting in the immense variety, the very randomness and irrationality that modernism attempts to surmount. Nothing—certainly nothing so precious (in either sense of the word) as a spiritual essence—can be said to define or bind us. But in a way "nothing" itself can be said to represent us, for "nothing" is the end not only of our individual lives but of the civilization of which we are part. (Look further into the future and the earth melts into the expanding and dying sun.)

To the degree that "modern," at least in its conventional usage, refers to the present—that is, to a moment in time always to be replaced by another present—"postmodern" has a certain foreboding quality about it, as if survivors of the modern period were simply going through the motions, the human game being in some ultimate sense already over: in this respect, postmodern literature often is suffused with an apocalyptic atmosphere. Actually, the notion of life as a game is congenial to the postmodern mind, and, given its assumptions, its literature is surprisingly playful and self-referential. Given those assumptions, though, postmodernism is deterministic, the characters in its novels mere chess pieces, or puppets in a show, their movements dictated by an intellectual construct, a grand metaphor imagined by their maker.

To illustrate the difference separating the two movements, let me refer to Marcel Proust, an early literary modernist. Memory is Proust's subject, far more than is the case for most writers. According to him, "The true paradises are the paradises we have lost." Why is this so? He classifies memory into two types: one is conscious recall, the kind we can will into existence: it provides something like a photograph of a past image, something fixed in time. The kind he values are involuntary memories—brought before us by a smell, a musical phrase, or even something so trivial as a momentary loss of one's balance. These carry us back to an earlier episode, evoking all the emotions surrounding that episode so that we relive it. But involuntary memories can transcend time and put us in touch with the eternal "essence of things" that we were unaware of during our initial experience; imagination inter-

# of the Tongue

twined with the return of the actual event makes the involuntary memory superior to the event itself, and this is the reason that "true paradises" are those "we have lost."

Virginia Woolf provides another example of modernism. In a famous or infamous remark, she declared, "On or about December, 1910, human character changed." What she meant, of course, was that *she* had changed, in her perception of reality and hence in her attitude toward the fictional characters she and others created. In trying to make sense of this odd remark, critics sometimes attribute it to a lightbulb that turned on in her head—lightbulbs seem to be part of my theme—as the consequence of viewing a highly controversial exhibition of Post-Impressionist paintings assembled in London by her friend Roger Fry. The change told her that "reality" was not to be found in our social structures, our business or industrial activities, our wars and competing ideologies, but rather in our inner life or stream of consciousness, particularly in our moments of "being"—moments in which we are most intensely alive, most responsive to "a token of some real thing beyond appearances" that later can make us perceive a transcendent pattern in existence.

Now it is obvious from what I've said about that star-filled night in 1959 that I must belong to the modernist camp. The insight that came to me was involuntary; if it is an example of Proust's involuntary memory, its particular antecedent is unknown to me. But let me be just as outrageous as Virginia Woolf and say that the change from modernism to postmodernism occurred on the same night in 1959 that I saw the mounded snow on a bird's nest, and a lightbulb switched on in my head. For what had influenced me—not only the imminent threat of nuclear annihilation, but the knowledge of Buchenwald and Auschwitz and other irrational and dehumanizing horrors of our century, horrors resonating against much of the unsettling information humans have learned about themselves through and since Darwin and Freud—surely had influenced others: in literature, something called "black humor" had already arrived, and black humor presaged postmodernism. A grim determinism was surely in the frigid air during those dark hours. I am bolstered in what I'm saying about the birth of postmodernism that very night because Thomas Pynchon was probably writing away then, in another Ithaca room. His novel *V*, an early postmodern work, would appear a few years later; and Tom was an undergraduate advisee of mine who never required advice.

So I certainly understand the reasons for postmodernism, and recognize that postmodernist writers like Pynchon have produced the most influential novels of the past four decades. I share with them the sense that the conventions of storytelling are more outmoded than even Proust and Woolf felt

them to be. Why didn't I have another kind of conversion experience, then, one that would have headed me down the postmodernist route? Because I was already too old for that. Because I was married and the father of two young sons. Because I lacked the required inventive facility. Because I was what I was. To write from the self—wholly from one's memories—has enormous limitations for a creative writer, for it excludes the invention of fictional characters or events; but it has benefits I found equally immense. What a difference it makes, to turn either inward or outward! Turn inward and your reality can still be invested with a spiritual truth. Turn inward and you realize that neither you nor the actual people memory brings to mind are puppets: you and they remain capable of free will, each person determining, within necessary and sometimes tragic limits, his or her unique destiny. For here your memory is working to understand the present in terms of your past, through all the associations the past makes with it; though the future is ever in your mind, you bring to the present the rich potential you have discovered only in that past. Will your discoveries influence others, and can they have a cumulative social effect? Conceivably, this just might be the case—that is, if you write of them as honestly and clearly as you can in the expectation that others will see in your experiences a reflection of their own. These were the thoughts that came to me in the weeks and months following that crucial night, for I hoped I could help bring about a change.

The determinism found in postmodern novels predates the coming of theorists—postmodernists themselves—to our universities. Their early pronouncements, indicating the writer's entrapment in the social and linguistic texts, are equally deterministic. Most of that determinism still hangs on, as Jonathan Culler demonstrates in *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*, a concise, balanced, and remarkably lucid guide to the maze of theory. In expanding on some remarks by Michel Foucault about the "decentering of the subject" brought about by psychoanalysis, linguistics, and anthropology, Culler says,

If the possibilities of thought and action are determined by a series of systems which the subject does not control or even understand, then the subject is 'decentered' in the sense that it is not a source or centre to which one refers to explain events. It is something formed by these forces. Thus, psychoanalysis treats the sub-

ject not as a unique essence but as the product of intersecting psychic, sexual, and linguistic mechanisms. Marxist theory sees the subject as determined by class position: it either profits from others' labour or labours for others' profit. Feminist theory stresses the impact of socially constructed gender roles on making the subject what he or she is. Queer theory has argued that the heterosexual subject is constructed through the repression of the possibility of homosexuality.

Neuroscientists believe that their research into the human brain has overturned the determinism that has haunted us since Descartes, who saw the mind as separate from the brain. But now we know that the mind is not divorced from the brain, or from the material world. We know also that memory is the key to consciousness, and human consciousness constructs memories—as Antonio Damasio has remarked—of the future as well as of the past. To Gerald Edelman, the mind (in its historical development, and at each and every moment for the living individual) is a biological process, a process that demonstrates an intentionality not found elsewhere in nature; because of its awareness of time, it possesses "the

ability to model the past and the future." Thus our minds permit us enough free will to make present changes, enabling us to alter the future in significant ways. We have suffered far too long a sense of our "decentration," Edelman says, almost as if he were responding to the above quotation; neuroscience demonstrates that fatalism, like all forms of "silly reductionism," does not apply.

In the form of postmodernism, though, determinism—as I hope I have shown—still haunts our thinking. And surely all of us, postmodernists or not, have felt the hold of external events upon us—particularly those events that make the reading of twentieth-century history such a painful exercise. Compared to the glow briefly over Hiroshima or the illumination over fire-bombed Dresden, or over much more recent cities and villages with their straw roofs in flames, doesn't my little lightbulb in 1959 seem dreadfully dim? I tell myself that mine is quite different in kind, and cannot be compared; that individually, personally, we all carry in memory a similar bulb, and that if all these bulbs were extinguished, we'd be huddled together in the hallucinatory dark. How do we regain greater control over the external world,

making our institutions a better representation of what we know to be true within us? E.M. Forster, an uneasy modernist, foresaw the dangers of the split as early as 1910, and said, "Only connect." But how? A major irony of postmodernist theory is that, while it is quite adept at illustrating the blindnesses, prejudices, and ambiguities in a given culture's text, any necessary social change requires in us what theory denies that we possess: free will and an encompassing spiritual insight.

Postmodernist theorists could say that the modernists I have cited represent only the cultural elite, and that my own views about human will and spiritual essence illustrate no more than my own privileged condition as a member both of the white majority and the professional class. I can reply that they too are elitist, maybe even more so than I am; and furthermore that the spiritual revelation that came to me so long ago may well have been a biological memory from the distant past, from the primitive ancestors I share with them. (This kind of genetic determinism I gladly accept.) I can also say that the irony implicit in theory represents the contradiction between theory and the theorists' own essence or spiritual nature. And I can add that countless individuals in the past have battled all the powers assembled against them for the sake of their personal insights—and that many of these individuals have made a small difference, and a few have even won.

Ultimately, determinism rules, in accordance with physical laws; nothing I've said really contradicts that. But life—conscious life—remains a mystery in which we muddle along, doing the best we can to discover the truths that can guide us. Given the deceptions, the half-truths and outright lies we find in the media as well as in Washington and other centers of political and economic power today, we desperately need the kind of insight that the research of psychologists like Marcia Johnson provides us; for today more than ever we need to be aware of the possibilities of error in our own memories and in what others tell us is true. We need to devise "reality checks." Can we, as readers, also impose a "reality check" on any given writer's imagination that is based on the qualities of imagination itself? The question may seem quixotic, but as a writer and reader I'm always doing precisely that. Memory makes associations; it imposes whatever order it can on experience in the attempt to make sense of it. To my way of thinking, it is searching always for a synthesis or unity beyond its grasp: memory itself has a spiritual dimension that we refer to as the soul. To the degree that another person's imagination is devoted to that search—devoted with integrity, without sentimentality of any kind—I give it my measure of validity.

James McConkey is completing a novel.



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## Battle of the Books

*continued from page 1*

A broad base of ideas and artistic expression is an important part of any flourishing society. So it is disturbing that the major bookstore chains increasingly determine which books will be available to the public. According to Nancy Bereano of Firebrand Press in Ithaca, "It's insidious because it concentrates power in the hands of fewer and fewer individuals." The buyers for the chains have tremendous power over what America reads and doesn't read. Many small press publishers fear that the personal preferences of a single buyer will impact the distribution of a book so greatly that it will not be economically feasible to print it. As Alex Skutt, founder of McBooks Press, discovered when he began to distribute the book *The Boxing Register: International Boxing Hall of Fame Official Record Book*, "The buyer for one of the two main chains didn't like boxing, had a personal objection, and only stocked it very lightly, even though it sold quite well at the other chain."

Presently, the chain stores do try to offer a wide selection of books in such diverse categories as gender studies, holocaust studies, history, philosophy, and gay and lesbian studies. Bereano points out, "When a person enters a chain store and goes to the section on gender studies, for example, they see so many books, they think that they're being represented." But if present trends continue and the chains do succeed in driving out the independents, their interest in stocking slower-selling books will certainly decline. As William Petrocelli wrote in the ABA's *Book-selling This Week*, "The monopolist's handbook has a couple of simple rules: To gain a monopoly, you flood the market with goods and cut prices; to exploit a monopoly you restrict the amount of goods and raise prices. Is there any good reason to believe that this will not occur in the book business as it approaches monopoly or near-monopoly conditions?"

Already, the Book Industry Study Group reports that, since 1995, the number of adult trade books in the United States has increased by less than 1%. Chain store buyers are increasingly reluctant to stock books that are not predicted to sell in large numbers right out of the gate. This reduces the incentive for publishers to take on new authors or to publish more specialized books. According to Barbara Bonds Thomas, former president of the ABA, "We have already seen publishers going to chains and asking if they will buy a title and then not publishing that title if the chains say no." Even if the book is published, most publishers in that situation will downplay it, hold back on promotional money, or give it a small print run—all of which means that it will go out of print quickly. Chains frequently pass over important books whose authors have no recognizable track record. Later, after these books have built a word-of-mouth following in the independent stores, the chains gladly begin to stock them. Authors such as Barbara

Kingsolver, Amy Tan, Anne Lamott, Faye Kellerman, and Frank McCourt have acknowledged that without this word-of-mouth phenomenon in independent stores their careers would never have gotten started.

Just as troubling is the possibility of censorship. Amazon raised quite a stir in May this year when it removed from its on-line listings *A Piece of Blue Sky* by UK writer Jon Atack. The book is an exposé of the Scientology movement and has been the subject of various lawsuits by the Church of Scientology. Amazon spokesperson, Lizzie Allen, would only say that "under certain circumstances, for legal reasons, we need to stop selling the book."

For those who view books as vehicles for ideas, the battlefield of independent bookstores is a complex one, involving issues of freedom of expression, public accountability and the preservation of a free marketplace of ideas. The ABA, in addition to spearheading legal battles, has recently introduced a marketing program called "Book Sense" to establish a kind of collective identity for independent bookstores that will raise public consciousness of the issues involved. Individual bookstore members are in no way constrained to fit a specific image or conform to any pricing or buying policies. Rather, the program seeks to build a national identity for independent bookstores while celebrating the unique character of each store.

Currently 1,100 independent bookstores in 50 states and in Puerto Rico have joined the Book Sense campaign. The program features gift certificates that can be used interchangeably in participating independent bookstores. And, capitalizing on the passion that independent booksellers have for hand-selling the books they have enjoyed the most, the program has introduced Book Sense 76, a compilation of book suggestions by individuals at member book stores. The Book Sense tag line "Independent Bookstores for Independent Minds" sums up the impetus behind this lively marketing operation.

What will be lost if Borders, Barnes and Noble, and Amazon.com succeed in monopolizing the retail book business? Basically, bookstores that reflect the diverse communities they serve, that support local and unknown authors of merit, that employ staff who truly know and love books, that are passionate about treating their customers as individuals and not as faceless consumers—those bookstores will be gone. And it is doubtful if the computer programs at corporate headquarters will ever share in the sentiment expressed by Susan Scott, a former manager of the now defunct independent bookstore Books & Co. in New York City: "When someone goes home with a good book and reads it, the world is a better place."

*Erin Coughlin recently returned to Ithaca. She writes prose and poetry.*

## Taking Leave

*continued from page 3*

"I'm a grandfather now," he said proudly slipping a photo from his wallet. "Your cousin Joey and his wife had a boy. His name is Cologero."

I took the picture and glanced at it and wondered where all the years had gone. I remembered my cousin Joey when he was a teenager wearing a football jersey rushing out of his house in College Point to play two-hand touch. Now he was a father. I handed the photo back to my uncle and said, "Congratulations."

I stepped into the viewing room and encountered my sisters Gracie and Maria. Both were drowned in black clothes. We hugged and kissed and each cried on my shoulder. I was quickly surrounded by other family members, including my father, whom I had not seen in ten years. His hair was pure white and as fine as rabbit's fur.

"You made it," he said.

We embraced. "Yeah dad, security cleared me."

Because of restrictions, I had not spoken to my dad while he was away. I stood there and scrutinized him, searching for the man I had last seen on a visit ten years ago. I knew I'd never find him again.

The room was still and quiet. Chairs lined one wall and a sofa the other. There were tables with lamps on them, and others that held crystal bowls filled with mints. At the rear of the room my grandmother lay lifeless, surrounded by an assortment of colorful floral arrangements. As I approached I could smell the familiar fragrance of freshly picked roses. I placed my hand on the edge of her bronze casket and gazed at her face. She was thinner than the last time I saw her five years ago. Her skin was pale and colored with a thick coat of makeup that made her look unnatural. She wore a smile that seemed more like a contrived grin. On her wrist was the same gold bracelet that she always wore on special occasions. It was heavy and adorned with several medals that jingled like bells when she walked. Now, the charms—large solid gold hearts and diamond-studded medallions inscribed with dates and heartfelt expressions—hung stiffly from her frozen wrist. She was dressed in a beautiful silk and lace pink gown that stretched to her ankles. On her feet she wore tiny pink shoes, the color of sea shells.

All these years I had expected this day. I just never thought it would happen so damn suddenly. Now all I had left were memories. Fragmented remnants of our lives scattered on the lid of her coffin. One was a picture of my grandmother taken in 1985, the year after I went away, standing by the dock of our home in Howard Beach. Boats adorned with flags, some with fly bridges as tall as our house, floated on the surface of the calm waters

waiting to cast off. She's wearing a pair of shorts and sneakers, and has a huge grin on her face. And there beside her are the rose bushes she raised exploding in brilliant full bloom.

At our house my grandmother usually kept large bowls of warm food in the oven. Pans of chicken cutlets and pasta, or meat and white potatoes were always available for visitors who wanted to sit down and eat. On Sundays Nan always cooked a huge meal, large pastel colored bowls filled with pasta, marinara sauce, garlic and freshly picked basil. Then we passed around trays of meatballs, sausages, and meats stacked a foot high. I would wipe the sauce from my lips between mouthfuls of food and gulps of red wine mixed with Seven-up. My grandfather wore a napkin tucked into his shirt and a pen in his pocket; he would busily grate a chunk of fresh ricotta cheese onto his macaroni. His arm moved in round, sweeping, circular motions. When he was finished, I took the cheese from him and I did the same.

When I used to come home after Junior High School to a house filled with the aroma of sauce simmering on the stove, I'd snatch a loaf of semolina bread, tear off a hunk, and soak it in the sweet red gravy. Before long I'd hear my grandmother say, "Get outa there, will you?" She didn't say it in a mean way, she said it proudly, delighted by the thought of how much I loved her cooking.

The time to leave arrived with a nod from Officer Warren. Everyone surged forward to kiss me goodbye. My uncle and I grasped each other one last time and he said, "You were your grandmother's world, she loved you more than anything." Then my father held me and exploded into a violent, shuddering convulsion of sobs. We stood there clinging to each other like passengers on a plane about to crash, hurtling towards the ground. At that moment, with my dad's tears falling on my shoulder, I felt like I was his father and he was my son, and in the solace of my arms he discovered the safety I had once sought in his.

I walked to the van and extended my hands to Officer Rizzo to have the cuffs clamped on my wrists again. Instead he said, "We'll put them on later, after we eat." This surprised me. I hopped into the van, slid close to the window, and peered out one last time hoping to freeze this moment that would have to last in the pictures of my mind eternally. I watched my uncle reach into his jacket pocket, pull out a cigar, and light it up; taking short, quick puffs. As we rolled away I waved to him and wondered if my expression betrayed my sadness.

*Joe Miceli is an inmate at the Auburn Correctional Facility.*

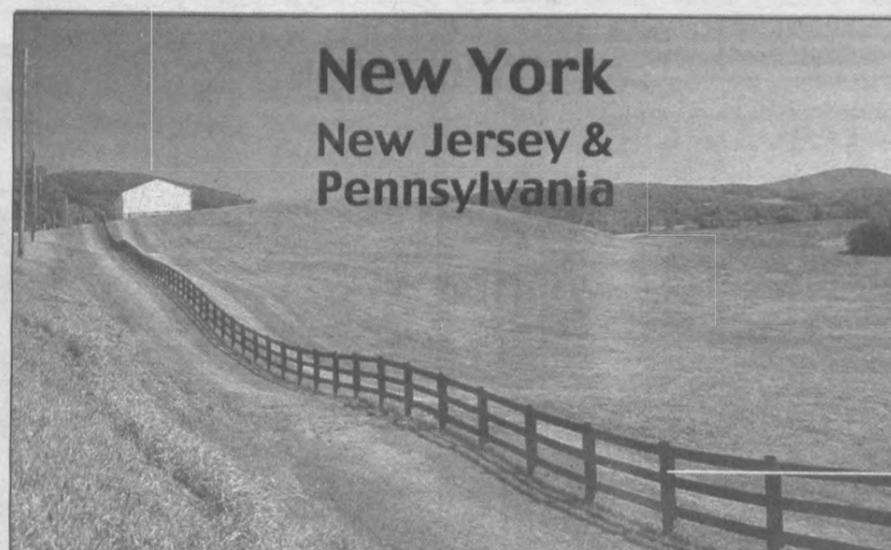
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## FICTION

## Story Problems

## Anna Harrington

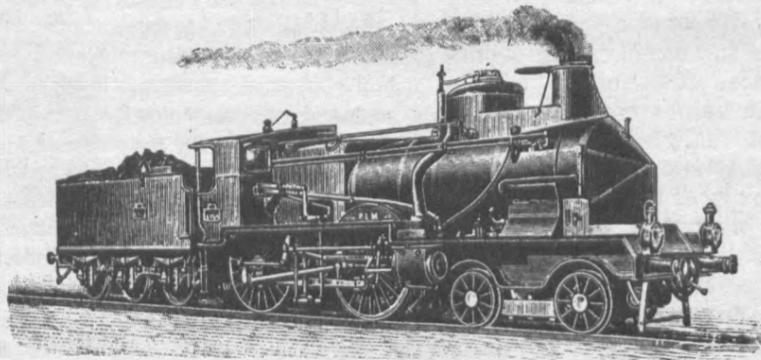
A train leaves Philadelphia at 8am and travels west at 100 miles per hour. Two hours later, a second train leaves San Francisco and travels east at 80 miles per hour. If a careless switch operator accidentally throws the wrong switch, connecting the two tracks on which the trains are traveling, how long will it take before the two trains collide? And would it make a difference if on one of those trains, a young woman wearing a bright yellow dress were on her way to meet her fiance with the deed to their new home tucked safely inside her purse? Or if the conductor of the train were only two days from retiring after thirty years with the railroad? Or if there were a boy on his first family vacation to the seaside? But what if that careless operator sends only one train down the wrong track with his accidental flick of a lever, to a track that leads not to a collision with the other train but to a dead end in front of a granite wall. Would it matter what train the woman in the yellow dress is riding? Or the little boy? Or the retiring conductor? And if the careless switch operator has slept through his shift from too much drinking the night before, causing a more careful operator to pull the correct lever and keep the two speeding trains separated, where will they pass and at what time? Would anyone care, including the boy who just threw up on the woman in the yellow dress?

What if her name were Wanda? Yes, Wanda Jean Franklin, a young woman who has never before owned a yellow (and now stained) dress, much less a wide-brimmed hat and matching handbag. What if she has saved up her loose change for months in a pickle jar she keeps hidden beneath her bed in the boardinghouse where she lives in exchange for fifty dollars a week and evening dish-duty, until enough crumpled bills, dimes and nickels have gathered to buy the (now stained) yellow dress. The same dress that she first sees in the department store window, worn by the faceless mannequin with the cream-colored vinyl purse and shiny new shoes, the night her boyfriend takes her to the movies. Would it matter what the boyfriend's name is, if he were a Dwight, a Norman, Max, or Jim? Would a different name cause them to walk down a different street on the way home, perhaps past the park instead, so that she never sees the dress in the window? And what of the movie? If they see *Some Like It Hot* instead of *An Affair to Remember*, will they be holding hands so tightly, walking so closely and slowly together down the avenue? Or would they be so wrapped up in each other's eyes that they don't notice the window display at all, and the next morning a plump woman with flame-red hair purchases the yellow dress for her niece?

For every story problem there is a set of givens, and it is a given that Wanda Jean Franklin sees the yellow dress in the window, that her boyfriend Jim comments on how pretty she'd look in it, that instead of seeing *An Affair to Remember* or *Some Like It Hot*, they buy a ticket for her landlady so that Wanda can smuggle him up the backstairs of the boarding house, to spend two hours making love to him. And Jim proposes to her. But what if, instead of proposing to her, he tells her that he's taking a job with the Pacific-Atlantic railroad? Would it matter that he has to leave that same night? That he leaves her in tears at the station to catch the midnight train to St. Louis and promises to write every day? And what would it mean if he saves his money from the job to surprise Wanda with a honeymoon cottage with a white picket fence? But it takes two years to save the money, and the letters grow shorter, fewer, colder. And the dress that Wanda sees in the window, the yellow one with the matching shoes and handbag, is bought and lovingly hung on her room's wall, like a precious painting, nearly eighteen months before.

Then, after a year of waiting for Jim to either return or send for her to join him, the dress is moved into her closet. After two years, it has gradually voyaged through the closet and now hangs, nearly forgotten, in the very back.

And what of Jim working the railroad in St. Louis? Which would have the larger impact on those two speeding trains: if he dedicates himself to his job and thinks of Wanda at every moment, or if he spends long nights with strange women and thinks of her only when he feels obligated to respond to her increasingly desperate letters? But what if those letters aren't desperate but simply distanced because she's living her own life independent of him and any false sense of the future? He might even suspect that she's seeing another man. And what if she is? Would she have the right, and would she enjoy it, even as the yellow dress hangs in her closet? Would she understand if the reason his letters come fewer, shorter, and colder is that he's working double shifts to earn as much pay as possible? And what would it mean if Jim finally sends for her to join him, if he mails her a one-way ticket to start a new life together, and if on the night before she is due to arrive, all his friends at



the railroad throw him a party? And what if one of the people who attends, who arrives at just a few minutes past nine and drinks more beer than anyone else, is the man in charge of switching the levers that sends trains onto new tracks?

Suppose that the wrong lever were thrown and the tracks crossed...would the retiring conductor, even with his thirty years of railroad service, sense that something were wrong? Or would he be focused instead on the retirement condo he and his wife Maeve have just purchased in Sarasota, the one on the beach with the ice cream-colored pink and green awning? Or is he focusing on the bitter taste of the coffee Maeve has sent along with him in his metal thermos? No sugar, again. Would something seem different to him on that train trip, would the tracks sound different, vibrating peculiarly beneath the metal wheels? Would the engine run differently? The sound of the steam whistle? The smell of the air? Would he be able to sense any difference at all? Or maybe there is no difference between this train ride and the thousands of others he has taken during in his long career. Not even a cold shiver up his back. And if he does shiver, in some kind of telepathic or karmic warning, would he simply shrug it away, blame it on the morning chill, and reach for his thermos of bitter coffee?

Would it make a difference that the train crew surprises him that day with a retirement gift of a brand new fishing rod and a jelly roll with a single candle flaming up in the middle? He loves jelly rolls, they all know it, just as they all know that Maeve forbids him to eat them. Your cholesterol, dear, she warns gently. Would it make a difference if he suffers a mild heart attack two years before? Or that he spends a week in the hospital hooked up to all kinds of whizzing machines? And if the heart attack is actually severe, forcing him to remain in the hospital fluctuating between life and death for over three weeks? What if that is the reason for his retirement? Could that heart attack dull his senses to the point where he won't notice when the train turns

off its correct course and speeds down the wrong track, won't suspect that the scenery passing by is strange and unknown, won't feel any shivers of cosmic forewarning? What if there is no heart attack at all? Or no wife. What if she divorces him ten years before, leaving behind a house full of empty rooms and a kitchen stocked only with a single box of jelly doughnuts? What if he never marries her at all? If on that night when he meets a beautiful and funny woman at the train station in Mobile—an adorable creature who is lost and stops him to ask for directions—she catches her scheduled train and he never sees her again?

Still, he would smile at the boy who bounces aboard the first-class car with his parents, unable to sit still because of his excitement. That is a given. The boy with the light brown hair and Buster Brown shoes, dressed in a small suit that matches his father's and holding a little suitcase of his very own. And the boy would smile back, perhaps even wave, hoping secretly without daring to ask that the conductor would offer to show him the mighty engine on one of the stops. Would his mother admonish him for fidgeting in his seat, for marking fingerprints all over the window,

moon? Or adopt a baby sister for him? And if one of his parents remains behind because someone has to take care of the dog and water the plants, would he be as happy, even as the train speeds westward at 100 miles per hour? What if his family has never bought a dog? Or any plants. Would it make a difference to the conductor who runs to fetch a bucket and clean towels, or to the woman in the (now stained) yellow dress who begins to weep loudly because she has no other dress to change into before her fiance greets her at the station?

For every problem, there exists a specific and limited set of givens around which a unique solution revolves. It is a given that one train leaves Philadelphia at 8pm and travels west at 100 mph, while a second train leaves San Francisco two hours later and travels east at 80 mph. It is also a given that a careless switch operator does throw the wrong switch and does send those two speeding trains onto the same track, with no way to detour them or stop them, and it is a given that they will collide at a combined velocity of 180 mph somewhere in middle America. There will be no survivors. Within this set of givens, would it matter that if on one of those trains, a young woman wearing a vomit-stained yellow dress were on her way to meet her fiance with the deed to their new home tucked safely away in her purse? Or if the conductor who was only two days from retiring after thirty years with the railroad wipes jelly from his mouth? Or if the boy on his first family vacation to the seaside suffers motion-sickness? Or if a twelve-year-old girl in Muncie, Indiana, her pencil paused in the middle of calculating the exact time of the impending collision, wonders if she will ever use algebra in real life?

Anna Harrington is the winner of several short fiction and poetry contests.

for asking too many questions? Would it dampen his excitement at all or merely make him even more nervous? So nervous that he develops motion sickness? And in his excitement, would he notice any of the people around him, including the woman in the bright yellow dress until he vomits on her just as the train passes into Chicago?

What if his parents are lying to him? If there is no vacation to the seaside as they promise, but instead a trip to a California hospital? Could the conductor tell, even as he waves to the boy, that Tommy is terribly sick? Would the pretty woman in the yellow dress scream less loudly when he vomits on her if she knows that his medication causes queasy stomachs? Would the conductor take him to meet the engineer if he knows the boy is dying? The crayon drawings Tommy makes of the passing scenery, including one of a railroad track curving away from the train as the cars switch tracks, would be sent back to his classmates and teacher. And if there is no sickness? If the trip is an excuse to leave him with his aunt while his parents take a second honey-

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## Imagining the Holocaust

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# The New Muddle

Edward T. Chase

The American media largely missed out on the fact that Europe's two key leaders, Germany's Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder and England's Prime Minister Tony Blair, have written together and now have issued a revolutionary socio-economic manifesto, entitled "Die Neue Mitte, or the Third Way." It is not easy to find a copy. England's ambassador to the United Nations, the Honorable Jeremy Greenstock, kindly gave me one. In it Schroeder and Blair vow to "deepen and continually further the concept of the New Center and the Third Way." They invite "all social democrats in Europe" to join with them. To this end they will be holding "a series of ministerial meetings," "will seek discussion with political leaders in other European countries," and "will establish a network of experts, far-sighted thinkers and political fora and discussion meetings."

The intent of this effort is to modernize social democracy's socio-economic "programmes" to meet the "challenges of the 21st century." Such modernization is imperative, they write, in order for social democrats, now dominating almost all the countries of the European Union, to stand not only for social justice "but also for economic dynamism and an unleashing of creativity and innovation."

Inspired by the prolonged economic boom in the U.S., this manifesto sharply reverses basic social-democratic principles and preaches neoconservative clichés. Hailing the transition from an industrial economy to the new "knowledge-based service economy," the two leaders write that "social democrats must seize the opportunity of this radical economic change. It offers Europe a chance to catch up with the United States."

Blair and Schroeder begin their declaration by characterizing the basic tenets of social democracy in terms that any neoconservative or Tory would readily espouse: "The promotion of social justice was sometimes confused with the imposition of the equality of outcome," they write, i.e., equal opportunity wasn't enough; everyone was to enjoy the same benefits.

The result was a neglect of the importance of rewarding effort and responsibility, and the association of social democracy with conformity and mediocrity rather than the celebration of creativity, diversity and excellence. Work was burdened with ever higher costs. The means of achieving social justice became identified with ever higher levels of public spending regardless of what they achieved or the impact of the taxes required to fund it on competition, employment or living standards.

"Too often rights were elevated above responsibilities," their scolding of their fellow social democrats continues. What's more:

The ability of national governments to fine-tune in order to secure growth and jobs has been exaggerated. The importance of individual and business enterprise to the creation of wealth has been undervalued. The weaknesses of markets have been overstated and their strength underestimated.

One can almost hear a George Bush (either one), a Trent Lott, an Irving or William Kristol, a Margaret Thatcher say "Amen."

While conceding the need for international cooperation to cope with the global financial problems, they preach "as a general principle, power should be devolved to the lowest possible level," echoing the time-honored Republican shibboleth. Schroeder and Blair's manifesto seems to take on emotional fervor when they declare:

The past two decades of neo-liberal laissez-faire are over. In its place, however, there must not be a renaissance of 1970s-style reliance on deficit spending and heavy-handed state intervention. Such an approach now points in the wrong direction...We want a society which celebrates successful entrepreneurs just as it does artists and footballers—and which values creativity in all spheres of life...the taxation of companies should be simplified and corporations' tax rates cut...corporate tax cuts raise profitability and strengthen the incentives to invest.

Taking on the mantle of supply-side ideology, the manifesto continues:

In the past social democrats often gave the impression that the objective of growth would be achieved by successful demand management alone. Modern social democrats recognize that supply-side policies have a central and complementary role to play.

One evident consequence in Germany of Chancellor Schroeder's drift to the right has been his party's dramatic series of recent electoral defeats in several heretofore safe Social Democratic Party states and in municipal elections. Given the overcelebrated spectacle of America's record stock market and growth boom, the pressure on Schroeder and Blair to try to adopt American across-the-board deregulation and its freewheeling juggernaut capitalism is perhaps understandable. But while the American model of success strongly supports liberal political and civil rights (which tend to further market freedom), it neglects concern for the social and economic rights that are essential if a tolerable degree of equality is to be realized in a capitalist market economy. These basic enti-

lements include access to lifelong medical-health service, opportunity for employment, a decent pension, and high-quality public education. These elements of social justice, largely realized in social democratic Europe and Canada, are not the product of market forces, but of government acting to mitigate the negative aspects of unrestricted capitalism.

For years now, editorialists in the *Wall Street Journal* and other neoconservative publications have lambasted Europe's social democratic nations as exemplars of "Eurosclerosis"—economic stagnation caused by stifling regulations on business, high tax rates, a bloated welfare security system, and excessive state intervention in the economy. Yet in a recent study Seth Ackerman of Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting shows that, over the decade business cycle 1989-1998, the German economy *per capita* grew more rapidly than the economy in the U.S. It is true that unemployment in Germany is unacceptably high at 10%-12%, and Schroeder's failure to deal with joblessness is one of the reasons for his growing unpopularity. But even here, Ackerman notes that the German unemployment rate falls to 9.4% if the same standardized statistical measure is used by the U.S. and Germany, while the U.S. rate would be 7.5%. At the same time, social democratic Germany provides universal health insurance, a guaranteed living minimal wage and pensions, tuition-free universities, shorter work weeks and an average six weeks vacation. Sweden too continues its generous cradle-to-grave welfare security system and, according to the O.E.C., invests a substantially larger part of its gross domestic product in research, training, and development than any other country.

Meantime, America's inequality gap increases and 46 million Americans, 17% of the population, have now (October 1999) dropped below the official poverty line. European "malaise," "Eurosclerosis," isn't what it's cracked up to be, nor is the American economic boom. While enormously enriching those in the upper quintile, especially the top 1%, the American boom has not freed those below the median level from marginal security, unprecedentedly long working hours, and the general need for both spouses to work. In the U.S., it is the best of times for many, productivity and economic growth have risen, but the absence of social and economic rights has left millions in the lurch.

Recent reports seem to indicate that Chancellor Schroeder may be having second thoughts about the wisdom of *Die Neue Mitte* in the face of growing opposition from German workers. As the gap in the U.S. between rich and poor continues to widen, perhaps American workers will begin to learn from their European counterparts.

Edward T. Chase is the former editor of *Times Books*.

## Northern Sweden

*People there are farmers. Farmers  
don't travel in the summer,  
they hay.*

*They don't know that elsewhere on  
this planet  
there are warm black nights  
in June.*

*They think all the June nights  
are the same: coldly  
bright*

*suffused in greenish light, the sun  
so pale you can look him in  
the eye*

*so small you can cup him in your palm  
the tender way you cup a  
new-born chick.*

*Earlier, he bent to kiss the birches,  
blushed  
and busy, busy, hurried back  
to work*

*conducting his officious industry  
with a nervous  
icy fire*

*knocking the moon out of her orbit,  
—she won't be seen  
for months—*

*and waking the birds. They sing madly,  
madly  
war-like marches. When in love  
they shriek.*

*He has no power. Berries ripen on their own,  
darken, sweeten, will freeze before  
they rot.*

GUNILLA FEIGENBAUM

Gunilla Feigenbaum is a painter and writer who was born in Sweden and now lives in New York City.



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# The Nail

Tom Eisner

When I go to concerts, I love to follow the music with score in hand, particularly if I want to savor the intricacies of a composition. That is why I looked forward so eagerly to that day in April 1998 when the Cayuga Chamber Orchestra, with Cornell Chorus and Glee Club, and a great set of soloists, was to perform Bach's St. John Passion in Bailey Hall. It was a splendid performance, under Peter Schreier, conductor, who also doubled as tenor in the evangelist role. I was very much moved, and my disbelieving nature notwithstanding, deeply grateful that there should have been a J.S. Bach in our

past, who could give such loving musical expression to religious feeling. I had a score by which to follow the performance, and I used it. The score was one that had been in the family for years, and there was something special about it, something at once ironic and evocative of a cruel past.

We lived in Germany in 1933, when Hitler came to power. My parents had been blissfully happy in that turbulent Berlin of the twenties: my mother as an artist, my father as a chemist. My father, though, should have been a musician. Music, without question, was his great love. He had bought his first piano with the proceeds of his very first professional paycheck, and he spent every spare "Pfennig" on music, music, and more music.

My parents thrived on concerts and operatic performances, and on musical evenings in the home. Dueting with partners at the piano, accompanying singers, or taking the piano part in chamber music—my father was good at it all, and he was appreciated for it. My mother loved him for it. My sister and I were imprinted on the sound.

My father built up a fabulous music library. His collection of piano duet pieces,

which I own to this day, filled shelves. So too did his collection of scores, which he loved to read. It was from him that I picked up the habit. I learned about Brahms by the radio, my hand in his, drawn in rhythm along the lines of the score. Music, my sister and I had been taught, is the perfume of life.

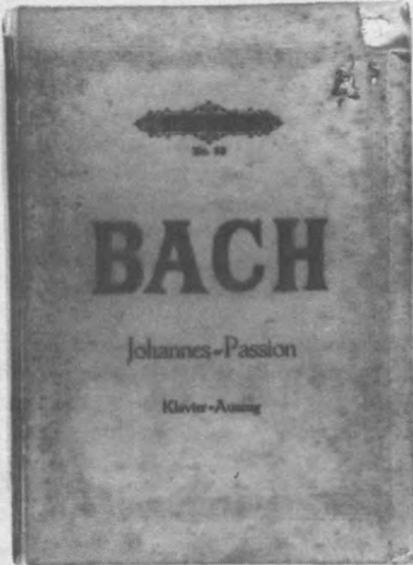
And then came Hitler. My mother had a true sense of what was to come and insisted, despite my father's initial reluctance, that we emigrate at once. My mother prevailed, and in April 1933 we left for Spain. One did not have to flee at that early time, but could leave with one's possessions. Priorities had to be set as to what to take, and my parents chose the basics—kids, double bed, and musical paraphernalia, in that order.

We departed for Barcelona after packing a number of crates for later shipment. The crates arrived in due course, with nothing stolen. But someone, somewhere, while the crates were in storage, had vented his rage by taking six-inch nails and driving them at random into the sides of the crates. There was no question as to the intent. Our Jewish name was clearly in evidence on the address labels. Bach's St. John Passion was one of the items pierced by a nail. The nail drove halfway into the volume, near the upper right-hand corner. You can still use

the tome as a score, although the pages stick at times as you try to turn them, and there are notes to be imagined where there are holes in the paper.

We always thought that the damage did not really matter. How could we think otherwise, considering the fate of those who stayed? But we saw meaning in the event nonetheless. It seemed so perfidious, and symbolic of acts of hate. Think of it: a nail driven through a musical version of a passion story! And J.S. Bach's version no less... Recollection of the incident used to infuriate me. Nowadays, as I reflect on the world and wonder whether things have really changed, I find the remembrance sobering.

Tom Eisner is a biologist at Cornell.



## AKA Crossword by Adam Perl

1	2	3	4		5	6	7	8	9		10	11	12	13	
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60							61					62			
63							64					65			

### ACROSS

1. Peon
5. Acidic
10. Goldie of Hollywood
14. Kind of code
15. Nostrils
16. Mixture
17. Giovanni di Pietro di Bernadone
20. Sixth sense
21. Western natives
22. Total
23. Star
24. Fear, for one
26. Fatty substances
29. Idyllic spot
32. Part of 52 down
33. Ruth's forte
34. Vegas opener
36. Jerom van Aeken
40. Inform
41. Bounds
42. \_\_\_ gras
43. Group of secretaries
45. Clue, perhaps
47. At any time
48. Guitarist's worry?
49. Saw
52. Snakeless land
53. Can
56. Charles Sherwood Stratton
60. Scads
61. TVs Sawyer
62. Arafat, for one
63. Loupe
64. Deli offerings
65. Colleen

### DOWN

1. Not out
2. Is human?
3. Get the benefit of
4. Booster
5. Hill and O'Day
6. Checked out
7. 1960s photo magazine
8. He makes a lot of calls
9. Jamboree org.
10. Youth \_\_\_
11. Landed
12. Lays competition
13. Film \_\_\_
18. Prompted
19. Not just good
23. Yarn spinner
24. "The Stranger" author
25. Infamous 1990s spy
26. Garland's co-star
27. Sacro-\_\_\_
28. Michelangelo masterpiece
29. Rudolph's colleague
30. Merlin of the NFL
31. Implied
33. Over the top
35. "\_\_\_ Gotta Have It"
37. Best Picture of 1968
38. "And Then There Were \_\_\_"
39. "What \_\_\_?"
44. Sires
45. Readies
46. Pulitzer Prize Winner of 1996
48. Vanguard
49. "\_\_\_ in Calico"
50. Strike
51. Presently
52. List ender
53. Ambience
54. Holiday abbreviation
55. Abates
57. Gen. equivalent
58. Golfer's concern
59. Bad computer?

Answers on page 4

## How to Turn an Old Book Into a New Book



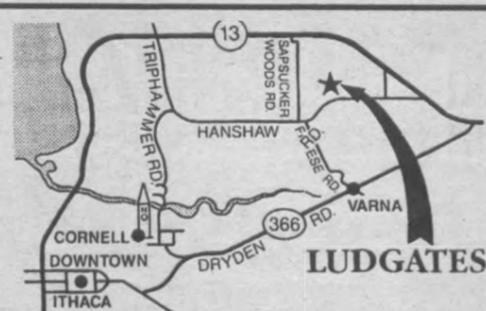
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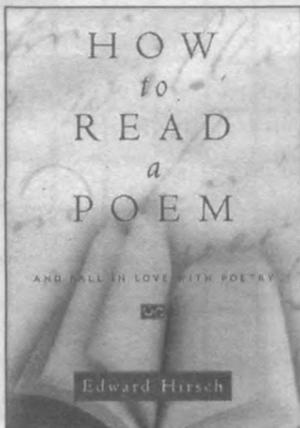
# The Bookpress Holiday Bookshelf

We asked some of Ithaca's local authors to give their book recommendations for the holidays...

**DIANE ACKERMAN**

Here's a book I'm giving this season: *How to Read a Poem* by Edward Hirsch (Harcourt Brace, 1999). \$23 hardcover.

It's wonderful to look at poems, familiar and unfamiliar, through loving eyes. In the role of reader-guide, Hirsch offers so much to think about. My copy is heavily underlined.



Diane Ackerman's most recent books are *Deep Play (prose)* and *I Praise My Destroyer (poetry)*.

**DAVID KIRK**

*The Subtle Knife* by Philip Pullman (Knopf, 1997). \$20 hardcover; \$10 paperback.

My daughter is nearly thirteen, and has just about outgrown bedtime stories, but I'm still hanging on with *The Subtle Knife*. She's not allowed to read it without me. It's the second of Philip Pullman's series, which started with *The Golden Compass*. Incidents in these books have stayed with me for months, and have the magical quality of things remembered in dreams.



David Kirk is the creator of the popular series of children's books featuring *Miss Spider*. His most recent work, *Little Miss Spider*, chronicles the early days of that popular character.

**KEN McCLANE**

*Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* by John Lewis (Simon & Schuster, 1998). \$26 hardcover; \$15 paperback.

*Walking with the Wind* is one of the best memoirs about the Civil Rights Movement by the congressman who was chairman of SNCC at the age of 26. It's a wonderful personal memoir filled with insights on Dr. King and others.



Poet and essayist Kenneth McClane teaches English at Cornell University.

**PAUL CODY**

*Underworld* by Don DeLillo (Scribner's, 1997). \$27.50 hardcover; \$16 paperback.

There's a quote hanging on my office wall. It begins, "Most of our longings go unfulfilled. This is the world's wistful implication—a desire for something lost or fled or otherwise out of reach." It's from Don DeLillo's *Underworld*, and it's about loss, longing, and love, and what it is to be human—here on the edge of the razor, falling into the next millennium. DeLillo, for me, is the Man.

*Underworld* goes very far. Very deep. It's so good it makes you ache.



Paul Cody is the author of three novels, most recently, *So Far Gone (Picador USA)*. He lives in Ithaca and teaches at Hobart and William Smith Colleges.

**DAVID LEHMAN**

A poetry book I recommend is *Then, Suddenly* by Lynn Emanuel (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1999). \$25 hardcover; \$12.95 paperback.

What I admire most about this brilliant poet's latest volume, her third, is her ability to give her poems an intellectual dimension with no loss of emotional intensity. Not just a gathering of miscellaneous poems, *Then, Suddenly* is a unified book, with certain haunting motifs recurring. There is a pronounced noir element that resonates beautifully for this reader.



David Lehman is the author of *The Last Avant-Garde* and the forthcoming book *Daily Mirror: A Journal in Poetry*. He edits the *Best American Poetry* series.

**BETH SAULNIER**

*The Face-Changers* by Thomas Perry (Random House, 1998). \$24 hardcover; \$6.99 paperback.

Of all of the new generation of women detectives, one of my favorites is Jane Whitefield, a smart, resourceful Native American guide (and Cornell grad) who helps people escape from deadly situations. She appears in such books as *Shadow Woman* and *Vanishing Act*, by Thomas Perry (a Cornell grad himself). The latest one, out this year, is called *The Face-Changers*. All of his books are very cleverly plotted and feature original and engaging characters. I am always amazed at the brilliant and elaborate schemes Jane uses to protect her clients (and herself) from harm.

Beth Saulnier is the author of two mysteries: the recently published *Reliable Sources*, and *Distemper*, scheduled to

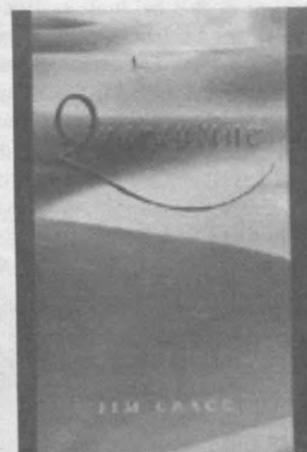


appear next June. She is at work on the third book in her *Alex Bernier* series, set in a fictionalized Ithaca. It's tentatively called *The Fourth Wall* and is loosely based on the effort to save the *Strand Theatre*.

**BRIAN HALL**

*Quarantine*, by Jim Crace (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998). \$23 hardcover; \$13 paperback.

This is not only a good and strange novel by a writer who should be read more, it's about Jesus, so it's seasonally appropriate. It also has what a gift book ideally should have: a beautiful cover, showing sand dunes that will pleasingly mirror in warmer tones the snow drifts outside the reader's window.



Brian Hall is the author of *The Saskiad* and *The Impossible Country: A Journey Through the Last Days of Yugoslavia*.

**ALISON LURIE**

*Gap Creek: A Novel* by Robert Morgan (Algonquin Books, 1999). \$22.95

*Gap Creek* is the story of a young farm couple in 1900 South Carolina. It's a wonderful novel filled with drama and struggle. Bob Morgan is a Cornell professor and award-winning poet and fiction writer.



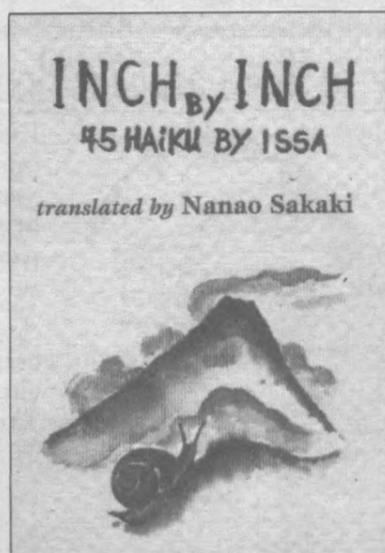
Alison Lurie is a semi-retired Cornell professor and author of many books, the latest of which is *The Last Resort*.

**IRENE ZAHAVA**

*Inch by Inch: 45 Haiku by Issa*, translation and calligraphy by Nanao Sakaki (La Lameda Press, 1999). \$12 paperback.

Advice for how to catch your breath during these busy times: When you have only a single moment, spend it with the Japanese poet Kobayashi Issa.

Irene Zahava leads writing workshops at Emma's Writing Center and edits *Starfish*: a journal of contemporary haiku.



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