

# The BOOKPRESS

THE NEWSPAPER OF THE LITERARY ARTS

Volume 12, Number 4 May 2002 Ithaca, New York FREE

## Israel's Hope

Yehudith Harel

Due to scant media coverage in the United States, most Americans are only dimly aware of the significant opposition within Israel to the Sharon administration's policies in the occupied territories. Within the past year, most recently on April 27, three large protest demonstrations have been led by a broad coalition of Israeli citizens, Jewish and Palestinian. More than 10,000 Israeli citizens have marched on these occasions to demand the immediate withdrawal of Israeli forces from the Palestinian territories, the dismantlement of all settlements in these areas, acceptance of the recent Arab League peace proposal offering full recognition of the state of Israel in exchange for withdrawal to its 1967 borders, and a just and mutually agreed upon solution to the Palestinian refugees' tragedy.

Most immediately, protesters are demonstrating against present incursions by Israeli armed forces in the West Bank that have inflicted heavy casualties among Palestinian civilians and widespread destruction and well-documented vandalism of the Palestinian infrastructure, including government buildings, public services, cultural and scientific centers, roads, private property and many vital facilities. This assault on the civilian population in Jenin, Ramallah, Bethlehem, and other Palestinian towns and villages has led to allegations of serious war crimes against the Sharon government. We Israelis in the protest movement reject Sharon's claim that this is a "war on terrorism," or a "war for the very existence of Israel." On the contrary, we believe that the only way to secure Israel's existence in the region is to achieve peace, and it is possible by putting an end to the occupation without delay. That is why we mobilize our ranks to march in protest, holding black flags to commemorate all victims of this war.

The anti-war coalition in Israel is a loosely-knit network, made up of political, non-government, and grassroots organizations united by broad understanding that the 54-year-old injustice inflicted on the Palestinians and the 35-year-old military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza are the underlying causes of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. What triggered the establishment of this coalition was growing frustration and indignation among many ordinary people with the almost complete paralysis of the traditional/mainstream Israeli peace camp in the face of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's deliberately provocative actions and his refusal to enter into meaningful political negotiations with Palestinian representatives. As the situation continues to deteriorate, there has been a growing sense of anger concerning the failure of established opposition parties, and the peace movement associated with them, to provide an honest interpretative framework for what is happening: why did this intifada break out, what went wrong at Camp David 2, what is the Sharon government up to with its practices clearly directed at the



February 9 Demonstration in Tel Aviv

Rachel Avnery

effective annihilation of the Palestinian political entity?

After the collapse of the Camp David 2 talks, the majority of the Israeli public fell into the trap set by former Prime Minister Ehud Barak's propaganda concerning his so-called "generous offers" that were allegedly refused by the Palestinians. The traditional peace camp's failure to expose the false nature of this oft-repeated narrative led to the collapse of the traditional Israeli political Left—the Labor and Meretz parties—and the election of Sharon and his rightist government. The participation of the Labor party in Sharon's cabinet only intensified these trends, making it still more difficult for popular resistance to the government to emerge.

However, since the outbreak of the second intifada in September 2000, a number of grassroots groups took up the popular resistance. Ta'ayush (Arab Jewish Partnership) was formed by Israeli Jews and Arabs to alleviate Palestinian suffering and at the same time to convey a dramatic and powerful political message by engaging in humanitarian actions such as food and medicine convoys to besieged Palestinian towns and villages. Other groups, including Gush Shalom, The Coalition of Women For Just Peace, Rabbis for Human Rights, the Israeli Association against House Demolitions (ICAHAD), Physicians for Human Rights (PHR), and the recently established Israeli Committee for International Protection (ICIP) have organized many protest demonstrations at military checkpoints, vigils, sit-ins and other political activities with the participation of thousands of men and

women—Jewish and Arab citizens. These Israeli peace groups also offer their unequivocal support for the rising wave of conscientious objection among courageous reserve soldiers and officers who refuse to serve in the occupied territories (there are now 436 objectors, 41 of them currently imprisoned by the military authorities).

In light of recent events in the West Bank, the situation in Israel has become a matter of extreme urgency. Many of us are concerned that Sharon seeks to further escalate the conflict in order to carry out a major ethnic cleansing. Thousands of Israelis have come to the realization that Sharon's war against the "terrorist infrastructure" is intentionally designed to weaken, if not destroy, Palestinian civil society.

Every human being must be appalled by some of the absolutely unacceptable Palestinian resistance tactics, such as targeting innocent civilians with suicide bombings. At the same time, in its present incursions the Israeli army is committing acts of "state terrorism" and atrocities tantamount to war crimes that cannot be excused by claims of "self-defense." Despite the justifiable fears for their personal safety among many Israelis, this is not a war in which the very existence of Israel is at stake. Israel is a mighty military power, armed with the most sophisticated and modern American and Western armaments, waging a war against a practically unarmed people who are struggling for their independence. For these reasons, we see this conflict as a colonial war for the sake of the settlements which Sharon has repeatedly stated—as recently as last week—that he will never abandon under any

circumstances. It is increasingly apparent that Sharon's goal is the destruction of the Palestinian Authority in order to make it easier for him to dictate humiliating terms that would preclude the establishment of a viable Palestinian state. Failing that, Sharon is prepared to destroy the collective existence of the Palestinian people on their land.

The progressive peace movement in Israel has taken the position that the Sharon administration's reliance on military force to impose its will on the Palestinian people is a recipe for a disastrous wider war. We are united around the following principles: 1) that peace between Israel and Palestine must be based on justice and full equality between the two peoples; 2) that Israel, as the occupying power and the overwhelmingly stronger force, bears the major responsibility in the current crisis; 3) that the Palestinian struggle for independence is a justified response to Israeli occupation, and that the conflict—with its tragic cost in lives on both sides—will continue until Israel recognizes the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people.

It is our hope that the growing number of Israelis working for a just peace may develop sufficient political strength in the not-too-distant future to achieve a new culture in Israel that upholds universal values of equality, social justice, and true democracy for all its citizens.

Yehudith Harel is an Organizational Psychologist, an active member of Gush Shalom and one of the founders of ICIP—the Israeli Committee for International Protection.



## House of Books

In a dwelling sided by vinyl or aluminum,  
that's where you feel free.  
Here you toss off the semicircular arms  
of the entire neighborhood, all the noses  
sniffing round the corners, and the roses  
blooming on sheer green lawns.  
Here you feel free, ridiculously free.

But I didn't grow up in a house of books.  
My father's a statistician, so he fears fictions.  
And my mother, well, she's just afraid.  
Yet I wonder, holding in my lap the saddle of a book  
(the Ecclesiastical History of the English People) and looking  
out over a variegated sunset, pixeled in the panes of the sliding-glass door,  
I wonder how words, so imperfect, have ridden it out so long,  
still smelling of leather and iron and ink, imprinted upon  
the page like a horse's hoof, and then I think

how my father's father is still yoked  
with the smell of his father's fields. And how he  
still sees his father (my great grandfather) humped  
by calcium deficient bones,  
and tastes his wicked tongue thick with foreign words  
and curses, and feels the sun bleached skin, olive and old,  
peeling from his palms, cleaved with calluses,  
cleaved with work.

And how he hears the voices of angels  
in the cooing pigeons, which nested  
in the rafters of the family church in Naples  
where, as a boy, the bell of his mother's voice called him home  
to assure him he was living the good life,  
to tell him never be afraid.  
And there he was free, ridiculously flee,  
to drink from a barrel of rain water, to drink from the palms of God.

—Adam Penna

## Girl and Apple

The budding of the blood ah the green  
heart high and merry in the body  
as hung on a branch swinging  
on a white day.

Skeined with silky wind  
the kicking heart's secret and high dance  
is cloaked from all but its creator—  
even from itself the game is kept

hidden  
through long days and hours and long  
nights of rush and whisper. When  
ah the red fruit

is caught at last—  
all that wild knocking  
by noonsun tranced  
in steady buzz and drain of the true

summer, spelled  
to a plumbline.  
In the gathered heat  
the unwinding of the sheath,

then the dropped  
solemn folds about the feet,

awaiting from the new nude height  
the letting go the fruit.

—Carol Rubenstein

## Letters

## Hatred &amp; Reconciliation

To the Editor:

Re the April issue of the Bookpress, nice editing by format: to centerfold "Belfast: July 2001" and placing the petition "Breaking the Silence" opposite the end of David Ost's article in which he comments in "Vietnotes" that "we couldn't find animosity anywhere... and now [that] America shows

different behavior, and that's good... [illustrating] a kind of Buddhist understanding of the different things that happen in the world." This issue certainly emphasized two differing attitudes toward longtime killing—one, guilt and hatred, the other, acceptance of violent past history. Maybe only separate self-governance and earning-power reconciles antagonism whether it be in the Arab-Israeli conflict or brooding Ireland. The courage to protest indifference to human suffering is necessary as is the financial support for the recovery and restructuring of broken social orders. Good work.

Le Moyne Farrell  
Ithaca

## Life in the 6 Counties

To the Editor:

Since my brother alerted me to your publication, I have been a regular reader of The Bookpress, and have felt so appreciative of the comprehensiveness of the commentary and articles.

But until now I have not been motivated to write to you. In the most recent issue, April 2002, you have published an article by Professor Fred Wilcox ("Belfast Diary July 2001.") It is the first time I can recall seeing an accurate account of how it really is in the north of Ireland, at least in any US publication.

Professor Wilcox manages, in a two-page spread, to transmit a sense of what it is to be

Irish and Catholic in the northern 6 counties, currently occupied by the British government. It is a "failed entity" and is being maintained, as it was created, by force.

It is a complicated issue, and one most people shy away from, because it does take a lot of study to truly understand what is going on behind the smoke and mirrors. There is always a subtext. So I was very heartened by the way Professor Wilcox provides a sense of what life is like there without a prolonged history/political lecture. It was really a brilliant piece of work, an impossible task really, but one he did anyway!

Susan Smith  
Brentwood, MO

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## THE BOOKPRESS

DeWitt Building

215 N. Cayuga Street, Ithaca, NY 14850

(607) 277-2254; fax (607) 275-9221

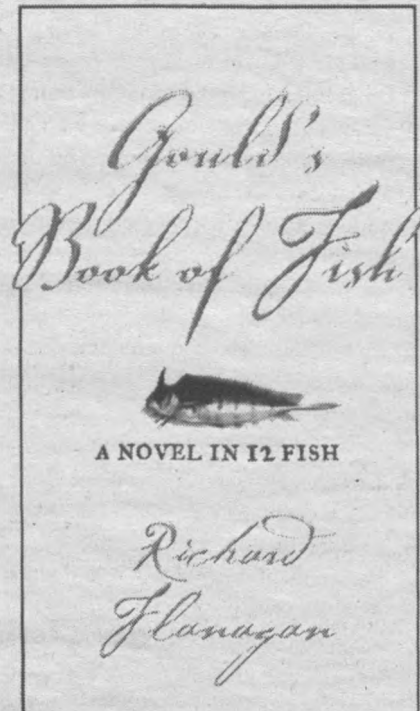
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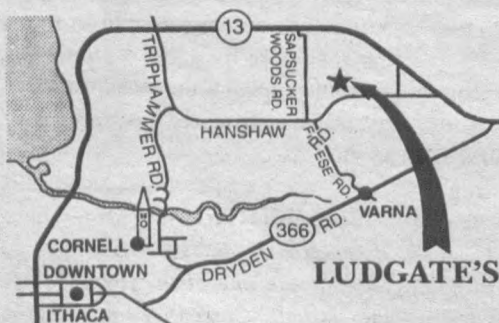


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# War ~~on~~ is Terrorism

Dan Finlay

## The War on Terrorism and the Terror of God

By Lee Griffith

William B. Eerdmans

399 pages, \$29, cloth

"The greatest concession to terrorism is mimesis, and it is also the most frequent concession."

—Lee Griffith

The effort to interpret and control the meaning of September 11th has been intense from the start and will continue for years. Sometimes, especially early on in the network news, this effort to make meaning has seemed fumbling and superficial to me, a kind of chattering in the face of immense evil, with no sense of the place of silence in witnessing tragedy. Sometimes I have had an opposite reaction—hearing the plurality of voices as a deeply human effort to understand, to find direction before acting, and to heal. Never, though, have I felt we will come to one agreed-upon interpretation. The Tower of Babel often seems like a good metaphor for the social construction of meaning. As Raimon Panikkar puts it, if we assume the builders of Babel are not constructing each their own tower, "they not only have to communicate about the means (tools), but share the goals (the one Tower). Isolation is no longer possible and unity is not convincing since it destroys one of the parties." We are living with that dilemma.

One way to try to dominate the argument is to say that all explanations of what happened, all efforts to place this event in a larger historical context, dishonor the dead and hide the special horror of this atrocity. A column by Thomas Friedman in *The New York Times* criticized some commentators of the left for their "yes, but" approach. Yes, they say, it is an atrocity, but let's understand the rage against American foreign policy in the Arab and Muslim world. Or yes, but let's remember the atrocities we have committed. For Friedman, the phrase stands for claiming to listen but not really listening: when we move too quickly to commentary or explications of one sort or another, we veer off from the horror and injustice of what happened into justifications of it.

Still, we need to make sense of things. When those who speak for the administration call this an attack on freedom or demonize the enemy, they too engage in creating a certain context for understanding. In truth, once the conversation begins, all sides have their versions of "yes, but." How else could Hiroshima be justified, or any other military actions of both the left and the right in which innocent civilians have been killed? "Collateral damage" is a phrase both nation states and terrorists embrace as necessary to their power struggles. If we replace "yes, but" with "yes, and" —yes, each innocent life lost was precious, each killing a crime against humanity—New York, Washington, Pennsylvania in 2001, and Afghanistan in 2001 and 1998, and Yugoslavia in 1999 and Sudan in 1998 and Haiti in 1994, the Persian Gulf, Panama, Libya, Granada, Lebanon—we are on the road to a pacifist's perspective on killing: that human life is unique and sacred—the soldier's, the guerrilla's, the terrorist's along with the innocent civilian's—and we must commit to non-violent means of seeking justice rather than engage in killing.

In the public debate about how to respond to 9/11, pacifism seems out of the question as always. The columnist Colman McCarthy wrote that in the Persian Gulf War the major networks had "738 interviews with experts analyzing the conduct of the war" and "only one interviewee was from a major peace

group opposing the war. For the media, that was balance: 737 to one." Things are much the same today. A few "human interest" stories are the exception: the parents of a young man killed in the World Trade Center ask that America not seek revenge. Relatives of people killed in the WTC travel to Afghanistan to grieve with relatives of people killed by US bombing. Other relatives of victims march from Washington to New York to demonstrate for peace. These exceptions confirm the general rule: non-violent action is unimaginable for most people. It would be political suicide for those in power. It is seen as naïve in the extreme, unrealistic, ineffective, weak, dangerous. And historically the idea is kept unimaginable because all our resources go to war and preparation for war. There is no peace equivalent to the trillions and trillions spent on war preparation since 1945. Our colleges and universities graduate "peace illiterates" with no knowledge of the history of non-violent action (which in fact is very rich in this country). We cannot really imagine something that we never think about. Public political debate has little room for the moral equivalent of war when the topic is war.

Lee Griffith's book, *The War on Terrorism and the Terror of God*, is a new and important contribution to the broad alternative movement that argues for non-violent struggles for justice. Griffith, a writer committed to pacifism, began this book in response to the US cruise missile attacks on Afghanistan and Sudan following the embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998. He completed it before September 11th, but has added a preface and postscript since then. The goal of his work is "to study terror from the perspective of current events and history and biblical theology." He describes himself as a layperson, not an expert, someone who took Karl Barth's advice to heart "to read the Bible and newspaper side by side." This understates the sophistication of this book—the author is widely read in the debates about terrorism, in Scripture studies, theology, history, pacifism, current events. What makes him no expert in the usual sense of the word is not his lack of knowledge, but his open commitment to certain moral values: "I was (and am) interested in protesting violence—all violence, but especially that violence which the governing authorities of the United States inflict in my name by means of the resources I provide to those authorities. I am made complicit in such violence." Or from his preface: "The apostasy of violence lies in its denial of God's ability to accomplish anything without the trigger that is about to be pulled, without the missile that is about to be fired. Violence is inevitably a renunciation rather than an affirmation of the will and freedom of God."

Griffith begins his book with an overview of the definitions of "terror" and "terrorism." This is a hot topic currently, crucial to the control of public opinion. What makes the violence of terrorists different from the violence of the nation state? Griffith summarizes the views of experts: "1) Terrorism entails the use of violence or force, 2) the violence is utilized in pursuit of political goals, and 3) the violence is intended to generate fear." Nation states as well as terrorists do all three. How did it come to be so widely accepted that the violence of the state is seen as different, legitimate, even moral?

A sense of the historical debate is useful: "most terrorism experts agree...that the contemporary prominence of the term 'terrorism' can be traced to the French Revolution." The Terror in France "was the product of an efficient and bureaucratic state" rather than those out of power. But Edmund Burke, "who first popularized the use of the word 'terrorist' in English," set the terms of the debate by linking terrorism and disorder:

"while Burke lifted the words 'terror' and 'terrorist' from the French milieu, the definitions he attached to those words were not descriptive of the Reign of Terror in France; they were instead descriptive of any who acted in opposition to the high value Burke placed on the state and on tradition." In other words, terrorists are "those who are lacking sufficient awe for Father State."

This view has lasted, "with the label of 'terror' being hung on all manner of groups who were actively opposed to the established political or economic order." This was true for example in 20th-century struggles against colonialism:

When outside rule is inflicted on a nation or a tribe or a community and 'terrorism' is defined as violence by a 'non-state' entity, then *ipso facto* if any individual from among a colonized people picks up a gun with a political idea in his or her head, he or she is a terrorist. This is sleight-of-hand, and it is not uncommon in the study of so-called 'terrorism.' The actions of a European power in invading and colonizing another nation is not terrorism because it is an action by a state, but any violent objections from colonized people are now grist for study as 'terrorism.'

Griffith argues that the distinction between the violence of nation states and the violence of non-state entities does not hold up. In fact he takes this a step further, quoting one scholar (E.V. Walter) on terrorism: "Terror is not confined to anomalous circumstances or exotic systems. It is potential in ordinary institutions." What he calls "racist vigilantism" is an example of that in America.

Because Griffith is a Christian pacifist, he takes the modern debate on the use of violence further back than Burke, to early Christian history. Christian pacifism is not a complicated matter. It is basic to the message of the New Testament and to the choices and actions of Jesus. The commands to "love your enemies" and "resist not evil with evil" are unqualified. Forgiveness and love are central themes. In the example of Jesus' death, "victory is won and violence is transformed, not by those who inflict it, but by those who suffer it." In other words, for Christians the evidence that non-violence works is the Resurrection. What looks like failure is redemptive.

Belief in the Resurrection, as William Stringfellow pointed out, is radical and subversive of state power because "it takes away the state's ultimate weapon against dissent—death. Much has been written about how conservative and reactionary belief in the afterlife can be. But loving God and loving your enemies to the point of not fearing death is always potentially subversive and was seen that way in the first three centuries of Christian history:

The crux of the extent to which Christians should fulfill their responsibilities as provisional citizens of various localities came with two defining issues: whether Christians could honor the divinity of the emperor, and whether Christians could wield weapons of war. 'No' was the resounding answer on both counts during the first three centuries of church history, with very few exceptions to prove the rule.

The views of the Platonist philosopher Celsus, who "asserted that civilization would collapse if all refused military and public office as the Christians did," are a well-known testimony to the subversiveness of early Christianity, for, as he put it, the emperor would be left "in utter solitude and desertion and the forces of the empire would fall into the hands of the wildest and most lawless barbarians." His views would fit well in

any number of Washington think tanks today.

The story of Christianity's reversal of core values on war is well known, too, (but usually ignored). When the Roman emperor Constantine "attributed his victory at the Battle of Milvian Bridge to the intercession of Jesus [he] converted to Christianity." Faith became allied with political power: "Constantine maintained that the most effective method to convert barbarians was to expose them to the terror of the army, which fights with the blessing of God." It took a while, but the martyrs became the killers. This shift, from a pacifist point of view, is called "the Constantinian fall of the Church," or as Father Charles McCarthy phrases it more bluntly, the beginning of "murderous Constantinian Christianity." It requires a forgetting that "every act of terror is a reenactment of the Crucifixion." It is the road to a triumphalist view of war, to the Inquisition, to the persecution of the Jews, the Crusades, to Christians killing each other and enemies in the name of righteousness.

Augustine of Hippo is the apologist for this change. In *The City of God* he gave an intellectual basis for Christians to participate in killing and from his thinking flows the just war theory. By A.D. 438 the Theodosian Code "mandated that only Christians could be in the army. The code was Christendom's version of the Diocletian auguries, a fretting that God may not be well-disposed to an army corrupted by the presence of pagans." Christian pacifism became a minority tradition—something optional for saints, or something to be persecuted as heresy, but definitely something to the side. In this evolution Bush is a true heir to the Constantinian tradition, and it is important to him (and to any administration) because the just war doctrine blesses violence right at the point where it needs legitimacy the most: the intentionality of those who kill. It is in fact impossible for anyone, of whatever party or background, to become President of the United States who is not willing to see innocent civilians killed for policy reasons. "Good intentions" mute this truth.

The dehumanization of enemies that seems necessary to accomplish organized killing requires "organized forgetting" (Milan Kundera's phrase), which happens in several ways. The first—well-publicized and debated—is censorship. From Vietnam the military learned that images—napalmed children, a soldier executed, huts torched—could undermine its mission. Since then, it has sought and achieved a high degree of control over the media's access to war zones. Compare Vietnam to Iraq or Afghanistan: we see less and less of what we do. A combat photographer in an American-led war today is almost in the position of Matthew Brady: he can photograph the dead, not the action. Griffith points out that there was no effort to censor the images from Oklahoma or the World Trade Center or the embassy bombings in Africa, and rightly so. But "the memory of those who suffered at Hiroshima or Nagasaki [censored for years after the war and very recently in the controversy at the Smithsonian exhibit on the end of World War II] was somehow a dangerous memory, a subversive memory. The American national mythos is messianic; it seeks to tell a story of freedom spread through self-sacrifice, not victories won through the spread of terror."

If organized forgetting begins by blocking access to the terror of war, it also works by "flooding our consciousness with a rapidly moving plethora of competing images." With TV news, where one disaster quickly replaces another, interruption, discontinuity and incoherence are the norm. The war images of Panama, or the Persian Gulf, or the Balkans are not even alive enough to com-

continued on page 10



# Michael Moore Sells Out

Jamie and Peter Lewis

## Stupid White Men

By Michael Moore

Regan Books

277 pages, \$24.95 cloth

When I was in my early teens, I suffered from terrible nightmares. My parents traced it back to my interest in horror films. Sure enough, when I stopped watching the splatter flicks, the nightmares went away. I moved to action films instead. In between the explosions and the flimsy plotlines, I noticed a pattern: In any action movie, no matter how many bad guys are eviscerated, the trail of bloody retribution always leads to an arch-villain. To make things easier, the arch-villain usually dresses in black and has a foreign accent. Recently, I haven't needed to watch many action films. Reality is more terrifying. Nowadays, it seems there are way too many villains. They don't color coordinate, and despite the graphically assisted insistence of the media to the contrary, their accents are the same as ours.

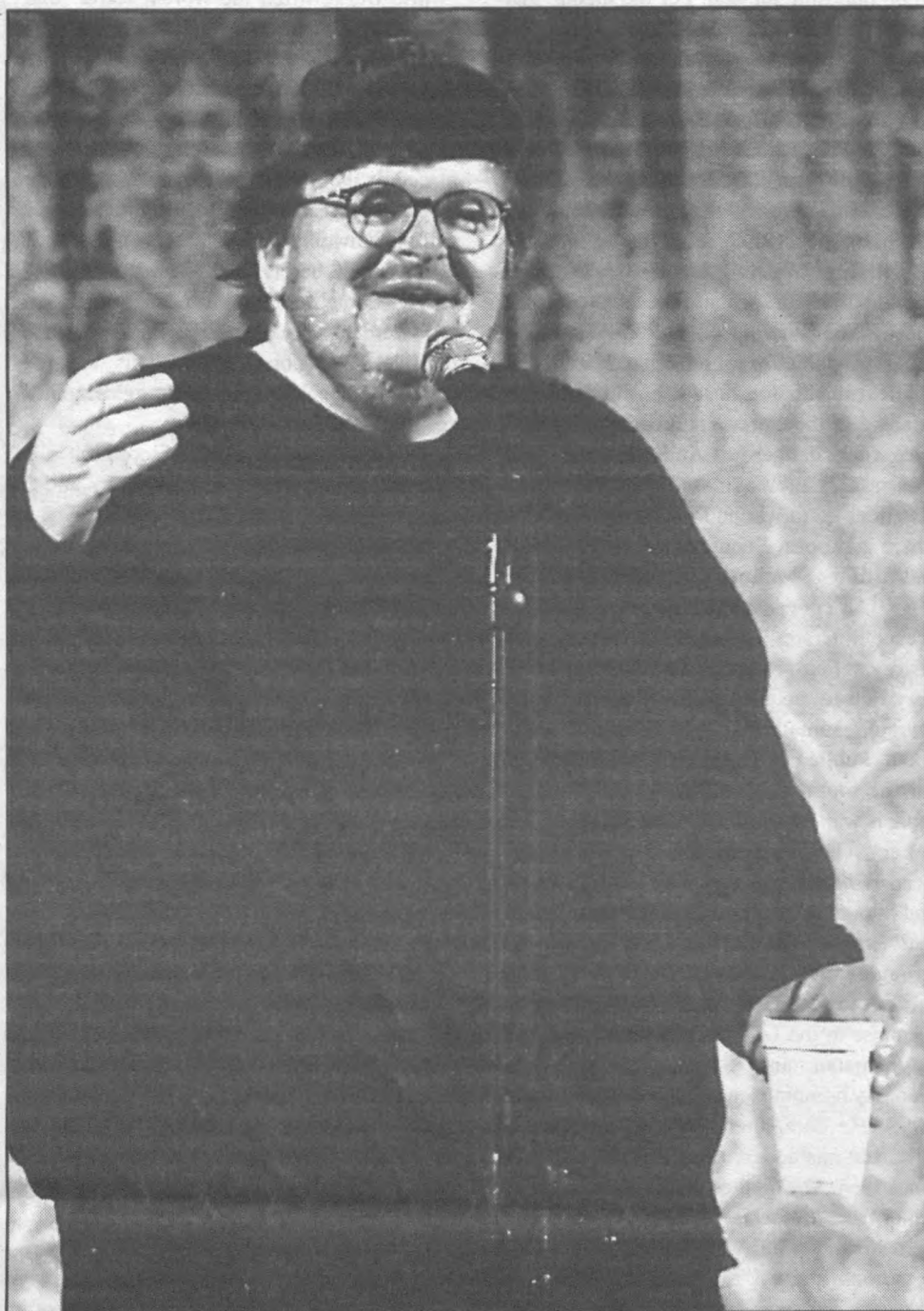
Like many people in America, I have been living on a steady diet of news. And like others, I have started to have nightmares again. Then I read Michael Moore's new book, *Stupid White Men*, and the nightmares got much worse.

Michael Moore first came to the public's attention in 1972. At the age of eighteen, fed up with the way his high school was run, he got himself elected to the local school board. By the time he was thirty-five, he had just been fired as a magazine editor in San Francisco and was forced to return to his hometown of Flint, Michigan. On arriving, he discovered that the General Motors plant was being shut down, putting about thirty thousand people—most of whom he knew or had grown up with—out of work. Horrified by what was happening, Moore decided to go to General Motors and get some answers from Roger Smith, the CEO. He documented his attempts on film, cutting between his quest for an interview, footage of Flint, and the problems of its residents. His film, "Roger and Me," has become one of the most successful documentaries ever made.

Moore went on to produce two groundbreaking television series, "TV Nation" and "The Awful Truth," both darkly satirical and politically oriented shows that feature such episodes as Moore leading a group of caroling tracheotomy patients with voice boxes outside a tobacco company's headquarters at Christmas; the smuggling of hundreds of Canadians across the American border to point out the racist treatment afforded to Mexicans; and setting up a webcam outside Linda Tripp's apartment so she too could feel what it was like to be on the receiving end of unwanted surveillance.

In between the two television shows, Moore also released his first book, *Downsize This*, and his second film, "The Big One," documented the subsequent book tour in 1997. The film starts out as a road movie, but as Moore goes from town to town, he does his best to investigate and expose corporate and political corruption. Caught between flights and running from book-signing to book-signing, Moore still finds time to present a "Downsizer of the Year" Award to Procter and Gamble, and even sings Dylan with Rick Nielsen of Cheap Trick. You don't see Ralph Nader doing that, do you? The film ends with Phil Knight, the co-founder of Nike, gleefully admitting that he has no problem with underage, underpaid foreign workers making his shoes.

Moore's latest book, *Stupid White Men*, is a collection of eleven essays, each of which deals with an element of contemporary



George Sapiro

American life: sociology, politics, economics, racism, corruption, the prison system, election scandals and sexism. It's all here, folks! Originally due to be released on September 10th, the book was shelved (no pun intended) by its publisher, Harper Collins, after the events of the 11th on the grounds that it spoke out against the American government at a time when the populace was feeling particularly patriotic. Harper Collins asked Moore to tone down his rants against George W. Bush, but he refused and the books sat in the warehouse. Then something very strange happened.

Speaking at a rally in New Jersey, Moore mentioned the problems he'd had with the publisher and said that the book would probably never be released. At the back of the auditorium, a local librarian took note of this and contacted her fellow librarians across the country. Outraged that a publisher would censor an author, they deluged Harper Collins with complaints. For the record, I'd rather work for King Herod's public relations firm than upset a librarian. They're dedicated, persistent, and there are thousands of them out there.

Harper Collins finally acquiesced and released a limited run of the book, which promptly sold out. They reprinted it, and it sold out again—promptly. As of this writing, *Stupid White Men* is in its nineteenth printing and at number one on *The New York Times* bestseller list. It's about to be released worldwide and the advance orders abroad are phenomenal, yet Harper Collins is still not advertising the book. They aren't even crowing about its success, and if you go to their website you'll have to search for a long time to find any trace of their involvement with Michael Moore.

Perhaps it's the irreverent tone. The book is anti-Bush, but only to a degree that most of

us enjoy in the privacy of our own homes. When I saw Bush speak at a military base about the fact that women in the American military are, "...amongst the brightest and the breast in the world," I laughed like a condemned man who had just found out that his execution had been delayed due to a power outage. It's that kind of funny.

The book begins with a relatively straightforward analysis of the Florida election scandal, but with some fascinating new tidbits of information: Katherine Harris' decision to remove 170,000 voters, mostly black and pro-Gore, from the electoral rolls on the grounds that they shared similar names with felons. Remember the unfortunate moment when Fox News prematurely announced that Bush had won? Perhaps it wasn't an accident, when you consider that the man in charge of Fox's election desk was John Ellis, who also happens to be Bush's cousin. The list goes on and on, and the book begins to sound like a litany of criminal charges. In turn, this made me think, "Why are these people in office instead of in jail?" Then I remembered the smile on the face of Phil Knight, one of the Teflon men...to whom nothing sticks!

A series of character sketches and biographies of members of Bush's cabinet details their affiliations with big businesses and their involvement in various criminal cases. The last sketch made me laugh out loud. As the book was written last summer, it was printed before the Enron affair hit the media. Guess whose biography is last? That's right, Kenneth Lay, the former shadow adviser to George W. Bush. Moore finds out that Lay was the biggest single contributor to Bush's campaign (\$310,500), and that Enron had also funded the campaigns of 18 of the 22 judges in Texas. Even better, Lay persuaded Enron employees to contribute a further \$1,000,000 to Bush.

Throughout the book, Moore urges his readers to get out there and do something about the current political situation. So I did. I phoned the Department of Energy to find out if Kenneth Lay was still employed as an adviser. I was transferred six times, interviewed by an "agent" who wanted to know my name, Social Security number and the paper I worked for (I lied and said I was Dave Barry), and was finally put through to an answering machine in the public relations department. I left a message, but no one ever called me back.

One part of the book that caused so much consternation at Harper Collins is Moore's open letter to George W. Bush. Aside from the political questions the letter raises, it also highlights Bush's literacy, alcoholism, felony record and military service. Can a leader with such weaknesses preside over affairs of state and keep the nation safe, let alone the rest of the world? Can one confront an axis of evil with a consortium of the corrupt? How can our nation keep terrorists at bay and corrupt businessmen out of the White House when our president can't even keep his own FBI-supervised, under-aged children from drinking like Tom Waits at a Jack Daniels family wake? As Moore says to Bush at the end of the letter, "...you've been a drunk, a thief, a possible felon, an unconvicted deserter, and a crybaby. You may call that statement cruel. I call it tough love."

Moore goes on to talk about corporate profits (up 362.4% since 1983), wage disparity (since 1979, the richest 1% of the population have seen a 157% pay increase, while the poorest 20% have seen their wages drop by an average of \$100 a year), and my favorite fact-bite: The average starting wage for a Delta Airlines pilot is \$15,000 a year. As Moore puts it, "Never, ever let someone fly you up in the air who's making less than the kid at Taco Bell." So now I'm not sleeping or flying.

In many ways, Moore exhibits the "Us Versus Them" mentality favored by a great number of left-wing writers. What sets him apart, however, is his ability to demystify the people in power by posing straightforward questions. He employs this technique in chapters on sexism, the prison system, the environment, education, and the withering of the Democratic Party. None of these themes is exactly original, but there isn't a page in the book without some piece of new information or a different spin on the issues. By the time you're done with this book, you should be exhausted. Not the "Phew! What a read!" kind of exhaustion, but the "I can't go on any further, just leave me here to die" exhaustion.

When the book first came out, a friend told me that Michael Moore had lost his direction and was no longer as funny or cutting. I'd been a huge fan of Moore's work since I first saw "TV Nation" on the BBC, so I was genuinely concerned that he'd become soft or simply less amusing. However, humor and severity are not mutually exclusive. "My way of joking," said George Bernard Shaw, "is to tell the truth. It's the funniest joke in the world."

Admittedly, sometimes the book misses the mark. Moore's chapter on education and literacy, "Idiot Nation," begins with a nod to Noam Chomsky's theory that more people would pay attention to current affairs if you could find a way to, "...make politics as gripping and entertaining as sports." The chapter veers off into another rant against Bush and his cabinet via some vignettes from Moore's own education that sound more like a transcription of one of his public appearances. Perhaps it's a deliberate decision to alleviate the more intensely didactic

continued on page 5



# News From Nowhere

## Chris Furst

### Gould's Book of Fish: A Novel in Twelve Fish

By Richard Flanagan Grove  
Atlantic  
404 pages, \$27.50, cloth

The writer Richard Flanagan has been called defiantly Tasmanian for finding stories in his postage stamp of native soil. Speaking of Tasmanian culture, he said in a 1997 interview for an Australian newspaper, "If you wanted to write or perform the other arts, you had to go into exile. We produced a disproportionately high number of artists but they all had to leave. I resented that . . . For me to do anything significant, I felt I had to stay." His first novel, *Death of a River Guide*, came out in 1992. As the guide Aljaz is drowning in a waterfall he recalls his own past and enters a mythic time in which he connects with his father's and grandfather's past and the dark history of Tasmania. It is a kind of underwater *As I Lay Dying*, and Flanagan signals his debt to Faulkner's treatment of the past as an omnipresent force. The book won the Adelaide National Fiction Literary Award and the Victorian Premier's First Fiction Award, and was short-listed for the Miles Franklin award, but it had to wait until recently for an American publisher.

—*The Sound of One Hand Clapping* began as an attempt at a screenplay before Flanagan turned it into his second novel. It is the story of the Buloh family, Slovenian immigrants who have survived the horrors of war in Europe and are thrown into an alien wilderness where they're given the job of building hydroelectric dams. One day Maria Buloh walks away during a blizzard, leaving her

husband Bojan to raise their daughter Sonja alone. Bojan beats her when he is drunk. As soon as she is old enough Sonja leaves for the Australian mainland. Years later she returns home with her out-of-wedlock baby, and father and daughter gain a chance for redemption. Flanagan finally turned the novel into a screenplay and directed the movie based on the book, an experience that soured him on the movie business, but not on movies.

An Oxford-trained historian and Rhodes Scholar, Flanagan wrote a history of unemployment in Britain (*Parish-Fed Bastards*), a biography, and a critique of local Greens before he turned to fiction. He credits the environmental movement for liberating Tasmania intellectually and emotionally: "There was a great silence in Tasmania for a century following the collapse of the convict system, a form of moral cowardice after that experience of the most brutal forms of control. The Greens were the first to speak publicly against it. They created an inclusive notion of what it was to be Tasmanian. . . . It was as though as a writer and historian, you could suddenly start investigating the confusions of the past."

Van Diemen's Land—the old name of Tasmania—has a hold on the imagination as a kind of antipodean Hell, the end of the end of the earth for convicts sentenced to transportation from nineteenth-century Britain, a dumping ground for human detritus, the harshest and remotest penal colony in the empire. The name change was part of an effort to erase the "convict stain" that Van Diemen's Land conjured up, as if the public relations strategy of moral whitewash could rewrite history. To this day if you look through the pages of mainland Australian newspapers you can read the same tenacious clichés: Tasmania is still regarded as an

untamed place peopled by the barely civilized descendants of the original convicts, Australia's version of the great wrong place, its other, a colony within a colony, useful only as a source of timber and tourism. *Gould's Book of Fish: A Novel in Twelve Fish*, Flanagan's third and most ambitious novel to date, explodes those clichés while at the same time playing with them. There was a real William Buelow Gould, a nineteenth-century convict artist, and his book of watercolors of fish resides in the Allport Library in Hobart, Tasmania. The opening chapter takes place in the present. Sid Hammet, who earns his living by selling fake antiques to American tourists, discovers a *Book of Fish* in a Hobart junk shop. It resembles the book in the library, with one important addition: Gould's autobiography. Hammet seeks out experts to authenticate his find, but they tell him it is a worthless fake. Eventually the book vanishes in a local bar, and Hammet attempts to reproduce the story from memory.

Telling unreliable stories lies at the heart of the narrative. Gould must be counted as one of fiction's great liars; he wears as many masks as Melville's confidence man. He scrapes through misadventures in England and Louisiana (where he assists Audubon and meets John Keats's brother) before being transported to the Van Diemonian penal colony of Sarah Island, Britain's equivalent to Devil's Island. "The novel is spectacularly inaccurate," says Flanagan. "The only reason it is set on Sarah Island is that it is about how rude men and women can make art that matters in circumstances of great tyranny." Lempriere, the prison surgeon, hopes to capture the attention of the Royal Society by ordering Gould to paint the local sea life; he also seeks to impress the Royal Society with his collection of heads of aborigines. The

fish soon become almost human for Gould, and he feels himself becoming more like a fish. Gould narrates from a cell that fills with water at high tide, so it is small wonder that he hopes for an ultimate transformation.

The surgeon is just one madman among many. Gould's prison guard forces him to paint fake Constables. The gold-masked, syphilitic Commandant dreams of transforming Van Diemen's Land into a new nation, and builds a giant mah-jong palace and a railway to attract traders who never come. Jorgen Jorgensen, the storekeeper, records an alternate, utopian history of the prison for the eyes of his superiors in Sydney and London. As Gould says, "Everything that's wrong about this country begins in my story: they've all been making the place up."

Each chapter is printed in a different color of ink, from the red of blood to the purple of crushed sea urchin spines, and each chapter begins with a painting of a different fish. (This makes the book itself a beautiful physical object.) Among Flanagan's virtues as a writer are his over-the-top comic sense and his great narrative energy, which holds together a universe as fantastic as anything out of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. While he was working on the novel Flanagan heard about Bill Gates's speech to the Royal Spanish Academy in which Gates trumpeted the death of the book and the supremacy of multimedia. "I wanted to prove Bill Gates and his leprous ilk wrong," said Flanagan. "I wanted to show the cant of technology up for the thin lie that it is. I wanted to prove that far from being finished creatively and commercially, books still remained pregnant with an infinity of possibilities, that implicit on every book is the universe."

Chris Furst is the assistant editor of Cornell Alumni Magazine.

## Michael Moore Sells Out

continued from page 4

portions of the book, but it doesn't always work.

Recently, Moore visited Cornell as a part of his book tour. When advance tickets for the Cornell event sold out, he contacted The Bookery and asked if they could organize a second speaking engagement. The Bookery promptly rented the State Theatre for a couple of hours, expecting an audience of around 500. By the time Moore arrived on stage that afternoon, there were well over 1000 people from such a diverse demographic it would make even the hardest marketing executives blanch. After two hours, he climbed off stage and was instantly mobbed. It was the kind of sight one would expect to see outside the stage door of an arena after a rock concert. If politics is the new rock-and-roll, then Michael Moore is Rage Against the Machine. Later that evening, he spoke to an audience of 900 people at Cornell. Could it be that we worms are beginning to turn?

Like his heroes, Chomsky and Nader, Moore urges us to be more pro-active in our dissent. Rather than fly a flag off your car's antennae, show your patriotism by asking yourself why the rest of the world's leaders (with the exception of British Prime Minister Tony Blair) are quietly shuffling away from Bush's "War On Terrorism." Ask yourself why Bush refused to sign the Kyoto agreement. Ask why the Reagan-era wet dream that was the Star Wars project (has anyone else noticed that the President is the only person that George Lucas hasn't sued?) has been re-instated, despite the objections of even our closest allies. Ask yourself why so many people are angry at the United States. Given the number of people around

the world, myself included, who look at the American way of life and think, "Hey, that looks like a pretty nice place to live," you'd think the United States would be the destination of choice for everyone. Moore's message is clear: the responsibility to question our government is no longer the preserve of activists and students with a taste for tear gas who are, "...risking arrest, taking a billyclub to the head, giving a few hours of their time each week to be citizens." As the bumper sticker says, "Question tyranny, not authority."

The book ends on a relatively positive note. In an epilogue, Moore notes that a significant number of independent candidates have succeeded in getting elected in the past few years, and he details the growth of the Green Party and Ralph Nader's supporters. Moore repeats his plea to go out and do more: "You own the store. The bad guys are just a bunch of silly, stupid white men. And there's a helluva (sic) lot more of us than there are of them. Use your power. You deserve better."

That's Michael Moore's final piece of advice; now for mine. Go and buy the book as soon as possible. Think of it as a grimly humorous travel guide to the world of politics. There are facts and figures you won't find on CNN, issues that your local congressman won't (or can't) discuss, and statistics that you wouldn't otherwise read about until your grandchildren bring you a copy of their history books. Heck, by the time *Stupid White Men* comes out in paperback, it might already be too late.

Jaime Lewis is a writer in Ithaca.

Peter Lewis is a humorist and writer in Hexham, England and knows a great deal more than his son.

upcoming readings at

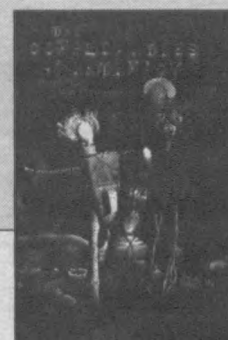
## THE BOOKERY

SUNDAY, MAY 5, 3:00 P.M.

Mary Caponegro

*The Complexities of Intimacy*

Tompkins County Public Library



The stories in *The Complexities of Intimacy* offer a surreal and darkly comedic exploration of that most complex of all institutions, the nuclear family. Buoyed by her arch, Jamesian prose and psychological tone, Caponegro's stories are as delicately fragile as the fragile and difficult relationships they describe.



SUNDAY, MAY 12, 3:00 P.M.

Edward Hower

*Shadows and Elephants*

Tompkins County Public Library

Set in Gilded Age New York City, India and Ceylon, *Shadows and Elephants* is a sensuous historical novel about the search for love and enlightenment, based on the lives of the notorious mystic, Madame Helena Blavatsky and her devoted cohort, Civil War hero Colonel Henry Olcott.

All Bookery events are co-sponsored by the Tompkins County Public Library. Books are available for 10% off on the day of the reading.



# Marking Silence: The Work

Emoretta Yang

Back in the good ol' olden days of Modernism, we were taught to understand paintings not as plausible representations of the world or experience, but as responses of an active self, endowed with some kind of inner vision, to that world and to experience. Pushed by the advancing claims of photography, painters turned toward the material of their craft, pigment, demonstrated that sheer expressiveness in the act of painting was a legitimate artistic goal, and found, with the aid of some gifted art critics, a public willing to shape its visual sensibilities to the challenge of abstract art. Then, someone came along and declared painting dead, and artists attracted to the new movements found their medium not so much in paint, but in new kinds of materials, in their own bodies, in performances, site-specific installations, or in photography, film and computer work; in postmodernism, as it has come to be identified, irony, sometimes a weapon, sometimes a defense, became the real medium, bolstered by quotation and narration, borrowing form and content from diverse fields, biology, geology, sociology, anthropology.

And yet. The universe of artists who have not rejected the solitary studio life and the uneasy life of the easel, has never completely disappeared, carrying on in real ways, not all of them commercial, mostly just outside the radar screen of much art criticism and Art Biz. The situation leaves those painters who have stayed committed to "representational" art often flummoxed by the absence of critical interest, feeling even more out of synch in the age of the Webmaster and, to their own astonishment, retrograde. It's clear that painting, in the old *beaux-arts* sense, underwent a crisis in the 20th century, but reports of its death by evisceration do seem to have been exaggerated. For all the injuries inflicted on it, either pointedly by modernist or postmodernist ambitions, or through neglect as newer technologies for visual arts have drawn energy away from classical instruction, or through political urgencies, the continued life of an approach to painting that is so often apologetically presented under the inadequate term "realism," appears to be more than a question of provincialism or naiveté. Retrograde or not, that world goes on, never having been quite abandoned either by artists at all levels of commitment, nor by an ever-renewed population of viewers who look to painting for some kind of visionary experience. It would be interesting to ask why this is true.

A body of works exists, created by a contemporary Ithaca artist, which I feel can be offered as an example of the kind of power that so-called realist art can possess, even if the hope is for simply the *possibility* of being transported, in ways both intellectual and emotional, by a work of art that shares something with our lived visual world. What prompts me to write



Landscape (etching)

about the work of Gillian Pederson-Krag is the current exhibition at the Upstairs Gallery (in the DeWitt Mall), which includes the artist's recent etchings, all of which come out of, as it were, the same universe as her paintings and her exhibited and published work throughout an accomplished career. Though what I'm writing here is neither a review of the show nor concerned with the etchings, it is my hope that these remarks will remind some of her long-time admirers to go see the new work and perhaps prompt some new viewers to

discover it for themselves.

\* \* \*

Born in 1938, Gillian Pederson-Krag grew up in Manhattan. Her mother, with English and Australian roots, had completed medical and psychoanalytic training in England, and emigrated to the United States, eventually founding her own clinic in the New York city area. Given her mother's interests in literature and art, Gillian's childhood must have been a heady one, with exposure to the city's resident and visiting writers, poets and artists, many of them European refugee intellectuals, guests in her mother's home. Pederson-Krag attended the Brearley school, and at the age of 16, studied for two years at the Art Students' League with Robert Beverly Hale, Nathaniel Kaz, and R. W. Johnson, with a summer of art study in Fountainebleau, and a subsequent year studying painting in Perugia and Florence. She went on for a fine arts degree from the Rhode Island School of Art, then completed a master's at Cornell, where she taught for some thirteen years, becoming the first woman to be given tenure as a teacher in the department of art.

\* \* \*

Near the beginning of the essay she wrote for her master's degree in fine arts, Gillian Pederson-Krag alludes to a story about the painter Henri Matisse, who is accompanying a woman visitor as she looks at his paintings. They come upon one which is a relatively abstract canvas of a nude figure. "But that doesn't look like a lady," says the woman. "It is not a lady," replies Matisse. "It is a painting."

Indirectly but succinctly, still at the outset of her career, Pederson-Krag identifies the issue that any mid-20th-century painter had somehow to come to terms with: representation, or imitation, *mimesis*. Her essay was written in 1963, at a time when one might reasonably guess that the writer's sympathies would have leaned toward Matisse's camp rather than toward his dismayed, naive visitor. Modernism was still staking out new territory in the art world, consolidating its earlier claims, and, though it would be a decade or two before the corporate world would embrace it, its individual advocates—gallery owners, dealers, critics, collectors—were well on the way to being recognized as innovative and influential.

But without having to diminish appreciation for Matisse, and all that he may have represented in the anecdote, Pederson-Krag's essay goes on to explore a topic that at the time, one suspects, was radically unfashionable, and, by implication, more forgiving of Matisse's lady visitor. The title



Monopoly (oil on canvas)



# of Gillian Pederson-Krag



Woman with a Piece of Yellow Silk (oil on canvas)

of that piece, "An Essay on Art as Imitation: the Religious Origins of Greek Sculpture," was atypical of MFA thesis titles of the time, in its impersonality, its historical and philosophic address, that is, in the way it appears to point away from the immediate person of the author herself; in fact, the three elements of the title, "art as imitation," "Greek sculpture," the "religious origins" of art, have turned out to be important and enduring modes, themes or impulses in Pederson-Krag's own work.

\* \* \*

One is struck, over time, by certain consistencies in viewers' responses to Pederson-Krag's work: words like "mysterious" or "engimatic" recur, or, often, the reaction is wordless but strong, filled with a certain conviction. "She's the real thing," I've heard one of her admirers say. Others have compared her paintings of interiors to the work of Vermeer, a comparison that somehow works, even with the differences. What the comparison points up, though, is a similarity in the emotion that the works of these two artists elicit, a response that always seems to involve a kind of quiet, as with something distantly remembered or dreamed, or, as I like to think of it, the mark of silence. In many instances, her paintings, like those of Vermeer, Watteau, Chardin, seem to transfix their beholders, and powerfully to induce in them states of reverie.

\* \* \*

"Yellow," the painter John Hartell once remarked, shaking his head, "is very difficult." The cautionary remark, which could strike one with all the punch of a zen koan, both surprised and delighted me—it's not like saying (if you're a nature painter), "Trees are difficult," or (if you're an urban painter), "The overpass at the Cross-Bronx Expressway and the New Jersey turnpike is difficult." The three-year-old with the box of crayolas doesn't think of yellow as very difficult. Hartell was referring to something altogether different from structure or design, something other than a derivative of cadmium. Perhaps his remark was compelling for all that it didn't or wouldn't say: that is, a lifetime's experience of painting and of striving to achieve persuasive renderings of the fugitive, evanescent qualities of natural light in a medium—oil paint—that is dense with

matter. A bold painting as rapturous as Wolf Kahn's 1997 "Rhapsody in Yellow", while creating a tension between atmospheric and flat space, seeming by turns representational (the woods, the landscape) and, expansively, just yellow itself, seems finally to be more about the affective and formal properties of pigment and its possibilities than about light and its opposite.

Pederson-Krag's 1998 painting, entitled "Woman with a Piece of Yellow Silk," could be evoked as a kind of rejoinder to John Hartell's yellow caveat. In it, the woman is seated on a deep window bench in the upper left of the painting. With her left hand she presses one end of a length of silk to her left shoulder, and with her right, stretches the other end toward the natural light from the window, leaning to examine the fabric intently. Her pose is evocative of classical sculpture, but there is a curious detail that emerges in the course of one's own scrutiny of the figure. The gesture with which she holds the silk to her shoulder, in the time-honored way familiar to anyone "trying on" a piece of cloth, implies the presence of a beholder.

Given the long emblematic tradition in Western *vanitas* painting, one might expect to see this woman looking at her own image in a mirror, her imagination engaged in seeing herself fitted to some future gown, but instead, the quiet absorption with which she scrutinizes the silk seems to preclude any scenario of seduction with a reflected image of the self. This is a seer who has, for the moment anyway, forgotten that she herself may be seen. Her open, investigative gaze, unself-conscious, absorbed in its object, suggests the potential of any forceful act of beholding, which is not just appreciation (of a piece of beautiful silk, of color, craft, or material, or of beautiful artifice made to seem natural, of a painting), but also something more active, the means by which a work of art invites the individual beholder into its particular frame.

That sensation of being "transfixed" by a work of art, of somehow having been transported, or elevated, from one's normal world into some other time and place, is an odd moment—no less odd for being so frequent. In movies and drama, of course, it's the moment when you laugh, weep, or jump, when feelings of revenge, pity, or terror

overtake you; in music, it happens often but more abstractly. The moment is perhaps strangest when it happens with a painting, a "realist" painting, which both is and isn't a mirror, creating that oddest of opportunities for imaginative insertion of ourselves that such a painting affords, invites, or even compels.

In an artist's statement that accompanied a showing of her paintings, predominantly still lifes, at the Johnson Art Museum in 1977, Pederson-Krag writes, "This series of paintings was done at a time when I was trying to discern how and why I was selecting subject matter.... It has always been a great mystery to me why ordinary pieces of reality like cloth, water, the sun, etc., are suddenly endowed with the potential to become 'more' than what they literally are." Even at the remove of twenty years, that thoughtfully wrought statement suggests one of the crucial ways in which "reality," that is, of the senses, serves as a necessary conduit in Pederson-Krag's painting for other imaginative acts of identification.

The kind of examination of a painting I've worked through seems to me comparable to "reading," in that it has to take place over time, sometimes slowly. Its challenge lies in how it asks the beholder to bring in, serendipitously at first, whatever sensibilities, memories, or infatuations he can to the contemplation. But the other way to see a painting such as "Woman with Piece of Yellow Silk" is, in fact, the first way one will experience it, that is, breathlessly, and though that viewing will be more immediate, packing the punch of "first sight," it's also more elusive and difficult to pin down. It's a response shaped by the way Pederson-Krag will mute colors, notching them down, blurring boundaries, to create what Jonathan Philips, himself a painter, calls the "subtle, rarefied light" of the artist's studio (because in Pederson-Krag's paintings, that's what all the rooms are, in essence). For, I suspect, it's through her careful construction of those contrasts—rarefied-saturated; seer-seen; obscurity-radiance—that her true gifts to us, solace and healing, will be understood.

\* \* \*

The paragraph below is quoted from a brief essay entitled "Painting Allegory" that Pederson-Krag wrote in the last year to accompany a catalogue of an exhibition of paintings by one of her students, Caren Canier. I include it here because its reflec-

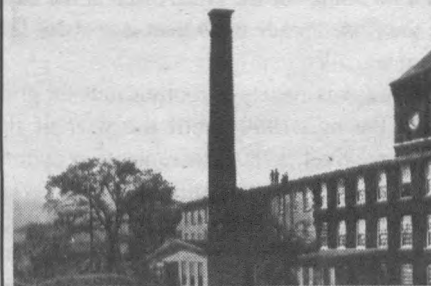
tions seem germane to Pederson-Krag's own work:

Other approaches to painting are more straightforward: political art, historical art, and portraiture, to name just a few, narrate situations from a sense-based reality. But the goal of allegorical painting is much more elusive. It may or may not describe the world as it appears through our senses and intellect. Its real goal is to create poetry which consoles and heals us, by establishing a bridge between the seen and unseen world. To create mythical situations is to assert that what might appear to us as our separateness and the random, chaotic nature of experience has some kind of overall coherence and meaning. The objects of this world—statues, bits of landscape, streets, cups, clocks: new, broken, or used—are really only costumes worn by something real which is intuitively revealed.

Emoretta Yang was assistant curator of Asian art at the Johnson Museum for a number of years, and graphics editor for the journal *diacritics*. She commutes between Ithaca and Ludlowville.

## Winner of the Pulitzer Prize in Fiction

**EMPIRE FALLS**  
RICHARD RUSSO



Dexter County, Maine, and specifically the town of Empire Falls, has seen better days, and for decades, in fact, only a succession from bad to worse. One by one, its logging and textile enterprises have gone belly-up, and the once vast holdings of the Whiting clan (presided over by the last scion's widow) now mostly amount to decrepit real estate. The working classes, meanwhile, continue to eke out whatever meager promise isn't already boarded up.

**Empire Falls**  
Richard Russo

Alfred A. Knopf  
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# When L.A. Had a Heart

Douglas Jones

**The John Fante Reader**  
Edited by Stephen Cooper  
Morrow  
324 p., \$25.95

Some writers are as identified with their regions as they are with their times. Dashiell Hammett had San Francisco; Chicago had Nelson Algren, James T. Farrell and Carl Sandburg; John Steinbeck defined forever Salinas and its surrounding Monterey and the Carmel valley; there is Faulkner's mythical Mississippi county; and where would Albany be without William Kennedy? As for New York City, there are no end of chroniclers: E.B. White, Herbert Asbury (*Gangs of New York*), Pete Hamill, Jimmy Breslin, and Joseph Mitchell who, in his straightforward *New Yorker* prose, surely captured a passing New York as it was changing before him.

When it comes to Los Angeles, no one wrote as achingly, hauntingly, or romantically about the town in its time as did John Fante. This is not to disparage such great social writers as Carey McWilliams and Lawrence Powell, both of whom wrote with clarity of the L.A. experience. Also, brothers Carroll and Garrett Graham (*Queer People*) collaborated on the best novel about 1930's movie-making in Hollywood. Nathanael West (*Day of the Locust*) and Horace McCoy (*They Shoot Horses Don't They?*) were Fante's contemporaries, but their sense of place was limited to the darkest possible view of Los Angeles: McCoy's cynical marathon dance and West's hallucinatory burning of the city as metaphor.

No list of L.A. writers would be complete without mentioning the elegant novels of Raymond Chandler, but I think his stories would work equally well in other sun-drenched California cities: Santa Barbara, say (Ross MacDonald territory), or San Diego. And James M. Cain's Pasadena-based *Double Indemnity* is more about the San Marino doings of the greedy rich at the edge of the Rose Parade town than it is about Los Angeles.

Fante was nearly forgotten, out of print from the mid-1950s until the year of the Fante Revival: 1980. His reputation continues its resurrection through the efforts of Stephen Cooper, who is doing for Fante what Tim Page has done for Dawn Powell, and what Art Spiegelman did for Joseph Moncure March a few years back (in illustrating March's book-length narrative poem, *The Wild Party*).

Santa Barbara's Black Sparrow Books brought Fante's 1939 *Ask the Dust* back into print in 1980 (accompanied by an enthusiastic preface by another L.A. writer, Charles Bukowski, who claimed that having discovered the book in the Los Angeles Public

Library made him want to be a writer). Since then virtually none of Fante has been out of print, and indeed the publisher has brought newer titles to the public thanks to Cooper, a California State University English professor, who wrote Fante's biography, *Full of Life*, and edited Fante's last book (a collection of short stories and unpublished fiction, *The Big Hunger*). Now there is *The John Fante Reader*, a sampler of excerpts from Fante's entire career: chapter fragments, short fiction, and letters. Edited by Cooper, the *Reader* works as a comprehensive survey from vital beginning to still-vital end.

Fante grew up with a Jesuit high-school education in Colorado, and an abusive, distant, alcoholic father ("My father was very happy at my birth. He was so happy that he got drunk and stayed that way for a week. On and off for the last 21 years he has continued to celebrate my coming.") Fante moved to Los Angeles in his twenties to pursue the insane dream of becoming a writer. After sending story after story (along with boastful, awkward notes to its editor H.L. Mencken), he gets published in perhaps the premier literary publication of its day, *The American Mercury*. Soon his work was appearing with regularity in *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Saturday Evening Post*, *Collier's*, *Esquire*, and *Harper's Bazaar*. In one letter, he tells the Bard of Baltimore that he intends to replace him as editor of *Mercury*: "The only hitch in the plan is that should you ever decide to quit the job, the magazine is liable to go on the rocks, so for God's sake stick around a while longer. Put your rubbers on and button up your overcoat." That blend of egomaniacal belief in his ability, and concern for Mencken's health, is a hallmark of Fante's originality.

After limited literary success, Fante found his fortune writing for the movies. He wrote screenplays for such 1950s stuff as *Jeanne Eagles* (probably the only good work to come out of Kim Novak and Jeff Chandler), and adapted his lovely, very personal *Full of Life* as a star vehicle for Judy Holliday (with Richard Conte as the Fante character; Conte would find lasting fame later as Don Barzini in "The Godfather.")

Some say Hollywood ruined Fante. The jury is still out on that one. That he continued to write novels well past that period is evidence of the commitment to something other than the money that the movies could provide. In fact, his most fertile and productive period was well after that lucrative spell. He was as prolific as he was spendthrift with his talent. *Ask the Dust* is joined in his canon by *Dreams from Bunker Hill*, *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*, *The Wine of Youth* (short fiction), *The Road to Los Angeles*, *1933 Was a Bad Year*, *West of Rome*, *Full of Life*, *The Brotherhood of the Grape*, a volume dedicated to his correspondence with H.L. Mencken, and collected letters spanning

1932 to 1981. Finally there was *The Big Hunger: Stories 1932-1959*.

If there is not a crying need for Fante in New York (which dismissed him as capriciously and arbitrarily as it did Steinbeck), then there is some comfort in knowing that the "Fante Industry" (as it is sometimes derisively known outside of Southern California) is going full-tilt in the West which, on occasion (and sometimes, by accident) can recognize a native talent and reward it.

Fante did not just love to write: he was purely in love with the *idea* of writing—the romance of it, the joy of it, the sure potential of communication. He was a kid who had something to say, and he was brimming over with the explosive message of his ideas.

*Ask the Dust* is, according to many, the best book ever written about Los Angeles. Screenwriter Robert Towne repeatedly referred to the novel when preparing his original "Chinatown" screenplay (arguably the best film set in Depression-era Los Angeles, or maybe the best movie set in Los Angeles—period).

Fante, through his alter-ego Arturo Bandini, expressed what it was like to be young, broke, in love, and then being heartbroken and disappointed in love in 1930s L.A. "I tried to write until I felt...the words only came like drops of blood from my heart."

In *The Road to Los Angeles*, he writes of a woman he admires from a distance, who lights a cigarette and throws away the match:

I knew where her match had fallen. A few steps more and I picked it up. There it lay, in the palm of my hand. An extraordinary match. It was half burned, a sweet-smelling pine match and very beautiful like a piece of rare gold. I kissed it. "Match," I said. "I love you. Your name is Henrietta. I love you body and soul." I put it in my mouth and began to chew it. The carbon tasted of a delicacy, a bittersweet pine, brittle and succulent. Delicious, ravishing. The very match she had held in her fingers. Henrietta. The finest match I ever ate, Madam.

This is the essence of Fante: passionate, florid, and totally devoid of irony. He writes with great affection of the era of decaying Bunker Hill mansions, now reduced to boarding houses for itinerants, down-on-their-heels drunks and prostitutes, the last brief decades when Los Angeles City Hall claimed the sky as the tallest building in the West.

But more than describe streets and structures, Fante captured a sensibility inherent in the sun-drenched perpetual light. You read Fante and swiftly discover his signal trait: he is in love with the rhapsody of language that doesn't call attention to itself. It is a disarmingly direct form of communication. From the long-lost forward to *Ask the Dust*, dis-

covered after his death in 1983:

Ask the dust on the road! Ask the Joshua trees standing along where the Mojave begins. Ask them about Camilla Lopez, and they will whisper her name. Yes, for the last one who saw my girl Camilla Lopez was a tubercular living on the edge of the Mojave, and she was heading East with a dog I gave her, and the dog was named Pancho, and nobody has ever seen Pancho again either. You will not believe that a girl would start across the Mojave desert in October with no companion save a young police dog named Pancho, but it happened... It happened to me. The girl is gone, I was in love with her and she hated me, and that is my story.

This is how the book actually opens: "One night I was sitting on the bed in my hotel room on Bunker Hill, down in the very middle of Los Angeles. It was an important night in my life, because I had to make a decision about the hotel. Either I paid up or I got out: that was what the note said, the note the landlady had put under my door. A great problem, deserving acute attention. I solved it by turning out the lights and going to bed."

Now, *that* is an opening paragraph with attitude.

To say that Fante was a complex guy would be to beg the question. He was complicated to the point of distraction. He adored his wife but was emotionally ambivalent. He had great friends whom he abused with his hubris. Photos of Fante throughout the years show the same stance: the bragging bantam rooster combative come-and-get-a-piece-of-me-son-of-a-bitch stance. He fairly dares you to dis him (like J.B. Books in Glendon Swarthout's underrated novel, *The Shootist*: "I won't be wronged, I won't be insulted, I won't be laid a hand on; I don't do these things to other people and I require the same of them.")

He lost his eyesight to diabetes in 1978 and would eventually lose both of his legs. He lived long enough, however, to enjoy renewed acclaim for *Ask the Dust*, and to dictate a last Bandini book, *Dreams from Bunker Hill*, in 1982. A year later he was dead at the age of 77.

It seems almost heretical to close with Nelson Algren, but what he says about Chicago in *City on the Make* applies equally to Arturo Bandini's world: "Once you've become part of this particular patch, you'll never love another. Like loving a woman with a broken nose, you may find lovelier lovelies, but never a lovely so real."

Fante left Denver in 1930, and never left Los Angeles.

Douglas Jones lived in Los Angeles for many years.

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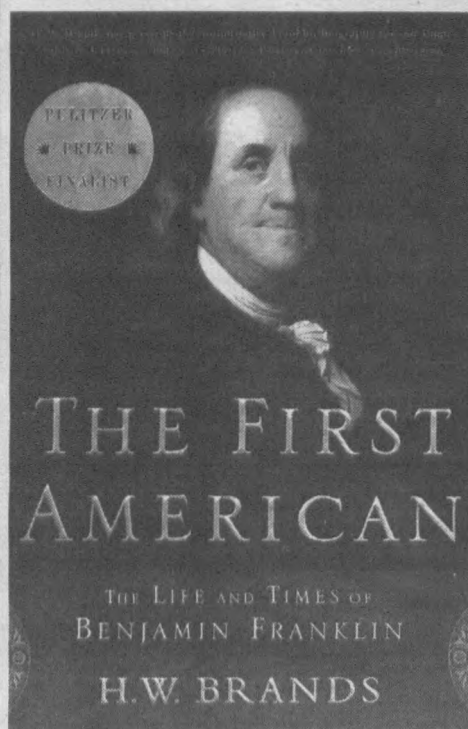
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# Globally Challenged

## Hortense Spillers

Kandehar, Mazar-i-Sharif, Kabul, Jalalabad, Quetta, Tora Bora—the names are not quite household items yet, but our national destiny is somehow tied to them. Think what might happen if we treated geography, *for a change*, as though our lives depended on it, as well they might! It is probably safe to wager that before last fall, the average American—and I would have to count myself as one of them in this case—had only a vague idea of the location of Afghanistan on the world map. All of a sudden, after September 11, the “global village” was no longer just an advertising ploy, and the beloved Big Apple had become a world-class city in a brand new way. If the price of active participation in the geopolitical order at this time is measured by a nation-state’s vulnerability to the consequences of its foreign/domestic policy, then the past fall harshly reminded us that, for all our vaunted wealth, we will not be able, or permitted, to purchase a “separate peace.”

A few days before the terror bombers made apocalyptically-themed movies look like child’s play, US representatives stumped out of the United Nations-sponsored World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, convened at Durban, South Africa. As Patricia Williams has noted (“Pax Americana,” *The Nation*, October 1, 2001), this convocation “had been titled broadly for the explicit purpose of being as inclusive as possible...” That American representatives disapproved of the “wording” of certain resolutions taken by the Conference, as was reported, seems to me no excuse at all for pulling the plug on these efforts. Shortly before Durban, the Bush administration abandoned the Kyoto Accords, has not endorsed, and will not participate in, the concept and establishment of a world court, and it is only recently that the United States Treasury released payments on *some* of its back debt to the United Nations. We would have to regard, then, as nothing short of the most cynical arrogance, the subsequent appearance of key American figures on the world stage, suing for international support of a US-led “war on terror”: How in the world is it possible to elicit global sympathy—which was actually, dutifully forthcoming in NATO’s first-time evocation of Article 5, I understand, (aggression against one member of the pact is aggression against the whole)—if you care about the globe only when it is convenient to you and your perceived interests to do so? But what is more, US foreign and domestic policy tends to be incoherent, isolationist, and cynical because its *citizens* have not demanded more, because the majority has been content to live in the world as though other languages, cultures, histories, lifeworlds, and their populations do not matter. If there is a “message” in 09.11.01—and there must be several—then one thing it is saying is “Pay attention!” The life you save may be your own.

I was embarrassed, incredulous, really, when the Federal Bureau of Investigation felt compelled to post announcements on television last fall, soliciting the aid of speakers of Arabic and Farsi. This nation, with virtually three hundred million souls within its borders, with some three thousand institutions of higher learning, and with access to a “brain trust” vaunted for its accomplishments in modern science and high technology, had to admit that it did not have at its ready disposal a sufficient number of speakers in the languages that it was about to go to war in. The FBI, of course, can and will take very good care of itself, as we well know, so I am making no brief for it here, nor for the rather dubious vocation of espionage and

counter-espionage, whose appropriation of the word “intelligence” more often than not raises a few eyebrows. Having spent nearly three decades in post-doctoral teaching, I am appalled that Humanities faculties across the country have all but jettisoned the university’s foreign language requirements and that it is entirely possible today for a bachelor’s degree candidate to exit the nation’s finest schools profoundly illiterate about the world.

Those cities in Afghanistan I mentioned earlier put me in mind of places called Bosnia, Croatia, Herzegovina, and Macedonia, described in Rebecca West’s *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, one of the most beautifully sustained travelogue-histories that I’ve read. West did not write as a professional historian, but it wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that the sweep and grandeur of *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* suggest the architectonics of the great old churches that she visited on her tour; in fact, one is reminded of Henry Adams’ *Mont St. Michel and Chartres*, which “reading” of Romanesque and Gothic architectural forms remains one of the seminal instances of the meeting between the eye of the observer and the permutations and punctuations of landscape—how it is organized and arranged by natural objects that “return” in the craftsmanship and invention of the public arts. Less systematic in that regard than Adams’ work, because it is not devoted to a study of ecclesiastical architecture, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* uses bold, broad strokes, stunning topographical and climatic contrasts, descriptions of eating, dancing, friendship and affection—and of stress and hostilities—whose pointed particularities manage to convey a total picture of pre-World War II Yugoslavia.

West is not without prejudice, but its signature is adroitly wielded in the interest of grasping a general economy of sociopolitical, cultural, and aesthetic organization. Individual personality and intimate impression inscribe this canvas, as it were, with the seductive modalities of fiction—one Bishop Strossmayer, for example, the “great Croat patriot” and founder of the University of Zagreb, financed “a number of secondary schools and seminaries for clerics, where the instructions were given in Serbo-Croat.” This at a time when the Hungarian overlords of the old Austro-Hungarian Empire were trying to “Magyarize the Croats by forbidding them to use their own language, and as far as possible deprived them of all but the most elementary education.” (pp. 104-05) Any capable history would offer this kind of bare-bones narrative, but we feel the enhancement of revelation and the extra kick of insight when we learn that the Bishop was gifted with charm sufficient to deceive his “victims,” who were led to misinterpret it “as a promise that now, at last, in this enchanting company, life can be lived without precaution, in the laughing exchange of generosity...” (p. 108) Alas, West writes, such men often “cannot understand generosity at all” and their charm has really made no promise and has no meaning, except “perhaps that their mothers’ glands worked very well before they were born.” (p. 108)

It is astonishing to learn that, prior to her tour of the Balkans in 1937, West only became aware of Yugoslavia precisely on October 9, 1934, while recovering from an operation in a London nursing home. To distract herself from the wearying sensation that a “load of ice” had been strapped to her body, she requests a radio for her room, and in a gesture that must have been the 1934 version of channel surfing, turns the “wrong knob” that first yields the sound of music “that is above the earth, that lives in the thunderclouds and rolls in human ears and sometimes deafens them without betraying the path of its melodic line,” only to give way shortly thereafter to a human voice announcing “how the King of Yugoslavia had been assassinated in the streets of Marseille that morning.”

For West, this was assassination number 3, which count would suggest that “someone [had] used a lethal weapon to turn over a new leaf in the book of history.” (pp. 1-3) The Empress Elizabeth of Austria, assassinated when West was five years old, makes this list, as well as the Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Este, on June 28, 1914. The heir-apparent of the Imperial Crown of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Archduke had gone to Bosnia as “Inspector-General of the Army to conduct manoeuvres on the Serbian front.” (p. 13) What a day to have gone, West exclaims, since 28 June is St. Vitus’s Day, which is the anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo, 1389, in which event the Turkish defeat of the Serbians would inaugurate five centuries of Turkish rule that only drew to a close in the nineteenth century. Though Kosovo had been recaptured in the Balkan War, West felt that it was, nonetheless, a stroke of insensitivity on the part of the heir-apparent to turn up, reminding the people on a day of remembrance, that they “were still enslaved by a foreign power.” Sarajevo, the Bosnian capital, where the Archduke was given “insufficient protection” by the local police that day (and where on earth have we heard *that* one before?), bred enough folk who must have “resented Austro-Hungarian rule,” and one of them was a Bosnian Serb by the name of Princip. (p. 13)

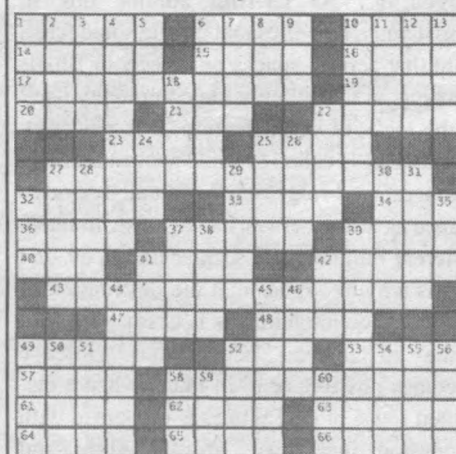
“And now there was another killing”: Twenty years later, the assassination is the subject of film, and West, a few days out of the hospital, will see the newsreel, but as importantly, she examines shifts in the forces of history that occur between the murder of the Empress and the felling of the King at the hands of a Fascist agent, dispatched by Benito Mussolini. If the King of Yugoslavia were a tyrant, then perhaps it is true that the tyrant’s people might have preferred “to kill [him] themselves.” In any case, West reasons that Mussolini’s folly was a “monstrous miscalculation” because the murder “shocked Yugoslavia into a unity it had not known before.” (p. 19) And “again it was in the South-East of Europe, where was the source of all the other deaths.” (p. 14) Having to admit, then, that she “simply and flatly knew nothing at all about the south-eastern corner of Europe,” West powerfully declares her *personal* and collective link to the geopolitical chain: “... and since there proceeds steadily from that place a stream of events

which are a source of danger to me, which indeed for four years [1914-1918] threatened my safety and during that time deprived me for ever of many benefits, that is to say I know nothing of my destiny.” (p. 21) Her journey was meant to correct that ignorance.

History may not repeat itself, but Yugoslavia and Kosovo have barely faded from the headlines when the “stream of events” in Afghanistan and the Middle East raises similar questions about our own ignorance and destiny.

*Hortense Spillers is a professor of English at Cornell University.*

## Crossword by Adam Perl



See solution, p. 10

### Across

1. Salves
6. 1994 biopic starring Tommy Lee Jones
10. Star \_\_\_\_\_
14. Suffix for “barb”
15. Indian’s home?
16. “\_\_\_\_\_ Rhythm”
17. Star of 43 Across
19. \_\_\_\_\_ Linda, California
20. Sheltered, at sea
21. Paul of music
22. Mystery award
23. Small amount
25. Lotion ingredient
27. Star of 43 Across
32. Disgusted
33. Artist’s medium
34. \_\_\_\_\_ Friday
36. Start of a well-known palindrome
37. Even
39. Gillette product
40. Big weight
41. Deli order
42. “Red as \_\_\_\_\_”
43. Subject of this puzzle
47. \_\_\_\_\_ Office
48. Prefix with sphere
49. Range
52. “\_\_\_\_\_ was saying”
53. Part
57. Move on a runway
58. Star of 43 Across
61. Sporting blade
62. “For \_\_\_\_\_ us a son...”
63. Go after
64. Writes
65. “\_\_\_\_\_ there...”
66. Worship
3. Head cases?
4. Try (for)
5. Weekend TV comedy prog.
6. Stand-up
7. \_\_\_\_\_ Law
8. Resumé
9. “\_\_\_\_\_ voyage”
10. Director of 43 Across
11. Eager
12. Arrivederci, \_\_\_\_\_
13. Lead
18. One way to Tel Aviv
22. Ages
24. Hint
25. Pierre’s friend
26. Lounge
27. Office
- \_\_\_\_\_ communiqués
28. Bell town
29. Kim of film
30. Prefix meaning bone
31. Wading bird
32. Kind of cat
35. Make antimacassars
37. Kink’s hit
38. Pernicious
39. Loathed
41. Actress Campbell
42. Teller alternative
44. Specialty of 10 Down
45. Billboard boast
46. Medical suffix
49. \_\_\_\_\_ aerobics
50. Scotch, for one
51. Farm team
52. Pay to play
54. Comic strip pooch
55. Half a Jim Carrey film
56. Villa D’\_\_\_\_\_
58. Nursery rhyme vessel
59. “A Chorus Line” show stopper
60. Team \_\_\_\_\_

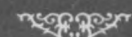
### Down

1. \_\_\_\_\_ California
2. Asia’s \_\_\_\_\_ Sea
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# War ~~is~~ Terrorism

continued from page 3

pete with Afghanistan for some sort of reflection on the use of power. Add to this incoherence the abstraction of modern war, where much killing happens from a distance—together with the flood of consumer images that distract us—and forgetting is guaranteed its place in the structures that sustain violence.

Thus Griffith argues that to keep justifying the violent use of America's overwhelming power, Americans must remember to forget. One of the themes I like in this book is the emphasis on the place of community in resisting the subversion of memory: "The biblical call to 'remembrance' is a renunciation of the death that accompanies organized forgetting." As Griffith applies this to Christianity, he writes that "while some faiths hold that certain spaces or objects or rituals are holy, in Christianity the community itself is the locus of sanctification. It is this community that is called to stand against amnesia and organized forgetting." Actually, remembrance as a form of resistance exists in many different religious and secular traditions, and that is why he argues that the destruction of pluralistic communities is necessary for violence to thrive: "Communal violence becomes possible or even likely when a disrupted sense of community is combined with economic insecurity, militarization, and racism or ethnocentrism." He touches on Rwanda and Yugoslavia as case studies of this dynamic:

Massacre on a massive scale is not a sign of age-old hatreds that have prevented community formation; it is a sign of new hatreds that have been generated intentionally to disrupt and destroy communities that already existed. Why? Because strong, pluralistic communities constitute a threat to the unhindered exercise of political and military power.

Terror can be both reflective of community disintegration and a means of fostering further disintegration by leaving people feeling unsafe, suspicious, and disconnected....Terror is a sign of dismembered community. Terror is also a sign of spiritual crisis....All violence is an attack upon community. All violence by Christians is also an attack upon the memory of Jesus.

As Griffith's argument progresses, it becomes more theological. He contrasts the attitude of those who conquer the world by crushing their opposition with those who believe redemption comes through conversion, a change of heart: "These are sharply contrasting views of the world: a world filled with evil in need of conquest, or a suffering creation groaning for redemption." The first view depends on what he calls ethical dualism. Like Walter Wink before him (see *Engaging The Powers*), Griffith objects to the outlook which sharply divides the world into good and evil forces, for several reasons. First, if (as the ethical dualists believe) evil is as powerful as good, then any means are justified to oppose it. Thus a demonization begins (he points out how often US administrations have used the Hitler label: against Nasser, Qaddafi, Noriega, Hussein, Milosevic, Bin Laden) without any obligation to reflect on one's own capacity for evil. Indeed such self-reflection might weaken the ferocity and resolve of attacks on evil. Demonization is the green light to do what it takes, and it has important consequences. For this country it has led to uncontrolled military spending and a quick reliance on force, a situation in which "the majority of Americans support any US military action despite a half century of lies behind every US military action," and in which it is no longer even necessary to declare war. Finally, demonization makes it permissible to use the means of ter-

ror to fight terror. And this last point means that we engage (inadvertently or not) in the creation of terrorists—e.g. our support of Saddam Hussein against Iran, our support of Bin Laden against the Soviets. As a pacifist, Griffith believes violence controls the system rather than the other way around: "The centrifugal momentum of militarism is wielded by neither emperors or thugs: it wields them." He summarizes Jacques Ellul's laws of violence:

1) Reliance on violence entails continuity, i.e., once one resorts to violence, there is no getting away from it. 2) Violence elicits reciprocal violence. 3) The law of 'sameness' suggests that all kinds of violence are tediously alike, with no way to distinguish between a violence that liberates and a violence that enslaves. 4) Violence has the power to produce nothing but violence; it is not able to produce peace or justice or anything except for more violence. 5) Violence is always based in hatred, but those who resort to violence will always seek to justify its use.

Such dependence on violence quickly leads to a spiritual crisis as Griffith noted earlier, because "the myths of violence stand in the way of seeing our world as the creation, the holy turf of God. The myths of terrorism hinder that flash of recognition by which we see the holy image of God in our sisters and our brothers." The Crusades are his prime example of this loss of vision, and the Hebrew prophets and New Testament are his key references for calling us back to it.

Griffith does a long survey of all the ways God has been perceived to function as a terrorist—the judge whom humans use to say who is chosen and who is not chosen (a strong theme in American history), who is converted by the sword and who dies, who holds on to power by using the fear of sin and damnation—the age-old practice of "harnessing fear for salvific purposes." Among his many examples, the Abolitionist movement is a good case study of how people use the judgment of God for their own purposes,

beginning as it did with a commitment to pacifism and ending for most (but not all) Abolitionists by invoking the wrath of God to justify violence to end slavery: "It was a juridical view of God that was punitive rather than restorative; the scales of justice would be balanced only when one side 'paid' in suffering an amount commensurate with the suffering the other side had already paid." A familiar and contemporary story. Sojourner Truth expressed a different view of God as judge: "the scales of justice would be balanced, not by additional suffering, but by the God who bestows restorative and reparative blessings on those who have suffered great harm."

Griffith has no use for what he calls theological terrorists. "That which is biblically rejected...is not rejected for the sake of passionate brutality but for the sake of a compassionate love." In fact his definition of the terror of God has nothing to do with hate, violence or judgment; it is rather love which overcomes death, the love of individuals and communities who answer the call to resist injustice non-violently by being in relationship to a God who loves unconditionally. The reason this love terrifies is that it calls for (and in Griffith's reading of Revelation, promises) the defeat of all political and personal power that oppresses others, a radical social and individual transformation from which no nation or person is exempt. Giving up privilege can be as hard as facing death.

The end of the book touches briefly on three witnesses to non-violence from different Christian traditions: Leo Tolstoy, Dorothy Day, Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Together they stress the centrality of love, service to others, forgiveness, self-reflection, attention to means which fit the end of creating a just community. In his choice of these witnesses Griffith reaffirms his preference for and commitment to the prophetic tradition. His book is a patient, detailed, eloquent denunciation of injustice and a declaration of faith in what Martin Luther King called the beloved community. Like the prophets, he does not offer short-term or military solutions to the threats we face. He asks us instead to start by pulling away from the violence we inflict: stop the arms trade which feeds terror worldwide; close the School of the Americas and the CIA; dissent publicly from our reliance on militarism; make economic choices that resist the destruction of communities elsewhere; create terror-free zones wherever we can, starting with our own personal lives and local communities. These suggestions have little to do with political effectiveness. But they are concerned with social and personal transformation that begins now and to which each of us is called.

Dan Finlay is a social worker living in Ithaca.

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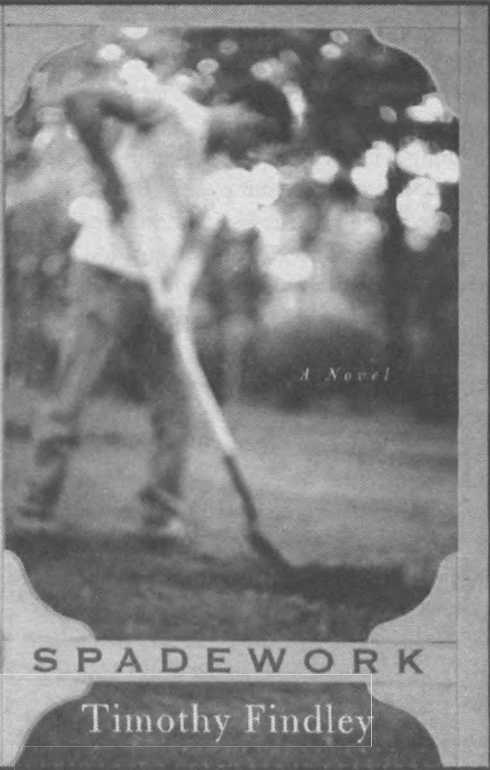
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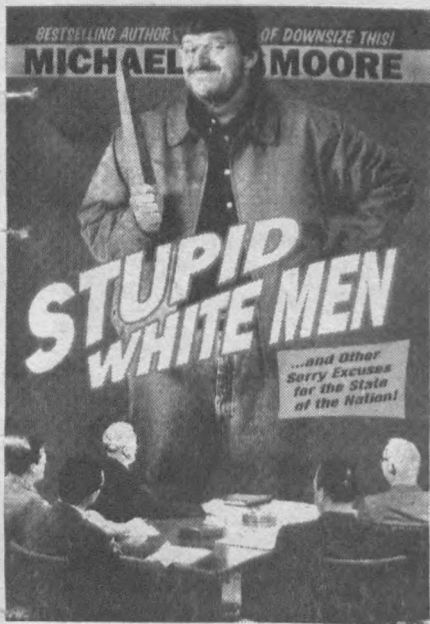
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# What Are Poets For?

## David Weiss

"...and what are poets for in a destitute time?"

—Friedrich Hölderlin

Honestly, I don't know what poets are for. I don't even know what they are against. Most likely, they are for the same things the rest of us are for. The beautiful. The good, the true. Honeysuckle, falling snow. Ground coffee. Human rights. Things well-made. The home team. Nature. Or the idea of nature. Honest labor. Sympathy. Steadfastness. Fair play. The splendors of the earth. The sun, the moon, and the stars. Growth and fruitfulness. They are likely to be for more rather than less, unless less is more. They are for pleasures. For love, "weeping, anarchic Aphrodite," as Auden called her. And for Jokes. Impulse. Delight. Mischievousness. Days off. Silliness. Serendipity. Surprise. Grace. A good flick. Friendship. Solitude. A good song. Good crack, as the Irish say. Ice cream of every stripe and flavor. You won't catch a poet being against dessert, a good drink, or a good time. They'll come down every time on the side of a well-told story, nursery rhymes and the guttural roar of running water. All these go without saying.

No, it's not what poets are for that sets them apart.

But of course the question "What are poets for?" also asks: what use are they? This is a more pertinent question, one that makes me nervous; it's an interrogation which, I have to say, I'm vulnerable to at all times. All times are difficult for someone or other, but "difficult times" are the ones which cast our private difficulties into shadow; the personal itself becomes a casualty of events which assume a common impact and enjoin on us a collective and even unanimous response. One symptom of such a time is that poetry seems, if only for a brief period, superfluous, useless; then we want help to be direct, simple and concrete. But perhaps it's then, when the

worth of poetry is most in doubt, that it's most needed. Is there some special purpose poets serve, then, that we keep them around to watch over the word hoard and its glittering artifacts, shined up by reading, added to, given away by saying them? To be guardians of the language is a role that poets have often felt charged with. In 1943, in a lecture on "The Social Function of Poetry," T.S. Eliot made that elevated use-claim: the poet's "direct duty is to his language, first to preserve, and second to extend and improve." W. H. Auden, during a more difficult time than ours, in 1939, in September, in New York City at the end "of a low, dishonest decade" said, "All I have is a voice/ To undo the folded lie," the folded lie being the news, the rhetoric of the newspapers, of war, of public speech. Eliot's notion argues for a deep-stratum purpose, poetry a dialysis machine for scouring the blood supply of language, keeping the vast reservoir of words vivified. Auden's lines, however, have a greater immediacy and say what a poem can offer, what we go to it for: a voice we can trust.

Not a public voice. But the voice of one person speaking to another or others or to himself in a way which restores events to their proper scale, to a human scale. This, I think, is one thing poets are for. Poets are said to crystalize what we are thinking and feeling. But I think that reading or hearing a poem also extends our thoughts and feelings. There's a poem of Seamus Heaney's, "Sandstone Keepsake," I'd like to say a few words about which extends further my idea about what poets are for. It's a poem written in the early '80s and included in the volume *Station Island*, but which Heaney left out of his selected poems. You can see why. In the poem he's out walking on a beach in Derry, in Northern Ireland, across the estuary from an encampment of British soldiers where, as the poem ends, he's

swooped on, then dropped by trained binoculars:

a silhouette not worth bothering about,  
out for the evening in scarf and waders  
and not about to set times wrong or

right,  
stooping along, one of the venerators.

The entire poem is bathed in this feeling of impotence and defeat. There are the watch-towers, and here is the poet stopping to pick up a stone, at dusk, under momentary surveillance, a figure of no consequence, no one to pay attention to or worry over, practitioner of a civilian not a martial art. And yet, to my mind, the poem marshals all the ordinance of the writer's art, even if the poet himself can't shake the sense that in picking up a stone, a chunk of sandstone, and musing on it "from [his] free state of image and allusion," that he is just dithering about. What does he do with that stone? Well, for starters, he describes it, or, since he's a poet, he makes it utterly palpable. Then he begins a process of association, literary, at first, not personal. He remembers lifting the stone from the water as the perimeter lights of the camp come on and wondering if it's a stone from "Phlegethon," the river in Dante's hell. No ordinary stone now, steam rising from his wet hands, he imagines he's just "plucked the heart/ that damned Guy de Montfort to/ the boiling flood," and then he remembers Guy de Montfort's victim, a nephew of Henry III, whom Montfort killed in a church to avenge the death of his own father who'd rebelled against Henry's rule. Montfort for that sacrilege is consigned by Dante to the Inferno, but the nephew's heart sent to London in a casket is "long venerated." This allusion becomes in the telling extremely personal. Facing the Brits across the estuary, he identifies at first with the avenger and king-defier Montfort and imagines plucking his heart: why? To venerate it. All Brits in uniform are the king's nephew. Yet he gives up his identification with Montfort when he remembers his victim. Dante's concerned with sacrilege, the killing of the nephew in church, Heaney with murder of a symbolic surrogate, and with its ironic result: it's the victim of Montfort's revenge who is venerated. At the poem's end, Heaney identifies himself, "stooping

along" the beach as "one of the venerators," and therefore, unavoidably and shockingly, a traitor. This is Heaney's response to his felt insignificance across from the watch towers. He rejects the violent act of Guy de Montfort though he is drawn to Montfort in his own anger against the British occupation. But he can't help thinking of the victim; he can't subordinate him to politics. And the reason he can't is that he is "one of the venerators." To venerate: it means to revere; to regard or treat with reverence, whose root comes from soliciting the goodwill of the gods, particularly Venus. Nicely, the poem digs under the Christian use to the pagan origin of the word. Veneration: this is what Heaney sides with. And he can't help himself in doing so. The depiction of the stone at the poem's outset is a gesture of veneration. To venerate: to express awe and respect toward. As in Auden's poem, "September 1st, 1939," "Sandstone Keepsake" is full of ironies—the ironies are what save Heaney from the weak gratification of a revenge fantasy. If it feels weak or ineffectual to be a venerator, it is, nevertheless, a truer understanding of his nature and his role. It even threatens to place him on the wrong side, amongst the enemy. Irony is what reasserts the human scale. Again consider the last line, "stooping along, one of the venerators." The soldiers "swoop"; the poet stoops. One's predatory; the other's amatory. To stoop means to bend over, Heaney is examining the wrack along the strand. But he is also lowering himself, accepting the position and status that goes with venerating, staying close to the ground. It may be a let-down after just having plucked a heart from "the boiling flood." But he takes his necessary place. That's what poets are for. To preserve and extend language. To reassert the human voice and a human scale. And to say the hard things which imagination, not fantasy, require of them.

David Weiss teaches writing at Hobart and William Smith Colleges.

# Ukranian Rhapsody

## Mark Rader

### Everything is Illuminated

By Jonathan Safran Foer  
Houghton Mifflin  
276 pages, \$24, cloth

*Everything Is Illuminated*, Jonathan Safran Foer's sometimes entertaining, sometimes cloying debut novel revolves around a quest: a young American (also named Jonathan Safran Foer) has come to the Ukraine in the hopes of locating Trachimbrod, the village of his ancestors, and tracking down a woman named Augustine who, as family legend has it, hid his grandfather from the Nazis. Assisting him are two men employed by a local travel agency that specializes in catering to American Jews who want to trace their roots. The young man hired as the translator is an accounting student named Alex Perchov, and the driver is Alex's grandfather, a depressed and ornery widower who claims to be going blind and insists that his "seeing eye bitch," Sammy Davis Junior Junior, come along for the ride.

Most of the novel's laugh-out-loud moments come courtesy of Alex, who narrates the story in a flamboyantly mangled brand of English all his own. In Alex's world, sleeping is "manufacturing Zs"; spending money is "disseminating currency"; cool people are "premium"; tasks are either "flaccid" or "rigid" to accomplish; and getting anxious is "making shit of a brick."

You might expect Alex's verbal tics to become annoying as their novelty wears off, but they don't; if anything, they make him more endearing.

Braided between the chapters narrated by Alex are two other storylines: a fantastical imagined history of Trachimbrod which focuses on the lives of three of Foer's ancestors, and an account of the emotional fallout of Foer's two-day trip, as told by Alex in letters written periodically to Foer, who, in turn, has been sending Alex installments of the Trachimbrod story and money, with which Alex hopes to buy a one-way plane ticket to America.

The Trachimbrod sections are considerably less assured than the two sections where Alex is doing the talking. Foer's touch isn't as light as it could be; many of his rhapsodic magic-realist passages seem affected and melodramatic. Two scenes, one in which the glowing bellies of coupling Trachimbroders light up the world and one in which the skies over Trachimbrod rain down orange vomit were especially hard to stomach.

Foer gives the reader a taste of what village life must have been like, but spends most of his time telling stories about three of his ancestors: his great-great-great-great-great-great grandfather Yankel, Yankel's adopted daughter Brod, and Safran, Foer's grandfather. What bonds these three characters together, besides their shared lineage, is their inability to hold onto a lasting and authentic love. Yankel is abandoned by his wife; Brod, a chronically depressed young woman, loves only the idea of love and so ends up with a

man who is merely a receptor of her love; and Safran finds what might be considered true love with a Gypsy girl, but abandons her because he knows his family would never approve of their relationship. While I couldn't help admire Foer's fearlessness in discussing the intricacies of love, I found myself wishing he had been more subtle in the way he filtered his ideas about the nature of love and sadness and self-sacrifice through his would-be lovers. Yankel and Brod and Safran never take on lives of their own; they are too busy serving a larger, didactic purpose.

As the Trachimbrod story moves forward into the future, the modern-day story moves further into the past. After driving aimlessly along country roads for hours, Foer and the Perchovs happen upon an old woman sitting outside her home shucking corn, a woman who turns out to have been an acquaintance of Foer's grandfather. The woman does not know where Augustine might be, but she does know where Trachimbrod once stood and agrees to lead the search party there. As night falls, they arrive, and what they find startles them.

Alex narrates:

I implore myself to paint Trachimbrod so you will know why we were so overawed. There was nothing. When I utter 'nothing' I do not mean there was nothing except for two houses, and some wood on the ground, and pieces of glass, and children's toys, and photographs. When I utter that there was nothing, what I intend is that there was not any of these things, or any other things.

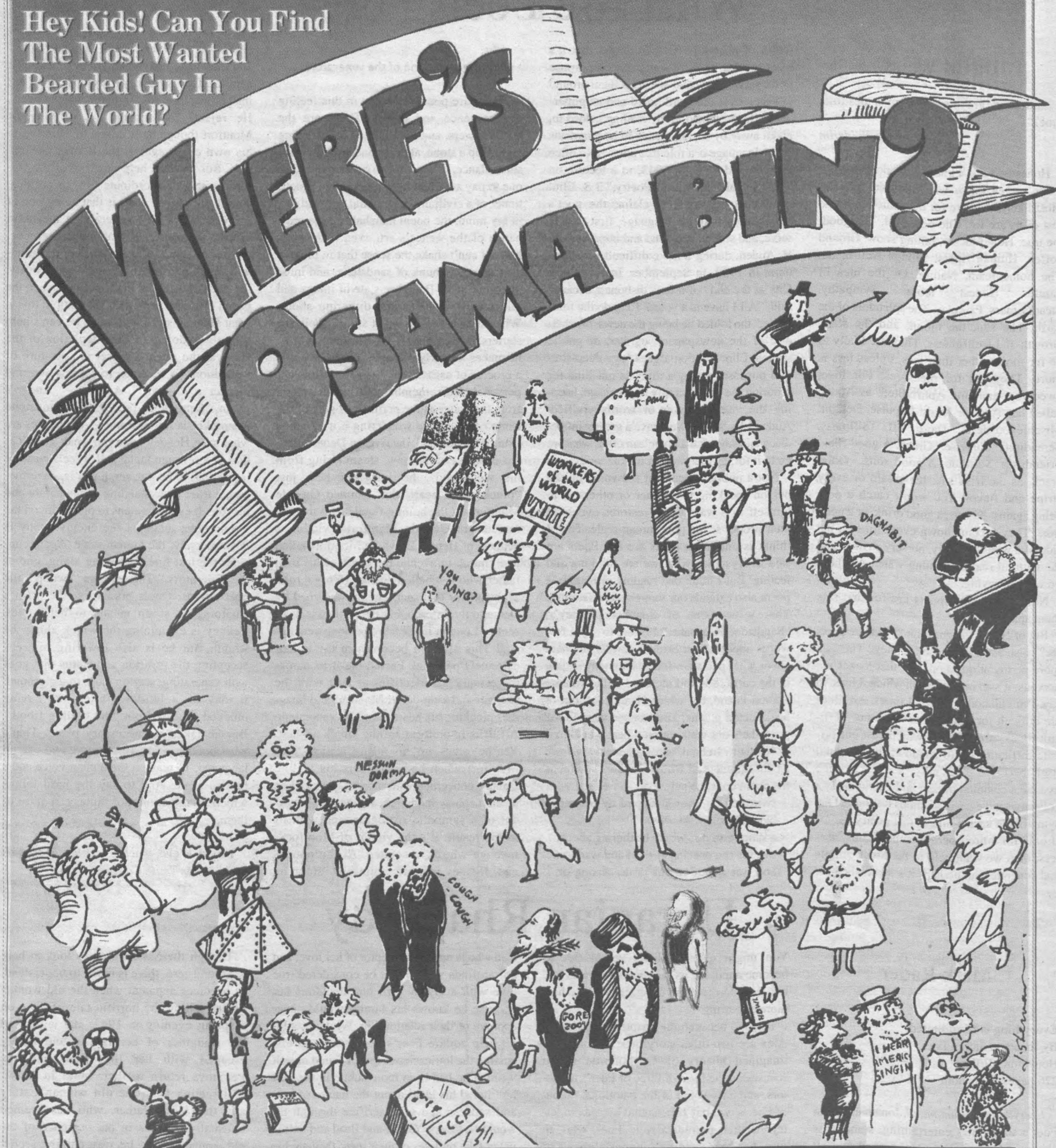
Though there is nothing to look at here at ground zero, there is much to understand, as becomes apparent when the old woman begins telling the horrific tale of how, on a spring evening in 1942, she witnessed the slaughter of her family and barely escaped with her life. Foer and the Perchovs return to their hotel in Lutsk, still reeling from the old woman's story and then Grandfather, who has seemed unusually anxious in the presence of the old woman, shares his own chilling secret: he was instrumental in the death of his best friend, a Jewish poet named Hershel. This is the moment of illumination the book has been barreling towards (the whole chapter is actually titled "Illumination"); unfortunately, Foer diminishes the story's stark power by once again laying on the melodrama too thick.

The false poeticism of much of Foer's prose seems less a result of a young writer's need to show off than a symptom of his enthusiasm and concern for his topic. Foer wants very badly to make us feel the deep love he has for his people and to impress upon us how profound and horrific the experience was that many of them endured. He's not entirely successful in meeting this formidable challenge, but you can't help admire him for so earnestly trying.

Mark Rader is a lecturer in English at Cornell University. He recently completed his M.F.A. in fiction and is currently working on a collection of short stories.



Hey Kids! Can You Find  
The Most Wanted  
Bearded Guy In  
The World?



Can you match the beard to these names?

Captain Ahab  
Yasser Arafat  
Bearded Lady  
Fidel Castro  
Jesus Christ  
Santa Claus  
George Clooney  
the Devil  
Charles Dickens  
Frederick Douglass  
Eric the Red  
Sigmund Freud  
Fu Manchu  
Jerry Garcia

Dizzy Gillespie  
Allen Ginsberg  
Goat  
Al Gore  
Ulysses S. Grant  
Tom Hanks  
Gabby Hayes  
Ernest Hemingway  
Henry VIII  
Al Hirschfeld  
Robin Hood  
Ayatollah Khomeini  
Maynard G. Krebs  
Osama bin Laden

Robert E. Lee  
Vladimir Lenin  
Abraham Lincoln  
Maharishi Mahesh Yogi  
Charles Manson  
Karl Marx  
Merlin  
Moses  
Luciano Pavarotti  
Ezra Pound  
Paul Prudhomme  
Rasputin  
Salman Rushdie  
Menachem Schneerson

Sir Ernest Shackleton  
William Shakespeare  
George Bernard Shaw  
the Smith Brothers  
Papa Smurf  
Tevye  
Leo Tolstoy  
Uncle Sam  
Vincent Van Gogh  
Orson Welles  
Walt Whitman  
Yahweh  
ZZ Top