

Cradle and All

Cara Ben-Yaacov

Most of us have not been to Iraq but we have seen its rooftops at night. We've seen its dark evening skies on our televisions. Rooftops where we might like to stand, above the lights of a bustling city in the warm darkness. And maybe think about the library at Nineveh, its ruins resting beside the Tigris river in the North, the ancient remains of a building that was supposed to have held all written tracts in all written languages. Or maybe we'd think about how old everything is. Think about generations of people stretching back through time, building and rebuilding cities, streets, homes, new but still distinctly Middle Eastern, thick-walled and white-washed beneath the cloudless skies of that region, cities designed to hold out, in what was once called the cradle of civilization.

During the early days of the Gulf War we saw these rooftops but not the city beneath them. We saw footage of Baghdad in the midst of blackout, shot from several miles away. We saw, starting generally around six p.m. weekdays (following reruns of *Roseanne*), what our reporters referred to as "smart bombs" streaking across a barely visible landscape, illuminating the layout of the city, the architecture, the roads, in an exhilarating array of smoke and light. And those covering it couldn't resist comparing the bombing to the images that came readily to mind. "It's like fireworks up here," they said repeatedly. "It's like the Fourth of July."

Often, in what seemed like deliberate attempts at dramatic irony, the war coverage would be intercut with commercials for sport utility vehicles, which were shot with the same zeal and the same attention to placing the viewer at the center of the activity. "You" gaze from this rooftop; "you" use your four-wheel traction to handle this desert-terrain. After an entire night of watching the war coverage, which consisted of footage of smart bombs, strategic strikes, and video-game-like images of pilots' radar equipment, you could easily forget that you had seen not one human being. You had not seen the ground.

This bombing campaign was what Westmoreland had referred to in Vietnam as "a war with no front; no combat." But those who planned and executed the Gulf War took an even more important lesson away from Vietnam. The Gulf War, as it turned out, was the war with no independent press coverage. It was a government-sponsored media event.

Former U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark was in Iraq before the war. He was there when Saddam Hussein asked U.S. government officials what their response would be if Iraq invaded Kuwait. He was there when Hussein was told by U.S. officials that the U.S. had "no interest in these regional matters." Clark, who served under the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, and is internationally known as a civil rights lawyer, has been instrumental in building opposition to the U.S. sanctions against Iraq. He spoke with *The Bookpress* this month about the situation in the Gulf.



William Benson

"Leadership from all over the world tried to prevent [the bombardment]." Clark says in his soft Texan accent. "I tried to prevent it. I told Hussein, just before he got angry and threw me out, that Hiroshima happened, and that he had to understand that. He said, 'If we withdraw America will attack. If we attack they will attack. America intends to attack,' and he was right."

During the initial bombing campaign the U.S. hit Iraq with one Tomahawk missile every thirty seconds for weeks on end. We killed 200,000 Iraqis outright. The strategic strikes that followed took out civilians and civilian facilities. According to reports from the Associated Press, our smart bombs hit "dams, reservoirs, pumping stations, water

and sewage treatment facilities, roads, bridges, pesticide and fertilizer plants, vaccine laboratories, hospitals, herds of cattle and livestock, and warehouses of food and grain." As General Schwartzkopf had promised, we "bombed Iraq into the Stone Age."

"Our government had been planning this for a long time," Clark speaks slowly with a quiet confidence, pausing occasionally to clear his throat. Caught between dinner and a speaking engagement he leans back in his seat, jokes about saying everything he can think of, twice. There's a relentless patience to his speech. "We have known that by 2025 Europe would be increasingly dependent on oil and we wanted control of that oil. All of

our geopolitical analyses came up with the same thing—control over this region. We wanted to break Iraq's fire-power down and take them down. Our purpose in policy was to serve wealth. That is what our foreign policy has continued to do in that region. No one should make a mistake about it. We're in that region to stay."

The Gulf War afforded the U.S. a chance to use weapons that had never before been tested in a combat situation. One of these new weapons was Depleted Uranium ammunition (DU), which can penetrate the heaviest armored protection. It can cut through armored personnel carriers, tanks, and air

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Unnatural Acts

J. N. Campfield

Chances are, if you're eating as you're reading this, you are eating some type of a genetically modified (GM) food, known unaffectionately in Europe as "Frankenfood." And you don't even know it. In fact, you can't know it. They aren't labeled. Corn, potatoes, tomatoes, canola and soybeans (which show up in an astounding variety of food products) top the list of transgenic crops so that, already, some 60-75 percent of foods contain at least one, perhaps many, genetically engineered ingredients. Brands of chocolate, cold cuts, ice cream, dairy substitutes, cooking oils and peanut butter are some of the products containing derivatives from genetically modified plants.

Meanwhile, students, the elderly and public halls in Great Britain have had these controversial foods wiped off their cafeteria menus. After a couple of years of uproar and sometimes open conflict between chemical companies and English consumers, government there has bowed to popular opinion that it is too soon to claim that these hi-tech foods are as safe as some would like us to believe.

Austria and Luxemburg have banned this technology and the import of GM food, while farmers in France and India have burned GM test fields and destroyed seeds. In Ireland, activists are rooting GM crops out of fields, and almost all 15 members of the European Union now require GM foods to be labeled and subject to other regulations before they can be imported.

In Europe and other countries, GM foods, in fact, have become hotly disputed environmental and health issues. But in the U.S., the majority of people have never even heard of them. It is almost as though the major media were participating in a conspiracy of silence around the issue of genetically modified foods.

Recently, the U.S., along with a few other countries (Canada, Australia, Chile, Argentina, and Uruguay), succeeded in blocking a treaty favored by some 160 countries that would have required exporters of GM plants, seeds, or other organisms to request the permission of the importing countries. The story was covered in the business section (not the health or environment section) of *The New York Times* (Feb. 25, 1999) and the headline rather boastfully screamed "U.S. Sidetracks Pact to Control Gene Splicing." The English weekly *The Manchester Guardian* used a more to-the-point headline to describe the same event: "U.S. sabotages global pact on GM trade."

There is a growing body of opinion, though, that perhaps we should be worried, or at least a little uncomfortable, with the ease, the speed and the anonymity with which GM foods have entered our diet. "We are on the cusp of a major revolution in the way we grow our crops, a revolution fueled by biotechnology and driven by multinational corporations," write Marc Lappe and Britt Bailey in *Against the Grain: Biotechnology and the Corporate Takeover of Your Food*.¹ But because "Many

of the key innovations have occurred behind academic and corporate doors with little public input...the public response in the United States has been strangely muted." Or, as Louise Gale, Greenpeace political advisor, was quoted in *The Manchester Guardian*: "The U.S. is willing to threaten biodiversity in the name of short-term profits. It wants a bio-trade, not a biosafety, protocol."

Genetically modified foods are created by inserting into the germ line of the host a foreign gene; in the case of transgenic foods, the foreign gene moves across species lines: a cow gene can be moved into a tomato, or a fish gene into corn, or a virus or bacterium into just about anything. Genetic change and mutation is as old as the planet, but these genetic developments sponsored by GM industries would never occur without human interference. (When was the last time a flounder mated with a tomato in your garden?) Which leads to the question: should they occur at all? "Genetic engineering is not a minor extension of existing breeding technologies," says the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS). "It is a radically new technology for altering the traits of living organisms by adding genetic material that has been manipulated outside of cells...[and] without regard to natural boundaries...This unprecedented ability to shuffle genes means that genetic engineers can make combinations of genes not found in nature."²

China was the first country to commercialize transgenic crops in the early 1990s, when they developed and introduced a virus-resistant tomato. Four years later, in the United States, Calgene's Flavr-Savrtm tomato, a variety with a delayed ripening characteristic, was available in our supermarkets. (It seems to me the world could have done without one more way to ship green tomatoes to market.) By the end of 1997, 45 countries, from Argentina to Zimbabwe, had conducted transgenic crop field trials, 60 different crops had been involved in those trials and, globally, some 31.5 million acres had been planted with transgenic crops. Most of the field trials took place

1. Common Courage Press, founded in 1991 and located in Monroe, Maine, is a publisher whose stated mission is to "turn pens into political swords in an effort to hack away at propaganda and injustice." They have published Noam Chomsky, Gore Vidal, Edward Said, Jennifer Harbury and others.

Lappe, from his website for the Center for Ethics and Toxics (CETOS), states that an earlier publisher cancelled their publication agreement after they were threatened by Monsanto with litigation.

2. The Union of Concerned Scientists (2 Brattle Square, Cambridge, MA 02238-9105 ucs@ucsusa.org) is an independent nonprofit alliance of 70,000 citizens and leading scientists across the country. Their stated mission is to "combine rigorous scientific research with public education and citizen advocacy to help build a clean, healthy environment and a safer world."

in the United States and Canada, with Europe, Latin America and Asia following.

The crops most commonly grown in transgenic field trials were corn, tomato, soybean, canola, potato and cotton. The traits most commonly chosen for transgenic development were herbicide tolerance (thirty percent of transgenic crops), insect resistance, product quality and virus and fungal resistance.

Genetic modification of food crops can lead to some confusion, as garden writer Michael Pollan discovered, when he planted the 'New Leaf Superior,' a GM potato. This potato produces its own insecticide (Bt, from *Bacillus thuringiensis*, a bacterium) to battle the Colorado potato beetle. The insecticide is produced in the potato's leaves and stems and—here's the kicker—in the spud itself. To eat this potato is to eat insecticide. So why isn't it labelled, since some of us might object to eating a toxin, even one deemed "safe" in these amounts?

As Pollan wrote in *The New York Times* article "Playing God in the Garden:" "The biotech industry, with the concurrence of the Food and Drug Administration, has decided we don't need to know it, so biotech foods carry no identifying labels." Pollan, curious and a hell of a good garden writer, called the F.D.A. about his new potatoes and an official explained that the potato didn't have to be labeled as having an additive, since Bt is classified as a pesticide, not a food additive. The Environmental Protection Agency, which oversees pesticides, said the potato did not fall under their regulations since it was a food.

One of the many problems surrounding genetically modified foods is that most of the testing of them has been done by the very companies trying to market them. The broad assumption is that GM foods are safe. But that may be too broad an assumption. Arpad Pusztai, a research scientist with the Rowett Institute in Scotland, certainly disagrees with it. His research involved feeding rats with GM potatoes. The rats, according to Pusztai, suffered damage to their vital organs and a weakened immune system. Apparently, Dr. Pusztai's experiments may have cost him his job: after he announced his results, he was forced to retire. (Twenty scientists from 13 different countries are currently calling for Dr. Pusztai's reinstatement and state that his data "would be acceptable for scientific papers.")³ A decade ago, in the U.S., 37 people died and 1,500 were permanently disabled after using a diet supplement (L-tryptophan) which contained a genetically engineered bacterium.

Even if a GM food is not toxic or otherwise harmful there is always the possibility that it will be allergenic: insert a gene from a Brazil nut into a soybean, and consumers allergic to Brazil nuts may be in real trouble the next time they eat a soybean. At least, in this case, corporate scientists made the discovery before the

3. More information about Arpad Pusztai's research can be found at the New Scientist Website: <http://gmworld.newscientist.com>

product was sent to market. "Where a product contains a novel gene, it may present previously unappreciated risks of allergenicity," write Lappe and Bailey. Again, the problem is that people with allergies to corn, nuts, eggs and other commonplace and not-so-commonplace foods will not know when genes from those foods are inserted into other foods, since GM foods are not labeled.

In addition to the lack of labelling and unbiased testing for safety, another problem with GM foods is gene flow. Although GM foods are planted in test fields and separate plots, plants and pollen don't respect fences. They go where they will. Pollen from a particular plant or field might (usually does) reach a different plant, a different field, so that GM crops will pollinate with, and change, traditional crops. In fact, plant traits produced by genetic engineering may be more likely to escape into the wild than naturally produced traits. Some scientists are already talking about "superweeds" and "super insects" produced by the cross-pollination of engineered and wild plants, resulting in, literally, who-knows-what growing in the fields and forests.

Even if GM crops stay caged in their plots, they will still affect the environment. The GM potato, for instance is, after all, a pesticide in its own right and will eventually create a pest that is resistant to it, as do other pesticides. This is a problem for organic potato growers, since the relatively benign Bt is the insecticide they have used for years. The incorporation of Bt into the plant itself will eventually render it ineffective, leaving organic potato growers in the lurch. In addition, government-funded research in England now shows that the GM potato, when fed to aphids, which are then fed to ladybugs, reduces both the lifespan and fertility of the ladybugs. Now, every gardener knows that having aphid-loving ladybugs in the garden is a wonderful thing, and any practice that harms those insects harms the garden. The GM industry's claim to encouraging sustainable, less chemically dependent agriculture is open to debate, it would seem.

Moreover, the very technology of GM represents some risk since it is less than reliable. When genes from one organism are inserted into another organism, in what is called random insertion, it's not too different from blindfolding a hunter and sending him into 20 wooded acres with a loaded weapon, hoping he'll hit the right prey. "Without knowing where the new gene is, researchers are literally shooting in the dark. Damage and disease may become evident only after several generations when such gene insertions create subtle plant morphological or biochemical changes..." write Lappe and Bailey.

Yet another issue looms large with GM foods: who owns the crop? After growers buy the genetically modified seed potatoes from one of the corporate suppliers, the harvest belongs to the farmer. But it is against Federal law for the farmer to save seed potatoes from that harvest for next year's crop (as has been

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Endangered Species?

Jason Cons

It is no secret that both independent publishers and independent booksellers are under duress from the ongoing conglomeration of both publishing houses and bookstores. Despite pressure from their larger competitors, and the market focus on blockbusters, a small number of establishments continue to produce and sell high-quality and challenging books. Two publishing houses that consistently produce important progressive work are Verso and The New Press.

Verso, which grew out of the British left-wing journal *The New Left Review* in the late '60s and early '70s has made a bid, over the last few years, to publish more trade-oriented titles. While Verso continues to publish works by such esteemed thinkers as Walter Benjamin, Louis Althusser, Jacques Derrida, and Fredric Jameson, it has recently achieved more popular success with titles like Doug Henwood's *Wall Street*, a critique of the stock market, and their new edition of *The Communist Manifesto* (see *The Bookpress*, May, 1998 for an overview of Verso's marketing of the *Manifesto*.)

The New Press, founded in 1990 after director André Schiffrin's now-famous walkout from Random House, is a non-profit publishing house dedicated to important books that would be overlooked by larger, profit-minded houses. In recent years The New Press has published new work by such authors as Studs Terkel, Michel Foucault, and Howard Zinn. The New Press has also engaged in projects with the National Security Archive to produce such books as *The Bay of Pigs Declassified* and *The Kissinger Transcripts*.

Recently, *The Bookpress* spoke with Verso managing director Colin Robinson and The New Press director André Schiffrin about changes in the publishing industry and the role of the independent press in today's cultural environment.

Bookpress: What do you see as the major changes in the publishing industry in the last 10 years?

Colin Robinson: Well, what's changed most is the consolidation of companies throughout the '80s and '90s. The conglomeration in publishing was mirrored by a conglomeration in retail in the mid-'90s. Barnes and Noble and Borders didn't exist in their current states in the early '90s. That's largely happened in the last five years. The key point here is that this is part of a process which induces more people to read the same books.

Marketing figures show that there has been no decline in the number of books published and no decline in the number of readers. But behind these figures is a major shift in the distribution of readers across the publishing range. Now readership is largely concentrated in the top end, the books that have the most money in advances and promotion behind them.

This is a phenomenon across all cultural production and includes movies as well as books.

Consumers are focused on the blockbusters. The seven largest publishing companies concentrate on their best sellers. They offer larger and larger advances to their writers and put more money into promotion to get their advances back.

André Schiffrin: I think the big change in publishing is this ownership issue. You can see by looking at the catalogues of the trade houses that while they're still producing many valuable books, many types of equally valuable books that used to be published no longer appear. They are limiting themselves to entertainment titles rather than the full range they used to do.

BP: How does this affect the overall quality of what is being published?

CR: My feeling is that this reduces cultural diversity. The arguments for cultural diversity are similar to the arguments for biological diversity, which hold that preserving a species is valuable even if it has no immediate use. It may be important in the future.

It's the same in the publishing world. Take, for example, William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. While it's not a book that I'm a big fan of, it has become a widely adopted text in British schools. Faber and Faber were the original publishers, but they were the 13th house that Golding approached. He was turned down 12 times before that. If that happened today, there wouldn't be twelve houses to send it to.

Another argument borrowed from biological diversity is that if you remove one species it may have an effect on all the others. By thinning out the middle end, publishing houses have an overall impact on the quality, rigor, and intellectual richness of their entire list. Diminishing cultural diversity in the publishing industry is bad now and it's going to get worse.

AS: It's been noted widely in recent years that the large commercial publishers are now integral parts of vast international entertainment conglomerates, and thus under pressure to come up with profits commensurate with those of the television and movie interests of their owners. As a look at the catalogues from commercial presses will show, they are still producing a great many valuable books. But, as in the movie business, it is their "fringe" offerings that will continue to provide the most interesting fare. Moreover, smaller independent and university presses simply don't seem to have the wherewithal to commission major new works, books that take years of research and thought. Nor do the smaller presses have the funds or staffs to select and translate major works from abroad—books that have increasingly disappeared from American life. Dozens of important books that appear in European languages every year will never find their way into English. Both the university presses and the independents can and do publish excellent work that has been completed, and then has been rejected by the commercial houses. It is

much harder—if not impossible—for them to finance the promising proposal or long-range project that might result in an important but non-commercial title.

BP: How does all this effect an independent radical publisher like Verso or a non-profit house like The New Press?

CR: One of the difficulties brought on by conglomerate focus at the top end of the market is that it weakens the middle of the market. You'll always have small, special-interest niche markets, such as academic publishing. But Verso is trying to break out of its academic niche and focus on the middle market.

Chains do have a kind of responsibility for carrying radical publishing. These people aren't philistines, they're businessmen, but they have very schematic views of the radical market. Verso is fortunate enough to be a recognized representative of radical publishing. Barnes and Noble supported our recent edition of the *Communist Manifesto*, got behind it, marketed it, and it sold quite well.

So all of this isn't disastrous for us, but if you are a smaller radical publisher than we are, such as Monthly Review or Southend Press, it can be quite difficult to get carried in the chains.

AS: Well, there's a whole range of non-profit publishing houses, including lots of university presses. Our role is to publish the books we feel are no longer appearing in the commercial houses.

We're not a university press even though we're housed at City University. Our aim is not to address the university audience as such. Some of our books could be published by university presses, but most of our books are aimed at different readers. And in fact, we've made a point of trying to reach some of the readers that university presses aren't at all concerned with, such as high-school readers.

BP: How does an independent or left-leaning press go about marketing their books in today's publishing environment?

CR: We obviously don't have the resources to buy a lot of advertising or expensive display materials. It's necessary for us to find other ways of attracting attention to our books. I believe radical publishing involves more than simply publishing radical books. You have to engage in creative ways of publishing and marketing them as well.

We displayed the *Manifesto* in the window of Barney's in New York, got a big display on Wall Street and were quite successful.

We've actually entered it for the "Best Publicity Campaign of 1998" for the Literary Market Place awards. Just to give you an idea of the market, this category is subdivided into two sections: campaigns over \$300,000 and campaigns under \$300,000. We came in at about \$3,000 dollars on that one, so if there is any justice in the world, they'll at least mention us.

We've also been quite successful with negative blurring on the backs of our books. *The New York Times* actually wrote us up on it. We've used Alan Ableson on the back of Doug Henwood's *Wall Street*, for example, saying, "You are scum.... It's tragic you exist." Or on the back of Michael Sorkin's book, *Exquisite Corpse* where the architecture critic from the *LA Times* wrote, "Michael Sorkin is to architectural criticism what the Ayatollah Khomeini was to religious freedom."

AS: Like all publishers we try to have a strong marketing division. We send out lots of review copies, we try to get displays in bookstores wherever we can. The difference with our approach is that we also have a large series of public events around the books. We had over 100 last year ranging from a small meeting of black teachers in a southern town to discuss our oral history of black teachers, to several thousand people turning up to listen to Studs Terkel in Berkeley. At the moment we're doing a series on self-censorship in the press at the Law school at NYU. Next month we have a conference on what's happening in Chiapas. So we have a very extensive outreach program that tries to reach a whole range of readers.

BP: What effect does the Internet market have on publishing and do you see any hope for independent bookstores to cooperate on the Net?

CR: In the future a lot more books are going to be sold on the Net, but ultimately I think the principles of the marketplace will just translate onto the Net. If you look at it, publishers already have to pay to get spots on Amazon.com and B&N. So what will happen is that where people are currently paying for physical space in bookstores, they'll be paying for electronic space on the Net.

As far as independent cooperation, I don't know. I'd think not, though. How would it work? It's much more likely that City Lights in San Francisco, say, could organize their own very groovy Web site and have people shop from that. Customers would know that the editorial sensibilities of the staff at City Lights are such that the books of interest to them would be presented in an accessible way and they would feel strongly that they should support City Lights. So I think that you will see good bookstores develop their own individual Web sites. Cooperation efforts and any kind of centralization are very difficult to achieve for a bunch of people with the sort of personalities that independent booksellers have. I'm not saying this in a pejorative sense. I think the fact that they have passionate and individual beliefs is one of the great things about independent booksellers. But trying to organize them? I think someone said it was like trying to herd cats.

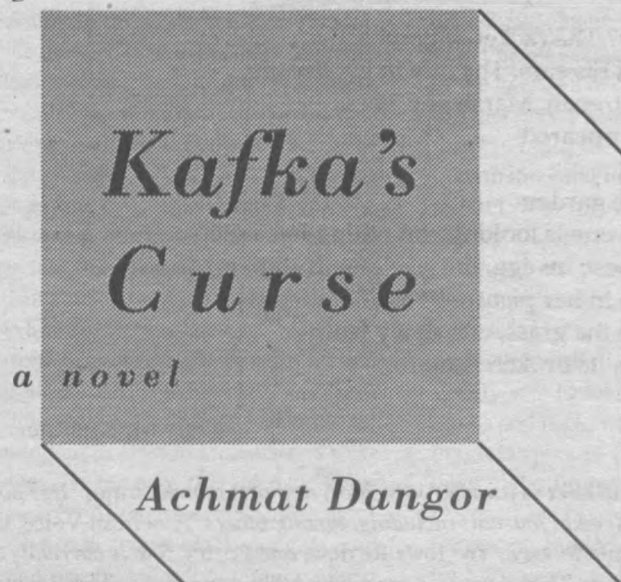
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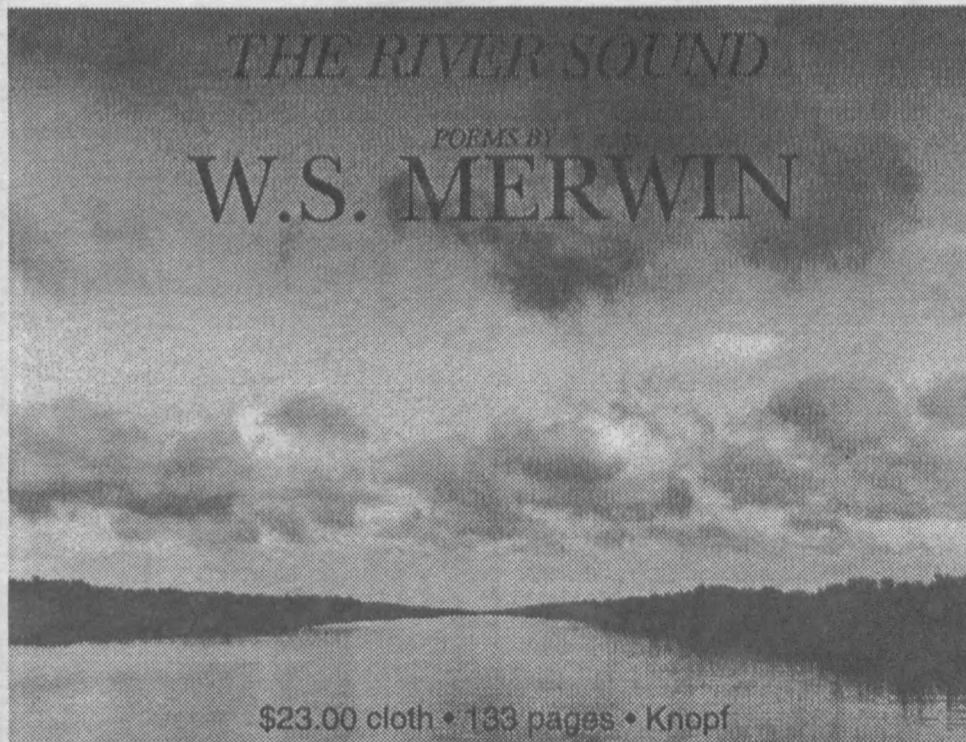
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STILL LIFE

The grapes have that smoky blue quality
of mountain gentians bathed in fog;
the pear, tipped upward like the breasts of a young dancer,
has begun to bruise.

Soon it will pass into russet and maroon
and the housefly balanced on the nosepiece
of the wire spectacles, abandoned hastily,
like the violin

found on a snow-covered bridge
by two drunken German soldiers,
will dance in the sugary pool of its juice.

Over in the corner the mother is staring
at a wreath of ash-colored moths.
How daring they are to court the light,
its sulfuric glaze. How stupid.
Her hands fly up to cover her face.
In one more second they'll sizzle
to extinction—

You see how it is!

the mother says—hope collapsing,
making of her heart
a crimson cut-out of felt. There it is

peeking out from between the slats of her ribs
flat as a valentine
pressed between the psalm that begins

My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?

Poor little hammer, it's turning blue,
while in the other corner, father sleeps in his Naugahyde chair,
his lungs like rained-on paper left to dry in the sun,
his own heart defenseless,
a turtle without its shell. He can't save anyone
certainly not his wife, who has given up
the responsibility of love. Tonight's dream

transports him to a marsh silvered by moonlight
in the Polish village of his birth. The boy
he once was lies on his belly
breathing in the rich purpose of decay.

A pair of ivory geese glide across black water.
The explosion of guns is distant
as the iced-over pasture of a different season:
horses snorting plumes of steam, the slaughtered calf
hanging from a branch, its neck sliced open,
scattering rubies in the snow.

Too quick for the painter's eye, his daughter
runs through the doorway, a tiny
sleep-drenched face creased with pillow lines,
eyes cloudy as tumbled glass. Something

has disturbed her slumber; she tries
to pinch her parents awake: Mother
stiff as her wooden doll, is rooted at the window, lost
to fireflies that ignite and fade, palest face at the cortege.

Father. Father!

Until finally he rouses to take her on his knee—
vessel of my happiness—
his solemn dark eyes insisting
he has returned from a long way away.

Or has he? The racket of bombs
repeats in his ears. The boy in his dreams
died in a trench. Marsh and geese
have disappeared.

Out in the garden
where no one is looking something has fallen
from its nest: an egg, the size of a thumb, turquoise
as the sea in her picture book. Tomorrow,
hidden in the grass, one dewy feather
cradled in its broken shell.

—Dale M. Kushner

Dale M. Kushner is a writer, educator, and arts administrator. Her poetry has been published in journals including, among others, *American Voice*, *Crazy-horse*, *Atlanta Review*, *The Iowa Review*, and *Poetry*. She is currently at work on a novel, *Lower Than Angels*, part of which has appeared in *The Beloit Fiction Journal*.

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Shadow Boxing

Kenneth A. McClane

For my Father

At age seventy-nine, my father has a remarkable way of remembering things. In his full-blooded narratives, he is often dutifully beating up someone who has been unfair to my mother, has threatened my sister, or has been contemptuous of someone—or something—he deems worthy of his protection. These stories are glorious in their intricacies, the delicious how and why buttressing the fateful moment when my father, “knocked the man’s teeth out” or “broke his jaw,” or “wrestled him to his knees.”

My father has always told good stories, since he delights in the heroic, and loves the way an outcome can confound an expectation. In the past, of course, these stories were more earthly—that is, most of the tale was true: one could believe the bone, though the gristle, perhaps, was porous. Still, then as now, when my father becomes truly animated, he is often brought to his full standing height, his hands purposeful, free-floating, before he settles back—a bemused, contented look on his face. At this moment, no one could be more pleased with himself. And yet, no matter how wonderful my father’s pugilistic yarns, none of these events ever took place. Once, many years ago, my father did hit someone, but that was in the most extraordinary of circumstances. He could have punched others; he is certainly strong enough. But, by nature and temperament, he is not combative.

Like most of us, my father is fundamentally decent and principled. His recent fantasies underscore his pain, although the rest—the blood and fisticuffs—is pure invention. For, above all else, my father is simply relating what he felt in a particular situation, that he wanted to act, and that had he been someone else, fists would fly. And considering the magnitude of the gore amassed in his recent stories, it is a good thing, for had my father pummeled everyone at his exponentially growing rate of recollection, there would not be anyone in Harlem, or in New York City, for that matter, who still possessed his original pearly whites.

In actuality, my father is remarkable for his generosity and lack of bitterness. Although he struggled against much racial prejudice, he remained doggedly optimistic, which is why, I imagine, he was able to become a successful African-American physician in a terribly difficult time. He, to this day, is pleased with his life, whatever its involvements and misfortunes—and they have been many, the death of an alcoholic son, the intimate challenge of parenting a brain-damaged daughter, and the loss of his wife of fifty-seven years to Alzheimer’s disease.

During his youth in Boston, Massachusetts, in the 1920s, my father attended public schools controlled by the Irish, many of whom had little use for him or his family. Often, his classmates would call him names; few, if any, ever spoke to him. At times, my father thought his middle name was “Nigger.” In fact, he was not initially permitted to graduate from his high school, although he was a brilliant student, because the principal would not sign his graduation release form. Though mild-mannered, my father believed in himself; he did not take nonsense from anyone. Proud to be black, he felt—as did his father before him—that he was as good as anyone else, which made him, in the principal’s words, “an uppity nigger.” Indeed, my father was only “paper certified” on my grandfather’s risk of a legal suit, his degree coming to him six months late.

Then, four years later, after my father had graduated Phi Beta Kappa, in three years, from Boston University’s College of Liberal Arts, he was admitted to Boston University’s College of Medicine, but only after the most tortuous of journeys. At the time, no Boston medical school would accept black students, and my father, as the child of a poor minister, could ill afford to go elsewhere. To insure their subterfuge—which depended upon their unwavering unanimity—the Boston medical schools (Harvard, Tufts and Boston University) had a

“gentlemen’s agreement” whereby they would collectively direct all their black applicants to black medical schools in the South. Yet, as is so often the case in the machinations of those who are truly despicable—those who, in Albert Camus’s phrase, wish to be “innocent murderers”—the Boston medical schools could effectively neutralize these unwanted potential doctors through bureaucratic sleight-of-hand; in reality, these applications were never officially reviewed. Black applicants were not “refused” at Harvard; they were “referred” to Howard. All the poor “successful” applicant knew was that, in a few months’ time, she was offered admission to a school to which she had not applied.

For a year, my father remained in limbo. Then, after much intrigue—and with the great help of Dr. Solomon Carter Fuller, a distinguished African neurologist—my father inveigled an interview at Boston University’s College of Medicine. It was an astonishing encounter, to say the least. The medical school’s faculty literally looked my father over, trying, one surmises, to ascertain if he were “too black” to trouble the white patients, a consideration not unusual in those days. Indeed, my father wonderfully recounts how the distinguished physicians all huddled around the door of the Boston University Hospital like prairie dogs, as my father, albeit timidly, moved through them on his way to the admissions interview. No one spoke to him; the doctors simply shot him quick glances as they “busied themselves,” trying *en masse* to enter the elevator before he discerned their enterprise. My father, of course, was not fooled.

Still, one can well imagine these bespectacled gentlemen all gathered in the small lobby, trying to look inconspicuous. And to this day, my father heartily laughs when he details the actions of the chairperson of the admissions committee who made the mistake of dropping his keys in the hospital’s lobby. My father naturally picked them up, presented them to the doctor, and was suitably thanked. Yet it was quite a day for that hapless doctor when, lo and behold, he had to lead the questioning of a young man whom he—and the others—had ostensibly never met before. The doctor never mentioned their exchange in the lobby; my father, of course, remained silent. And in two days, to the astonishment of many, my father was admitted, with little fanfare, to the School of Medicine, the first black accepted in twenty-five years.

Yet in the 1960s, it was not my father, but his children who were angry. I saw my father’s hurt; I wanted retribution. My father simply believed in being a good doctor, a good provider, and a decent man. The problems he had with Columbia Presbyterian Hospital, the fact that he was the only physician without private patient privileges and the ability to admit his own charges under his own name, was certainly discussed, but it was not the focus of his life. My father was more interested in his patients and their unusual ailments, treating the legion who couldn’t pay. Nothing was more important to him then getting a diagnosis correct—in his office he treated leprosy and, amazingly, identified one of the rarest diseases in the world (a strain of hyperthyroidism), one of the twenty-five cases then listed in the medical literature. Nothing was more crucial to him than providing black people with the best care imaginable, and nothing dwarfed his monumental love for my mother, my sister, my brother, and me.

When I was young, it was rare for me to see my father: he worked from nine in the morning to nine at night, six days a week. But on Sunday—the week’s grandest day—the entire family would take the Staten Island Ferry across and back, which is still one of the most magical rides in the world, no matter how many miles I travel and how many wonderful places I visit. My father would always remember that my brother Paul loved licorice; my sister Adrienne, a chocolate milkshake; my mother, a small remembrance—a piece of taffy or a bright red kerchief; and I, cashews.

In a phrase, my father was a gentle man, but he was not soft. I recall when I was seven and

he and I had gone down to Macys Department store in lower Manhattan. At that time, few black people frequented the most elegant stores: black people rarely worked in midtown; they certainly were not warmly encouraged to visit. Macys, Saks, and the others were exclusive, which inevitably meant, in our national doublespeak, that blacks were not wanted.

Nevertheless, we both had traveled downtown from our Harlem brownstone to purchase my mother a radio for her birthday. I remember how proud I was of our selection: we brought my mother a large cathedral-shaped radio, with eye-catching, globe-like dials. When we entered the elevator, I carried the enormous radio, which was a real treat for me, small and determined as I was. And then we began the slow, three-floor descent through the perfumes, the hand-stuffs, and, finally, to the lobby, which opened like an irrepressible, garish mouth. That day, we shared the elevator with five white men and one white woman, all of whom possessed that studied nonchalance that one perfects in cities.

Suddenly, as if possessed, the white woman began yelling at my father, and slapped him in the face, screaming that he had pinched her. The elevator was in chaos; the white men and I had not seen anything. Yet I knew that my father would never fondle any woman: he respected my mother far too much to participate in any such odiousness. But then, with no hesitation, my father took his hand and slapped the woman across the mouth, declaring in no uncertain terms that he had not touched her, that she must be crazy, and that he had no intention of being hit by anyone for something he had not done.

Now the elevator was in a panic, the white men demanding that my father apologize. For his part my father simply glared at them, holding on to me, his eyes reassuring but defiant. I still did not fully grasp what had transpired, but children, as if by osmosis, understand that this is a cruel world and that their parents—no matter how inexplicably they sometimes act—are all they have to protect them. So I, by instinct, just held close to my father: he would explain everything, as he always had. Then, after what seemed like hours, the elevator hit the ground floor, and my father told the men that he would be willing to fight them, one at a time, if that is what they desired. I still remember him chiding: “Just come on now, since you all are so certain I touched this woman. Come on. I only ask that this be a fair fight.”

The white men hesitated. Then my father, now conscious of his power and relishing it, rose to his full six-foot height and kept asking—demanding—for one of them to fight, his anger deepening, his voice more and more menacing. Thankfully, no one moved. After a few long moments, my father led me out of the store, and we drove home. He was silent, contemplative, victorious. I was scared yet proud.

For any black person in this country, there is always the possibility for racial insult and the resulting impetus for rage. My father, like all of us, had patiently tried to construct a universe in which he could live his life without

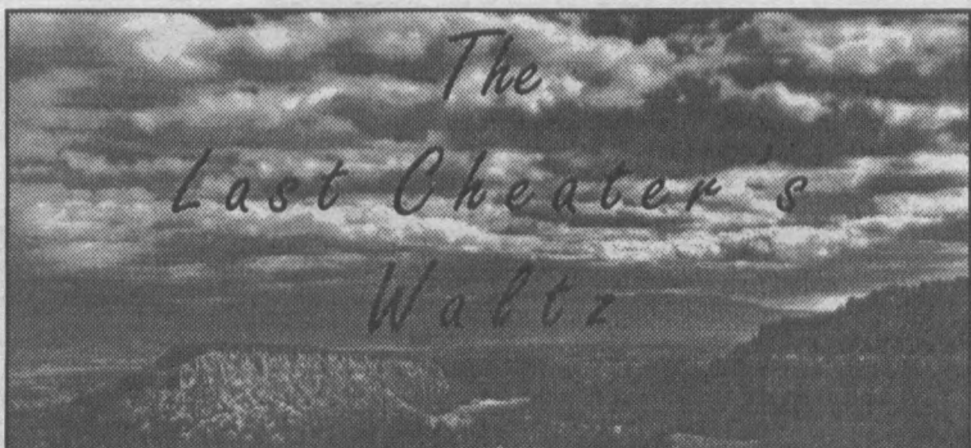
recourse to violence. In fact, I only recall one other instance where he was driven to a place where good cheer and sensitivity could not save him. It was again in New York City, again in midtown, when we hoped to hail a taxi. Cab drivers in New York rarely stop for blacks; they do not like to go to Harlem, for reasons real and fanciful. Yes, it is true that they are often picked upon; but much of this, I suggest, stems from the fact that so few cabs ever venture to Harlem, and far too many Harlemites have suffered from a cab driver’s callous dismissal. There is nothing more insulting—in a world full of insults—than having a cab driver—a hired, public servant—slow down, peer into your face, and race off. I don’t know if white people can even imagine the anger and dread of having one’s person denied. But it is deadly: it makes one want to die; it makes one ready to kill.

That July day, my father and I were looking for a cab and, finally, one came. My father was wearing his best summer suit—he had just come from the hospital—and I was stifling in my private-school attire with its stiff blue blazer, tie, and gray pants. We certainly did not look impoverished. My father, I would hazard, probably had more money in his pocket than that cab driver made in a month. And we were—at least in our own eyes—worthy of a cab ride up to our house, no matter where it was located.

The cab driver slowed up, and we began to let ourselves in. Yet as soon as the driver saw that my father was black, he immediately sped off, my father’s arm, like something immaterial, still stuck in the door. I’ve never seen my father so angry. He kicked at the cab, trying to break the window, and then—in a very strange yet poignant gesture—my father put his hand into his coat pocket, as if to find a gun. Thankfully, it was an empty act. My father had never owned a gun; guns were anathema to him. And yet at that moment, my father had wanted to send that cabby’s brains spiraling across the pavement: he wanted to kill something, anything. That he didn’t have a weapon is something for which I am forever grateful.

As I mentioned, of late my father tells stories—some familiar, others not—where he does the noble thing, hitting this or that miscreant. He, to my knowledge, has only struck one person, that absurd woman on the elevator. And yet his stories point to a serious truth. He, like all black people, has been hurt by this country, and those bludgeoned teeth, however imaginary, are testimony to the reality of his pain. For no matter how honorable my father is, the terrible thing about this world, the terrible thing about America, is that one is often made to hate and to want to smash something—be it yourself, your children, or God forbid, some misbegotten soul who, in a different time and place, might have been your friend.

Kenneth A. McClane teaches English at Cornell University. He is the author, most recently, of *Walls*, a collection of essays.



The Last Cheater's Waltz

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The Writer In His Labyrinth

Collected Fictions.

Jorge Luis Borges.

Translated by Andrew Hurley.

Viking, 1998.

565 pages, \$40.00 cloth.

Andrew Weiner

The history of Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges in English is shorter than one might think, given the amount of attention he commands in current academic discourse. His first story in translation appeared in 1948 in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*. Other stories appeared in journals and reviews throughout the next decade, but it was not until the 1960s that he began to enjoy widespread attention in America. 1961 saw him share the International Publishers' Prize with Samuel Beckett; in that year he also accepted a teaching post at the University of Texas. In 1962 the first major English translations appeared under the titles *Labyrinths* and *Ficciones*. Borges's work was rapidly and enthusiastically received in American literary circles, as John Updike, John Ashbery and John Barth all contributed favorable reviews in the next five years.

Anyone who doubts Borges's impact on modern fiction need do no more than compare Nabokov's *Pale Fire* with "The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim" or Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum* with "Death and the Compass." Neither do the meta-fictional experiments of Barth, Italo Calvino, or Julio Cortázar manage to escape this influence. And the explosion of literary-minded science fiction in the 1960s—Samuel R. Delany, Philip K. Dick, Stanislaw Lem—can at least in part be traced to Borges's distinctive fusion of genres.

But the appeal of the *ficciones* was not confined solely to high culture. Devotees of detective novels and fantasy were equally quick to pick up on this new talent. Judith Merrill, editor of the series *The Year's Best S-F*, included "The Circular Ruins" in the 1966 edition. She commends his work to s-f fans and wonders how different the field would be had Borges been translated earlier. This two-fold reception is fitting, for it reflects the broad appeal of his writing and the scope of his interests. A review of Borges's early career is similar telling: he devoted himself to the literary journals *Prisma* and *Sur*, but also reviewed detective stories and co-edited *Antología de la Literatura Fantástica*.

A *Universal History of Iniquity*, Borges's first foray into what he called "narrative prose," feeds off this interest in the overlap between the criminal and the intellectual, often exploiting the tension to hilarious effect. The *History*, which Viking reprints in its entirety, introduces the reader to various evil-doers: "The Widow Ching—Pirate" and "Hakim, the Masked Dyer of Merv." Perhaps the most memorable is "The Improbable Impostor Tom Castro," who earns his fame with the following tactic:

[He] knew that a perfect facsimile of the beloved Roger Charles Tichborne was impossible to find; he knew as well that any similarities he might achieve would only underscore certain inevitable differences. He therefore gave up the notion of likeness altogether. He sensed that the vast ineptitude of his pretense would be a convincing proof that this was no fraud...

Castro's unlikely ploy succeeds until circumstance intervenes. Exposed, convicted, but relentlessly eager to please, he travels the countryside giving lectures on his guilt—or innocence, depending on the desire of the audience.



Don Karr

Much of the later Borges crops up in this short tale: the double, a distorted reproduction, the play between history and contingency, and the suggestion that what passes as truth is more often a response to cognitive dissonance. Similarly characteristic is the interweaving of history, legend, and outright invention—the end-note contains a purposeful misattribution, and Borges embellished or altered certain facts to suit his purposes.

The subsequent volumes *Ficciones* and *El Aleph* would further develop the heady mixture of philosophy, philology and fantasy to which the adjective "Borgesian" is now applied. Certain motifs have become so common that the

innovation behind them is not always apparent: the mirror, the cursed book, the obsessive scholar of arcane or phony manuscripts, and, of course, the ubiquitous labyrinth.

Borges did not necessarily invent these tropes; in interviews he freely admits a link to the literature of the fantastic as practiced by Chesterton, Stevenson, Poe and Wells. But what he borrowed he re-invented, overhauling obvious plots and tired metaphors with a bold infusion of intellectual content, all without sacrificing the primary goals of the genre. The philosophers of the planet Tlön speak to this theme:

The metaphysicians of Tlön seek not truth, or even plausibility—they seek to amaze, astound. In their view, metaphysics is a branch of the literature of fantasy.

"Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" is as good a place as any to view the explosive proliferation to which Borges' imagination gives rise. The narrator, as is often the case, speaks as Borges. He recounts how his friend Adolfo Bioy Casares—a real-life colleague—suddenly recalled the words of an Uqbari heresiarch when he and Borges came across a "monstrous" mirror late one night. The source of the saying: *The Anglo-*

American Cyclopedia, a dubious reproduction of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

Yet no Cyclopedia contains the Uqbar article save Bioy's, which has four extra pages. Determined to have the truth, they are led to Silas Haslam, expert in the history of Uqbar and labyrinths, and German Gnostic theologian Johannes Valentinus Andreä, authority on the secret society of the Rosy Cross. Uqbari literature, they are to learn, refers never to reality but to the imaginary realms of Mle'khnas and Tlön.

A chain of unlikely contingencies brings the narrator a single volume of the encyclopedia of Tlön—"a vast and systematic fragment of the entire history of an unknown planet." Its mismatched contents are listed offhandedly: "its architectures and its playing cards... its emperors and its seas... its algebra and its fire." Tlön, as it turns out, is an unusual destination. Its language and metaphysics are founded on an unswerving idealism; an object can not be conceived, nor can space. There are no nouns, and Borges archly explains how this leads Tlönians to say things like "Upward, behind the onstreaming it mooned." That's South Tlön. In the northern hemisphere terms are formed from monosyllabic adjectives in a potentially infinite series; poems are often a single massive word.

Suffice it to say that the intrepid reader hears plenty more about Tlön: its peculiar geometry and metaphysics, the heresy of materialism, the practice of inventing authors, and the strange property of objects by which they spontaneously duplicate themselves and become more realistic. Tangents extend to thinkers as diverse as Berkeley, Hume, Spinoza and Russell, and surely the specter of Wittgenstein lurks over any attempt to invent a language. The postscript deflects the narrative yet again, this time towards the doings of the shadowy brotherhood known as Orbis Tertius.

Here, as elsewhere, Borges patterns his work on a convention equally familiar to philosophy and science fiction: the thought-experiment. Subject a hypothetical premise, no matter how farfetched, to logical analysis and record the results. Never is the product so bizarre that it bears no resemblance to the everyday world. Often, Borges' worlds are tangent except for one telling detail: the men who can't remember if they committed suicide, or the boy who replaces the numbers 7013 and 365 with the phrases "Máximo Pérez" and "a ponchoful of meat."

Collected Fictions is the first of a projected four volumes to be released by Viking and to be authorized by the estate of Borges. The occasion: the centennial of his birth. The objective: to produce an English corollary to the *Obras Completas* (1989). A volume of poetry will follow, succeeded by a collection of essays and a new biography.

No one would dispute that the project comes at the right time: past readers of Borges have been frustrated by the varying contents and quality of available translations. Moreover, as millennial cravings for order spawn increasing numbers of "Century's Best" lists, there is hope

continued on page 10

Jorge Luis
BORGES

TRANSLATED BY ANDREW HURLEY



COLLECTED FICTIONS

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Eve's Tongue

Serendipities: Language and Lunacy.
Umberto Eco.
Translated by William Weaver.
Columbia University Press, 1999.
129 pages, \$19.95 cloth.

Descha Daemgen

Thanks in part to his stylistic verve, Umberto Eco has never hesitated to tackle the most esoteric subjects in such novels as *The Name of the Rose* and *Foucault's Pendulum*. It could even be argued that Eco laid the groundwork for a whole sub-genre of contemporary fiction which fearlessly poaches on academic domains for its content. One has only to think of *Fermat's Enigma* (mathematics) and *Sophie's World* (philosophy) for examples.

But *Serendipities*, a collection of five essays presented over a period of two years as lectures and scholarly papers, most notably at the Italian Academy for Advanced Studies at Columbia University, does not present itself as a novel. The premise of *Serendipities* is actually quite humble. Eco is fulfilling a promise made to readers of his 1995 *Search for a Perfect Language* that he still had material left over from that book for "future excursions in erudition." At times one senses this collection may be the seed of a future novel, especially when Eco states in the introduction that the conceptual link for the five essays is a concern with ideas and beliefs "that exist in a twilight zone between common sense and lunacy, truth and error, visionary intelligence and what now seems to us stupidity." It soon becomes evident that what Eco is alluding to here is the historical search for an original language.

The story begins with the Tower of Babel, not merely as a metaphorical humbling of man's pride, but as an actual historical incident which has left a formidable linguistic wound on the landscape. Eco takes us to Genesis 11:1 where we are reminded that subsequent to the Flood, "the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech." After the destruction of the Tower of Babel by God's vengeful hand, the original tongue splits into seventy or seventy-two languages, depending on which source you prefer. Nearly all the sources Eco cites, ranging from Dante to Leibniz, believed that the original language had an iconic quality; words expressed the true essence of an object. The Judeo-Christian idea of a seamless affinity, a profound relation between an object and its signifier, stems of course from the idea that a linguistic act created the world. God spoke and said, "Let there be light." It is the performative act of naming that imbues an object with ontological status.

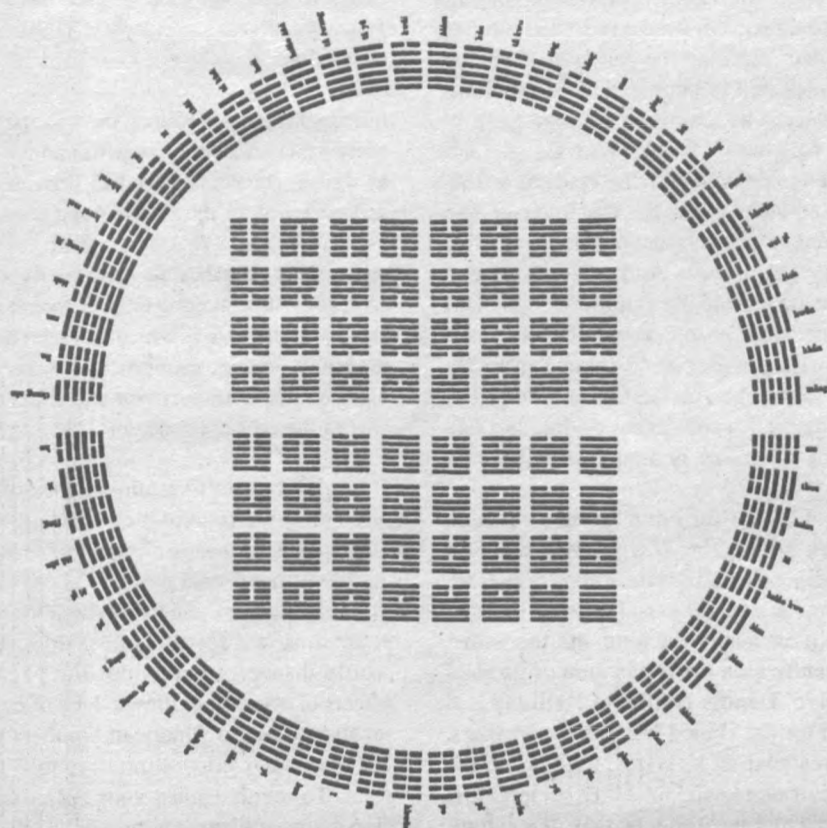
It was obviously not just scholars of a Biblical tradition that recognized the hidden capacity of language. The ancient Greeks identified the structures of their language with the structures of human reason. Non-Greeks were, by definition, barbarians because of their "lack" of language. In etymological terms barbarians were those that stutter, that

have no language. Included in this concept of course were a whole slew of xenophobic ideas about the capability of the barbarian intellect. Greek culture simply did not distinguish between the particular ordering system of a grammar and the subsequent (the Greeks saw a definite causal link) orderings of rationality. To put it lamely, they believed a tidy language led to a tidy mind. The Greeks were fortunate in not being overly obsessed with finding the perfect language. They thought they already had it.

Eco explains that the European search for an original, iconic language, on the other hand, took two main roads. One path was to fabri-

as a linguistic matrix capable of generating all other languages.

The Torah scholar Abraham Abulafia came to the same conclusion several years earlier than Dante, but rather than being philologic his approach was eschatologic and deeply mystical. He did not believe that the original language matrix would be revealed until the arrival of the Messiah, when all linguistic differences would cease, and language as a whole would be reabsorbed into the original Sacred Tongue. Unlike Dante's view that one needs a poetic language as interlocutor to access the sacred, Abulafia's view of language, specifically the language of the Torah, is that it has a



The hexagrams in the Fu-hsi Order. Leibniz misinterpreted the *I Ching* as a system of binary algebra. From *Serendipities: Language and Lunacy*

cate a new language based on the perfection of the lost speech of Eden, the other was to rediscover the actual language spoken by Adam. Dante Alighieri attempts both routes in a desperate effort to find the perfect poetic language with which to express himself. Dante is convinced he can usher in a new language based on the original Adamic Hebrew that will restore the natural link between word and object. He manages to unearth linguistic thought from Aristotle all the way to the Modist grammarians of the thirteenth century. Dante's scholarship is impressive, occasional lapses in his intellectual rigor notwithstanding. Despite his many revisions, recalcitrant blind-alley theories, and comically blatant self refutations, he emerged with a sophisticated solution eerily akin to Chomsky's generative grammar. Dante comes to recognize God's gift to Adam, not as an original language *per se*, but

direct iconic nature. For Abulafia, as well as other kabbalists, the current Torah is only one of the possible permutations of the letters of an invisible eternal Torah which exists only as a potential template, an amorphous matrix of possibility. Abulafia's commentary on the kabbalistic tradition of Torah disarticulation is worth quoting here at length:

And begin by combining this name (the name of God), namely, YHWH, at the beginning alone, and examining all its combinations and move it, turn it about like a wheel, returning around front and back, like a scroll, and do not let it rest, but when you see its matter strengthened because of the great motion, because of the fear of confusion of your imagination, and rolling about of your thoughts, and when you let it rest, return to it and ask [it] until there shall come to your hand a word of wisdom from it...

Abulafia could justify this textual dissolution because each letter that was altered and recomposed had a meaning independent of its specific context. As Abulafia states in his *Perush Havdalah de-Rabbi Akiva*, "Since, in the letters of the Name, each letter is already a name in itself, know that Yod is a name, and YH is a name." The kabbalists imbued each letter of the Hebrew alphabet with this mystical valence, not only because God created the world using these twenty-two letters, but because the letters represented a direct link to the generative matrix of language. It was this potential power of language, its hidden utterance, that was the reified thought of God.

While Dante obviously failed to originate the "perfect" Italian vernacular that would do justice to his potential poetry, Eco tells us that a linguist at the end of the eighteenth century by the name of de Gerando laid out seemingly ironclad reasons as to why Dante was doomed before he began. In his text *Des signes* de Gerando posits two possibilities for an artificial language: either you create an entirely compressed logical dictionary confined to a limited notional field, or you construct a language that is infinitely amplifiable and encompasses all our knowledge in an encyclopedic fashion. You are left with a language that is either conceptually insufficient, or one that is practically infeasible.

In fact, the only success story that Eco recounts, after chronicling the myriad linguistic losers of history, is Leibniz's triumph of formal logic. Leibniz was spurred on in part by Descartes' realization that a true rational language would have to correspond to an order of thought that was analogous to the logic of numbers—in other words, a language that would not have to be posited in its entirety but could be generated by succession. Only in such a deductive structure could one approach a true mathematics of thought. Leibniz, at the time of Eco's story, is working on a calculus that proceeds by 0's and 1's. Leibniz is convinced that this binary calculus has a profound metaphysical grounding in that it reflects the dialectic between God and Nothingness. Much to Eco's intellectual satisfaction, history would have it that Leibniz has the I Ching placed in his possession at exactly the right moment. Leibniz immediately recognizes a structural affinity between the I Ching's series of hexagrams and the binary succession of his new calculus. The strange result is that Leibniz extracted from the I Ching's "generative matrix" the principles of Boolean algebra.

It is this nascent territory of intellectual imbrication where Eco flourishes. His view of scholarship as a communal enterprise is seemingly matched by the interrelatedness of the objects he studies. In *Serendipities* Eco has set aside his usual narrative presence to let the trajectory of a developing intellectual language take center stage.

Descha Daemgen is a writer and intern at The Bookpress.

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Cradle and All

continued from page 1

raid shelters. In one incident, DU rounds were used to bomb the Amariya air raid shelter in Baghdad, killing some 300 civilians. This incident caused Amnesty International to call for an end to "Indiscriminate killing of civilians in Iraq." DU is now suspected by veterans' organizations as one of the causes of Gulf War Syndrome. It is also implicated in the skyrocketing rates of cancer and radiation sickness among Iraqis.

Depleted Uranium was studied extensively by the army prior to its use in the Gulf. The Army Environmental Policy Institute (AEPI) concluded that DU poses "Both chemical and radiological consequences" and that "Short term effects of high doses result in death, while effects of low doses are implicated in cancer." The U.S. General Accounting Office released reports that "Inhaled insoluble oxides [of DU] stay in the lungs and pose a cancer risk due to radiation," and that "Ingested DU dust poses a radioactive and toxicity risk."

Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting published a report prepared by the U.S. Veterans Administration which covered a survey of 251 families of Gulf War veterans who were exposed to DU. A study of their children conceived and born since the war shows that "sixty-seven percent were born with severe eye defects or no eyes and ears. They also suffer from blood infections and respiratory problems." These birth defects directly mirror the effects of DU exposure in Iraq, where infants of DU-exposed mothers are stillborn or born eyeless, and often with fused or extra fingers and toes. Independent reports on DU exposure coming out of Canada maintain that Iraqi doctors are now seeing a new phenomena of children being born headless.

"We fired more than 900,000 cartridges with DU tips toward Iraq and more than 17,000 heavy missiles with DU tips," says Clark. "As a consequence, we bestowed on that country and its air, soil, groundwater, and foodchain, more than a million two thousand pounds of DU. I was there during the bombing, and in 1991 doctors in the south were already reporting things like leukemia in children at an unprecedented incident rate. They were finding tumors in infants they hadn't seen before and even in fetuses—all kinds of malformations. The cause was DU, but it wasn't until 1993 that the Ministry of Health picked up on that. When I went back in '93 they were very anxious about it. The thing they can't tell to this day though, is *why* the rate is increasing, and for how long. The half life of DU is longer than recorded history by thousands of times [4.4 billion years]. It's there and you can't get it out. There's no way. You can't scrape the soil or remove the groundwater. It's just there and it's deadly. It ought to be absolutely prohibited."

In response to increasing concern over DU ammunition and its link to Gulf War Syndrome, the Presidential Advisory Committee on Gulf War Veterans Illnesses issued its final report, stating, "The Committee concludes that it is unlikely that the health effects reported by Gulf War Veterans today are the result of exposure to depleted uranium during the Gulf War."

DU weapons are now being deployed to U.S. troops in other regions, and all reserve units must train in the safe use of Depleted Uranium. Ithaca's national guard unit just finished their DU course last month.

"Iraq was a testing ground," says Clark. "We fired missiles from neutral territory, just to see if we could. We flew jets all the way from the American South to the Iraqi South refueling them six times mid-flight, just to see if we could."

But beyond allegations that the United States used Iraq as a testing ground for exotic and radiological weapons, Clark is most concerned about the issue of the U.S. sanctions against Iraq.

"The sanctions, which have been in place since 1990, have deprived the entire population of necessities and the majority of the

population of food and medicine," says Clark. "UNICEF, Food and Agriculture, The World Health Organization estimate that at least a million-and-a-half people, the great majority infants, children and elderly have been killed as a result of the sanctions, and continue to die at a rate of 250 people a day. 4,500 children a month die of malnutrition and disease. It's hard to think that a decent and rational people would believe we have to kill a million and a half Iraqis. Who do you think the sanctions are hurting? If Hussein has a headache he gets an aspirin. He gets anesthesia if he needs an operation. If he gets bad water, which is very unlikely for any leaders there, he'll get it taken care of."

The sanctions have left Iraqi society decimated and currently incapable of rebuilding. Iraq, which has not used a chemical weapon since their attack on the Kurds in 1987, has been subjected to unprecedented sanctions and inspections. Even the German government, following World War II, was not expected to comply with the kinds of restrictions Iraq faces. Since the war Iraq has been subjected to more inspections than any other country in history. And all this time it remains economically crippled. UNSCOM has gone so far as to demand personal interviews with every science student in Baghdad, making the successful completion of these interviews contingent on Iraq not facing more air strikes, or more restrictive sanctions.

The "UN Oil for Food" program which was set up by the U.S. government to allegedly help alleviate hunger in Iraq, allowing the country to sell its oil at deflated prices in exchange for food and medicine, has recently seen the resignation of its chief executive, Dennis Halliday. Halliday had worked for the United Nations for 34 years. In his resignation he states, "We are in the process of destroying an entire society. It is as simple and terrifying as that. It's a complete breach of the convention of the Rights of the Child and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights."

"The U.S. government has no right to intervene in Iraq or any other country," Ramsey Clark told *The Bookpress*. "As a nation we are not at war, but committing acts of war against the Iraqis every day. We're bombing the cradle of civilization. We can't do that and say we are a society that's compassionate or even democratic. I don't think our people would really stand for it if they understood the horror we have wreaked on the whole population. We have stunted an entire generation. The life expectancy has declined twenty years. The per capita income has declined more than 85 percent. Suppose you started getting fifteen dollars income for every one hundred you used to get. You'd be in pretty bad trouble. You'd get hungry real quick. That's exactly what we've done to these people. It's absolutely impermissible and we've done it for a lot of cheap political reasons. We've done it because we covet the resources, because those resources support our domination of Europe."

The most disturbing statistics on Iraq have to do with long-term sustainability of the society. Associated Press has reported that the U.S. is believed to have introduced biological contagions into Iraq's remaining livestock, killing over a million sheep, cattle and lambs. These reports seem increasingly likely in light of confirmation that UNSCOM was indeed infiltrated by British and U.S. intelligence. (The story of this unlawful espionage was broken by *The Washington Post*, March 2, 1999.) The epidemic of disease among livestock has been further complicated by the U.S. bombing of all vaccine laboratories and facilities in the country. Iraq, which had once manufactured the most effective vaccines for disease among herd animals, vaccines that had been exported throughout the Middle East, is in the midst of an uncontrolled epidemic. One million animals die of disease every seven weeks. At this rate it will take six months for the remaining infected livestock to die, leaving Iraq with no herd animals, and no meat. This

is starting to have a catastrophic impact on the protein intake of the people, who are already suffering from malnutrition.

Depleted Uranium in the soil and groundwater has prevented the Iraqi people from growing crops. U.S. intelligence reports talk of the success of "destroying the food chain." Warehouses and storage facilities that had been stockpiling rice for famine relief were destroyed two months ago in another round of bombings. CNN reported briefly on the warehouse bombings, calling them "a mistake."

The inability to rebuild infrastructure has left the Iraqi people with no clean water and no sewage treatment. There is no access in Iraq to chlorine, which could be used to purify water. Chlorine's "dual use" has made it an unacceptable commodity. UNICEF has stated that:

the sanctions are inhibiting the importation of spare parts, chemicals, reagents and the means of transportation required to provide water and sanitation to the civilian population. It has become increasingly clear that no significant movement towards food security can be achieved. All vital contributors to food availability—agriculture production, importation of foodstuffs, income generation, are dependent on Iraq's ability to purchase and import items vital to the civilian population.

Iraq, once a self-sustaining society, must now purchase food and clean water for an entire nation, a nearly impossible task without the lifting of sanctions.

Those who maintain that the Iraqi people should, or will revolt against their leaders would do well to consider the pacifying effects of starvation, illness, lack of communications (due to American bombers taking out the power grid), limited mobility, and grief. To revolt against your only source of "0.6 pounds of lentils a month," while under attack by a nation that has refused you the very basics of life is less than realistic. And the U.S. government, for all its talk, never intended to provoke such a revolt. The U.S. government knows how to stage a coup, (you may remember your Latin American history) and that is not what is happening in Iraq.

According to the World Health Organization, Iraqi hospitals are functioning without running water, adequate tools and scalpels, or medicine. Doctors can't wash their hands. They go from one room to another, one infection to another. There is a complete lack of sterile conditions. Before the sanctions, Iraq was known for its hospitals, which were the best, most modern facilities in the region. Many of their doctors trained in the United States and France.

Today, according to UNICEF, "the principal causes of malnutrition, illness, and death in young Iraqi children are waterborne communicable diseases, such as diarrhea, typhoid, and cholera," curable diseases that cause one Iraqi child to die every 12 minutes. The World Health Organization reports that "Iraq's health system is close to collapse because medicine and life-saving supplies promised by the oil for food program have never arrived."

The UN Food and Agriculture Organization has reported "four million people in Iraq are living with famine."

Before the sanctions, 92 percent of the population had access to safe water and modern sanitation. Today, according to UNICEF, "the lack of sewage treatment causes 100 tons of raw sewage to be dumped every day into Iraq's major rivers."

The international press has given extensive coverage to the loss of life and to the insidiousness of the tactics used by the American military. Yet in the U.S., the war with no coverage is still going on, and after an eight-year campaign of bombing and deprivation, our networks and our "public" media sources have still not touched down to look into the faces of the people our government is killing. If you think that you are getting by with NPR and PBS, you should

know—it's a matter of "public" record—that 70 percent of their programming is funded by American oil companies.

When Colin Powell was asked by reporters how many people had died in Iraq as a result of the sanctions he replied, "Frankly, it's not a number I'm interested in." But it doesn't take much to do the math. And it wouldn't take much for American news sources to tell you this: 250 Iraqi people die every day. Approximately 90,000 die a year; 1.75 million are already dead.

"Laws applicable to war prohibit us from using starvation as a weapon," Ramsey Clark says. "They mandate that you must provide food, shelter, and medical help to enemy soldiers even if they had been firing at you moments before. And here we hold off on an entire society. We are responsible. It is a crime against humanity. These sanctions are the carrying out of genocide, in the specific terms of the genocide convention. We are 'deliberately creating conditions which destroy a society because of their nationality, ethnicity or race.' We have the intent of 'deliberately inflicting on this group conditions of life calculated to bring about its destruction in whole or part.' We have killed nearly two million people because they are Iraqi. And the people most susceptible to radiological and biological weapons, starvation, and malnutrition are the very people who should be protected—infants, children, the elderly, pregnant women, nursing mothers, chronically ill and disabled people. We are doing it. We are killing them." Clark pauses, clears his throat. "And then we say, 'These poor incompetent people.' We say, 'These poor stupid people, who have this horrible leader. They're paying for having wanted such a horrible leader.' You look at Iraq and the whole American system comes together. In the name of free trade and privatization we have imposed on a whole population hunger, sickness, want, violence. They wait for an early death, while we get richer and more violent. What could be worth the lives of 575,000 children?"

Cara Ben-Yaacov is a writer who lives in Ithaca.

The following organizations can be contacted for more information about the U.S. sanctions against Iraq.

International Action Center
Anti-Sanctions Project
39 W. 14th St. #206
New York, NY 10011
phone: 212-633-6646
fax: 212 633-2289
email: iacenter@iacenter.org
www.iacenter.org

Ithaca Catholic Worker
PO Box 293
Ithaca, NY 14851
Neil Golder: 607 273-8025
Ellen Grady: 607 277-6932

Voices in the Wilderness
1460 West Carmen Ave.
Chicago, IL 60640
phone: 773 784-8065
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email: kkelly@igc.apc.org
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Living Jazz

Edward T. Chase

This year marks the centennial of Duke Ellington's birth. In a fitting, if indirect, tribute, the new Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra has taken its place beside the Metropolitan Opera, the New York Philharmonic, and the New York City Ballet at Lincoln Center. The Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra is a superb band, modeled on Ellington's *nonpareil* own. It was created and is led by Wynton Marsalis, a supremely gifted trumpet player and composer, whose musical knowledge is astonishing in its breadth and depth.

Jazz historian and critic Albert Murray is one of Marsalis's mentors. Murray, now in his eighties, is a formidable intellect and a prolific writer, with a particular interest in Ellington. His books, which are many and influential, include *Train Whistle Guitar*, *Conversations with Albert Murray*, and the 1976 classic *Stomping the Blues*.

Murray has been quoted as saying, "One of the things that horrifies me is that some white guy is always explaining black people to me." Not I. He's my friend and knows I admire him, so I'll take my chances. And besides, my interest is strictly jazz. My first published writing appeared when I was fifteen and it was about jazz, primarily Ellington. I was a boy summering in Woodstock, New York, in the 1930s and '40s, and heard all the early Ellington records in the barn reconstructed for the recreation of his kids and their friends by the writer-lyricist-editor J. P. McAvoy. It was equipped with a dance floor (indispensable), a 78 r.p.m. record player and every emerging new jazz record. McAvoy was a writer for Broadway shows, including *The Ziegfeld Follies* and *George White's Scandals*, so as a pro he had to keep up. I still have many of the 78's of that era—at least, those of my collection that survived World War II, during which I hauled them around to Navy bases in a big sea chest with a wind-up Victrola. In the section "Reading Jazz" from *Stomping the Blues*, Murray writes, "The phonograph music has served as the blues musician's equivalent to the concert hall almost from the outset. It has been in effect his concert hall without walls, his *musée imaginaire*, his comprehensive anthology, and also his sacred repository and official archive. Many blues-idiom composers use the recorded performance as the authorized score."

For Murray, jazz and the blues comprise the quintessential American aesthetic. He deems the blues "heroic," in the sense that "their idiom is an attitude of affirmation in the face of difficulty, of improvising in the face of challenge." The blues are a cultural response to slavery, he writes. And the ability to improvise, the essence of jazz, is the first crucial component of jazz blues. Jazz, he writes, synthesizes all of America's cultural forces. Most fundamentally, jazz, like all authentic art, creates form that counteracts chaos. It is the improvisational riff at the break that expresses "carrying on in the face of adversity."

It was Duke Ellington, writes Murray, who in the early 20th century first and then most prolifically was "the musician who was to become the composer who would possess or realize—which is to say extend, elaborate and refine—more indigenous American material into universally appealing fine music by means of idiomatic devices than any other [musician].... Ellington's music was to win a sophisticated international following even as he began to receive national recognition as a popular entertainment star in the United States."



The Duke Ellington band in 1942

Ellington of course was not alone. Murray notes the earlier influence of King Oliver in Chicago, and Louis Armstrong and Freddie Keppard in New Orleans. But, by 1925, the Duke, in New York City at the Cotton Club, was establishing his inimitable orchestra and unique music with such pieces as "Black and Tan Fantasy," "East Saint Louis Toodle-oo," "Mood Indigo," "Creole Love Call," "Birmingham Breakdown," and "Rockin' in Rhythm."

In a recent essay celebrating the Ellington centennial, Murray cites the comments of Czech composer Anton Dvorak in 1893, "...in the Negro melodies of America I discover all that is needed for a great and noble school of music. They are pathetic, tender, passionate, melancholy, solemn, religious, bold, merry, gay, or what you will. It is music that suits itself to any mood or any purpose. There is nothing in the whole range of composition that cannot be supplied with themes from this source."

Actually, jazz started invading the world's consciousness as early as 1902, if you can accept the New Orleans memories of the great piano player Jelly Roll Morton. And I have read with astonishment the incredibly prophetic comments of the conductor Ernst Ansermet in the Paris *Revue Romand* of

1919, in an article about Sidney Bechet. Ansermet wrote:—in 1919, mind you!—

There is in the Southern Syncopated Orchestra an extraordinary clarinet virtuoso who is, so it seems, the first of his race to have composed perfectly formed blues on the clarinet. I've heard two of them which he had elaborated at great length, then played to his companions so that they are equally admirable for their richness of invention, force of accent, and daring in novelty and the unexpected. Already, they gave the idea of a style and their form was gripping,

abrupt, harsh, with a brusque and pitiless ending like that of Bach's second Brandenburg Concerto. I wish to set down the name of this artist of genius; as for myself, I shall never forget it—it is Sidney Bechet.... What a moving thing it is to meet this very black fat boy with white teeth and that narrow forehead, who is very glad one likes what he does, but who can say nothing of his art, save that he follows his 'own way' and one thinks that his 'own way' is perhaps the highway the whole world will swing along tomorrow.

The literature on jazz by now is immense. There is remarkably perceptive writing by Stanley Crouch, Gunther Schuller, Whitney Balliett (in *The New Yorker*), and many others. Valuable recent books are *Reading Jazz*, edited by Robert Gottlieb and *Visions of Jazz*, by Gary Giddins, and of course, the writings of Albert Murray.

An esoteric book, *A Left Hand Like God: The Story of Boogie Woogie* by Peter Silvester (London: Omnibus Press, 1988) illustrates the diversity of jazz history writings. I used to relish the sophisticated boogie-woogie trio of Albert Ammons, Meade Lux Louis and Pete Johnson at Café Society in Greenwich Village in 1939 and 1940. I never had a clue as to boogie-woogie's origins. Historian

Peter Silvester traces boogie-woogie piano playing back to the immense Southern virgin forests, the pinewoods of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Georgia. There, in the 19th and early 20th century, the predominantly black labor force for the lumbering and turpentine industries lived in camps made up of boxcar-like bunkhouses set along spurs of logging railways. A large shack would be used as a combination dance-hall, crap-game dive and "barrel house"—a kind of honkytonk furnished by the lumber company with piano and liquor. Here is where the pioneer boogie-woogie pianists began. Silvester provides astonishing detail about the various logging companies, the railroads, the little towns, the legendary players—Rufus Perryman, Clarence Lofton, Pinetop Smith. Talent scouts from the record companies tracked some of them down during the mid-'20s and '30s. One of these was Jay McShann, later famed for his piano playing in Kansas City, whom I once inveigled, in his old age, to come play at a party in East Hampton with his celebrated bassist Major Holly.

Duke Ellington, beyond all others, drew upon every facet of American life to create his huge body of original compositions, with his orchestra of genius players over the years—players such as Johnny Hodges, Cootie Williams, Otto Hardwick, Barney Bigard, Bubber Miley, Sonny Greer, Harry Carney, Ben Webster, Russell Procope, Paul Gonsalves, "Trickie Sam" Nanton, Lawrence Brown, Rex Stewart, and Freddie Guy. The orchestra itself was Duke's instrument. He was himself, of course, a marvelous jazz pianist, but his distinctive composing genius was the way he made his utterly unique band of elite individual stars into his own unified magic wand.

In *Reading Jazz: A Gathering of Autobiography, Reportage and Criticism from 1919 to Now*, Robert Gottlieb introduces a section, "The Blues as Dance Music," from Albert Murray's classic, with the line, "The magisterial Murray, in his influential book *Stomping the Blues* (1976), reminds us of the primal relationship of jazz to dance." When one hears an Ellington piece starting up, the irresistible impulse, with the music's mood, its beat, its beauty, is to dance with the partner you yearn for. Jazz dancing involves an embrace (unlike rock); it is sexually alive—especially when one is young and the desired partner is someone new you are falling for. Jazz is intrinsically erotic. Surely the Duke—handsome, suave, elegant, sensuous—knew this. And while he no doubt would have been delighted to see his compositions being played at the Lincoln Center, it is worth remembering his sharp putdown of those favoring concert pieces over dance pieces: "When you get so god-damn important you can't play places like this [dances] anymore, you might as well give it up because you're finished."

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

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Endangered?

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don't know how it changes the actual situation. You could always order any book from a bookseller. I think one of the adverse effects of the Web sites will be the increasing diminution of the role that independent booksellers already play. They only account for 17% of sales. They will account for much less by the time the corporations are through with them. I think that's unfortunate. But you probably saw in *The Times* the other day, independent booksellers are finally coming up with their own Web site. But what the Web sites are doing is making available on a computer what you used to get by going down to a bookstore and saying, "Will you special order this for me?"

BP: Both Verso and The New Press have shown that books larger publishing houses won't publish can be profitable. What's the process of identifying these books?

CR: There's a kind of intellectual milieu called the New Left that we're connected to through the *New Left Review*. But I think you have to go out and search for authors. As I said, the hallmark of radical publishing is not just the content of the books, it's also the way that you publish. I think you have to look for authors in places that other people might not expect to find them. We're doing a book on New York taxis this spring. I came across the guy who's writing it at a meeting of the New York Taxi Association which happened to be meeting at the Brecht Forum one night. As it turned out, he's a very good writer and there's no one better to describe the industry than him. He's writing from the inside. I suspect this isn't the kind of place that Harper Collins or Random House would ever go looking for authors. I suppose to be fair, I wasn't looking for authors either, but I at least had my eyes and ears open.

AS: We're not identifying books that we think will be profitable. We're identifying books that we think matter. Some of them end up being profitable, some don't. It's as if we were the last university left with a scholarship fund. Books are admitted on merit and because we think they're important. And we'll take them whether they meet our overhead costs or not. Sometimes it turns out, like with *May It Please the Court* that we have a bestseller, sometimes not.

With something like our "Declassified" series, we were talking to the NSA over a long period of time. We started with the Iran Contra materials. That's a case where none of the commercial houses were willing to take them on and we thought their books were really important. The *Kissinger Transcripts* is the most recent of those. That's a book I hope people around Ithaca will be reading.

BP: How do you structure your lists?

CR: The Verso list is a combination of academic and more popular books. I think it's

very important that each of these complements the other. The popular books, which are often quite important, are underscored by the presence of academic books. On the other hand, the academic books can be projected to a wider audience on the back of the trade part of the list. So I think both our academic and our trade authors benefit. Our writers don't necessarily have to be left-wing. But they certainly have to be unconventional. While I like the balance we have, in our own way, we are going to mirror the larger markets by publishing fewer books and trying to sell more of the books we publish. At the moment we're publishing 40-45 books in a year. I'd like to get down to about 30. But I'd like them to be 30 books that really make an impact. Therefore we will try to sign bigger authors and do all the things that attend to that, such as bigger advances and foreign rights.

AS: The lesson we have drawn from such books as *May It Please the Court* and *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, is that, although many types of books undeniably become harder to publish with every passing year (the increasing intellectual isolationism in America makes that particularly true for foreign fiction), the audience for many topics remains untapped, simply because no one has tried to reach them. Whether for reasons of racial or elitist prejudice, many a reader has been assumed out of existence.

Needless to say, it has taken a not-for-profit structure to discover those readers. While some editors in commercial houses doubtless would be delighted to experiment as we have, they are forced to concentrate on the handful of books that may, if all goes well, allow them to meet the ever-more-unrealistic economic expectations of publishers. Editors who can remember the times of B.C. (Before Conglomerates) still regret the decimation of serious publishing. What is worrisome is that people joining the ranks of American publishing today have no such comparative vantage point. To them, the present situation is normal—"the real world"—and not something to challenge or change.

BP: Reading titles such as The New Press's *We the Media* leaves anyone advocating for an open media somewhat discouraged.

AS: Right. No, I don't think there's any cause for optimism at all. I think what's happened to film, what's happened to radio, what's happened to television, is happening to publishing at this point. It's one thing if that happens in media that are geared towards entertainment, it's another when media that are producing new ideas become part of the entertainment media. I think we're in for hard times.

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

Labyrinth

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that a more centralized and accessible Borges will both foster new interest and help to cement his place in the literary history of this century.

Necessary though the project may be, its ambition might perhaps be deemed inappropriate to its subject. In his essay "Versions of Homer" (1932), Borges bristles at the idea of a single, authoritative translation: "The concept of 'definitive text' is appealed to only by religion, or by weariness." Literature is made possible by the polysemous nature of language; it is this same quality that actively undermines the "definitive text" or the perfect translation. All that any one "version" of a text can hope to be is an accurate representation of the translator's feel for the original. The only way in which we can conceive an ultimate meaning of this original is by hypothesizing the sum of an infinite number of translations.

Borges actively encouraged this approach to his work by granting permission to many translators — some seventeen by Andrew Hurley's count. But this of course begs the question of whether the Viking project is in fact overstepping its bounds with its implicit claim to be the authoritative English Borges. Just because an infinite number of translations is impossible, that doesn't justify the opposite extreme. Wouldn't a collection of various translators' efforts do more justice to the multivocal character of Borges's *ficciones*?

A second objection is occasioned by the five-year collaboration between Borges and Norman Thomas di Giovanni. Together the two produced ten English translations, including *A Universal History of Iniquity* and *The Book of Sand*, and worked so closely that di Giovanni at times persuaded Borges to alter the Spanish original. But a falling-out pre-empted any further cooperation, and unfortunately served to estrange di Giovanni from the centenary project. It is odd, troubling even, that no contributions were sought from a source with a first-hand knowledge of Borges's views on translation and revision.

Though these and other questions cast doubt upon the Viking enterprise, they should not detract from the merits of Hurley's accomplishment. It is often said of translations, usually as faint praise, that they are "capable;" here, given the exceptional difficulty of the task, the term rightly assumes a more honorable quality. Hurley uses his brief note at the end of the volume to assess the pitfalls peculiar to rendering Borges, including the issue of what he calls "back-translation:" whether to re-translate excerpts from English sources from the Spanish or to present them in original form.

Another challenge is to capture the allusive quality of Borges's language as it deftly ranges between deadpan humor, abstract musing, philological trivia and unexpected poeticism. Hurley cites as an example the opening line from "The Circular Ruins:" *Nadie lo vio desembarcar en la unánime noche*. He offers: "No one saw him slip from the boat in the unanimous night." Hurley, unlike certain of his predecessors, does not shy from the startling

"unanimous," which as he notes is "just as odd in Spanish." But why replace "disembark" with the cumbersome "slip from the boat?"

A similar interpolation occurs in "The Book of Sands," where the phrase *no sin pedertería*—literally "not without pedertería"—unnecessarily swells to "not without a somewhat stiff, pedantic note." Perhaps the most unfortunate decision is in the story "*Funes el memorioso*." Hurley devotes a lengthy explanation to a defense of his choosing "Funes, His Memory" over "Funes, The Memorious." His complaints that *memorioso* is a neologism and "vaguely Lewis Carroll-esque" are misplaced in a volume of stories that tinker with language and celebrate the fantastic.

Such discrepancies indicate a larger trend in Hurley's translation: the tendency to be prolix. This is both a boon and a nuisance for the reader. Borges frequently indulges a taste for the baroque—a style that, he wrote, "deliberately exhausts its own possibilities and that borders on self-caricature." In that mode, Hurley's elliptical phrasings are accurate and indeed evocative: an inept con-artist's "muddle-headed joviality" and "infinite docility," or a detective-turned-kabbalist who displays a "reckless perspicacity."

But the strength of Borges's prose style lies equally in the ability to rapidly shift from comical exaggeration to sparse precision, and it is in capturing such transitions that Hurley falters, if only slightly. When the Spanish *vil* translates as "despicable," a certain necessary economy has been lost. Why not "mean" or "base" or "vile"? If such instances are particularly jarring, however, it is only because the bulk of the translation successfully reproduces the playful, often vertiginous sweep of the *ficciones*.

Were rigor and humor the only saving qualities of the *ficciones* though, they would stand little chance of overcoming their own cleverness. Instead, they burrow and lodge themselves deep within the reader's imagination like fables or nightmares. This is partly due to the sheer strangeness of Borges' inventions. The abundance of arcane philological and historical detail lends a patina of mystique to the stories, as if they had subtly become the hidden manuscripts or secret encyclopedias they describe.

Yet if these qualities begin to explain the allure of Borges, they do not quite account for his unique staying power. What is it about his writing that keeps the reader coming back? Perhaps it is his re-imagining of the literary artifact as a labyrinth. Throughout the *ficciones* the themes of infinity, memory, and time are worked and reworked in such a way as to suggest that the only proper response to paradox is obsession.

Borges once said of himself: "If I am rich in anything, it is in perplexities rather than certainties." The same can be said of his work, only without qualification. He was the closest anyone has come to a twentieth-century heresiarch: at once maddening and lucid, unsurpassed in his ability to bewilder and to compel.

Andrew Weiner is a writer and former bike messenger living in Cambridge, MA.



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Unnatural

continued from page 2

the practice for millennia). Each year, the seed potatoes must be purchased anew, since those patented genes (and the genes of other GM crops) are the intellectual property of the industry that designed them. So while the GM potatoes may, initially, be cheaper to grow since they require fewer chemicals, the yearly purchase price eats into that savings.

Even more ominous than potatoes that come with a legal contract is the concept of the terminator seed: genetically modified plants that germinate from seed for the first generation, but then produce sterile seed or no seed at all, so that the farmer must purchase new seed every year from the corporation, rather than save seed stock. So far, the technique works only on cotton and tobacco seeds, but in a few years wheat and rice and beans may also sprout from terminator seeds controlled by agribusiness.

It is often claimed that the goal of biotechnology is to feed the hungry masses of an increasingly populous world. But many would argue that it is not existing agriculture practices that cause hunger, but politics. Bailey, for example, writes that farmers in India export their wheat at \$60 a ton; it is sold on the open market at \$240 a ton; in winter, when their supplies have run out, the Indians are forced to buy back their own wheat at \$480 a ton. GM foods aren't going to ease that situation.

This is not to say that there is no room for important reforms in the standard methods of agribusiness. We have become much too dependent on the pesticides, fungicides, and fertilizers employed to combat the pests and diseases that always find a way, eventually, to foil the latest batch of chemicals sprayed and plowed into the soil. But genetic modification is not the only, or perhaps even the best, answer. It is common knowledge that old-fashioned agricultural practices like crop rotation can reduce problems. (Of course, industry doesn't make money when farmers simply rotate their fields.) Consumer education could help, too. In the case of potatoes, there are wild varieties much more resistant to pests and disease than our commercial varieties. But the wild varieties don't make good french fries, and consumers tend to complain about wilted fries. But if we consider the alternative (chewing on a mouthful of deep-fried Bt), we might be willing to put up with limp spuds.

Tellingly, the limited English ban on GM foods comes from the Local Government

Association, not Downing Street. Tony Blair, a true F.O.B. even during the Monica thing, has insisted, and continues to insist that GM foods are adequately tested and regulated, despite the fact that seven of the thirteen members of the government committee that approved GM crops in England were associated with GM companies. The entire GM industry is rife with conflicts of interest, and while profit as the bottom line may suit Wall Street, consumers may have other priorities—if they know what the stakes are. But government and politicians are not invulnerable to big money and contributions from business, and GM companies know how to throw their weight around.

It is ironic that these genetically engineered foods have acquired the GM label. It reminds me of the old General Motors motto coined by then-CEO Charles Wilson that, "What's good for General Motors is good for America." Now the chemical and hi-tech ag industries are saying the same thing. They weren't right then, and they aren't right now. American consumers have the right to know what they are eating, and how it was produced. They have the right to know if a tomato contains a fish gene or if corn contains a foreign virus gene, or how a genetically engineered crop may change the landscape. Consumers in many other countries are being protected by their governments; why doesn't our government protect us? Or at least enable us to do what we can to protect ourselves, by requiring labels?

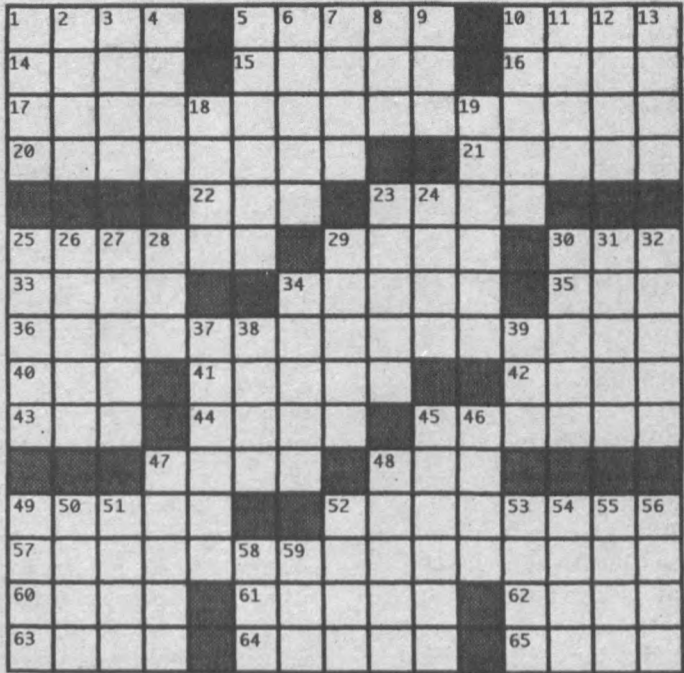
As Lappe and Bailey conclude in *Against the Grain*,

The worst case scenario of all is if we allow corporations to thwart the rights of consumers to know—and epidemiologists to track—the genetic footprints of their potential folly. The ultimate foolhardiness is if we bow to such pressures and fail to label and track this new generation of genetically adulterated products. Certainly, if we have learned anything, it is that our hubris in dominating nature often puts us into harm's way.

Debate and decision-making means we have to know what's going on in the first place. Perhaps it is time for reports on GM foods to be moved from the business page to the front page.

J.M. Campfield is a writer living in Ithaca.

Crossword by Adam Perl



Across

- 1. Tusked animal
- 5. Florida city
- 10. Small change
- 14. Quechuan speaker
- 15. Rasps
- 16. Diva's moment
- 17. Auto option
- 20. Third class
- 21. Pool parts?
- 22. Had a little lamb?
- 23. Lose
- 25. Pierce
- 29. C follower?
- 30. It may be crude
- 33. Manhandle
- 34. A Bruce Willis expression
- 35. Genetic material
- 36. Perfect
- 40. Arts org.
- 41. More than annoyed
- 42. Sharpen
- 43. Jerk
- 44. Start to communicate?
- 45. Public fights
- 47. Canadian native
- 48. Washington insider, for short
- 49. Allegro ____ (fast tempo)
- 52. Bug
- 57. Suave, e.g.
- 60. 60's do
- 61. Residence
- 62. 20th century Spanish painter
- 63. Has ____
- 64. Old Germanic Coin
- 65. Shade trees

Down

- 1. Angle
- 2. "Step ____"
- 3. Plot
- 4. 500, for one
- 5. Rococo
- 6. Sponge
- 7. What Washington couldn't tell
- 8. Tennis call
- 9. " ____ was saying"
- 10. Struck
- 11. " ____ Go Bragh"
- 12. Low square
- 13. Makes "it"
- 18. Kind of tradition
- 19. " ____ desu ka?" (How are you, in Tokyo)
- 23. Fortitude
- 24. Difficult
- 25. " ____ New York state of mind"
- 26. They may be curried
- 27. Wildcats
- 28. "The Greatest"
- 29. Slew
- 30. Giant hunter
- 31. " ____ ear..."
- 32. Alley features
- 34. Balance
- 37. Kind of acid
- 38. Brooklyn grower?
- 39. Pooh's middle name
- 45. Postal worker
- 46. XIX times VIII
- 47. Leslie of films
- 48. It's a sin
- 49. Patrick Stewart role
- 50. Not out
- 51. Rear
- 52. Leonardo, e.g.
- 53. "You talkin' ____?"
- 54. Indigo dye
- 55. Kind of paper
- 56. Young archer
- 58. Quaker staple
- 59. Magic org.


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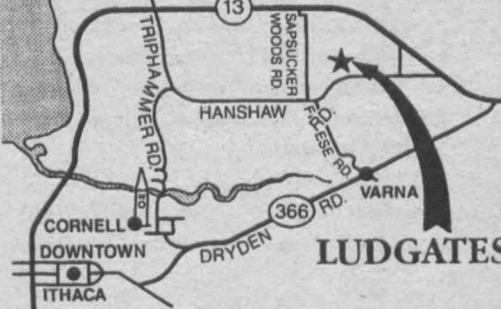


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A Whiz of a Wiz

Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone.
J.K. Rowling.
Scholastic, 1998.
309 pages, \$16.95 cloth.

Jamie Lewis

Anyone who works in retail will tell you what a joy it is to deal with the general public during the Holiday season. As rewarding as working in a bookstore can be, it's a prime site for furrowed yuletide brows and the screams of disappointed children (ages 5-65). You dole out the latest thrillers and biographies, have purchases snatched from your hand, loose change hurled at you like caltrops, and have to patiently explain to university staff that you can't really justify putting forty dollars worth of Garfield books on the departmental account. And what do you say at the end of the sale? Merry Christmas? Happy Hannukah? Cheerful Kwanza?

This past year wasn't too bad; everyone was reasonably well behaved for the first couple of weeks, but then something went horribly wrong around December 10th. Newspapers and public radio started to rave about a children's book from the United Kingdom. Daniel Pinkwater gushed over it like an over-ripe melon and Shel Silverstein said he liked it and smiled long enough for a picture to be taken of him that didn't make him look like an assault-rifle-wielding religious zealot. Needless to say, there was a stampede.

We weren't the only ones caught off guard. Scholastic, the publisher, found itself with no copies left to sell to retailers and frantically restarted the presses to supplement their initially small run. It was the closest thing we'd ever seen to literary hysteria. We had parents sobbing in the store, people phoning back every couple of hours to see whether copies had arrived and empty-handed patrons roaring that it was available on Amazon.com and they'd be buying their copy there (actually, it wasn't, they'd sold out too but continued to take orders).

So, what was all the fuss about? *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. The title still causes an involuntary shudder. It was written by J.K. Rowling, a divorced, single mother from Scotland, as she sat in a greasy spoon with her toddler contemplating the joyful existence that is living on the dole in Edinburgh. On the strength of her initial drafts, The Scottish Arts Council had given her a grant to finish the book and "hey presto!" It won a loch-full of book awards and shot to the top of the book charts.

Normally, America pays very little attention to cultural phenomena in England, but within a couple of weeks, the distribution rights had been snapped up by Scholastic and Warner Brothers had sent Ms. Rowling a six-figure offer for the movie rights. You

could almost hear the plaintive howls of her ex-husband.

At first, I wasn't that interested, despite coming from that part of the world. Then I noticed that every member of staff in the store was quietly borrowing the book and reading it. Customers who'd managed to get a copy were coming back in to thank us for selling it to them! All very strange. Setting aside my cultural snobbery (which is quite an achievement for a Brit) I took the book home and read it when no-one else was about.

Harry Potter is introduced to us as a baby. He's being delivered to his Aunt and Uncle Dursley after the mysterious death of both his parents. A group of eccentric professors leave him on the doorstep with a short note and vanish, literally. Ten years on and Harry is still living with the Dursleys. His Aunt and Uncle make him live under the stairs and lavish all their attention on their colossal brat of a son, Dudley. They inflict fairy-tale cruelty on Harry, refusing to let him go

The next day, Hagrid takes a shocked, but excited, Harry to London and begins to reveal some of the things we'd suspected all along. Harry is the son of two of the greatest wizards of all time. They were attacked and killed by an evil wizard, Voldemort, when they refused to join his suspicious cult. Voldemort had tried to kill baby Harry too, but failed, leaving only a lightning bolt-shaped scar on Harry's forehead. Sure enough, Harry's parents left him a serious chunk of change and he's already a celebrity of the world of magic thanks to his apparent defeat of Voldemort. We also learn that wizards and witches quietly keep the rest of the world running on a daily basis without being spotted by mere ordinary folk, or "muggles" as they affectionately refer to us.

Once outfitted with a wand, broomstick, and cloak, Harry is whisked off to King's Cross train station and catches the Hogwarts Express from platform 9 3/4. Thus begins the really great stuff, as Harry finally finds a world in which he feels comfortable and

Frankenstein myth is to Michael Crichton, but Rowling manages to make Harry Potter all the more human by granting him flashes of anger, frustration and crippling self-doubt about his identity. It takes the intervention of Dumbledore and a magic mirror just to convince Harry that Voldemort didn't leave more than a nice scar with him on that fateful night. Demonic possession isn't usually the stuff of children's books, but Rowling handles this (and all the other supernatural bugbears) with sufficient humor to prevent junior from wetting the bed at three in the morning and insisting that there's a wyvern in his closet trying on his tighty whiteys.

And that's the key to this book. It's written as much for adults as it is for children. Rowling has obviously been weaned on Monty Python, Blackadder, and a grimness of existence that demands humor. The Slytherins and Snapes of the book are in essence comedic bullies, nasty enough to make you cheer for the good guys and

Comparisons have already been drawn to Roald Dahl and C.S. Lewis, but Rowling's influences go much deeper than that. Her style is a glorious cauldron full of British classroom subjects.

out, attend a decent school, or even celebrate his birthday.

Despite all of this, Harry is a very well-adjusted boy. The only thing that worries him, and Uncle Vernon, is that strange people in cloaks keep waving and grinning at the two of them on the streets. Upon closer investigation, these people simply disappear. The portents and omens continue until a mysterious letter arrives. Not at all happy about Harry receiving mail, Uncle Vernon refuses to let him have it and destroys it. Then another arrives, then another and another. All addressed to Harry, sometimes so specifically that they stipulate the very room he's in.

Having read one of the letters, Uncle Vernon is extremely agitated, but won't reveal the contents. Instead, he gathers up his family (and Harry) and drags them off on a road trip to evade the mail. This fails spectacularly, and they end up in a windswept cottage with Uncle Vernon barricading the doors and windows.

Enter Hagrid, a magical motorcycle messenger. When Hagrid finally catches up with them he ignores Vernon's protests and hands Harry a copy of the letter which invites him to attend "Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry." Naturally, Dudley sulks and Vernon refuses to let him go, but as Hagrid is the size of a mail truck and has the temperament of a constipated grizzly bear, Vernon quickly acquiesces.

Rowling introduces us to the beautifully twisted world of Hogwarts. He makes new friends, starts taking lessons in potions and the Dark Arts, and discovers that he's quite the whiz (surely "wiz?") at a broomstick-bound version of aerial polo called Quidditch.

But all is not well at Hogwarts. Harry and the other members of his school house, "Gryffindor," are constantly bullied by the evil little sorcerers in rival house "Slytherin." Professor Snape, lecturer in potions and ex-member of Slytherin, has got it in for him, and Harry has a nasty suspicion that Voldemort didn't simply retire after he failed to finish him off all those years ago. Add to that the fact that Harry and his friends discover that the eponymous Sorcerer's Stone is hidden somewhere in the school building and that it will provide a convenient gateway for Voldemort to return to take over the world.

No one, it seems, except Harry and his chums, have realized the danger, so it's up to them to solve the mystery, defeat the bad guys and pass their exams.

Comparisons have already been drawn to Roald Dahl and C.S. Lewis, but Rowling's influences go much deeper than that. Her style is a glorious cauldron full of British classroom subjects. The character names are straight out of the Charles Dickens study guide. Old Charlie had a habit of giving the game away when he introduced you to characters—"Miss Nice," the hard-done-by, orphaned scullery maid with a heart of gold, or "Mr. Complete-Bastard," the local mill owner. Not much room for doubt there. Rowling does the same. You just know that Professor Dumbledore is a rolipoly, lovable old pedagogue with apparent memory problems, and that Peeves the Poltergeist is going to be a thorough pain in the ectoplasmic rear-end.

Harry is the epitome of Byron's romantic hero, making his differences his strengths and openly admitting his naivete. He even has the interesting-but-not-disfiguring scar (club-foot seems to have lost its windswept charm over the past few centuries, and sounds way too much like a mediterranean resort for podiatrists). Then again, along with the book's penchant for cloaks and dragons it could be claimed that the 33-year-old author merely loves Rick Wakeman-era Yes. And the Ziggy Stardust lightning-bolt motif? Dead giveaway. So maybe he's more Bowie than Byron, but a fop is a fop is a fop.

The theme of the downtrodden, unloved-yet-lovable hero is to Dahl what the

familiar enough that young 'uns will go back to their muggle school feeling a bit more empowered in the morning. None of the characters are cyphers. You get to know everyone at Hogwarts pretty well, without sacrificing pace or losing the interest of the younger reader.

The one criticism I did have concerned the inclusion of a couple of sub-plots that don't have much relevance to the story. Upon reading an imported copy of the sequel, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (apparently one of the best-selling import titles of all time), they make sense, but as the second book isn't due for release over here until September 1999, you could find yourself wondering why they were included. Rowling is planning seven books in all, and claims to have the last chapter of the seventh finished. She now merely needs to fill in a five-volume gap. The third book, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, will be released in July in the UK, so we probably won't see it until the next millennium.

Even armed with this information, don't be surprised if the titles change when they come across the Atlantic. The first book is called *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* in Europe, but Scholastic's U.S. offices changed it because they thought the concept of philosophy would "put off" American audiences. Wasn't Scholasticism a dominant school of thought that espoused religious philosophy for 800 years? Oh, well... what's in a name?

The first two are already children's classics, and that's no exaggeration. With a book planned for each year Harry spends at Hogwarts (is he going for his doctorate?), it's going to be interesting to see how he grows along with his intended audience. We can expect to see *Harry Potter and the Predatory Prefect*, *Harry Potter and the Dropping Crystal Balls*, and end with *Harry Potter and the Degree of Disillusionment*.

These days I read my copy proudly in public and I'm attempting to convince my wife that the book is good enough reason for us to procreate. Put down your literary theory and cognitive science for a couple of evenings and read a great children's book out loud to yourself or to your offspring. I guarantee the kids will like it more than the Walter Benjamin.

Jamie Lewis is, among other things, a writer, actor, and director living in Ithaca.

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