LETTER FROM LOS ANGELES

By David Streitfeld

In Praise of Milosz

CZESLAW MILOSZ

Larenont, Calif.—Gather enough of Czeslaw Milosz's books in one room, as a recent exhibit did in the university library here, and it's possible to chart some of the political upheavals of the last half-century.

In one glass case, there was Renascence, a collection of poems that appeared in 1945—the last time the poet would be legally published in his native Poland for many decades. Nearby was the May 1951 issue of the emigre magazine Kultura, published in Paris, with Milosz's article "No," breaking with the communist Polish government. In another case were 16 books issued between 1953 and 1990 by the Institut Literaire in Paris—an emigre press, publishing in small editions for exiled Poles and anyone brave enough to smuggle copies into Poland. These books were plain paperbacks; clearly, any ornamentation was spurned as unnecessary.

But the Institut books were downright substantial compared to the many underground Polish editions of The Captive Mind, Milosz's classic 1953 study of totalitarianism, and various editions of his poems as well as his 1959 autobiography, Native Realm. These were clearly done in great haste in makeshift printing shops. Many of them are tiny—all the better to hide them.

A final case displayed Milosz's recent Polish publications, mostly collections of essays. They were professionally bound and printed, and looked much like books anywhere—which means they used attractive art and elegant design to invite a reader's attention.

The transition is abrupt: An author who was once urgent clandestine reading is now an ordinary part of the consumer economy. It's the happiest possible fate, although not one the poet ever thought he would see.

A Poet's History

An impressive group of poets and scholars gathered here late last month to honor Milosz, who was born in 1911 and won the Nobel Prize in 1980. The prize was for poetry, most of which had not then been translated into English. Now, at the end of a millennium, I suspect that a survey of poetry readers would rank him our greatest living poet. People read him who know nothing of Polish history, who find in his work a voice and authority that makes American poets seem wan and irrelevant.

The four-day conference was the brainchild of Claremont McKenna College professor Robert Faggan, who recently edited a volume of Milosz's correspondence with Thomas Merton. There were several dozen participants, including a large contingent from Poland—all of whom would dart outdoors for a cigarette whenever there was a break in the proceedings.

Frequently, the panelists would note the impossibility of summing up someone whose poetry career not only spans most of the 20th century but who is also a political philosopher, national hero, literary critic, superb essayist and, though he would deny it, fine novelist (The Issa Valley, one of his two novels, is a remarkable evocation of his childhood home in Lithuania). Typically, it was Milosz himself who suggested the best way his life could be understood. In a 1987 diary entry, he wrote:

"I would like to read a novel about the 20th century; not one of those allegories in which human affairs are depicted metaphorically, but a novel, a report about many characters and their actions. It would have to be an international novel, since the century is international, despite the rise of all sorts of nationalisms. I cannot find such a novel, so it would be necessary to write it—and I am curious as to whether there is someone, somewhere, who feels capable of creating it."

Literary scholar Madeline Levine suggested that Milosz's work in its totality forms such a novel. "No one has yet written a fictional account of this century to rival [it], and it's a safe bet no one will," she declared.

He was born not in Poland but in the Baltic country of Lithuania, which stands in relation to Poland somewhat as Scotland does to England. Tomas Venclova, himself a notable Lithuanian poet, sketched out Milosz's roots in this province of a province. "One can't imagine an artist's past, one can't imagine a folkloristic environment for an artist's past... anywhere—which means they used attractive art and elegant design to invite a reader's attention."

The Jerusalem of the North, it was called. All this, along with so much Central European culture, was destroyed by first the Nazis and then the Soviets. Lithuania was annexed by the Soviet Union in 1945; for a long time, it was Milosz's fate to be from a place that no one had ever heard of and that no longer existed.

"I see an injustice: a Parisian does not have to bring his city out of nothingness every time he wants to describe it," he wrote in Native Realm. But this injustice, this necessity to recreate a vanished past in prose, inspired some of his best work, including The Issa Valley and the essay "Beginning With My Streets," while his five years in wartime Warsaw—"the most

agonizing spot in the whole of terrorized Europe," he once wrote—resulted in a poetry of unique force.

Robert Hass, the former poet laureate who has translated much of Milosz's verse, spoke at a session devoted to "The World," written in Warsaw in 1943. Among the poets who wrote about World War II, Hass said, only Milosz and a handful of others—the Eliot of "Little Gidding," as well as Miklos Radnai, Paul Celan, and Yehuda Amichai—"spoke with that of authority that sends me back to them."

What Milosz wrote is remarkable even among this elite group. "What he did was turn away from the three things that political poetry usually does—offer the authority of witness, make the heroic gesture of resistance, lament the victims," Hass said. "Instead, he turned to the values that were under attack," and defended them.

"The World," subtitled "A Naive Poem," returns us from a child's point of view the life and the ideals that the war destroyed:

Love means to learn to look at yourself.
The way one looks at distant things
For you are only one thing among many...

During another panel, the poet Edward Hirsch argued that "Deception," a short Milosz poem written immediately after the war ended as an offering for the dead, set the standard for what poetry should try to do. The key verse reads: "What is poetry which does not save? Nations or people? A coinview with official lies. A song of drunkards whose throats will be cut in a moment." Readings for sophomore girls.

The poem makes a case for the healing power of art, concluding:

They used to pour millet on gravels or poppy seeds
To feed the dead who would come disguised as birds.
I put this book here for you, who once lived
So that you should visit us no more.

The Return of the Exile

After the war, Milosz became a cultural attache for the new government, serving in Paris and Washington. In Poland, there was an audience for his verse, theatrical productions of his translations of Sadek's The Captive Mind, "my own country and my own language—what is a poet who no longer has a language of his own? All these things were mine, if I would pay the price: obedience."

He chose exile, ending up in Berkeley, Calif. He compared writing in Polish there to hiding words in trees—"a worthwhile enterprise, with no assurance they would ever be found or understood.

But the words made their way home. Milosz's autobiography, like his other works, was banned under the Soviets. Venclova, who was living in Vilnius, recounted how he read a copy that was smuggled in, page by page, in letters. Then it was sewn together—two pages were missing—given an innocent cover, and passed around. As Venclova sat on a riverside bench reading the book, he noticed that this very perspective—indeed, the bench itself—was mentioned by Milosz.

"To Milosz, the river current and the sky at that time spoke of an irrevocable sentence," Venclova told the conference participants. "For me, they were permitted by a vague light of hope, and the hope was due to the fact that the book finally found its way to its own city."

Venclova pointed out that, after several more decades, his hope has been fulfilled—Lithuania was once again independent. "One may ascribe [this] to God, or to the laws of history or, perhaps in the most justified way, to the will of people who had resolved to be free. I would ascribe it also to the books written by Czeslaw Milosz."

Adam Michnik, a leader of the Solidarity trade union, explained Milosz's importance to the freedom movement of the late '80s this way: "We Poles, being Catholic, have to hang on to holy trinity. In 1980 we had the pope, and second of course was Lech Walesa. There was a need for a third. And a Polish God who loves Poland caused Milosz to win the Nobel Prize."

This forced the Polish authorities to at least acknowledge his existence and begin publishing some of his work, however censored. It also probably helped allow Venclova to visit Poland. Photos in the library exhibit showed thousands crammed into his readings. Hundreds of thousands of copies of his books were sold.

Unlike, say, Solzhenitsyn, the literary figure he most closely resembles, Milosz didn't want to become spiritual leader of his now-free nation. "In 1981, there were crowds following him around everywhere," said his Polish publisher, Jerry Ilg. "Now, we pass the market in Krakow and young girls say, 'Can we take a picture?' He's become normal. Since the Nobel Prize, he's tried to get down off the pedestal where the nation and journalists had put him. He's a bard, but he tries not to be one."

Still Writing

Through all these testimonials, explanations, analyses and encomia, the poet remained largely silent. He sat up front and off to the side, wearing special headphones to help him hear better. Most of the panelists pretended he wasn't there.

If the poet felt any urge to interject, to compliment or critique, he kept it to himself (although when he was described as the best-selling poet in America, he couldn't help asking, "Is it true?"). After the panel on The Captive Mind, he said that "I have simple answers to complicated questions. Why did I write this book? Because I was stupid." Before he could explain more, an admirer swept him away.

On the last night, he took the stage himself, reading for the most part his less-familiar poems. Approaching his 10th decade, he is still writing. Indeed, one of the more endearing moments came when he asked his assistant to come to his room for a moment. "I want to show you a poem," he said.

As a preface to his reading, Milosz spoke of his life in America as a country of poetry. A good thing, too. "Poetry by its very nature," he noted, "resists the spiritual devasation induced by the mass media."
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Balanchine vs. Ashton

To the Editor:

Terry Teachout’s review of Julie Kavanagh’s “Secret Muse: The Life of Frederick Ashton” (May 18) criticizes the author for not explaining why Ashton’s ballets haven’t survived their creator’s death while Balanchine’s have. Leaving aside the fact that the “ballet masters and mistresses who took class every day” from Balanchine, “in the process internalizing his stylistic principles,” are the very ones who are no longer welcome at the New York City Ballet, the reason Balanchine’s ballets are—barely—surviving is mainly geographical: those ballet masters and mistresses have other American cities besides New York in which to stage them. English ballet is centralized to a degree that permits one company life-and-death control over a whole repertory.

Mr. Teachout also seems unaware that even though Balanchine taught a daily class, half his dancers were going to Stanley Williams and even Maggie Black. Ashton’s failure to teach—which, like Mr. Teachout, I myself once blamed for the decline of the Royal Ballet—is a theory that doesn’t hold water.

ARLENE CHOICE
New York

Garwood’s Defenders

To the Editor:

Nicholas Proffitt’s insightful review of “Spire House,” by Monika Jensen-Stevenson, was obviously written after a careful reading of the book. Gary D. Solis’s criticism of it (Letters, April 27), however, is more an emotional outpouring of his preconceived opinion. I readily recognize the vindictive spirit of Mr. Solis’s response; I lived with that poison in my heart for many years. I was a part of the effort in Vietnam to find Bobby Garwood and kill him, and my only regret at the time was that I failed. It was “official” records and briefings that convinced me of Private Garwood’s guilt, and it was my idealistic patriotism that precluded any doubts about the “official” view of him. Today I know many things that were withheld from me in 1968-69 and are still being withheld from the American public.

Compellingly significant is the fact that after 25 years of investigation and reflection, other princes of war—unquestioned heroes—know the truth about Bobby Garwood and defend him. Such men do not defend traitors. Similarly compelling is the fact that the broad community of P.W.M.A.’s families and combat veterans defends him. These people stay on top of events, invocations and declassified documents. Their beliefs are not based on disinformation from dusty files.

As the real evidence unfolds, those of us who once sought to kill Private Garwood are being freed from the official statements that we once believed. The truth cries out for a new hearing for Bobby Garwood; until then, how can we recruit innocent boys and send them into battle, knowing that they, too, could have their lives destroyed in the name of political expediency and diplomatic serenity?

TOM C. MCKENNEY
Marion, Ky.

What Happened?

To the Editor:

As a writer and teacher of fiction, memoir and journalism, I agree with Anna Quindlen’s statement (“How Dark? How Stormy? I Can’t Recall,” May 11) that fiction can tell the truth “far better than personal experience” though to say that it can do so should not imply that it always or even usually does. Along those lines, Ms. Quindlen refers to the task of “the most able, and most honest, memoirist,” who makes the distinction between “cumulative, quantified tabloids and what really happened.”

Ah, but what really happened? Every reporter who performs the daily, necessary, inevitable grunt work of transforming the spoken word into language suitable for print has negotiated that minefield. Different memoirists handle the challenge differently, but the best always honor this contract: If you make it up, you figure out some artful way to let the reader know. The key word is “artful.” Nabokov, the most brilliant practitioner of the form, invariably lets us know when he’s faking.

What’s at issue is not the relative value of fiction and nonfiction, but the writer’s signed-in-blood moral responsibility to keep the reader posted as to the workings of the particular memory. As with photojournalism and art photography, the genres of fiction and memoir serve different purposes.

FENTON JOHNSON
New York
Nonfiction

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18 SHATTERED FAITH, By Sheila Rauch Kennedy, Reviewed by Christopher Lydon.

Moving Along the Border Between Past and Future

BY MICHIKO KAKUTANI

 Cormac McCarthy's new novel, "Cities of the Plain," finally com- pletes his "Border Trilogy" but also reveals the grand design behind it: It brings together the heroes of "The Borderlands of the Peach Pies," "The Pretty Horses," and "The Crossing," and in doing so, it raises the themes of loss and exile laid out in those earlier books.

Once, the border between Mexico and the United States was used as a metaphor for the partition of the American mind between the old and the new, the past and the future. Once again, the Old West — of cowboys, trail drives, unaccommodated nature — is me- morialized as a vanishing time and place. And once again, a "doomed enterprise" violently divides the characters' lives in two and after.

Although McCarthy has been hailed as a critic of great American original and compared to Faulkner, Twain, and Melville, he .is a truly original and highly derivative writer. This quality has rendered him incendiary, as early, more disjointed work, like "Blood Meridian," and "The Borderlands of the Peach Pies," has given way to increasingly accessible, straightforward narra- tives.

In fact, "The Border Trilogy" gives us two McCarthy novels. The first one emerges as a direct descendant of Hemingway and gives us some powerfully evocative, deeply con- cise if oddly familiar prose. "Roy had climbed out of the truck and he walked back and stood smoking qui- etly and looking at the tire and the tubo and the handles."
The second McCarthy emerges as an haunted-handcrafted story, a more portentous meditations on time and nature and fate. ("They drift down on a slow, sad paramour, seeking a thing now extinct among them."").

Happily for the reader, the Hemingway/McCarthy complex of the "Border Trilogy" is better than the better part of "Cities of the Plain." Among the two novels, the first two novels are the better parts of "Cities of the Plain." The second novel is the better part of McCarthy's gift as a novelist.

The story in both novels is set in the midst of a bro- mantic "The Borderlands of the Peach Pies" and "The Pretty Horses". The story in the first novel is about the border between Mexico and the United States. The story in the second novel is about the border between the old and the new, the past and the future. The story in the third novel is about the border between the characters' lives in two and after.

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LYLE LOVETT

COMEDY!”

TIMES

HOMICIDE! ARSENIC AND PASS TO SPARE!”

ONE

THAT HAS AUDIENCES PLUGGING THEIR EARS!”

N-TIMES
Ideas & Trends

In Cold Facts, Some Books Falter

By BEN YAGODA

T
HE Clutters, a Kansas farm family, were all murdered during a botched robbery one day in 1959. Truman Capote spent several years investigating the crime, and emerged with “In Cold Blood,” which was published in the New Yorker in 1965 and then as a book Mr. Capote called a nonfiction novel.

The first chapter has a detailed account of the Clutters' comings and goings on the day they were to die. If you go to the New York Public Library, where New Yorker documents are housed, you can see the galley proofs on which William Shawn, the magazine’s editor, first read Mr. Capote’s work. In the margins, next to descriptions of the words and thoughts of the Clutters, Mr. Shawn repeatedly wrote: “How know? discuss”/author.

Any discussion he did have with Mr. Capote is lost to history. What is verifiable is that no changes were made on that galley, and thus “In Cold Blood” was published, to much fanfare, with statements that were patently a matter of educated conjecture.

Twenty-one years earlier, in 1944, the same New Yorker (then consolidating its reputation as a journal in which every fact was checked for accuracy) published Joseph Mitchell's profile of Hugh G. Flood, a retired house-wrecking contractor, aged 93. Accompanying the article was an illustration of Mr. Flood.

Several years later, when Mr. Mitchell collected three pieces about Mr. Flood in a book, he wrote this in an author’s note: “Mr. Flood is not one man; combined in him are aspects of several old men who work or hang out in the Fulton Fish Market, or who did in the past.”

Blurred Line

More than 200 years before that, in 1722, a book called “A Journal of the Plague Year” was published. It purported to be an account of a London resident about the events of 1664-65, the year of the Great Plague. It was actually written by Daniel Defoe, who in 1664 was 4 years old.

More than 2,000 years before that, in the fifth century B.C., Thucydides wrote his history of the Peloponnesian Wars, which the Oxford Companion to English Literature” cites for its “scrupulous accuracy.” In Book I, the author writes the following: “As to the speeches which were made during the war, it was hard for me, and for others who reported them to me, to recollect the exact words. I have therefore put into the mouth of each speaker the sentiments proper to the occasion, expressed as I thought he would be likely to express them.”

That backward procession — to which considerably more examples could be added — gives some perspective to the recent concern that the line between fact and fiction has blurred, with the implication that something has gone horribly wrong in the modern age of media and hype.

Every year or two there seems to be a new literary journalism. John Hersey’s novelistic “ Hiroshima,” initially published in The New Yorker in 1946, was grounded in extensive reporting and interviewing. But because the narrative was based on his sources’ memories of the immediate aftermath of the most horrific event in world history — with dialogue translated from the Japanese — the account wasn’t expected to be accurate in every detail.

What has changed since then is not the practice of literary journalism but expectations about truth. They began to be raised, curiously, by “In Cold Blood,” at least as important an event in the history of publicis as in the history of journalism.

At the time of publication, the book received immediate attention for what was called Mr. Capote’s meticulous accuracy and total recall, which obviated the need for note-taking. But now the documented list of Mr. Capote’s alterations and fabrications (including a graveside conversation) grows longer each year. Nevertheless, the book made it seem possible to have both the literary qualities and readability of fiction and the seal-of-approval accuracy of journalism, all without having to resort to those pesky attributions. It has led to shelves full of novelistic books like Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein’s “The Final Days” (their follow-up to “All the President’s Men”) and “Indecent Exposure,” by David McCullough, which are followed or preceded by lengthy author’s notes explaining how many people were interviewed and what standards of accuracy were applied.

Mr. Woodward and Mr. Bernstein said they used at least two sources to verify each fact — a problematic assertion when you consider the scene in which a drunken Richard Nixon breaks down and weeps in front of Lincoln’s portrait.

Clearly, Henry Kissinger, who was with Nixon, was one source; just as clearly, Nixon was not the other. The internal evidence suggested that the second source was an aide to whom Mr. Kissinger related the incident. Is that any less blurry than John Berendt’s playing with chronology in “Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil”? What is the point of reading a book if you can’t trust it?

Capote’s Fabrications

The other significant thing about “In Cold Blood” was its huge commercial success, which helped spawn a capacious and continuing market for “nonfiction novels.” It is undoubtedly true that some writers have been inspired by dreams of six-figure ad-

vances and movie deals to try to get away with passing reality-inspired melodrama off as nonfiction. Buzz Bissinger, whose book, “A Prayer for the City,” chronicles big-city politics in Philadelphia, and others have marketed for more accurate and rigorous labeling of fiction and nonfiction works, which they believe would inhibit such transgressions. Certainly, this would allow literature to catch up with automobiles, air conditioners and potato chips in the labeling department. And it would clearly be useful for bookstore employees uncertain where to place a new release.

But it may underestimate the intelligence and taste of the reading public, which traditionally has been fairly good, given enough time, at distinguishing the genuine and lasting from the spurious and cheap.

In his author’s note to “Old Mr. Flood,” Joseph Mitchell, who may be the greatest literary journalist of this century who never made the best-seller list, wrote: “I wanted these stories to be truthful rather than factual. This will never be every writer’s aspiration, nor should it be; facts have a beauty, precision and power all their own.”

But as Thucydides and others since have recognized, there are some true places they cannot take you.
The Nation

800-Pound Guests At the Pentagon

By LESLIE WAYNE

With the cold war over and Pentagon spending on weapons slashed, the military-industrial complex isn’t what it used to be. The nation’s defense contractors, hurting for business, have gone through an eat-or-be-eaten merger wave so sweeping that only three major military contractors are left standing today.

One would think that this corporate downsizing would have crimped their power, shrunk their lobbying efforts and lessened their appetite for making hefty campaign contributions. One would think.

Instead, military contractors, who were never wimps in Washington, have actually seen their power increase as their numbers decrease. As they consolidate on a corporate level, they are also consolidating their political clout. Their campaign contributions are as strong as ever and they continue to engage the best of the K Street lobbyists.

Their grass-roots support has grown and they have gained the upper hand over a Pentagon that once could pit one contractor against another.

"When you have fewer companies making our weapons, they are more powerful and their voices are louder," said Charles Lewis, director of the Center for Public Integrity in Washington. "Their need for throwing around cash and walking the halls has increased exponentially.”

As recently as the early 1990’s, there were more than 50 military contractors, each elbowing the other for contracts. But as the Pentagon’s weapons budget fell to $44 billion last year, from a peak of $98.5 billion a decade earlier, contractors were forced to merge to survive. Lockheed Martin Corporation acquired 26 different companies, bringing them under a single corporate umbrella that now lobbies as one in Congress.

A Global Shake

Today, Boeing Company, Lockheed Martin and Raytheon Company account for 70 percent of the nation’s military business, and an increasing share of the world’s as well. And Lockheed may - or may not - get even bigger. Last week, Federal regulators threatened to quash a proposed $83.3 billion takeover of Northrop Grumman on antitrust grounds, and both companies are trying to restructure the deal.

"The contractors no longer have to cut each other’s throats to compete," said Eugene Carroll, a retired admiral and director of the Center for Defense Information, a Washington nonprofit group. "Now they are giants who are beefing up their case for more spending.”

The Big Three do a lot more than make weapons. Lockheed, which churns out F-16 Fighting Falcons and the new F-22 attack fighter, also makes 3-D computer games for Sega and devises mail sorting systems for the United States Postal Service. Raytheon sells air traffic control equipment to the Federal Aviation Administration. Lockheed is bidding to administer state welfare programs under the new federal reforms.

New ventures mean Lockheed, Boeing and Raytheon have more issues to lobby and more members of Congress to support with contributions. With many new plants acquired in more parts of the country, they have more employees, and their families, in more districts to write representatives.

"They operate in more districts and they can be more of a block," said Jennifer Shecter, a researcher at the Center for Responsive Politics, a Washington nonprofit group. "Votes are often based on where there are plants, and these companies have plants everywhere.”

These companies may have a greater say than even the Pentagon in determining what weapons are bought and how much they cost. Gone are the days when the Pentagon could threaten to take its business away from one contractor and give it to another to maintain some price competition. As a model, many point to the intense industry lobbying on behalf of the B-2 bomber, a plane that the Air Force says it doesn’t need in any numbers above current plans. The main contractor, Northrop Grumman, divided up the subcontractors in such a way as to optimize its political clout. The subcontractors were let out in as many states as possible, with the states then lobbying on behalf of the B-2.

The Washington agenda is more complex too. While Boeing may be working to sell commercial jets to China, it also cares about Government export loan programs, which would help its McDonnell Douglas subsidiary sell armaments abroad. Raytheon benefited from a tax loophole, called a Morris Trust, which enabled it to acquire Hughes Aircraft at a lower price because less taxes were owed. And, with more overseas arms sales permitted, the Big Three want a bigger say in foreign policy initiatives.

"Our political spending is more reflective of our diversity," said Charles Manor, a Lockheed vice president. "We’ve expanded the base of people we support. We’re dealing with more Government agencies. It’s not just Congress and the Pentagon, but the Departments of Transportation and Energy.”

Major Donors

More issues mean more money. In 1997, Boeing made $424,000 in campaign contributions and McDonnell Douglas, which it just acquired, gave $331,000. By contrast, in 1995, the previous non-election year, Boeing made $382,000 in contributions and McDonnell gave $256,000 (in 1997 dollars).

"The Big Three contractors aren’t trying to trumpet each other for business," Mr. Carroll said. "They are trying to increase the market for all, with each getting a share. They will drive Congress to find money for them.”

Though smaller than before, the Pentagon budget still has plenty left. Congress is about to decide on the 1999 budget, with such big-ticket items as the B-2 bomber, continued F-16 funding, Apache and Comanche helicopters and the Patriot 3 missile. A bidding war is currently going on between a group headed by Lockheed and one by Boeing to make the joint strike fighter plane, a contract that could cost $20 billion.

The biggest loser has been the Pentagon. "It will be harder for the Pentagon to cancel a weapon system because these companies will bring their full weight to bear," said Lawrence Korb, a defense analyst at the Brookings Institution. "In the old days, the contractors would be careful about bypassing the Pentagon and going to Congress because the Pentagon could threaten to take business to their competitors. Now the Pentagon can’t threaten to go anywhere else."
Into the Wilderness

Jesus' 40 days of fasting and temptation in the desert inspired Jim Crace's new novel.

QUARANTINE
By Jim Crace.

By Frank Kermode

This is Jim Crace's fifth novel. His first, " Continent," which was published in 1986, is really less a novel than a collection of seven stories, all set in an imagined world of which the author has mastered the geography, the botany and the anthropology. His second, "The Gift of Stones," is a brief, intense story of the prehistoric moment when stone yielded to bronze. "Arcadia," his first book of any length, imagines a city and the usurpation of its ancient market by a self-made capitalist who began his life in it. The world of "Signs of Distress," a remote fishing village on the west coast of England where, in 1836, a ship runs aground and, among other strange events, a herd of cows is rescued and a black slave escapes.

Obviously, Crace has no attachment to a single locale or theme; one has never had the slightest idea of what he was likely to do next. Each of his disparate worlds is rendered with unshakable assurance and in impressive detail. The description of a great produce market in "Arcadia" is a fine example; you would think the author had spent his life studying fruit and vegetables. Then, in "Signs of Distress," we meet him as an expert on matters nautical and on life in an early Victorian seaport. This intense focusing on, or inhabitation of, a particular milieu means that there is little obvious thematic continuity from one book to the next. What they share is this imaginative power, these variously obsessed landscapes and cultures.

In these times, when many profess to believe there can be little interest in art that has no obvious political bearing, it may seem remarkable that Crace's chosen topics are so devoid of direct political reference. It might be argued that the books return to the theme of conflict between old and new social and technological orders, as when the workers in stone encounter horsemen with bronze weapons, or when the ancient market and its trading traditions are demolished by the edict of the man in the skyscraper, so that a life close to nature must give way to the unnatural demands of steel and concrete and business. If this is politics, it is a very abstract politics.

More generally, it could be said that Crace's ultimate concern is with the endings and beginnings of worlds. In the gap between the two there are some survivors: the remnants of the stone people, the dispossessed greenrocers, the man at the end of "Signs of Distress" who dreams he can replace the great fallen rock and "put the world to rights again."

Frank Kermode's latest book is "Not Entitled," a memoir.

It is an ambitious theme, certainly, though Crace's ambitions could hardly be less those of a Pynchon or a DeLillo, a Bellow or a Roth or an Updike, writers who in their various ways think it natural to pack the whole of modern American culture between their covers. Crace's way is closer to that of Iris Murdoch: "crystalline construction, the end of the fiction spectrum where the novel is most like a poem, most turned in on itself, most closely wrought for the sake of art and internal cohesion — the other pole being the social or even, at the extreme, journalistic, a mode to be preferred if the writer's purpose is to develop studies of characters in a larger modern society, given the degree of freedom to act and decide that such a society allows. There are distinguished novels of both kinds. The writer of the recent past whom Crace most resembles is William Golding, whose novel "The Spire" has the same sort of almost fanatical concentration on a particular time and a particular object — the erection and partial collapse of the Salisbury cathedral spire. Indeed "Signs of Distress," with its central rock, never to be restored to its original place, resembles that novel in containing a huge but collapsible phallic object.

Crace is once more in the Golding vein in "Quarantine," a novel-fable that offers an imaginative account of Christ's 40-day sojourn in the wilderness. Crace is far from the first to expand the original version. Mark's Gospel dealt with that test — the wilderness of Jesus' career — in two verses: "And immediately the Spirit drove him into the wilderness. And he was there in the wilderness 40 days, tempted of Satan; and was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered unto him." Matthew and Luke elaborated on this account, Matthew in 11 verses and Luke in 13, specifying the Devil's temptations — to turn stone into bread, to possess glory and power, to cast himself from the pinnacle of the temple. Milton wrote his short epic, "Paradise Regained," as an expansion of those expansions; his Christ is unmoved by all that Satan can throw at Him, the point being that He stands as an exemplary instance of the heroic virtue that just says no.

Crace's Jesus seems to have no divine origin and no obvious supernatural administrations. An unlearned boy from Galilee, whose too-pious habits are deplored by His parents, He has deserted the paternal carpenter's shop and run away to the Judean wilderness in search of God. He arrives with other quarantined, each with his or her own purpose: it might be to live 40 days in a cave, with what food and water they bring or can find, to purge guilt or be cured of cancer or barrenness. Jesus chooses the least accessible cave and means to go without food or water for the whole period. In contrast, the merchant Musa, though abandoned by other members of his caravan in wasted ground like a terminal sickness, lives in a fairly splendid tent with his oppressed and pregnant wife. Musa makes a miraculous recovery (ambiguously related to a momentary contact with Jesus). He is a greedy and lecherous crook who cheats the quarantiners, charging them rent for their cave accommodations, spotting and exploiting fake piety; yet he is aware of some special quality, some power of healing, in the Galilean. So, as in the Gospel account, it is the demons who recognize Christ for what He is when others fail to identify him.

The wilderness setting of this story is rendered in obsessive detail: the geography and geology of the area, its birds and animals, insects and plants, its folk beliefs and superstitions. As often with Crace, there are words one needs to look up in a dictionary, and in fact there are some I can't find in any of mine. It doesn't matter; this, for the moment, is his world and its language, and the effect is of an almost hallucinatory concentration.

This effect is deepened by the report of dreams and by the shadows cast over the characters and events by the original story from which the new fable derives. When Jesus dies, naked and starved, His body is prepared for burial by busy Miri, the wife of Musa, and her more contemplative friend, Marta; we may remember the sisters Mary and Martha who did the same once for Lazarus. The two women weave a birthing mat on Miri's portable loom. It has, perhaps, in origin wool and clashing colors, but they save it, a token of the new world of the future.

USA, seemingly stranded in the old world, is nevertheless vouchsafed a vague vision of a resurrected Jesus. He even refers to it without distinguishing it from the self-serving lies he tells some people he meets on the road: "There was a man who had defeated death... 'Be well,' he told me. And I am well..." As always with Musa, a faint, visionary knowledge has to live in a context of lies and deceptions. He will "trade the word!" and "preach the good news." He will make a good thing of it. Incurribly corrupt, Musa's is the unregenerate spirit that survives even the most virtuous and spiritual of revolutions, even the touch of the supernaturally. Yet this raptist, bullying and bewildered alone recognizes a healer who will later argue that it is for such people He has come to heal.

So this, like the author's other novels, baffles prediction, and it would take more than 40 years to have to say what sort of thing he will do next, beyond the feebly secure guess that it will be strange and original. And since Crace is only 52, a very good age for a novelist to spread his wings, we can look forward, ignorantly eager, to that future.
The Undead

A fictional account of the tormented life of the director F.W. Murnau.

NOSFERATU
By Jim Shepard

By Leslie Epstein

JIM SHEPARD’S unusual new novel is an imaginative reconstruction of the life and work of F.W. Murnau, the greatest of all German film directors and one of the two or three real masters of the silent screen. It begins with what Shepard easily convinces us is the most important day of Murnau’s life.

In August 1907, the 18-year-old philosophy student arrives at the Berlin-Charlottenburg railway station and meets Hans Ehrenbaum-Degge, the sickly young Wilhelm feels as if “he’s caught his first glimpse of life’s splendor.” What the weakly Hans sees is a tall, freckled, awkward peasant — though he instantly senses what reserves of feeling lie un tapped beneath that awkward exterior. The two young men soon begin what is not so much an adolescent crush (though there are elements of that: the all-night conversations about art, the tramps through the countryside, and excursions into the wild nightlife of Berlin) as the “aim-inhibited eroticism” that Freud called the essence of friendship.

Shepard writes movingly of this period of unfulfilled wishes. Here are the two friends, high in the mountains, passing in one of their discussions of Faust:

“Living shoulder to shoulder, breathing in the hot wind swirling up from the valley, they nearly levitated from tension . . . the sun heated the grasses around them. Their agitation alternated with intoxication. A fly drew figure-eights over Hans’s face, and Wilhelm shooed it away. Hans’s skin shared the bitter freshness of the columbiales.”

It is clear that, given their own natures and the atmosphere of bohemian Berlin, such aims are not going to be inhibited for long. It is as lovers, then, that Wilhelm and Hans embark upon their careers, the latter as a poet and the former as a member of Max Reinhardt’s famous theater school. Estranged from his own parents in rural Westphalia, Wilhelm becomes part of the extended family of Reinhardt’s company and the demimonde of the capital.

We meet any number of the actors and artists who were to make names for themselves after World War I: Wassermann, Jackmann, Granach, Franz Marc, a sinister Conrad Veidt. Alas, one of those who approached the dimensions of a full character is the half-crazed poet Else Lasker-Schüler. However outlandish she may appear in these pages — she is almost preternatural in her insensitivity for scandal — in real life she made the single most sensible remark about poetics since Aristotle: “A true poet does not say anything.

Leslie Epstein’s most recent novel is “Pandemonium.”

Burdened by guilt at Hans’s death — why else had his friend volunteered if not because of Wilhelm’s betrayal? — Murnau transfers to the flying corps, where in passages of unusually telling detail he takes on ever more risky assignments: “When the engine turned over, warm oil misted back and they were constantly wiping their goggles. . . . At altitude they occasionally found themselves in the trajectory of the big shells. The plane rocked like a canoe whenever one went by.” Here is an exaltation in the face of death that seems at once all too German and yet particular to this singular man — bereft, solitary and severe.

After the war, from which Murnau finally deserts, the novel slips abruptly to the contemplation and making of “Nosferatu,” the first and finest of the films based on Bram Stoker’s “Dracula.” This part of the story is essentially told from what appears to be actual documents and parts of what may or may not be Murnau’s own journals. Together, they make the “Nosferatu” chapter as fine a realization of the creative process — of the struggle to bring to life an interior vision, to make it move — as exists in the literature of film. Where else could we learn (again, note Shepard’s feeling for details) that to avoid sunstroke from the arc lights, the crew must rub their faces with raw grated potato?

“The Nosferatu” section gives way with whom he distracts himself.

It must be said that this story, while often beautifully written, is throughout oddly conceived. There is almost no dialogue, little attempt at characterization beyond the two lovers and, after the death of Hans, no real relationship. It is almost as if Shepard were attempting to duplicate either Murnau’s self-speechlessness of silent film or the Expressionist doctrine that, to quote Lotte Eisner in “The Haunted Screen,” “denies a personal life to all the characters with whom the hero is in conflict.” Or it may simply be that Shepard in some sense shares Murnau’s own ambition, which is “to photograph thought.” Such techniques reflect the author’s integrity and artistry, but they deny his book the vividness and fullness of, to take a comparable project, Bruce Dutil’s sumptuous novel “The World As I Found It,” based on the life of Ludwig Wittgenstein, another seminal modern figure whose sexual life is handled with circumspectly and who is also a guilt-ridden participant in the Great War.

Still, it may be that Shepard is after something else. In his highly praised recent collection, “Battling Against Castro” (in which the “Nosferatu” chapter also appeared), there are two wonderful stories that strangely mirror his strategy here. In the first of these stories, “Mars Attack,” the terror of an alien army stands as a kind of emblem for the greater terror and inner emptiness the narrator feels as he watches his brother slip into mental illness. In “Krakatau,” a brother (is it the same one?) works as a vulcanologist. The explosiveness of Krakatau, with its boiling lava and tidal waves, represents to some degree the helplessness, self-hatred and anguish that one sibling feels as another drops off once more into madness.

O too in “Nosferatu,” F.W. Murnau becomes his own subject — one of the undead, hollowed out and sucked dry by the love he has betrayed. The life, again, forms, deforms and becomes the work. This strategy succeeds for the first half of Shepard’s novel. The flying corps section, for example, is tied crucially to the past by guilt and grief, and to the future as well, since it is only high above the earth that the filmmaker-to-be realizes that flight itself is “a new manner of perception,” a sort of picture in motion.

Moreover, at the center of the vampire legend is the idea of parasitism — “you must die if I am to live,” as Murnau puts it. The idea that one lover’s work can prosper only by the other’s death permeates the “Nosferatu” chapter, giving it pathos and significance. But after that the shadow of Hans becomes thinner, the references to him, along with Murnau’s fits of self-acusation, start to become formal, almost obligatory, as if the great director feels it necessary to continue paying homage to the memory of two boys lying in the hot grass, even as he single-mindedly turns out, one after the other, his masterpieces.
“Get out of here,” Jimmy says.
“You’re the best, Jimmy.”
Jimmy rolls his eyes. “Let’s go find some girls.”

A voice from the stage announces, to scattered applause, that “Jimmy Bronx” is in the house, and Jimmy shakes hands as he moves through the crowd. He greets Ricky Ricardo (no relation), a former d.j. for WBLS radio. Los Hermanos Rosario, a hot merengue group, is onstage, animating the dancers, several of whom leap onto the stage to show their moves. Jimmy exchanges kisses with Darlene Pomales, a reporter for CBS Radio. “She should be on television,” he says. “Darlene,” he tells her, “I swear, if you didn’t have a boyfriend ...”

At 3 A.M., Jimmy decides that we should go to the Copacabana—not the legendary room on Fifth Avenue but its new incarnation, over by the West Side Highway. On the way out, Jimmy grabs a drink for the road. As we walk down the stairs, he lays out the weekly schedule of Salsa Nation: “Monday night, S.O.B.’s. Tuesday night, Copa. Wednesday night, Life. Thursday night, Jimmy’s. Friday night, Roxy. And Saturday night, Latin Quarter.” But Jimmy plans to capture more nights with a new room he has just opened adjacent to the restaurant, a ten-thousand-square-foot space with a huge stage for bands and with windows looking out over the Harlem River. He has already made a move across the river, recently buying a restaurant on 131st Street, in Harlem, which will house the second Jimmy’s Bronx Café. After that, he has his eye on Miami and L.A.

At street level, a young woman working the door tries to stop Jimmy. “You can’t leave with that drink,” she says. Jimmy gives her a look that combines censure and injury—a look that says, “Are you really sure about that?” Suddenly, a doorman rushes over to intervene. “That’s Jimmy,” he says, scowling at the woman before shaking Jimmy’s hand and ushering him out onto Broadway.

After a stop at the Copa, Jimmy decides to call it quits at four-thirty. He’s got to speak to a group of senior citizens in the morning. As he drives off toward the Bronx in a new white Ford Expedition, cell phone pressed to his ear, a young woman in a silver-lamé dress and silver spike heels rushes from the club and runs with rapid little sandpaper steps up the street, chasing him, shouting, “Stop, Jimmy, stop! You didn’t say goodbye!”
PROFILE

FORTRESS MAMET

Where did the playwright get his gift for the swagger of American speech?

BY JOHN LAHR

When I met David Mamet this summer, he made me the gift of a Boy Scout knife. On one side of the knife was the Scout motto: “Be prepared.” The words, which invoke both prowess and paranoia, seemed to sum up the twin themes of Mamet’s work, and of his guarded life. We were sitting in the back room of his headquarters, on the second floor of a two-story yellow clapboard building on Eliot Street in Cambridge, Massachusetts, at a table with a large Second World War poster hanging over it which read “Loose Talk Can Cost Lives! Keep It Under Your Stetson.” There was no identifying name on the bell to the front door or on the office door. You had to feel your way along until you found Mamet hidden away, which is how it is with him. Mamet, who is masterly at communicating his meanings in public, is prickly in private. He is a small but powerfully built man; in the stillness of his presence and in the precision of his sentences, he exudes an imposing, specific gravity. “Fortress Mamet” is how Ed Koren, the cartoonist and Mamet’s Vermont neighbor, refers to the emotional no-go area that Mamet creates around himself, and I was acutely aware of this hazardous moat as Mamet eased into a chair across the table from me, wearing his summer camouflage: a khaki baseball cap, khaki shorts, and a purple-and-brown Hawaiian shirt. Over the years, Mamet has adopted many fustian public disguises to counterpoint a personal style that Albert-Takazacukas, the director of his first Off-Broadway hit, “Sexual Perversity in Chicago,” in 1976, characterizes as “blunt, blunt, blunt.” He adds, “It’s his lovely cover.” As the star of Chicago’s booming Off Loop theatre scene in the early seventies, Mamet affected Che’s guerrilla look: fatigue, combat boots, a beret, and, for good measure, a cape. After his Pulitzer Prize for “Glengarry Glen Ross” (1984), his play about salesmen in a cutthroat real-estate competition, Mamet assumed a Brechtian swagger: cigar, clear plastic eyeglass frames, and open collar, which consolidated in one iconic image the powerhouse and the proletarian. Now, in his mellow middle age, Mamet has forsaken the cigar and adopted the posture of rural gent: work boots, blue jeans, Pendleton shirt, and trimmed beard. In all these guises, the one constant is Mamet’s crewcut, which dips like a tree line over the craggy promontory of his broad forehead and gives him an austere first appearance. “The crewcut...is an honest haircut,” he has written. “It is the haircut of an honest, two-pair-of-jeans working man—a man from Chicago.”

Mamet is certainly a workingman, even though, at a million and a half dollars a movie, he’s far from a wage slave. He has written twenty-two plays, six collections of essays, two novels, and fourteen films, five of which he also directed. He belongs in the pantheon of this century’s great dramatists; he has done for American theatre at the end of the century what his hero, the iconoclastic sociologist Thorstein Veblen, did for American sociology at the beginning: provide a devastating, often hilarious new idiom to dissect the follies of American life. Mamet’s muscular imagination strips dialogue of literary nicety and robs plot of that naturalistic decoration which has progressively tamed theatre. His plays, though rooted in reality, are fables, whose uniqueness lies in their distinctive music—a terse, streamlined orchestration of thought, language, and character.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRIGITTE LACOMBE

Mamet at work: Writing, he says, “stills the need to be accepted and the need to be revenged.”
distracted ten-year-old boy.
John flashes in Mamet's autobiographical masterpiece "The Cryptogram"—a play about the betrayal of the boy by his parents. He is on the stairway looking down at the living room, where his mother, abandoned by his father and unable to meet his emotional needs, sits in the tortured last beat of the play. At whom, exactly, is the boy's murderous energy aimed, himself or others? His gesture foreshadows the life of the playwright, who learned to turn aggression into art: the knife became a pen. Knives are tools of creation as well as of destruction, and Mamet likes to whittle. His specialty is carving animal figures for his three daughters—Willa (fourteen) and Zosia (nine), both from his twelve-year marriage to the actress Lindsay Crouse, which ended in 1991; and Clara (three), from his marriage, in the same year, to the Scottish actress and singer Rebecca Pidgeon. The knife as an ambiguous symbol of penetration is the central metaphor of "Three Uses of the Knife," a collection of Mamet's lectures about theatre to be published later this year, in which he recounts an anecdote first told by the blues singer Huddie Ledbetter, better known as Leadbelly, who once said, "You take a knife, you use it to cut the bread, so you'll have strength to work; you use it to shave, so you'll look nice for your lover; on discovering her with another, you use it to cut out her lying heart." In its affecting irony, this progression illustrates for Mamet the essential elements of dramatic structure; it also demonstrates, he writes, "the attempt of the orderly, affronted mind to confront the awesome."

If Mamet felt affronted now, it was by my request that he turn back to the memory of his past. "My childhood, like many people's, was not a bundle of laughs. So what?" he said. "I always skip that part of the biography." After a while, he added, "This might help. There's a movie I'm hoping to do in the fall about making a movie. The female movie star is having a breakdown. She's
DESPITE his disclaimer, the dominating themes of Mamet’s work—the sense of not belonging, the imperative of speaking out, the betrayal by authority—evolve directly out of his childhood. He was the firstborn son of two handsome, highly intelligent, upwardly mobile first-generation Americans, Leonore (Lee) and Bernie Mamet, whose families were Ashkenazi Jews from Russia and Poland.

“Are you an only child?” I asked Mamet when we first met, in 1983. “Yes,” Mamet said, “except for my sister.” “We lived in an emotional hurricane,” says Lynn Mamet, the extrovert of the pair, who still speaks to her brother almost every day from her home on a scorched hillside canyon in Los Angeles. She adds, “We were safe for each other.” Until their parents divorced bitterly, in 1958, when David was eleven and Lynn was eight, they lived on Euclid Avenue in Chicago’s South Shore Highlands, in a capacious three-story red brick house that stood as a kind of totem to the Mamet family’s self-invention. “My life was expunged of any tradition at all. Nothing old in the house. No color in the house,” Mamet told me. “The virtues expounded were not creative but remedial: let’s stop being Jewish, let’s stop being poor.” Lynn says, “There was a great deal of pressure for us to be the best Americans we could be. There was no room for us to make mistakes.” She and her brother lived in fear of the ferocity of parental expectations—what Lynn calls “hoops of fire.” “It was successful or did,” Mamet says.

Bernie Mamet, a tough labor lawyer who represented over three hundred unions, and once argued—and won—a case before the Supreme Court, preached an exacting semantic gospel of precision, nuance, and observation. “The map is not the territory” was one of Bernie’s mantras, which voiced his bedrock belief that nothing was all black or all white. He hectored his children to listen “with the inner ear,” and, according to his second wife, Judy Mamet, played games with them to build up their powers of observation and memory. “Stickler” is a soft word for my father’s attachment to the absolute necessity of expressing yourself correctly,” Lynn Mamet says. “It’s just what was correct changed on a daily basis.” In the crossfire of family conversation, David grew quickly into an agile sparring partner for his parents, and also learned to listen defensively. “From the earliest age, one had to think, be careful about what one was going to say, and also how the other person was going to respond,” says Mamet, whose celebrated “ear for dialogue” evolved out of listening for danger. “In my family,” he once said, “in the days prior to television, we liked to while away the evenings by making ourselves miserable, solely based on our ability to speak the language viciously.”

Indeed, Mamet’s prolific output and his compulsion to master skills (writing, directing, piano playing, sharpshooting) are a daily reiteration of competence in adulthood which seeks to redress a childhood whose litany was “You are not living up to your potential.” Lee, who Mamet says “kind of created this wonderful persona of elegance,” also had a short fuse and a sharp tongue. “You just didn’t know where it was coming from—she could blow at any minute,” Lynn says. “When they harvested the bipolar patch, she ripened first.” To Lynn, Lee said, “If only I could have had a pretty daughter”; and, to David, “I love you but I don’t like you.” Lee had elusive verbal ways of parrying her children’s demands, and this mystification, where what was being said wasn’t what was meant, brought with it a sense of helplessness and frustration. Mamet demonstrates the shifting sand of this dynamic in “The Cryptogram,” where John, the distressed young boy, can’t make himself seen or heard by his self-involved mother, Donny. John is suicidal, and when he confesses his dark thoughts to her she seems to acknowledge them but then both literally and figuratively wanders away:

JOHN: Do you ever wish you could die? (Pause.) It’s not such a bad feeling, is it?
DONNY: I know that you’re frightened. I know you are. But at some point, do you see...? (Pause. Exit.) (Offstage) John, everyone has a story. Do you know that? In their lives. This is yours.

The boy’s anxiety goes unattended; throughout the play he is almost never touched or held. “They were not tactile,” Lynn says of her parents. “If they were tactile, it was like being touched by a porcupine.” Mamet is more forgiving: “They didn’t have a clue,” he says, explaining that Bernie and Lee had their children in their early twenties. Still, his portrayal of John’s demoralized childhood and narcissistic mother connects to the notion of the “corrupt parent” that Mamet later outlined in one of his essays: “The corrupt parent says: If you wish to be protected you must withhold all judgment, powers of interpretation, and individual initiative. I will explain to you what things mean, and how to act in every situation.” David himself was always in trouble for speaking up at home. “He would tilt at every fucking windmill,” Lynn says. At such moments, his mother would say, “David, why must you dramatize everything?” “She said it to me as a criticism,” Mamet told me. “I found out—it took me forty years to find out—that rhetorical questions are all accusations. They’re very, very sneaky accusations.”

Between his mother’s mixed messages and his father’s high standards, Mamet, who from an early age was a voracious reader but a wretched student, grew up believing he was stupid. “I was like the professor in ‘Oleanna’”—his controversial play about a university professor accused by his pupil of sexual harassment—“who all his life had been told he was an idiot, so he behaved like one,” Mamet says. “I just always assumed people assumed I was gonna come to a bad end.” In “Jolly,” an autobiographical one-act play that is part of three meditations on his past called “The Old Neighborhood,” which opens on Broadway this month, he addresses the psychological sleight of mind by which parents project their own inadequacy onto their children,
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as a grownup brother and sister sit talking about the sins of their parents:

**BOB:** . . . That's their way. That's their way. That's their swing, selfish, goddamn them. What treachery have they not done, in the name of...

**JOLLY:** . . . I know . . .

**BOB:** . . . of "honesty," God damn them. And always "telling us we . . ."

**JOLLY:** . . . yes

**BOB:** . . . we were the bad ones.

In Mamet's family, the helpless collusion of children with their parents' sadism was acted out in good times as well as bad. In his essay "The Rake" he recounts one such incident that took place after the family went out to dinner. "My stepfather and mother would walk to the car, telling us that they would pick us up," he writes. "We children would stand by the restaurant entrance. They would drive up in the car, open the passenger door, and wait until my sister and I had started to get in. Then they would drive away. They would drive ten or fifteen feet and open the door again, and we would walk up again, and they would drive away again." He continues, "They sometimes would drive around the block. But they would always come back, and by that time the four of us would be laughing in camaraderie and appreciation of what, I believe, was our only family joke."

In 1958, Lee married Bernie’s law associate—a close family friend, also named Bernie. She had moved out of the house with the kids, and they ended up in Olympia Fields, on the outskirts of Chicago, which Mamet called New South Hell. She didn’t inform the children of her wedding plans. "We’d been in Florida with my father," Lynn says. "We came home. They said, 'How was your weekend?' We said, 'O.K. How was yours?' They said, 'We got married.' David responded 'So what else is new?' and went into the other room. He was profoundly distressed by his impulsive, fist-pounding stepfather, who occasionally punched Lynn, and broke the glass top of the kitchen table several times with his explosions of temper, 'so the table was associated in our minds with the notion of blood,' Mamet writes in "The Rake." His anxiety about this new "cobwebbed-together family" is powerfully evoked in his description of one afternoon in Olympia Fields, when, as his sister remembers it, she came out to call him in to dinner while he was raking leaves. He hit Lynn in the face with the rake. "He opened up the whole side of my face," Lynn, who still has a scar above her lip from her brother's outburst, says. "If you could pick a single incident in David's life which has constantly exacerbrated it, it was possibly that act, which also explained a great deal to him internally. How he felt: his anger, his rage, his confusion, his life." But neither child—David out of guilt, Lynn "out of a desire to avert the terrible punishment she knew I would receive"—would fess up to Lee about what had happened. "My mother pressed us," Mamet writes. "She said that until one or the other answered, we would not go to the hospital; and so the family sat down to dinner, while my sister clutched a napkin to her face and the blood soaked the napkin and ran down onto her food, which she had to eat; and I also ate my food, and we cleared the table and went to the hospital." In a way, Mamet’s iconoclasm as a writer is a means of understanding and of finding words for his fury. It also, he says, "stills two warring needs—the need to be accepted and the need to be revenged."

At the age of fifteen, after a series of blowups with his mother and stepfather, Mamet returned to Chicago to live with his father, on Lake Shore Drive. Although he was offered an airy, ample room, he chose to live in the maid’s quarters near the back door, which made escape easy. But Mamet could never escape his father. "Bernie Mamet was clearly the intense relationship of David’s life, and there seems to be no aspect of the relationship of father to son that they did not explore to hell," says the director Gregory Mosher, who is Mamet’s foremost interpreter and has collaborated with him on fifteen plays over the years. Mamet looked like his father, his skepticism and his savage view of entrepreneurial capitalism came from Bernie, who, according to Judy Mamet, regularly "railed against the inequities of commerce," and advised his son, "Don’t trust an expert." Mamet remembers this theme being driven home in one of his father’s early jokes: "A guy takes his son. He puts him on the mantelpiece, and to his son he says, 'Jump!' Kid says, 'Daddy, I’m frightened.' Father says, 'I’m your father. You kidding? Jump!' Kid jumps. Father steps back and the kid falls on the floor. Dad says, 'That’s the first lesson. Don’t trust anybody.'"

As a playwright and theorist, Mamet has adopted his father’s advocate style of thinking against the system. "He was a winning lawyer. He believed in being smarter than the other guy and working harder than the other guy," says Mamet, who based the character of Jimmy Hoffa, in his 1991 film, on Bernie. "One of Dad’s lines I put in the movie," Mamet says. "He said, ‘Some people say that the client’s gotta pay you to do your best. The client’s not paying me to be best, the client’s paying me to win.’"

Bernie, who had wanted to go on the stage himself as a young man, was deeply competitive even with his son. "He came to see ‘American Buffalo,’" Mamet says. "He said, ‘When are you going to chuck all this nonsense and go to law school?’ " "He was a very hard man," says Sheila Welch, who observed them during the opening of "Edmond," in 1982, and later became the producer of Mamet’s Atlantic Theatre Company. "He was very, very critical. I think he taunted Dave, almost like Mozart’s father—you know, ‘You have to be better’—but in a sense he secretly didn’t want David to be better than him." For about four years in the eighties, the father and the son stopped talking to each other, but they made up after the birth of Mamet’s second daughter, in time for Mamet to cast his father as a terrorist in his movie "Homicide." The occasion is memorialized in a photo of them on the set, in which Bernie sits slumped at a table in the foreground, wearing a leather jacket, and above him, dominating the frame, David stands on a radiator giving orders. On July 5, 1991, Mamet stood over his father for the last time, at his funeral. (Bernie had died of cancer, at the age of sixty-eight.) He spoke at the service; afterward, as is the custom in Jewish ceremonies, the mourners filed forward one by one to shovel a spadelful of dirt onto the casket from a huge mound of earth beside the grave. Mamet had his turn. But when the gravedigger picked up the shovel to finish the job Mamet took the shovel back from him without a word and started to fill in the grave himself. It was a blistering summer day. After a while, he took off his jacket, and the wilted
mourners watched for nearly forty minutes while he buried his father.

Mamet graduated from Goddard College, which he calls "sex camp," in 1969. By 1975, he was famous. His psychological makeup, then, as now, was "essentially that of an unsure student who has finally discovered an idea in which he can believe, and who feels unless he clutches and dedicates himself to that idea, he will be lost." At sixteen, he had become a dogsbody and bit player at Bob Sickinger's innovative Hull House Theatre, in Chicago. "It was the first time in my confused young life that I had learned that work is love," he wrote later. He was by then well read in the literature of avant-garde drama, especially the plays of Harold Pinter. "It was stuff you heard in the street," he says. "It was the stuff you overheard in the taxi cab. It wasn't written." He adds, "Pinter was sui generis. He was starting out with his vision of the world, and he was going to write it." (Pinter would later champion Mamet. "He sent me, unforgettable, 'Glengarry Glen Ross,' with a note saying 'There is something wrong with this play. What is it?'" Pinter recalls. "I wired him immediately. 'There is nothing wrong with this play. I'm giving it to the National.'"") Mamet began playwriting in his final year of college, after a summer vacation spent working as a busboy and odd-job man at Second City, Chicago's improvisational theatre, and watching comic players like Peter Boyle, Robert Klein, and David Steinberg; the quick cuts and blackouts of their revue format became part of Mamet's early punchy minimalism. "For the next ten years," he said, "none of my scenes lasted more than eight minutes."

Mamet had also taken off his junior year to study acting in New York with the renowned Sanford Meisner, at the Neighborhood Playhouse. Meisner believed that "every play is based upon the reality of doing," that "good acting comes from the heart," and that "there's no mentality in it." He urged his students to "fuck polite"; he devised the Word Repetition Game, in which two actors play off each other, each repeating exactly the words the other has just said, in order to bring out real emotion and impulsive shifts in behavior. Mamet wasn't chosen by Meisner to go on to the next year of classes, but when he began writing plays his distinctive fractured cadences and overlapping dialogue gradually transferred the rigors of the Word Repetition Game from the stage to the page. "I think the rhythm of his dialogue actually comes from the repetition exercises," says Scott Zigler, who has been a member of the Atlantic Theatre Company since its inception, in 1985, and is directing "The Old Neighborhood" on Broadway. "The rhythm is simply the rhythm of being in the moment." For instance, "Sexual Perversity in Chicago" begins:

**Danny:** So how'd you do last night?  
**Bernie:** Are you kidding me?  
**Danny:** Yeah?  
**Bernie:** Are you fucking kidding me?  
**Danny:** Yeah?  
**Bernie:** Are you pulling my leg?  
**Danny:** So?  
**Bernie:** So? It's time to go to work.

But if it took Mamet a few years to absorb Meisner's teaching into his writing, it took him no time to incorporate Meisner's rogue ideas into what Mamet called his South Side Gypsy attitude. His senior-year project was his first completed play, "Camele"—a revue composed of thirty-four blackout bits based on "the more potent pieces in my journal." (It's a method that Mamet still uses, mining material from the daily ledgers he keeps.)

He had never directed a play "in my whole life," he wrote in the project notes. But, he went on, "I remember that Acting is Doing. So I just started doing." Mamet had the chutzpah to charge fifty cents admission, a gesture that ruffled a lot of hippie feathers. "I wanted to communicate to the public at large that this was going to be no ordinary theatrical event," he wrote. Also, he added, "I felt like it." The last sentence of the project report served as Mamet's envoy to college life: "It's time for the actor to find another big rock to push up that long hill."

Everyone, including Mamet, conceded that he was not an actor. But in 1970, after undertaking various acting stints and odd jobs, Mamet found himself back in Vermont—this time teaching acting, first at Marlboro College and then, in 1971, at his progressive alma mater, which had no grades, no requirements, no tests. "So here comes Mamet dressed in tailored sailor pants, this tight shirt, with impeccably done hair. He walks like he's got a ramrod up his butt, and he just laid down the law," the actor

"Before we try assisted suicide, Mrs. Rose, let's give the aspirin a chance."
William H. Macy, who is one of Mamet's closest friends, and who was nominated for an Academy Award last year for his performance in "Fargo," says of Mamet's arrival in class. "The first thing he said was 'If you're late, don't come in. If you're not prepared, don't do the class. If you want to learn to act, I'm the man who can teach you. If you're not here for that, leave.' The class just looked at each other, going 'Who is this fucking guy?'" Macy continues, "But he won us over. He was not egotistical in any way. He just had this unshakable confidence." Mamet was in the habit of fining latecomers a dollar a minute and then burning their money. After about a year and a half of study, according to Macy, Mamet "walked in one day and said, 'I've written these plays.' It was 'Sexual Perversity in Chicago'—a comedy about the vagaries of dating which, a few years later, would become Mamet's first hit. "In that incarnation," Macy goes on, "it was a bunch of blackouts—about twelve of them. A role for everyone. Who knew he even wrote?

MAMET himself seems never to have doubted his playwriting ability. "I was just sure," he says. "I mean, how are you sure you got a fastball?" He adds, "Writing was something I could do. I figured, Well, if you fuck this up, you deserve everything that's gonna happen to you." When Mamet was about twenty-two, a friend sent a draft of "Sexual Perversity in Chicago" to Mike Nichols, who had recently made "Carnal Knowledge"; he said he'd have turned it into a movie right away except that he'd just made one like it. "I thought, Oh my God, these guys actually believe in me," Mamet says. "I better start working right now. I better have another play and another play after that." In 1972, he formed the St. Nicholas Company, in Vermont, with Macy and another of his students, Steven Schachter; in 1973, they shifted their base to Chicago, where, Mamet writes, "the air feels new, and all things still seem possible."

Mamet, who worked in the Windy City only between 1973 and 1977, is either Chicago's most famous New York playwright or New York's most famous Chicago playwright. "Chicago is very, very different from New York," he says. "In Chicago, you lived with your theatre company. The money that you made you shared. If you didn't work together, you starved. You weren't in it for an individual career." Chicago's earthiness extended to its pragmatic literary tradition, which carried with it "an intolerance for the purely ornamental." Performance art—whatever the hell that may be—would have been completely foreign to Chicago, which is very meat and potatoes," Mamet says. "It's a comedy it would be a good idea if it were funny." Mamet and his cohort, who soon added the actress Patricia Cox to their founding group, lived by their wits. They helped fund their productions by giving acting classes. "We invented this myth of the Chicago theatre scene," says Gregory Mosher, who considers having bumped into Mamet in 1975 "the central fact of my life." What made the Chicago theatre scene was that no one cared. The audience didn't care. They were profoundly indifferent to everything we did."

In those days, Mamet resided and wrote at the Lincoln Hotel. "His room was the size of a closet. He had no belongings. It was Spartan like you can't believe," Macy says. But "from the very first day I met him," a Chicago playwright, Alan Gross, recalled in the Chicago Tribune in 1982, "David told me he was an important American playwright. He was completely self-encapsulated. He knew exactly what he wanted to do and what was expected of him; he had a great rap, a great act." According to the program note for the St. Nicholas's debut production, the company was named for the patron saint of "mountebanks, prostitutes, and the demimonde." And Mamet had a bit of the mountebank in him. "He was very, very fast on his feet," the company's first literary manager, Jonathan Abarbanel, says, referring to what he calls Mamet's "intellectual Barnumism." Abarbanel once told the magazine Chicago, "He would be talking—As Aristotle said, blah blah. Or, 'I was rereading Kierkegaard the other day.' I remember saying, 'Aristotle never said that!' You weren't reading Kierkegaard! And he'd go, 'Shhh! Don't tell anyone.'"

While Mamet waited tables, drove taxis, and cleaned offices to support his theatrical habit, he turned Chicago into a kind of raffish playground. "He always had very good luck with the ladies," Macy says. "Oh, man, smooth as silk." (One of Mamet's best come-ons—"Is anyone taking up an inordinate amount of your time these days?" —is memorialized in "Sexual Perversity in Chicago.") He explored the city's gritty corners, whose vernacular he savored and kept note of. Among his actor friends, Ed O'Neill had been a football star at Ohio University; Dennis Farina had been a policeman; and J.J. Johnston, a walking lexicon of underworld phrase and fable who was from the South Side, had been a bookie. Having been raised on high culture and hated it, Mamet was drawn to "people who don't institutionalize their thought."

"Dave got hit with the gangster bag early," Johnston, who recalls telling him about the old-time hoods, says. "These crooks, most of them, have pipe dreams. They can't do anything right. Like they say, these guys would fuck up a two-car funeral." Mamet, who has written a lot about criminals, including his screenplays for "The Untouchables," "Things Change," and an upcoming movie about Meyer Lansky, sometimes socialized with them and saw their paths at first hand. "They're entrepreneurs," he says. "They speak their own language. Like many people engaged in violence, they're sentimental." He tried to talk his way into a daily North Side poker game of petty thieves, which was held in a junk shop owned by a fence called Kenny. "I came out several times, hung out, they didn't want to let me sit down," he says. "Then, one day, I wasn't there. They said, 'Where were you yesterday? We missed you.' I said I was teaching drama at Pontiac Correctional Center. It turned out later that many of them had done time at Pontiac. So they started calling me Teach, and they let me sit down on the game." It was out of this subterranean milieu that Mamet made his first masterpiece, "American Buffalo"—a tale of betrayal cloaked in the comedy of a botched heist, set in a Chicago junk shop. When he handed the script to Mosher, a strapping director just out of Juilliard who was in charge of the Chicago Goodman Theatre's Stage 2, Mosher told him he would read it over the weekend. "You don't need to read it," Mamet said. "Just do it." He paused, then added, "Tell you what. I'll put five grand in escrow, and if the play doesn't win the Pulitzer, keep the money."

MAMET didn't win that year's Pulitzer and never made good on the promise, but "American Buffalo" made his name. It was produced on Broadway in 1977, giving Mamet his first real payday; it was the beginning of
his being able to make a living as a playwright. Though it was only his second full-length play, it was a great leap forward in his storytelling. As late as 1991, Mamet maintained that it was “the most structurally competent” of his plays. “It has the form of a classical tragedy,” he said then. As he put it to me recently, “That’s the only thing I ever really worked hard at in my life: plotting. Do it and do it, and do it again.” He added, “I’m not looking for a feeling—I’m looking for an equation. Given the set of circumstances, what does it end up with? How is that inevitable? How is that surprising?”

What Mamet had excavated from the junk-shop poker games and captured in “American Buffalo” was the notion of a world and an idiom composed of waste. In the swagger of small talk he found a metaphor for the spiritual attrition of American capitalism. His small-fry characters hilariously emulate the badinage of big business. “You know what is free enterprise,” says Teach, the punk who kisses himself in on a plan to rob the coin collection of a man who recently paid the junk-shop owner ninety dollars for a nickel. “The freedom of the Individual… Embark on any Fucking Course that he sees fit… in order to secure his honest chance to make a profit… The country’s founded on this, Don. You know this.”

Mamet’s rhythm gave the words and the pauses an unusual emotional clout. “Dave’s dialogue is a string of iambs, which can often be broken down into fives,” Mosher says. “For example, ‘But all I ever ask (and I would say this to her face) is only she remembers who is who and not to go around with her or Gracie either with this attitude: The Past is Past, and this is Now, and so Fuck You’ is, I believe, twenty-seven iambics in a row.” Joe Mantegna, one of Mamet’s favorite actors, talks about seeing Mamet “tapping it out with his pen” while actors speak their lines. Sometimes Mamet could be even more insistent. “He sits in the back of the house going, ‘Pick up, pick up, pick up!’” Mosher says.

In Mamet’s plays, speech becomes
the doing that reveals being; identity is dramatized as each character's struggle to speak his meaning. For instance, Teach, who is full of big plans, can't think clearly. When he makes his sensational entrance cursing "Fuckin' Ruthie," who has insulted him for eating a piece of toast off her plate, we hear a syntax that reels backward like his fearful, scramble mind:

Only (and I tell you this, Don). Only and I'm not, I don't think, casting anything on anyone: from the mouth of a Southern bulldyke asshole ingrate of a vicious nowhere cunt can this trash come.

Over the years, so many people have written Mamet to complain about the "language" in his plays that in the eighties he had a form letter printed which read "Too bad, you big cry baby." Once, while talking on the phone in the kitchen to the producer Fred Zollo, Mamet reached into the refrigerator to help his daughter Willa get a Fudgsicle. "Oh, fuck," he said. "Daddy, don't use that language." Willa laughed. Mamet replied, "That language put that fuckin' Fudgsicle in your mouth." In his plays Mamet relishes slang for its impoverished poetry; it helps to create the sense of energy and of absence which his work dissents. In "Sexual Perversity" it's the absence of self-awareness ("'Cunt' won't do it," Deb says to the indecent Danny: "'Fuck' won't do it. No more magic... Tell me what you're feeling. Jerk"); in "American Buffalo" it's the absence of beauty and possibility ("There is nothing out there," Teach says after trashing the shop. "I fuck myself"); in "Glengarry Glen Ross" it's the absence of community and calm ("Fuck you. That's my message to you. Fuck you and kiss my ass," Shelly "the Machine" Levene crows at Williamson, the guy who gives out the property leads, after making what he fondly thinks is a sale). Out of the muck of ordinary speech—the curses, interruptions, asides, midsentence breaks, and sudden accelerations—Mamet carefully weaves a tapestry of motifs which he sees as "counterpoint." "The beauty of the fugue comes from the descent, from the counting," he says. "The melody line is pretty damn simple. Anyone can write that." When he composes, Mamet says, he doesn't picture the characters onstage; he hears them. "The rhythms don't just unlock something in the character," he says. They are what's happening.

Until Mamet emerged, American commercial theatre was primarily a literary, naturalistic theatre, where words were a libretto for the actor's emotions, and where the actor determined the rhythms. To be successful, the author had to become invisible. But Mamet brought the author's voice back onto the stage; his ideas about acting protect the author's voice at the expense of the actor's invention. "The words are set and unchanging. Any worth in them was put there by the author," he writes mischievously in "True and False." "If you learn the words by rote, as if they were a phone book, and let them come out of your mouth without your interpretation, the audience will be well served." This is, to say the least, controversial. "It's completely nuts," says the director Karel Reisz, whose films include "Saturday Night and Sunday Morning" and "The French Lieutenant's Woman." "In order to get what you want from the other actor, you have to invent, color, invest it with your own feelings. I think the notion of separating words from actions is very odd; words are part of the action. It's the reason why the shows he directs are so poor. The element of believability is not there; you have the sense of automata reciting the words."

Mamet, like Pinter or Beckett, is perhaps not the best interpreter of his own vision. ("The Cryptogram," for example, was given an excellent English production by Mosher which Mamet did not see, and was directed by Mamet, first in Cambridge and then in New York, without the same impact.) But once he had defined his voice he was determined to defend it. He even traded punches with the actor F. Murray Abraham during the New York production of "Sexual Perversity in Chicago" when Abraham rejected Mamet's tempo in his line readings. "He was like a man on a mission," says Fred Zollo, who met Mamet in those early years and went on to produce most of his major plays as well as many of his films. "I just wanted to be so far ahead," Mamet says. "I didn't want to look back and find somebody gaining on me. If I couldn't write a play, I'd write a movie or I'd write a poem or I'd direct something or I'd teach a class or write a book. I didn't care."

He continues, "I ain't gonna go home."

In 1976, Mamet moved to New York, married into show-business aristocracy—Lindsay Crouse was the daughter of Russel Crouse, who, with his partner Howard Lindsay, wrote such Broadway smash hits as "Life with Father" and "The Sound of Music"—and got down to work. During this period, he began supplementing his playwriting with screenwriting. He got his first assignment through Crouse, who was on her way to audition for Bob Rafelson's 1981 remake of "The Postman Always Rings Twice." He told her to tell Rafelson that "he was a fool if he didn't hire me to write the screenplay," he says. "I was kidding, but she did it." Rafelson called Mamet and asked why he should hire him. "I told

"Still, a brisk walk can be just as effective."
him, 'Because I'll give you either a really good screenplay or a sincere apology.' He also wrote "The Verdict," and by 1982 he was at work on "Glengarry Glen Ross," which had its debut at London's National Theatre and then went on to become a huge hit on Broadway. Crouse, who starred in such films as "Slap Shot" and "Places in the Heart," for which she was nominated for an Oscar, "understood the joy and glamour of show biz," the playwright John Guare says, "and she had integrity." Guare remembers walking with her in Vermont: "She said to me, Just look at him. Do you realize that this man has made himself? He's been given no help. I understood David's sense of will through her pride in it. She was so sublimely proud of him—until she wasn't." But in the years they were together Crouse was essential to him. "She saw herself as a creative partner, and in some ways she probably was," Sheila Welch says. She adds, "David wasn't very smooth socially. Lindsay had social graces. David learned how to present himself in the theatre world from her." Mamet was now properly seen as well as heard. "That's why I love the theatre," a character says in "Edmond." "Because what you must ask respect for is yourself." If he hadn't found the theatre, Mamet has said, "it's very likely I would have become a criminal—another profession that subsumes the outsider, or, perhaps more to the point, accepts people with a not very well formed ego and rewards the ability to improvise."

"Injury has given David enormous energy," Sidney Lumet, who directed "The Verdict," says. "I have no idea where it comes from, but there's a sense of I've been screwed. A lot of the movies are very much about being had." In fact, all Mamet's movies, including the recent crop, and most of his major plays are about betrayal. Many of them revolve around con artists, those picaresque urban hunter-gatherers who scour the postindustrial wasteland in search of both surplus and leisure, and around con games, which give his sense of betrayal a dramatic form. Mamet himself has performed a mentalism act at county fairs, and when he was in college he shilled for his friend Jonathan Katz, then a nationally ranked Ping-Pong champion. "We would stage a game for money between him and me, and I would let him win," Katz says. "He wouldn't give me a rematch. I'd get 'upset,' but some other guy would give me a rematch, having just seen me beaten by David playing badly." The magician and master card manipulator Ricky Jay says of Mamet, "He has what a hustler has. He has 'grift sense.' It's what makes his plays work." In "House of Games" (1987), the first movie that Mamet both wrote and directed, the con illustrates the dilemma of trust. "I 'used' you. I did. I'm sorry," Mike, the con man, says to his mark Ford, who has caught him out. "And you learned some things about yourself that you'd rather not know." He continues, "You say I Acted Atrociously. Yes. I did. I do it for a living." Writers do the same in the service of their story, but with this difference: their lies are like truth. Mamet sees a parallel to the con game in writing for the theatre. The con of performance is to rob the audience not of money but of its preconceived notions. "The trick is leaving out everything except the essential," Mamet explains. "As Betelheim says in 'The Uses of Enchantment,' the more you leave out, the more we see ourselves in the picture, the more we project our own thoughts onto it."

The con trick has a still more abiding pull on Mamet's imagination: it reverses the parental situation. In the con, the public is put in the role of the helpless child, while the con artist is the parent who knows the game and controls all the rules and the information. The whole enterprise is an assertion of omnipotence and a refusal to admit helplessness, which speaks to something deep in Mamet's nature. At the finale of "House of Games," Mike is held at gunpoint by Ford, who has shot him twice. Ford says, "Beg me for your life." But Mike, a con man to the last, won't. He'd rather die than be infantilized and surrender his sense of autonomy. Ford
shoots him again. "Thank you, sir, may I have another?" Mike says as Ford fires three more shots into him. In real life, Mamet also controls the rules of his game: he is the agent of all action, all answers, all interpretation. Even Mamet's instructions to actors, which demystify the notion of character ("There is no character. There are only lines upon a page"), are a way of insuring that the play's meaning and invention stay with him. "He controls the actors with an iron hand, in the rhythms and little quarter words and half words and stammers," Mike Nichols, who uses Mamet's work in his acting classes, says. "He says 'You will do what I say!' more than any writer that's ever written for the theatre, with the possible exceptions of Lillian Hellman and Pinter. For the actor to force his life through this iron control leads to such exciting things." It can also sometimes flatten and dehumanize performances, as it did Lindsay Crouse's in "House of Games." But as a film director Mamet has progressed from that static, unsure first effort, which one critic accurately observed was shot "like an Army training film," to the fluid, well-paced achievement of "The Spanish Prisoner," in which a con trick played on a credulous company man becomes a moral lesson about how the getting of wisdom equals the getting of skepticism.

About every eighteen months, Mamet likes to direct a movie. "When I'm making a movie, I'm just about as happy as I can be," he says. "I'm playing dollhouse with my best friends in the world." He oversees these occasions with patriarchal good humor and consideration. "He's an embarrassingly stand-up guy," the producer Art Linson says. "He expects nothing from people. So when somebody does something, the slightest gesture, he's truly moved." Every night after shooting, Mamet goes among the crew and thanks each member personally. His sets are exceptional for their congeniality. "I've had many happy movie experiences, but that one was right up there at the top," Steve Martin says about playing the heavy in "The Spanish Prisoner." Mamet keeps a joke reel of each film, which is to say a partial record of his practical jokes. On the first day of "The Spanish Prisoner," for instance, he laid out for the actress Felicity Huffman a Brünnhilde costume, complete with horned helmet. Once, during the shooting of "Oleanna," he asked William Macy to learn a new full-page speech on the spur of the moment and he put it on cue cards for the take. "I start the speech," Macy recalls. "I do the first card. I get to the second card, and it reads, 'But what do I know? I'm just a dumb towheaded cracker from Georgia. You know, when Dave first picked me out of the gutter...."

Of course, Mamet has less fun being a hired hand on other people's Hollywood projects. "Being a writer out there is like going into Hitler's Eagle's Nest with a great idea for a bar-mitzvah festival," he says. His streamlined screenplays, which have no embellishments or explanations, are not studio-executive-friendly. "They're dry sponges waiting for the water of performance," Sidney Lumet says. "And that's when they swell up to five thousand per cent." Mamet's script for "The Verdict" had been forgotten by the producers, who had spent more than a million dollars in development, but Lumet read Mamet's early version and said it was the one he wanted to shoot. Likewise, Paramount was indifferent to Linson's notion of going after Mamet to write "The Untouchables." A cartoon of their first meeting, in 1984, is pinned on the wall of Mamet's cabin, with Linson giving his pitch: "Dave, don't you think that the best career move for someone who's just won the Pulitzer Prize would be to adapt 'The Untouchables' for a shitload of money?" Mamet's screenplay departed from the TV series, and, inevitably, the executives didn't like it. Nonetheless, when it was filmed by Brian De Palma it grossed over two hundred million dollars worldwide and gave Mamet considerable heat in the industry.

Actually, Mamet's minimalism and his notion of character suits screenwriting. He works up his story on file cards. "You know the movie's ready to be written when you can remember it," Mamet says. "When the progression of incidents is so clear that you no longer need the cards, then you're ready to write." He writes very fast. "He wrote the first
draft of ‘The Untouchables’ in what seemed like ten days or less,” Linson recalls. “He has occasionally turned a script in to me and said, ‘Could you please sit on it for a couple of weeks? I don’t want them to think it’s this easy.’ Dead true. Once Dave gets something, it just kind of writes itself.” Rewriting Mamet is very difficult. “It looks like somebody put a patch on a pair of Levi’s,” Linson says, and, though Mamet will accept notes and supply rewrites, “there’ll come a time where the gate comes down and it’s ‘No más.’”

Mamet’s talent and his inflexibility have given him something of a bad-boy reputation in Hollywood, whose folly he memorialized in “Speed-the-Plow.” “I find that a smile and a hearty ‘Fuck you’ does the trick,” he says of seeing off the intrusive suggestions of movie executives. Sometimes even his own producers get it in the neck. Mamet once handed Zollo a copy of “American Buffalo” to do as a movie. “Have you adapted it for the screen?” Zollo asked. “Adapted it?” said Mamet. “Have I fucking what? I’m going to adapt it right now for you.” Mamet demanded the script back. “He crosses out ‘A Play by David Mamet’ and he writes ‘A Screenplay by David Mamet.’” Zollo says. Mamet is fortified in his truculence by the lesson of his poker playing (“If you’re smarter than the other guy, be smarter than the other guy”) and by a favorite dictum of the English critic William Hazlitt, which he paraphrases as “Don’t try to suck up or even be nice to your intellectual inferiors. They’ll only hate you more for it.” He adds, “Having read that makes my life a little bit easier.” About two years ago, Bob Conte, of HBO, gave Zollo a few pages of notes to give to Mamet on his “Lansky” script, which is finally being produced this year. “Essentially, almost all of our notes concern the following issues: Chronology, Clarity, and Character (alliteration unintended),” Conte wrote. “Tell him to Suck My Dick,” Mamet told Zollo. “Alliteration unintended.”

MAMET’s life as an uncompromising writer/director seems in direct contrast to—and is probably made possible by—the tranquility of his surroundings. In Vermont, he lives in a converted farmhouse, originally built in 1805, that sits on the rise of a hill and looks down a sloping meadow onto a large beaver pond. There are deer, bear, and moose in the surrounding forests, where Mamet likes to walk and sometimes hunt—or, as he says, “take my gun for a walk.” He never shoots anything. “My wife calls me the Deer Protection Association,” he says. If he gets in his Land Rover, a gift from Linson for a week’s rewrite, he can be at Goddard College in fifteen minutes; if he gets on his mountain bike, as he does with Rebecca several times a week to go into town for the mail, Cabot is less than four miles of hard pedalling away. Mamet’s kingdom consists of the farmhouse, a red barn, and a cedar cabin whose shingled roof is tucked under the bough of a pine tree about a hundred and fifty yards from the house.

On this rough-hewn masculine landscape Rebecca Pidgeon has put her graceful mark: red, white, and pink hollies press up against the fence posts; under the kitchen window, she has planted an array of herbs among rows of rhubarb, spinach, and lettuce, which Mamet looks upon with the kind of wonder that Jack had for the beanstalk. “After roses, it’s all broccoli to me,” he says. Mamet’s admiration for his wife’s competence and for her attentiveness to the world around her is transparent and touching. “She’s had a tremendous effect in anchoring him, in calming him down, in making him feel it’s O.K. to be scared, it’s O.K. to be upset, it’s O.K. to fall,” Lynn Mamet says. “There’s nothing self-destructive about her. She’s healthy. And I think it’s allowed my brother to exhale for the first time in his life.”

Mamet first laid eyes on Pidgeon, who is nineteen years younger than he is, at National Theatre rehearsals in London for a 1989 production of “Speed-the-Plow,” in which she was playing the tenacious, idealistic secretary who almost succeeds in making the producing gonif do good. “He came up to her and said, ‘You know, I always wanted to meet a girl like that,’” the actor Colin Stinton, who played opposite Pidgeon, recalls. “She blushed and was sort of flattered by it, I think.” Pidgeon, who had her own rock band in addition to her acting career, was resourceful, straightforward, and beautiful, and she didn’t bore him. “You think she likes me?” Mamet badgered the painter Donald Sultan, with whom he had travelled to London. Sultan explains, “I said, ‘Yeah, I think she likes you.’ He said, ‘What makes you think that?’ I said, ‘Well, every day for the last six months, every thought, every word, every action has been yours. How could she not like you?’” Pidgeon herself was surprised that she did. She says, “I had imagined him as this old, tall, very intellectual, cold, godlike kind of writer, and then I see this young, vibrant kind of street urchin. I thought, How could this be possible?” In the meantime, Mamet called his sister from London. “He said, ‘I’ve found her,’” Lynn Mamet says. “He told me about her. I said, ‘So, you’ll marry her.’ He went on for months, driving me crazy. ‘She’s in London, I’m here; she’s got this career, I’m here; she’s eleven, I’m here.’”

After a two-year long-distance courtship, they married; Mamet had found his bliss and a new mellowness. Zollo was surprised when Mamet agreed in 1994 to let him mount “The Cryptogram,” which he had kept in his trunk since the late seventies because of its intensely personal material. “He felt safe in his life,” Zollo says, by way of explanation. Pidgeon says, “We’re extremely compatible. There’s no ‘I’m going off to be a genius and be troublesome and mysterious and worried.’ We have a very peaceful life.” Contentment seems to have opened Mamet up even in literary ways. “I think his women’s writing has improved since his marriage to Rebecca,” Lynn says—a statement borne out by the complex rewrite of the mother’s role in “The Cryptogram,” and by the corporate femme fatale in “The Spanish Prisoner,” a part well played by Pidgeon. Lynn goes on, “I don’t think David has written a lot for women because I don’t think he’s been around that many women to whom he wishes to listen,
and therefore replicate their voices." Rebecca and Clara go down through the meadow to hunt for frogs at the beaver pond, and Mamet heads for the cabin. "I've never been anything other than happy here," he says as we approach the porch, whose left side is piled high with firewood. In the winter, when it can get to forty below and the snow is deep, Mamet makes the trek in snowshoes. When he arrives, his ink is frozen, so he improvises a trivet out of pie plates, putting pencils under the ink bottle and warming it up on the black Glenwood's parlor stove that dominates the front half of the room. There is an exhilarating sense of containment and comfort here, where Mamet's cherished objects are arranged carefully around him: a canoe paddle with a beautifully painted pine on its blade hangs on the beam separating the writing area from the reading area; there's a dartboard, a skeet thrower, a collection of campaign buttons, a .38 muzzled loader, a nine-pound medicine ball, and bookcases full of outdoor reading like "The Parker Gun Shooter's Bible Treasury" and "Black Powder Gun Digest." It's as if, instead of with the stove, Mamet were keeping himself warm with the things he loves. "Being a writer is all so ethereal that I think most of us tend to surround ourselves with tchotchkes so we can actually be sure we have a past," he says. "Or a life."

Mamet types with his back to the window on a blue Olympia manual typewriter, above which a kerosene lamp is suspended by a chain from a beam smudged black with smoke. The special calm of the place is in part the peace of having no electricity; it is also the peace of the activity that goes on there. Writing has always been Mamet's way of containing terror, or what he calls "mental vomit." "David's brain is a very busy place. It's very cluttered," Lynn Mamet says. "Writing's the only thing that stops the thinking, you know," Mamet says. "It stops all that terrible nonsense noise that's in there." In "The Edge," where the billionaire bookworm thinks himself out of the backwoods, Mamet quite literally shows the triumph of thought over terror. It's something that he clearly works hard at in his own life. Across the room, on a table in front of the sofa, his serious reading is laid out: D. W. Winnicott's "Thinking About Children"; a special Hebrew prayer about "the good wife," whose twenty-two verses are traditionally read by the husband to his wife on holy days; and Seneca's "Letters from a Stoic." Mamet has underlined only one passage in Seneca: "Each day . . . acquire something which will help you to face poverty, or death, and other ills as well."

When Mamet set out on his theatrical journey, the teachings of the Stoics emboldened him. "The stoical motto is 'What hinders you?'" he explains. "I'd like to be able to write clearer. What's stopping you? I'd like to be able to figure a project out. What's stopping you? I mean, let's say Sophocles took eighteen years to write 'Oedipus Rex.' It's not under your control how quickly you complete 'Oedipus Rex,' but it is under your control whether or not you give up." He adds, "It doesn't have to be calm and clear-eyed. You just have to not give up."

A heron lands on top of a sixty-foot tamarack tree that towers on the ridge above where Rebecca and Clara are staying back up the hill. Mamet studies it through the window, then walks over to his desk looking for his camera. Taped there is a blue file card with a snatch of dialogue on it, which I bend close to read. "Here, take it," Mamet says and hurries me into the bright day with his camera in hand. Clara and Rebecca are skipping up the path; Clara is clutching a heron's feather. Mamet darts around them trying to capture the scene. Clara drops her feather; Mamet stoops down to pick it up. Clara's hand touches the top of his bristly head. It's a fragile moment, whose mysterious joy sends him glancing up to see it reflected in his wife's eyes. In his high-school yearbook, to print beside his nerdy photograph, Mamet had chosen the quotation "And so make life and that vast forever one grand, sweet song." He seems somehow to have lived up to his early romantic plan, even if his song is a fierce, rueful, sometimes cruel one. Just how his talent and his life have come together so well seems, like all blessings, both miraculous and inexplicable. I glanced at the file card in my hand:

A) Life, maan...
B) . . . life.

A) It is so crazy—let me tell you: if you saw it in a movie, you would not believe it. You know why? BECAUSE IT HAS NO PLOT. ♦

—DAVID RIMANELLI

**NASTY PICTURES**

**PAINTING** is the Freddy Krueger of art mediums: pronounced dead again and again, it keeps rising from the grave for yet another sequel. So perhaps it's appropriate that some of the liveliest examples (and some of the most influential) should appear, like Frankenstein's monster, as an unruly amalgam of dead elements. That's certainly the case with Carroll Dunham's new paintings, which, for all the seeming crudeness of their imagery, are steeped in contemporary art history. Hints of Willem de Kooning, Philip Guston, and Cy Twombly percolate in Dunham's canvases, yet they're in no sense wan salon pictures, richly but pointlessly allusive; on the contrary, their energetic vulgarities are unsettling.

Dunham's work belongs to a broad stream of recent painting that attempts to reconcile the competing claims of abstraction and representation. Although his earlier canvases tended more toward the former, his new works explicitly take up the vocabulary of cartoons and graffiti. The overriding influence is probably Guston, the first-generation Abstract Expressionist who, late in his career, abruptly abandoned the lyrical style of his youth for a heavy-handed representational mode of creepy signature motifs—in particular, hooded Klansmen, the ancestors of Dunham's angry homunculi.

"Demon Tower" (1997), part of Dunham's latest group (on view at Metro Pictures, in Chelsea, through November 15th), pulses with hysteria. The artist has a knack for aggressively inelegant color combinations—in this case, Pepto-Bismol pink, poisonous yellow, and marrwil brown. The rectangle of the tower is a kind of surrogate abstract painting, in which vestigial grids jostle mammalian biomorphs. The little demons themselves are arresting comic inventions, peering and wielding knives, their toothy mouths exploding with silent invertebrate. Several of them are equipped with bloated, ridiculous phalli. In Dunham's hands, the face of contemporary painting may not be pretty, but it's vividly, nastily alive.
In an essay in the most recent issue of the quarterly journal Modern Age, Peter J. Stanlis, Distinguished Professor of Humanities, Emeritus, at Rockford College in Illinois, argues that conversation was the critical element in Robert Frost's poetry and was the basis for his theory of language. Rather than conventional literary usage, he contends, Frost was after a “poetry that talked.” Here are excerpts from Professor Stanlis's essay.

From around 1913 until Robert Frost's death in January 1963, almost everyone who knew him personally agreed that he was among the most brilliant, provocative, learned, and original conversationists of the 20th century. There is no doubt that from early manhood until his death, the poet believed that next to poetry itself, the art of conversation with sophisticated literary friends was the great social, aesthetic, and intellectual passion of his life.

Fortunately, the dramatic moment of epiphany in Frost's life as a poet is provided by him, when he experienced the esthetic revelation of how, in general, his conversation was related to his early poetry.

Frost's sudden flash of insight and intuitive understanding occurred in 1895, at age 21. It was said to me that when he read my poems it was just like hearing me talk. I didn't know until then what it was I was after. When he said that to me it all became clear. I was after poetry that talked. If my poems were talking poems — if to read one of them you hear a voice — that would be to my liking! So I went to the great poets, from Chaucer and Shakespeare to Coleridge and Wordsworth and looked for this very thing in their lines. I will admit, when I have been quoted on the matter I have been made to speak rather mistily. But one thing must always be kept in mind: whenever I write a line it is because that line has already been spoken clearly by a voice within my mind, an audible voice.

"I have unconsciously tried to do just what Chaucer did when the language was young and untried and virile. I have sought only those words I had met up with as a boy in New Hampshire, working on farms during the summer vacations. I listened to the men with whom I worked and found that I could make out their conversation as they talked together out of earshot, even when I had not plainly heard the words they spoke. When I started to carry their conversation over into poetry. I could hear their voices, and the sound posture differentiated between one and the other. It was the sense of sound I have been talking about. In some sort of way like this I have been able to write poetry, where characters talk and though not without infinite pains, to make it plain to the reader which character is saying the lines without having to place his name before it, as is done in the drama."

Although as Frost himself said, no poet ever wrote in order to fulfill a theory of a writing, it is evident that in the decade or more before he went to England, he was consciously developing his theory of language as a vehicle for "correspondence" between a writer or speaker and his audience. His revolutionary conception of language applied not only to his poetry but to all spoken and written prose sentences. As both a poet and a classroom teacher of composition, Frost believed that "oral reading" through a close attention to the "voice posturing" of speakers and their changes in "voice tones," so natural without inflated literary rhetoric in actual conversation, was the most valid and effective method of conveying meaning in both writing and reading, whether poetry or prose.

His theory goes to the heart of his entire esthetic philosophy and conception of art and is ultimately a vital part of his great skill and power both as a conversationalist and poet.
Deconstructing Harry

Harry Block wrote a bestseller about his best friends.
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POINT OF VIEW

Brief Encounters

By Ernest Hobert

WHEN I FIRST SAW computer-come into a creative writing classroom about eight years ago, I waited for a breakthrough that would change writers and writing. I thought technology might spawn new insights into human nature. I expected to see a leap into experimental writing, perhaps relating to hypertext.

None of these changes occurred. My students are serious about their work, but conservative in their approach. Writing is a means to an end. Art takes a back seat to content. Traditional forms are okay with them. Few experiment.

But computers have changed writing. In a nutshell, here’s the main difference: Students today write simpler, shorter sentences, but longer stories.

They write longer for the obvious reason that in an era when few professors accept handwritten papers, it is easier and less time-consuming to produce acceptable prose on a computer than on a typewriter.

The reasons they write shorter, simpler sentences are more subtle. Any writer who has tried to create prose on pen and paper or on a typewriter knows the feeling of tension that follows when he or she starts a sentence. Suddenly, you’re thinking, how am I going to get out of this and still not bust the grammar train?

This tension is often resolved through parenthetical phrases, ideas set off with dashes, dramatically joined sentences by means of semicolons and colons. Sentences tend to become long and varied, with a good deal of creative punctuation.

The difficulties posed by handwriting and, even more so, by typing tend to frustrate and discourage writers of modest talents. But in the hands of writers with big talents, the challenges often lead to difficult but elegant prose. Think of Proust, Joyce, Faulkner, Henry James, Pynchon. Even Mark Twain and Charles Dickens wrote very long and often complicated sentences, full of tension, relieved at the end through their genius.

On a computer, the writer at the first perception of that tension can delete the offense. In other words, it’s possible to start editing before you’re finished creating. The result is what I call the Bill Gates effect.

Read Gates’s prose or listen to him on TV, and you can’t help but be moved by the simplicity of his language. He’d fit right in as a character on Sesame Street. Proust is out, Gates is in. The result: dumbing and downsizing of language. Students have bought into it, producing long stories full of little words in lots of little sentences.

The computer helps ordinary student writers produce their best work, but it impedes the geniuses, allowing them to relax too much, removing the challenge.

Computers have changed writing, but they haven’t changed writers. Student writers are still the sensitive, tormented souls they’ve always been. Most tend to distrust their computers. They refuse to learn any more about the machines than they have to in order to compose. I’ve never had a creative writing student who could format a page correctly the first time. Make a header? No, thanks. This summer, Stuart Moulthrop, a cutting edge hypertext novelist, was on campus, and in a q&a period a few creative writing students jumped down his throat for putting form over content.

The best student writers invariably write their first and often succeeding drafts by hand. They intuitively act on the principle that the computer enhances the editing side of the brain, and squelches the creative side.

I try to persuade my students (and the lazy bum writer in myself) to treat the computer like a typewriter for the first few drafts. Just type the words and see what happens.
the Foobarians concluded that pencils do not contribute to better learning.” Subsequent events have indeed shown my fears to be well-founded: Conclusions of a Foobarian kind have in fact slipped into the accepted wisdom of American educators. For example, educational experiments in which children’s access to computers and to computer culture was far short of what would be needed to learn programming have been accepted as proof that programming computers is not an educationally valuable experience for children. But in telling the Foobar story today I would give it another, even more insidious, ending.

In fact what I now understand that the Foobarian educators would actually do is not reject the pencil but appropriate it by finding trivial uses of the pencil that could be carried out within their meager resources and that would require minimal change in their old ways of doing things. For example they might continue their oral methods of doing chemistry but use the pencils to keep grade sheets. Or they might develop a course in “pencil literacy” which would include learning what pencils are made of, how to sharpen them and perhaps how to sign one’s name.

I qualify this kind of appropriation as “more insidious” than merely drawing misleading conclusions because its retarding effect on future developments is cast in the concrete of a culture, including a profession of specialists who see their (often tenured) jobs as implementing schools’ construct of “pencilling” or, to come back to the literal plane, of “computing.” And I have devoted a third of this little essay to leading up to the point because I see it as the critical issue that must be understood if one wants to make sense of the situation of computers in schools and to participate in steering its future in a constructive direction. To make the point concrete I devote the next third to the story of the intellectual turnaround of “Bill,” a high school-aged youth in a summer work-study program for “youth at risk” in an economically depressed area of rural Maine.

IM RESENTED SCHOOL, and had actually given up on learning if not on society itself. He had joined the project...
Today Bainbridge Island turns around and discovers it has got an epidemic of writers on its hands. You can hear them tapping like woodpeckers, you can make out the cricket song of their printers, their whines and groans and eruptions fill the island atmosphere.

I was introduced to this island by the spy novelist Alan Furst, an old college pal of my brother’s who moved out a few weeks before I moved in, and I have often thought of myself as his late-arriving replacement, my residence here the fulfillment of some unwritten island literary quota. But I gradually learned that there was no quota, or if there was it had gotten out of hand. Alan had told me that the preeminent Jack Olsen was here, and Peter Beagle turned up at our neighborhood Christmas party, and then my daughter introduced us to Fred and the other Moodys (and any selection of island writers that does not include his daughter Erin is woefully incomplete).

And then there was this aspiring writer in the high school English department who used to ask me in to address his students about the writer’s life and afterward have my advice about when to get an agent, how large a manuscript to submit and so on, which I would dispense with the indulgent fatuity of an old veteran, all but ruffling little David Guterson’s hair as I departed.

I had come from New Haven, Connecticut, where writers like myself and Richard Seltzer and Alice Mattson and Shepherd Nueland were a dime a dozen. We used to bump into each other in grocery stores and movie lines and library stacks and inquire, sometimes backhandedly, about each other’s progress. Nine years ago it seemed to me it would be a considerable relief to live on a remote island in the remotest corner of the contiguous United States and commune with fishermen, beach bums, cranks, far-flung fugitives from the national hurly burly. Instead, I find myself bumping into writers again in grocery stores, movie lines, the library.

It is a nice question whether Bainbridge should celebrate this literary infestation. I suspect that if a great many more of us settle here the Environmental Protection Agency is going to have to do something about it: chase us off with water cannon, capture us in cages and release us somewhere else. Laguna Beach, if they’ll have us. We’re a strange breed of human being. Judging from our work we can be humane, inspired, capable of asking great questions and occasionally speaking great truths. But looked at another way—and it is how we look to ourselves in the mirrors of the night—we are also narcissistic, parasitic, and masturbatory.

Writers make rather dubious citizens, for though we will lend our names to petitions and appear for a good cause wherever a captive audience is promised, we either decline to join boards and committees, or join them only long enough to gather some new material. Our notes—if we take any—from the stray meetings we attend—if we attend any—are filled not with the meeting’s salient points or marching orders, but brief sketches of the other members, with special marks reserved for anyone in authority. “A dour and disabused man with pallid jowls,” is how I might describe the unoffending chair, or “a crenelated lemon-square of a woman with a Ding-Dong-School delivery.”

Bainbridge Islanders entertain the most extraordinary sugar-plum visions of what a writer’s life is like. You see, David’s experience has, I fear, only exacerbated. In order not to disappoint my neighbors in their own dreams of million-dollar advances and movie deals I have heard myself utter the most extraordinary falsehoods about my income. But during those years that fall between the cracks of books advances and magazine assignments it’s shamefully low. Some poll found that 80 percent of people who call themselves writers earn under $5,000 a year from writing, and though for the past 10 years my average has kept me safely among the remaining 20 percent, there are still years when I have not been even remotely self-supporting.

Writers are generally not self-supporting in other ways as well. For most of the year we lead a monastic existence, shunning our fellows and then for a few weeks, with the publication of a novel, we become winning little engines of self-promotion. There are among you disillusioned hosts and hostesses who, reading our work, have had the naive but touching notion of calling us up and inviting us to dinner so that you might partake of the exquisite sensibility you found represented so convincingly in the pages of our books. You found yourself stuck instead with an evening of dressing our gourmet cuisine to the blowzy, depleted diaphanous opposites of the personae we inhabit on the page. We drink too much (or too little), we trash our fellow writers, grouse about our publishers, scandalize our agents’ names, and warming to our hosts’ and hostesses’ lofty expectations, tell dirty stories and pass caustic criticisms on all manner of subjects we know nothing whatever about.

Our partners will tell you that you simply can’t inspire what we are like to live with. Ivan Doig advises aspiring writers to find a working partner. With a health plan, would be my only amendment to that, but it’s these partners, working or not, whom you really ought to celebrate. Without our partners we would go either mad or fallow. In my case it is the former Deborah Lathrop Huntington who keeps me from surrendering entirely to the infatuations, rivalries, false pride, and razzle-dazzle which menace the better self that struggles to reach the pages of my books.

I don’t want to descend into any Oscar-ceremonial bathos here, but I have come to understand that the writer’s great blessing—which is the freedom to follow your best self wherever it may lead, be it riches or poverty, fame or obscurity—depends on the kindness not of strangers but of those who love us and stand up for us, and stand up to us when we’re at worst. It is a wonder that they abide by us after all we run through, for we don’t have much to offer in the way of dinner conversation but a day’s accumulation of misplaced modifiers, dangling participles, misplaced adverbial clauses, dashing hopes.

As we lunge toward our deadlines they hush the children or the dogs, turn away visitors, unplug the phone, and, against every lesson of experience, agree to read and critique our drafts only to contend with the ingratitude expressions of our worst, most insular and self-indulgent selves. I suppose I make it sound almost like what social scientists call “enabling behaviors,” on the other hand what our partners enable, God help us, is literature.

After emerging from four years’ labor on a novel, I once scrawled a little rhyme: “Think what he put his family through to birth it/ read it once. It wasn’t worth it.” But occasionally I suppose it is worth it. I have to think of David’s must think it worth it, or I am worth it, or she would never put up with it, or me. But it is her devotion that flows from the better pages of my books, the continuity of her love that sustains me, and it is to her that you owe whatever pleasure my books may give you, whatever truths I trip over in the dark.

Andrew Ward is a writer living on Bainbridge Island. His most recent book is Our Bones Are Scattered: The Caumpepe Massacre and the Indian Martyr of 1890 (Univ. of Nevada Press). This article was originally a speech to the Friends of the Bainbridge Library, delivered June 17, 1996.
Little Boy Lost

MY DARK PLACES
An L.A. Crime Memoir
By James Ellroy
Knopf, 354 pp. $25

By Ann Rule

M Y DARK PLACES by James Ellroy cannot be categorized: it is part true crime, part autobiographical, and yet it is neither. This often agonizing voyage of a 47-year-old Ellroy back to 1958 in El Monte, Calif., where he was a 10-year-old boy, is both compelling and disturbing. Ellroy took the bus home from a weekend visit with his father to find his mother murdered and his house swarming with cops. Any grief he felt for his red-haired mother was overridden by the negative propaganda his father had preached at every opportunity. Even as a kid Ellroy was telling him it was dead, Ellroy felt only relief, because now he could live with his father. “The kid was lead out and tiptoeed back down the hallway. He heard his father and the cops talking in the kitchen. His father was calling his mother a promiscuous tramp. I hated her,” the kid admitted later. “Some unknown killer just bought me a brand-new beautiful life.”

In the early chapters of My Dark Places, Ellroy describes, in chillingly dispassionate narrative, the discovery of the garroted, bearded corpse of the woman who was once his mother. (Jan) Odell Hilliker and an aspiring Ellroy. The child—then called Lee Earle Ellroy—becomes every stunned stoned orphan caught in the flashbulbs and strobes of the press. And all the time the reader knows that this boy is the author of the words on the page, and it is wrenching to consider. Ellroy was in full denial—denial that he would embrace for decades.

While Ellroy reveals his parents’ flaws and tawdry secrets in a bitter, harsh light, he is just as unrelenting as he moves to first person and confesses to two murky decades in his own life. Living with his father, the smart kid quickly realized who the real liar was, but he still fought back the memory of

A long time after his mother’s murder, James Ellroy was finally able to face his feelings.

course, The Black Dahlia. Like Mikkel Borg Bjornson’s memoir, Shot in the Heart, My Dark Places is as painful as an unamed bolel and as heartbreaking as a lonely kid’s run-over dog. A long time after his mother’s murder, James Ellroy was finally able to face his feelings. With the help of a de- tective’s detective—Bill Stiner, about to retire from the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Office—Ellroy went back to El Monte and then sought out Jean Ellroy’s Wisconsin

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condoms on its offering plates.”). His chapter headings, the “7 rules,” set the tone: “Race Plus Rage Equals Ruin,” “When You’re A Credit To Your Race, the Bill Will Come Due,” “When You Divide Body and Soul,” “Invisible,” “Red’s the Color of the Kids.” They will make nice sound bites. What they will not do is add much texture to the discourse. His reflections on J.O. Simpson, Colin Powell and Louis Farrakhan are uninspiring for the most part. His disposition on the black church and black sexuality is confusing and often condescending. It is only when he dissects intra-African-American conflict over its young people that he reaches his highest and best use.

Another problem is that the author is easily distracted. Either that, or he doesn’t understand that his every stray thought is not worthy of inclusion in a putatively seri- ous work. The result is a plethora of goofy parentheticals peppering the book like stink bombs or whoopie cushions: “self-styled rigorous black intellectuals (shall we call them the rightonious?)”; “the black church must develop a theology of homoeroticism, a theology of queerness.”

Michael Eric Dyson

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Dyson notes in an aside, “Always wanting to be like Simpson but never quite measuring up, Cowlings, this one time, ended up in the driver’s seat.” For this, a Princeton Ph.D.

Perhaps if Dyson could tune out his own madcap sense of humor, he’d be more alert to the undertones eddying beneath the surface of his writing. Some, while not necessarily fatal to his main points, bespeak a low-wattage analytical power. Dyson writes of O.J.’s perennial “colorless ness,” a concept fraught with conceptual traps it takes him 144 pages to acknowledge and address. Repeatedly rereading the page devoted to this impor- tant and complex concept only raised more questions. Does “colorless” just mean “not black”? He writes that “African Americans can never effectively transcend race.” You don’t have to catch him on Mon- trel Williams’s show to get a full under- standing of what he thinks needs to be done so that black men can be reclassified to the black bosom. Far too little has been made of the “hugeness of the bias in American” as exemplified by its lack of interest in the legal woes of Snoop Dogg Dogg, Tupac Shakur, Dr. Dre, Gerardo Ortega and Muslim Abu-Jalal. It is not a collective demand for racial justice that made blacks rally to O.J., nor was it his wealth (the average successful rapper could earn more); it was their perception of him as “the right kind of black.”

Black Americans have bought into whites’ demonization of young black men who are nontraditional as the soulless sym- bol of all crime and predation, hip hop culture as the last stop before Sodom and Gomorrah, and rap music as the siren’s call to certain death and destruction. There is a nostalgia-based perception in the community of today’s black youth as “moral strangers . . . ethically estranged from the moral practices and spiritual beliefs that have seen previous black generations through hard and dangerous times.” Well, as Dyson puts it in one of his less cutey chapter headings, “We Never Were What We Used To Be”; the good old days weren’t so good and today’s so bad. But shouldn’t we rather view the prism of white hysteria and bourgeois black disapproval. Dyson could have done a lot more for the cause of black youth and black males had he taken this book more seriously.
The Writing Life

Continued from Page 1

and resonating with what has preceded it, if anything has. These are not naturally harmonious functions: looking forward, listening back, uniting and differentiating. History has been written by warring with its succulent fruit, that life looks down upon its future, but it is a future in which this present, now past, can only be remembered. The reflection on the water resembles reality almost exactly, yet it is just that—a picture. And you and I then, adopting the poet’s position, can halve our souls or see what we are now as we shall be: illusion.

What a beautiful idea: earth, solid and settled, flesh rosy and trim, life full and accomplished, altering into water, into remembrance, into image.

Ihr heilen Schauspiel, Unser halbgenossen
tunkt ihr das Haupt
Ins helligquemerne Wasser.

Upon this water swans are swimming so calmly the reflection of the land they float upon is undisturbed. “You lovely swans, and drunk from kisses you dip your heads into the hollowed water,” there is an alteration of the normal order here which exactly parallels the first (“and full with wild roses”). It is the habit of swans to do a bit of necking and bill dipping, too. This information comes to us from some swan-watching. That the swan (most notable for its raucous, peacock-like scream) is supposed to sing a love song at the point of death is handed down to us from myth. It is likely that English speakers will have heard Yeats first, “The Wild Swans at Coole,” for one, which opens upon a similar landscape—

The trees are in their autumn beauty.
The woodland paths are dry.
Under the October twilight the water mirrors a still sky.
Upon the breezing water among the stones
Are nine-and-fifty swans.

—and there is no reason at all why we should have to forget, reading Hoelderlin, everything we know that came after him. As Breon has taught us, all the books in the library are contemporary. Great poets are like granaries. They are always ready to enlarge their store.

Swans play upon the interface between earth and water, its own image rising beside it, and drunk with the kisses which convey the primeness of life, soberly itself by sipping from the cup of consequence: that the first half of one’s history will linger on in the second half only in recollection.

Translation is reading, reading of the best, the most essential, kind. The adjective “gracious” barely hides what the German man is franker about—the poem’s religious allusions—for the swans are dipping their heads ins helligquemerne Wasser. That helligquemerne is one helleva word. Christopher Middleton, in his fine version, says “you gracious swans” and then ends “into the holy lucid water,” while Michael Hamburger, in his equally excellent try, writes “you lovely swans” to close with “into the hallowed, the sober water.” “Gracious,” unfortunately, doesn’t mean “graceful,” and “gracious” doesn’t mean “full of grace” anymore. But if swans are lovely (as I’m certain they are), they’re only lovely, which isn’t enough. The cool fall water will have a sobering effect, to be sure, but I’m not convinced it should be like a splash in the face. I don’t dare do “holy sober” either. There’s no place for that kind of pun in this poem. So I’m going to take a chance and push the religious undertones up a little. And I have to remember to hold off hugging the land.

With yellow pears, the land, and full of wild roses, hangs down into the lake, You graceful swans, drunk from kisses, you dip your heads into the holy solemn water.

The swans are graceful and lovely, and the water is lucid and sobering and solemn, hallowed and holy. In this case, one does not “speak it,” one must choose.

It’s been frequently said that translation is a form of betrayal: It is a redundancy, a constitution made of sacrifice and revision. One has to keep the boat afloat, as it were, he who we don’t have to give up everything. Neither swans themselves, nor their symbolic significance, are uniquely German. We won’t have to replace them. The season and its meaning, the reflective power of a pond: These things are easily retailed. The central image of the stanza, perhaps, we will have a proper hold on them, can be transported without loss. When the poem asks a question, we can ask one; when it asserts or describes orFirstResponder, we can follow.

THERE GENERAL shape of the sonnet can be repeated, too, but the poem does not want to be squeezed into its form like an ill-fitting suit; it hopes to flower forth in 14 lines as if all its genes said “bloom.” The sonnet shape is as powerful as a right-wing religious group, however, conservative to the core, and snooty to boot. The meter wants to march five abreast across the page, arm swinging smartly. And as the chiasmus attempts to move right at the right time; rhyme waits like a typist, sticks poised above the paper and the tightened lines it would make resonant; alliteration wants to twist the tongue as—Continued on page 11

William H. Gass

I BEGAN The Tunnel in 1966. William Gass said halfway through the highbrow magnum opus it took him 30 years to create. “And who knows, perhaps it will be such a good book no one will ever publish it,” he said on that hope.

It is a perverse thing for a novelist to say, but it is dead-on Gass. Here is a philosopher lumering through commercial publishing as wofully as a deep-sea diver through a thin-shy swamp as in thrall to words and ideas as others are to fortune and fame.

He was born in North Dakota in 1924, the only child of a professional baseball player and an English teacher. Within the first months of his life, his parents moved to Warren, Ohio, a dismal industrial town in a down-and-out valley full of steel, smoke, and sad, sullen people.

Gass’s father had been a major league athlete until he went off to the Balkan Corps during the First World War, contracted influenza, and came home a broken man. Trained as an architect, he was hired by the local high school to teach mechanical drawing to “problem kids.” Gass’s mother stayed home and drank. Before long, as Gass puts it, “she crossed the picket lines. A man who read magazines and newspapers in order to find someone to hate. He’d say terrible things about blacks and Jews and ‘bohunks.’ The depth of his bitterness scared me.”

He didn’t like my opinions, and didn’t quite approve of anything I did. My mother, on the other hand, was a puddle of silence.

There were no intellectual interests in our home—no reading, no painting or music or anything. And so I was a slow reader until the third grade, at which time I exploded into books and began reading everything in sight. It might have started with a volume of retold King Arthur, I’m not sure. The point is, I was reading to escape. And I borrowed books like crazy. Good and bad alike. Thankfully, my teachers responded.

He graduated from high school with honors in 1942 and went to Kenyon College for two years, but war got in the way. To avoid being drafted into the infantry, he joined the Navy officers’ training program and was sent to midshipmen’s school at Columbia University, and then to learn “codes and ciphers” at Harvard.

By 1944 he was the top secret officer on the Pacific fleet’s Pasadena, decoding and encoding messages, and headed for Okinawa. Within a year, he was transferred ashore as fleet representative to the port of Shanghai. “A revolution was going on; not to mention plague, smallpox, typhus, you name it. But more than anything I got a chance to see the behavior of American sailors firsthand. The cruelty. The way they treated the Chinese, the Filipinos.”

When he came back to civilian life, he went to the offices of the philosophy department at Kenyon on the G.I. Bill. And then as soon as he earned his BA, he went on to do a PhD at the College of Wooster.
**Books**

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Reviewed by Robert Storr

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The Odyssey of a 19th-Century Kentucky Family  
By Mary Clay Berry. Reviewed by Jonathan Yardley

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Lives of Contemporary American Nuns  
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Editor  
Book Critic  
Deputy Editor  
Assistant Editor  

November 24, 1996
THE WRITING LIFE

In Other Words . . .

By William H. Gass

I N A TRANSLATION, one language—and one particular user of that language—reads another: *Mit gelben Birnen haenget/ Und voll mit wilden Rosen/ Das Land in den See . . .*

If I am reading Friedrich Hoelderlin's German in German, the language will be trying to understand itself. Out of the number of words which German offers, Hoelderlin has chosen these, and I can let them ring in my head as if heard.

"With yellow pears hangs/ And full with Wild roses/ the land in the lake." Easily said, less easily understood, because the order of the words is—well—wild as the roses are.

These lines, first of all, send me to experience. I remember how, when heavily fruited, the fruit tree’s branches are bowed; and I remember how, in the clear fall light, flowers, bushes, trees are oddly reflected in still water as if actually upside down and directly beneath themselves, an optically odd apparition. Then I may read the poem’s title ("Haelite des Lebens") again and realize that the pears and their image are halves of one real, unreal whole.

The land, heavy with fruit and flowers, hangs down into the lake where object and reflection are joined. I ask myself why the natural order is interrupted. Shouldn’t it be: "With yellow pears, and full of wild roses, the land hangs down into the lake"? But then the word "haenget" wouldn’t hang.

Every line of fine literature forms a secure, seemingly serene, yet unquiet community. As in any community, there are many special interests and the groups which promote them; there are predominating concerns, persistent problems; and, as in the psyche of any individual or in the larger region of the body politic, there are competing aims, anxieties, habits, anticipations, perplexities, memories, needs, and grievances. When the line is a good one, their clamor is stilled because its constituents are happy, their wants appeased, their aims fulfilled.

When the line is a good one, there is a musical movement to its meaning which binds the line together as if it were one word, yet at the same time articulating, weighing, and apportioning the line’s particular parts the way syllables and their sounds and stresses spell a noun or verb, while throwing down a pattern of rhythm and meaning like a path to be pursued deeper into the stanza,

—Continued on page 10
New in Paperback

NONFICTION

**Frontiers of Complexity**, by Peter Cowen and Roger Highfield (Fawcett Columbine, $15). Surprisingly, popular conceptions of the cosmos don’t differ much from those envisioned by theologians who preach of a divine order or scientists who work to find overarching patterns in the universe’s chaotic workings. Scientific efforts in this direction are part of the discipline of complexity, an endeavor that attempts to make connections between events in nature. Cowen and Highfield, authors of *The Arrow of Time*, write about natural occurrences with grace and elegance. “When viewed in profound close-up,” they write, “the universe is an overwhelming and unimaginable number of particles dancing to a melody of fundamental forces. All about us and within us, molecules and atoms collide, vibrate, and spin.” *Frontiers* continues where *The Arrow of Time* left off, exploring the issues surrounding complexity, self-organization and artificial life. All the while, the authors strive to make their explorations accessible to everyday readers.

**An American Procession: Major American Writers, 1830-1930**, by Alfred Kazin (Harvard, $15.95). In this study, initially completed in 1976, eminent critic Kazin turns his tireless eyes to the major writers working during what he has termed “the two greatest periods in our literature.” His focus begins with Ralph Waldo Emerson’s departure from the church, signaling the advent of a national

literature, and ends with the widespread influence of modernism—Eliot, Pound, Hemingway, Fitzgerald. Central to Kazin’s observations is the uniquely American concept of individualism, a trait celebrated by Emerson and regarded with some consternation by Alexis De Tocqueville. Kazin defends Emerson’s doctrine of self-reliance and cites it as the philosophical forebear of Walden, *Leaves of Grass* and *Moby-Dick*. “Some sense of self has to be sustained in a broken world,” Kazin writes. “The world is always new to those who can see themselves in a new light.”

**Powers & Prospects: Reflections on Human Nature and the Social Order**, by Noam Chomsky (South End, $16). The linguist and cultural critic assembles his latest views on topics ranging from language and human nature to Middle East politics and the place of East Timor in the New World Order. The essays included here are based on a series of lectures Chomsky gave in Australia in January 1995. Chomsky’s speaking engagements involved both political and academic concerns, so the essays are quite broad in scope. “Language and Thought,” for example, traces the relationship between philosophy and “hard science” in the study of human cognitive development. “Writers and Intellectual Responsibility” is also vintage Chomsky: “The responsibility of the writer as a moral agent is to try to bring the truth about matters of human significance to an audience that can do something about them. That is part of what it means to be a moral agent rather than a monster.”

Bestsellers

**Paperback**

FICTION

1. **HIDE AND SEEK**, by James Patterson (Warner, $6.99). A woman is presumed guilty of her husband’s murder. [2 weeks]

2. **CRY OF THE HALIDON**, by Robert Ludlum (Bantam, $7.50). In the wilds of Jamaica, a covert geological survey is carried out by a corrupt company. [2 weeks]

3. **THE HUNDRED SECRET SENSES**, by Amy Tan (Dry, $6.99). A photographer grapples with a messy divorce and gains wisdom from the ghosts of her dead ancestors. [2 weeks]

4. **THE HORSE WHISPERER**, by Nicholas Evans (Dell, $7.50). A mother tries to save her daughter by healing an injured horse. [7 weeks]

5. **SHOCK WAVE**, by Clive Cussler (Pocket, $7.99). One man tries to stop a dangerous mining operation and an impending natural disaster. [1 week]


7. **ABSOLUTE POWER**, by David Baldacci (Warner, $7.50). A witness to a crime becomes ensnared in a White House coverup. [6 weeks]

8. **SONG OF SOLOMON**, by Toni Morrison (Plume, $11.95). A black man seeks to reclaim the wealth and glory stolen from his grandfather. [5 weeks]


NONFICTION/GENERAL

1. **THE RULES: Time-Tested Secrets for Capturing the Heart of Mr. Right**, by Ellen Fein and Sherrie Schneider (Warner, $5.99).
much as assonance would soothe it; there is the short word that sounds long, like “oboe,” and the thin tight-lipped ones like “pit,” to be played against those of generously open ends like “oboe” again, and of course “Ohio,” as well as words long in print but short of sound, or hissies such as “Mississippi,” lovely liquids like “hallelujah” and undulating beauties such as “Alabama.”

Moreover, the right sorts of sacrifice are essential. We had better lose the poem’s German sounds and German order, because we are trying to achieve the poem Hölderlin would have written had he been English. We can’t make it move too smoothly and go whistling along. Here is my version of its closing seven:

Where shall I, when winter’s here, find flowers, and where sunshine and shadows of earth? Walls stand speechless and cold in the wind, weathercocks clatter.

Middleton has “weathervane,” but I must follow Hamburger here, not only for a better sound, but because I want to call what the German concludes “Kräften die Fähnen” and could be interpreted as “flags flap,” but nationalism has not had any presence in the preceding lines. What we get when we’re done is a reading, a reading enriched by the process of arriving at it, and therefore, really, only the farewells to a long conversation.

What must not be given up, of course, is quality—quality and tone. If the translation does not allow us a glimpse of the greatness of the original, it is surely a failure, and most of us fail that way, first and foremost, last and out of luck. Tone, too, is a very tricky thing. Recently Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy translated Rilke’s Book of Hours for New Directions Books. Here is a sample. The poet is presumably addressing his god, but we know the divinity in question is actually Rilke’s quondam lover, Lou Salome:

Extinguish my eyes, I’ll go on seeing you.
Seal my ears, I’ll go on hearing you.
And without feet I can make my way to you,
Without a mouth I can swear your name.

Break off my arms, I’ll take hold of you with my heart as if with a hand
Stop my heart, and my brain will start to beat.
And if you consume my brain with fire,
I’ll feel you burn in every drop of my blood.

I feel that the tone of my version is fiercer, more ardent, but it is perhaps more a love poem now than a religious one:

Put my eyes out: I can still see;
Slam my ears shut: I can still hear,
Walk without feet to where you were,

and, tongueless, speak you into being.
Snap off my arms: I’ll hold you hard in my heart’s longing like a fist;
Halt that, my brain will do its beating,
And if you set this mind of mine ablame,
Then on my blood I’ll carry you away.

It will usually take many readings to arrive at the right place. Somewhere amid various versions like a ghost the original will drift. Yet our situation is no different if we are trying to understand English with English eyes. Hardy begins his great poem about love as rhyme with this nine-liner:

If it’s ever Spring again, Spring again,
I shall go where I went then
Down the moor-cock splashed, and hen;
Seeing me not, amid their flounder,
Standing with my arms around her;
If it’s ever Spring again, Spring again,
I shall go where I went then.

Try “translating” Hardy’s English into your own. “I shall go where I once saw the moor-cock and his mate splash down locked in one another’s wings. I notice them but they do not see me standing nearby with my arms around my own beloved.” I must not omit the awkward beauty of the refrain, “I shall go where went I when,” and any change I make will reinforce the rightness of the original. If I lose the rhymes, I lose the poem, for there are four in a row before the couplet, and then three more of the same sound in return. There is a reason for this rhyme scheme, which Hardy subsequently reveals:

If it’s ever summer-time,
Summer-time,
With thehay crop at the prime,
And the cuckoos—two—in rhyme,
As they used to be, or seemed to.
We shall do as long we’ve dreamed to,
If it’s ever summer-time,
With the hay, and bees acheim.

To read with recognition (not just simple understanding) is to realize why the writer made the choices he or she made, and why, if the writing has been done well (suppose I said “well done”), its words could not have been set down otherwise. Our translations will make a batch of batches, but it will not matter, ball them all and toss them into the trash. Their real value will have been received. The translating reader reads the inside of the verse and sees, like the physician, either its evident health or its hidden disease. That reader will know why Hardy couldn’t come right out and say: “Someday we’ll have a roll in the hay.”
NERDS,
TECHNOCRATS,
AND
ENLIGHTENED SPIRITS

Robert Pinsky

In the early eighties, when I was writing Mindwheel, an interactive text-adventure for computer, I found myself collaborating with a team of computer whizzes about the same age as the Berkeley undergraduates I was teaching. We had been assembled into a team by Ihor Wolosenko, the president of Synapse Software, a company Ihor before long sold to Broderbund Software, which issued Mindwheel in 1984—reviewed by the trade press as a considerable advance in its genre.

It was always a pleasure to leave the Berkeley campus, with its vague architectural references to the accumulated gropings for the meaning of human history, putting behind me Telegraph Avenue’s weary evocations of Free Speech and Flower Power, and drive over to Synapse, an unglamorous industrial building overlooking the freeway and the Bay. The anonymity of that building and the youthful spirit inside made me think of the featureless buildings on Long Island and in Los Angeles where young wiseacres, grunts, and entrepreneurs invented the motion picture industry.

As with movies, the overlap of technology and art had the exhilarating quality of group improvisation. The programmers might ask me to write a sentence for each of two hundred verbs of action being executed by our interactive, second-person protagonist-reader. Or we might have a philosophical discussion of narrative: narrated “rooms” or spatial creations were important to our product, as were narrated “scenes” in time—is a scene in a room, or is a room in a scene? It was necessary to make the “look-at” messages of Mindwheel (text that appears onscreen when a reader chooses to “look” or to “look at” some specific object) consistent with the “scene” messages, and to write the random, textual background narrative for which we coined the terms “weather” (text that occasionally scrolls down to lend emotional texture, without affective action) and “drivel” (amusing or confusing text that scrolls down without affecting action or emotion). Another day, all work might stop while everybody tinkered with a cheap version of that year’s fad toy—the wristwatch-unfolding-into-a-robot—that had something wrong with it. We were all contract workers, rather than employees, which meant that the boys in the pit, as they were known, had no fringe benefits and no regular hours.

My strange young collaborators seemed at first to be charmingly without histories, as if they had been invented by the industry they were inventing. We lived in the task at hand, which for me was writing text and for them was writing code. Of course they did have histories, lives in California tract houses or suburban high schools, where many of them had been ungovernable geniuses or social outcasts. One of them told me about going to college for a few weeks and leaving when he realized that he knew considerably more about Computer Science than his instructor. Plus, he felt homesick. These dramas were invisible to me at first because I lacked the experience to read them the way I could read the approximate histories of students and street types on Berkeley’s Sproul Plaza.

One day, I was sitting at a computer terminal at Synapse, with my two main collaborators and some of their fellow programmers gathered around behind me. That was the normal configuration at Synapse: someone at a keyboard, several other people staring at the monitor. I was performing the kind of writing-on-demand that tickled me because the programmers admired my knack for rapid writing (and overwriting, to tell the truth) on demand. On this occasion I was touching up a scene where the reader-protagonist has been immobilized from the waist down—a rather Freudian
PREGNANCY

I wish I knew
them better, those infant
explorers;

I wish I knew more
of them, single cells in the primitive
streak: how they know when—each one free-

moving—to go away; how they
know, one by one, to slip their mooring, to become
a sex cord, a neural arch, the heart. I wish I could see

the heart’s rudiment
form, see mantle edges thicken into a tube: the heart,
a hole, a closed pocket

inside. I feel
undulations that take hours, even
days, squeezing one way, or the other. No one

understands it, not by law,
not by science,
what this layered movement

is, how
it knows
what it’s doing, where to go,

when to stop.

—Stephanie Strickland

image I had raided out of *The Thousand and One Nights*—and
can escape only by insulting a couple of animal-headed chil-
dren standing by with sticks. Taunting them, and getting
them to offer violence, was the means of escape.

We were making a list of bad names and epithets that the
program would recognize as triggers. Giggling, in adolescent
high spirits, we added to the obvious obscenities: “wartsnif-er,” somebody suggested, “dirtpouch.” Somewhere on our
way from “motherfucker” to “dweeb” I spoiled the party.
“Nerd,” was all I said. My friends grew silent, as at a racial
epithet. *Nerd,* I realized, was a word that had wounded them
in high school—it wasn’t funny. It implied hypertrophy in one
direction, and failure of a social, physical kind. In their expe-

rience the word—desexualizing, contemptuous, exiling—had
been a blow to their sense of themselves at a tender stage of
life. They did not like it.

This little incident recalls other stereotypes of the engineer
or scientist. The Nerd’s retaliation, in this mythology, is to
grow up to become the heartless Technocrat, menacing all of
our familiar arrangements while luring us into dependence
on new ones, forcing us to live according to impersonal and
alienating demands—repaying social banishment or slights
by reducing society itself to a kind of internal banishment, ef-
facing the old connections and dependencies among people.
Or there is the image of Strangelove, the technical genius or
functionary so in love with his devisings, so eager to dazzle
his bosses, that he lacks rudimentary humanity. He makes
elegant missiles without worrying about individual people
they might kill or what destruction they might inflict.

Older than either of these ideas is another, nobler one: the
scientist as Enlightened Spirit, the advocate of sanitation and
vaccination, the fighter for clean water and decent schools.
In the nineteenth-century European novel, he is the liberal
spirit who argues with the village priest; in the plays of
Chekhov—and in the person of Chekhov—he is the medical
doctor who works for a better world, a society illuminated by
knowledge and resistant to the prejudiced past. The builder
of bridges, the healer, the researcher, the enemy of infection
and poverty, the scientist or engineer in this avatar is an en-
lightened spirit.

All three types or stereotypes—the nerd, the technocrat,
and the enlightened spirit—play a role in my perception of
another personal association: a life that in its dignity as well
as its sadness calls up many of these failures and possibili-
ties.

My father-in-law, Sam Bailey, was an engineer who
worked on missiles. He was also a writer of fiction, pub-
ished in the “pulps” of the twenties and thirties: a man of un-
usual gifts. As was possible in his generation, he became an
engineer without getting a degree. He developed the first
medical diagnosis computer, decades before the idea flour-
ished. In the sixties, just before the Vietnam War took over
national consciousness, he proposed a computerized system
of sorting and understanding the vast amount of data that
came into the State Department, which I can recall Sam de-
scribing to me as “the largest post office in the world.”

Timid as a person, bold as an imagination, never making
much money or establishing a métier, he was a valued work-
horse and innovator for a series of employers. He devised
the idea of frozen food before its time. To the day he died, three
years ago, at the age of ninety, he was familiar with the most
current developments in digital technology and software,
particularly in the area of control engineering. Like the boys
in the pit at Synapse, he was resourceful and unforldly.

The son of a New Jersey farmer who was also a rural post-
master, Sam had a New Jersey version of Yankee ingenuity, a
tinkering wit capable of fixing broken appliances cheaply,
inclined to make a gate-closer out of a bit of salvaged shoe
tree, an alarm clock housing, and three roller-skate wheels.
He had other kinds of ideas as well. The pulps, named for the cheap, mealy paper they were printed on, the TV of their day, came in genres such as Western, Romance, Urban Sophisticated, Adventure, Fantasy, and Crime. Crime was the specialty of Sam Bailey—a good name for an author in that field.

The pathos and charm of Sam’s life, his lonely accomplishment and frustration, bear analysis. I think the old ideal of the enlightened spirit beats its wings feebly in his career, which in ways characteristic of his time forced him into the roles of nerd and very minor technocrat. He had a long career in what became the aerospace industry, going from firm to firm and project to project, a respected engineer, never getting paid very much.

He was not a happy man in his work, for a reason he often alluded to: virtually all he worked on for forty years or more was weapons, mostly the development of guided missiles. He objected to this use of his intelligence not on anything that could be called political grounds, and certainly not from sentimentality about human nature. Sam in fact did not like people in general; and when he did master the difficulty he had liking any individual, he did not find his affection easy to express. True to stereotype, he was not comfortable with people or feelings, a trait I associate with the death of his mother in a flu epidemic when he was quite small. In any case, it was not a love of humanity that made him loathe spending his stringent and ingenious spirit on the development of one weapon or weapon component after another.

I say “spending” because it was a matter of personal economy. He hated working on means of destruction because he was to the bottom of his soul a creator, a maker. For a meticulous, fanatically orderly man who was skilled with his hands, the idea of applying imagination and resources and organization in order to create devices whose function was to destroy structures, to maim and kill, to deliver disorder, panic, and death, was a peculiar violation. Warfare offended his imagination as the ultimate mess. Partly because he grew up on a farm, he knew crafts. He installed wiring and plumbing, he repaired leaky roofs, and knew how to repair stucco, plaster moldings, pavement, roofing, sump pumps, motors both electrical and internal combustion. He built a rustic house and several cabins with his hands.

He selected the house he bought in suburban New Jersey because he liked its unusual construction, of concrete slabs brought to the site on heavy trucks, rectangular holes for windows and doors already molded into the thick slabs that were piled together on the site like Stonehenge. I used to call it Stonehenge, after the town. Sam spoke of it with a peculiar sardonic pride as a bomb shelter.

The house was a museum of inventively eccentric gadgets: hidden speakers and intercoms, self-illuminating picture frames made of hardwood salvaged from the dump, door closers and laundry chutes and mail slots assembled and insulated and automated by a barely decipherable anthology of cannibalized and deformed salvage, parts recognizable and enigmatic. When his flagstone walk deteriorated, he made a wooden jig to support the stones as he replaced them, and for the mailman to walk on, and by slow progress and with a minimum of effort, removed and replaced the flagstones by degrees, pushing the jig down the walk the way Egyptian slaves and taskmasters brought stones for the pyramids. His daughter observed that someone could make an effective short film called “How an Eighty-Seven-Year-Old Man Repairs a Sidewalk.”

His favorite materials were wiring and wood. His wedding present to his daughter and me—a marriage he came to approve of only gradually—was a double chest-on-chest of pine: two stacks of dovetailed drawers, his and hers, that we have used daily for thirty years. Among several other relics we have inherited is the first piece of furniture he made, at the outset of his own marriage: a two-door cabinet constructed from salvaged tongue-and-groove flooring and scrap from a dismantled cherry staircase. The cabinet was made entirely with hand tools. With incised geometrical designs, stained ebony-red, it looks like something from the tradition of William Morris—which I suppose it is. And indeed something of Sam’s wasted energy, his sense of his own failure, reminds me of the irony of Morris’s career: the Marxist reformer who wanted to give pride and dignity to labor, and beauty to the masses, and who ended as an interior decorator to the upper middle class.

The most satisfactory period of Samuel Bailey’s life in technology, by his own perception, did not begin until he was nearly seventy years old, when he began his true career—a career which, against reasonable expectation, lasted for over twenty years. For a while after he retired from his last aerospace job, he tried freelance work for whatever vestigial magazine world resembling the pulps he could find. Sam even had a little success. He sold a very short piece, for example, to one of the minor imitators of Playboy, a little fantasia about a married man who goes clandestinely to a computer dating service, using an alias, and gets set up with a date, and the woman turns out to be his wife.

This sense of technology biting the hand that uses it seems to have been an aspect of his thinking: in one of his stories from the pulp days, the murder weapon is a house, prepared by the killer with so many booby traps, each separate one undetectable by the police, that the aggregate of hazards dooms the victim as surely as a bullet to the forehead.

But in another sense, the computer-dating-service plot reflects the author’s sentimental attachment to computers and systems, to rational ideas like the input of accurate data leading to the output of accurate decision making: the man and his wife belong together, inexorably, and the computer knows it. Technology, in Sam’s little marital parable, both exposes the two would-be adulterers and tells them they were meant for each other.

The prose of these stories is serviceable, colorless, conventional, uniformly correct. In language, Sam was a largely self-taught stickler, a devotee, for example, of the distinction between uninterested and disinterested. Sometimes he hid from emotion in the habitual formality and precision of his language. Objecting to his only daughter’s too-early mar-
riage, he emphasized that his view was principled, not a matter of—he emphasized the Latinate word—*consanguinity.*

He was a frugal crank, a homemade pedant, a failure, a gadgeteer, a New Dealer, a square, a liberal, an Enlightenment Man. Then, at the age of seventy, he went to work for a magazine whose very name epitomizes much of what Sam stood for deep in his heart: *Control Engineering.* At first commuting to the offices in Manhattan, he compiled and wrote articles about Controls, both freestanding and integrated. He wrote about Controls pneumatic and hydraulic, mechanical and electrical, and—this with perhaps the greatest enthusiasm of all—fiber-optical. He conducted extensive surveys of clients and producers, for lead articles. When the magazine moved to Chicago he became a telecommuter, at the age of seventy-six, and for twelve years, with the official title “East Coast Editor,” he produced so much excellent copy that often he chose to leave an article unsigned because, with two or three others already slated for the same issue, it might look peculiar to have still another carrying the byline “Sam Bailey.” Few readers of the magazine would picture an octogenerian writing these intense, exhaustive discussions of the most recent developments in this or that area.

But so immense was this late flowering of energy, buoyed by liberation from the designing of weapons, that the man began writing fiction in his spare time. He spawned a couple of crime novels—not accepted for publication, perhaps because unlike the technical writing his fiction was dated.

One day, during a visit, he actually asked me for advice. “Robert,” he said, “I want to write a book, and I need a topic. Maybe you could suggest a subject for me.”

I am, after all, a professional teacher of creative writing. But such questions usually leave me blank. This time, for once in my life, I had what I felt was an extremely good idea—maybe one of the best ideas of its kind I have ever had. As I talked about it, I got excited.

“Sam,” I said, “you should write an autobiographical account of twentieth-century technology—your personal experience of the changes and advances you have seen in your lifetime.” I pointed out to him that within his lifetime we had gone from the earliest airplanes to manned space flight—to the moon. “And you understand it,” I said: as a child, he built gliders and made models of Spads. Then he worked on missile guidance and propulsion systems. He made a crystal set, and he saw the nationwide commercial networks develop; he designed transistors and circuit boards. I reminded him that he had stories in every one of these areas—his father’s Model T Ford, for instance, how the floorboards were designed to be set in loose, so that when the car got stuck in mud the motorist could lift the separate boards up to wedge under the drive wheels. I suggested to Sam that he could have a separate chapter on each technology—flight, radio and TV, the digital computer—mixing explanations with personal anecdotes. He could write about lasers and fiber optics and tell the story about his physics instructor who, in 1920, when Sam told him he was interested in optics, said no, don’t waste time working in optics, it was a dead area, just about everything about it was already known and exploited.

And so forth. I liked my suggestion, and Sam seemed to like it, too: an autobiographical account of twentieth-century technology, informed and anecdotal, covering the greatest sweep of material progress in history. “That’s a great idea, Robert,” he said. “I’ll see what I can do.”

Months passed. Once in a while | I wondered about this project, and one day Sam brought it up: “Robert, you remember that idea you gave me for a book?”

“Yes, Sam, I do.”

“Well, I’ve been working on it.”

“That’s excellent news, Sam—it really is. I think it could be a truly wonderful book.”

“Yeah,” he said, and then he broke my heart: “I’m doing it as a mystery novel.”

This little story is among other things a parable about Creative Writing, or maybe about advice in general. But I believe that Sam’s failure (from my viewpoint) to rise to the bait of a lifetime reflects a social and political defeat, or if not a defeat an abdication. His unwillingness or inability to imagine the story of the technology he had seen involved all the frustrations and disappointments of his own life. In my own mind, this failure reflects the larger failure of the post–World War II culture: the hopeful world of my childhood with its housing construction boom, its elegant skyscrapers, the U.N. buildings and the Pan American Terminal, the thrilling cars in bright colors, the interstate highways, and the rich new playground of television, a medium simultaneously homey and glamorous.

While inventive people like Sam were devising the cloverleafs and construction techniques for the highways, the materials for the buildings, the electronic advances that made TV sets ever cheaper and better, all the refinements and revolutions that have made the world of the fifties and after look the way it does, most of those inventive souls were as bewildered as anyone by what their imagination and intelligence had made possible. Perhaps many of them were, like Sam, more bewildered than most Americans by the new world of desirable marvels and their undesirable corollaries: highway development and TV stars, dying downtowns and fortress suburbs, rapid communications and declining schools, the expansion of land-grant universities, the suburbanization of many small towns, the morbidity of many small cities, explosive abundance and the brutality of unzoned growth, the menace of nuclear war and the prosperity of auto workers, the Cold War paranoia, the new giddiness of sexual mores, the ghettoization of inner-city neighborhoods, high-rise public housing projects, the parking lots so filled with workers’ cars that on his visit to America Khrushchev assumed they were faked for his benefit, the dazzling, quasi-public space of the shopping mall, which courts have legally determined to be a private space, where the rights of public free speech or assembly do not apply.

Our somewhat disturbing wonderland has gotten some of
its energy from advances in technology: little improvements and economies in making air conditioners, bridges, cars, hydrogen bombs, home music systems, and elevators. But though he had an informed, accurate notion of these improvements, Sam was more bewildered than most people because the sensibility that made him a scientist also made him a square: though the house of slabs in Teaneck was a few yards away from north Jersey's Route 4, the most horribly overdeveloped highway in the world, he loved the woods, where he retreated when he could. He rarely watched television, listened all day to Mozart and Rossini. A timid man socially, he lived in his house and in his own mind, a quiet region governed by Newton's laws, by concepts like input and output, and the distinction between who and whom.

The people who designed, say, the earth-moving machines that built Route 4, or the machine tools that built those machines, were specialists in a way. But in another way, like my father-in-law, they were generalists and tinkerers, people who understood better than most of us a wide range of technological developments. In a technical sense, they understood the story of the making of the contemporary world. But perhaps like my father-in-law they were not quick to think of it as their story—unlike the character in "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime," who sings the words Once I built a railroad. Rather, it was for Sam the story of entrepreneurs, investors and politicians, corporate planners and real estate developers.

In his creative efforts, in his variety of skills, even in his political values and racial outlook, Samuel Bailey harked back to that tradition, in however feeble or dilute a way. A lifelong New Deal Democrat, he seemed devoid of racial prejudice, just as he tried to be free of all other irrationalities, a category that for him included religious belief or practice, gambling, rock and roll, and romantic love. He was raised a Methodist but married a Miss Ginsberg, whom he met at a party in Greenwich Village. Together they avoided all forms of worship scrupulously, raising my wife and her brother to revere not God but the values of efficiency, decorum, not making a fuss, neatness, and the general Engineering of Control whenever possible.

This way of life represents a flawed, all but nostalgic survival of that old idea of the scientist or engineer as an enlightened spirit. In that tradition, Sam's success in fiction—and dabbling in poetry, he once confessed—appropriately embodied the way in which understanding of the physical world fosters humanistic, artistic, and progressive concerns, far from being their opposite. His love of music and poetry was not a contradiction of his allegiance to the era of rural electrification and the Tennessee Valley Authority. Like Mark Twain's Pudd'nhead Wilson, fingerprinting the twins, he believed that the light of scientific truth ought to dispel bigotry.

His resignation and timidity, his unvarnished expectation that the large community decisions were made by the likes of devious lawyers, rascal corporate executives, and real estate sharks, reminds me—I am sad to say—of the passive, fatalistic role of my young programmer colleagues in the pit at Synapse. Some sixty years or more younger than Sam, they too had a dreamy, cocooned quality, an assumption that the story of the products we were creating was on some important level not their story or mine, but that of Ihor Wolosenko and of the others in the front office. (This attitude was confirmed when Synapse with all its products was bought by Broderbund.) Though I found the programmers more charming than most of my English Department colleagues at Wellesley or Berkeley, the professors had a strikingly more autonomous approach to such matters; what the college or university did seemed to them properly a narrative of their own intentions and values. The brilliant young programmers tended to be passive and fatalistic about what the managers might bring to pass.

When Sam in his concrete fortress, full of wood and plaster and metal that he had worked with his hands, listened to the traffic on Route 4, rushing through a vital, garish retail and wholesale world, in a technical sense he understood that traffic with unusual clarity. But the social organism that rushed and proliferated, gorging itself on cars and stereos and air conditioners, that charmed itself with the computer animations that sold them, left him with one of his favorite expressions: "I don't get it," he would say, turning away from the newspaper or the television news.

Meanwhile, downtown Teaneck, which had been a crisp, lively meeting place with a movie theater, a famous deli, attractive shops, came more and more to resemble a game boxer who has been hit too many times. The crime rate and the vacancy rate kept going up. Sam cared about these things; how much he related them—or how much they should be related—to the story of progress I had urged him to narrate, I do not know.

The stereotype of the techie or hacker who is ignorant outside a narrow expertise, like the notion that scientists, engineers, doctors are conservative in their personal tastes or politics, may be a relatively recent notion. The group working on the Manhattan Project, playing their string quartets and chess games out on the desert, discussing great books and great ideas, may represent a kind of cusp or watershed: the products of the technological imagination may have become too ambiguous or disturbing, or too far-reaching in their consequences, for the old liberal, enlightened-spirit outlook quite to survive.

In Sam and maybe in my programmer colleagues, I see the melancholy of American tinkering, gadgeteer optimism staggering on without the Enlightenment confidence. The once proud American term "know-how" has become largely ironic. Amongst the Founding Fathers of the country there were surveyors, surgeons, doohickey designers, architects, and inventors, many of them agnostic or deist or atheist, reading their Horace, Martial, and Virgil. I took Sam's failure to understand the book project, as I imagined it, to be a measure of his distance from such spiritual ancestors.

But on the other hand, aside from his engineering articles,
TOBACCO

Before the dream of tobacco, golden
as it cured inside our October barns,
we had thought our land generous enough,
the apple trees drooping their fruit to our hands,
the woods and streams thick with squirrels and trout.
We planted our oats and corn and wheat and beans.
Some crops were lost but the springhouse filled
with enough to carry us through the winter.

But then the fence laws passed and taxes rose.
A cash crop was needed to keep our farms.
We heard the legends of those who had no more
land than us but now were men of ease,
who lived in columned houses tobacco raised,
and knew if they were rich then we were poor,
and so tobacco came and changed our world.

We bought those bitter seeds, the fertilizer,
the poison for the worms. In January
we set out plant beds and later broke
the best ground in our bottomlands.
Then came the kind of toil we’d never known,
plowing, chopping, suckering, and topping.
We left the beans and corn unhoed,
let weeds strangle our fields, the apple trees
unpruned in the orchard as we spent
the days kneeling to tobacco, cupping
our blistered hands around the plants as though
each leaf were a small, green flame
a summer breeze might steal from us.

By fall some blight or drought or sudden rain
had wiped out all our crop or most of it.
When a good year came that only meant
everybody else had done as well,
the prices dropped at least ten cents a pound.
Good harvest or bad we sank in deeper debt,
and planted more tobacco to get out,
and every year our dream slipped away like smoke,
which was all it was, all it would ever be.

—Ron Rash

the detective novel was a genre Sam had mastered. Maybe it
is as simple as that. Certainly, I prefer to think so. I prefer
to think that in the present generation of technological maes-
tros there are some souls able to pick their way through the
terrible and beautiful possibilities ahead, with something of
the old moral sureness and confidence—as I cannot. It would
be reassuring to think that some citizens of that kind were
among the gentle souls in the pit at Synapse, Inc.

Shortly before he died, Sam was working on a particularly
troublesome article. The software involved had a glitch; he
cursed and fumed and labored into the night, upsetting his
wife. Finally, he wound up speaking to the designers at the
firm that developed the program, and over a few days of
phone conversations helped them revamp the code. Finally,
after one last evening of work he finished the article and
printed it out: texts and labeled diagrams, neatly stacked
next to the addressed envelope and camera-ready. The next
morning he had a stroke that deprived him of speech.

Before the second stroke that took him away a month or
two later, Sam laboriously learned to speak again, almost
perfectly. The therapist at the hospital was astounded by his
persistence, the systematic intelligence he brought to his
task. The day we brought him home, he told me that he
might possibly write one more article for Control Engineer-
ing. I wasn’t positive that he remembered much about the
magazine; the stroke had disoriented him considerably. Still,
he said he might write one more piece, a retrospective essay
looking back at his previous work: it was not, he said, “be-
yond conceive.”

Touched by the intelligence and concentration that sur-
vived to help him climb back from darkness into speech, and
by this sad, revealing imperfection of idiom, I could not help
thinking about my creative writing assignment. Yes, it had
been stupid of me to think that Sam could somehow tell
the partly appalling story of technology in his lifetime, a daimon
as rampant, as capriciously benign and terrible, as the old
Olympians. But he was a shy, covertly articulate engineer.

What else would one expect? Well, enlightenment, maybe:
an old tradition embodied by those scientists and engineers
and medical men in Ihseh and Chekhov, that figure in nine-
teenth-century novels who believes in draining the swamps
and cleaning up the slums, progressive ideas in the practical
world, which extend themselves into ideals like universal
suffrage, education, social democracy.

That figure believed his enemies were ignorance, supersti-
tion, unquestioning allegiance to the past. What if his real
enemy was the profitable allure, the revolutionizing, obliter-
ating power, of his own imagination? What if traditional
structures turned out to be in some ways his only defense
against his own mind and its devices? (This is an aspect
of the rather conservative story told by Mary Shelley in
Frankenstein.) If some such reversal is even part of the story,
then how insensitive I was to propose that Sam Bailey might
set out to tell it. Maybe his words “as a mystery” have more
force than either of us realized.
MARKETING TO GENERATION X
Baby-boomer Ritchie's epiphany regarding selling products to younger consumers serves as the springboard to this primer for perplexed—and, yes, aging—marketers. Amply armed with relevant anecdotes from her personal experience as an advertising and media executive, as well as an arsenal of statistics, Ritchie presents detailed, contrasting portraits of her contemporaries and the now formidable generation born between 1961 and 1981. The author's insights function as a road map for deciphering the considerable information presented. Most interesting are the parallels drawn between generational perspectives, e.g., "To Boomers, television is a mirror . . . . To Generation X, television is not a mirror, but a window." Although much of the media buzz surrounding Generation X has cooled, Ritchie wisely cautions that it is essential to understand this diverse and ultimately powerful group of 79.4 million people. This title will be a useful tool for many a baffled Boomer, as well as a pop-culture history lesson for "Xers," validating much of what they already know. (Mar.)

Poetry

☆ SENSUAL MATH
In her brilliant fourth collection, Fulton frequently echoes Emily Dickinson ("Because life's too short to blush / I keep my blood tucked in"); suggesting in many ways that she may be Dickinson's postmodern heir. In a complex metaphorical alchemy, Fulton blends Elvis and orchids, TV ads and Greek mythology, sculpting these elements on the page with controlled language and her mastery of the lyric. "My Last TV Campaign: A Sequence" links commercials, poetry and theories of Darwin, concluding that "the deep shape of everything is—/ tranvestism." Shape-shifting in nature and culture is cast in terms of gender in the long (a third the length of the book) final section, "Give: A Sequence Reimagining Daphne and Apollo." Here Fulton also employs word play and even an invented grammatical sign ("==," described variously as "dash to the max" and "sutures that dissolve into the self") to spin the myth of a spirited, absurdist, often hilarious, contemporary life. Images and themes reiterate and reform in these energetic and unassailably intelligent poems, so that the collection, taken as a whole, helps demystify Fulton's more visionary, difficult work. (Apr.)

FYI: The sequence on Daphne and Apollo also appears in After Ovid: New Metamorphoses, edited by Michael Hofmann and James Lasdun and published by Farrar, Straus & Giroux in February. Fulton received a MacArthur "genius" grant in 1991.

RED SAUCE, WHISKEY AND SNOW
August Kleinzahler. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, $21 (64p) ISBN 0-374-28924-7
Kleinzahler's first major collection since Earthquake Weather (1989), which was nominated for an NBCC Award, is his first volume published by a trade press. One of the few contemporary poets clearly influenced by both the Objectivist tradition and the more formal, academic poets, he combines a meticulous eye ("Peaches reddened, / and at day's end glow as if lit from within / the way bronze does") with surrealist perception (objects moved to make room "for the big white cloud spiring across the river"). Short lines and frequent stanza breaks make for quick movement through most of the poems, where all five senses are engaged by edgy rhythms and kinetic images: "his pretty nerves bloom, / a school of minnows just under the skin." In the estimable "San Francisco/New York," the poet wanders San Francisco after a friend's departure, drawing readers into a used bookshop to smell the dried-out glue of each volume, and, outside, to see as if for the first time gabled roofs, the streetcar, the hills. Addicted to city life, Kleinzahler brings us the homeless, the alcoholic, the distraught. Although there are also enough failed poems—some mere exercises—to form a chapbook, the finest poems reward both first readings and later, closer attention. (Apr.)

YOU DON'T MISS YOUR WATER
This is a small book of tremendous power and grace. In 21 poems, Eady (The Gathering of My Name) illuminates experiences evoked by his father's dying, making quick, startling leaps of connection with the precisely chosen details of a born storyteller. Like a high-wire walker moving steadily along an almost invisible tension, Eady writes with simplicity and apparent ease. As he depicts his and his mother's responses to the difficult, belligerent and secretive father, a convincing and moving portrait of the three emerges. Blues, rock, pop songs and hymns give these poems titles and context, linking the vernacular with the universal. "I think that every hymn is a flare of longing, that the key to any heaven is language." Eady's joy in language engenders our trust in the music that his art has made of love and pain. (Apr.)

WOUNDED IN THE HOUSE OF A FRIEND
Sanchez (Under a Soprano Sky), along with Nikki Giovanni, was a major player in the early 1970s as African American women began to explore feminist, political and cultural issues in poetry. Focusing on performance as an integral aspect of craft, Sanchez prepared the way for such writers as Ntozake Shange. Much of this book (her first in eight years) pays back debts; in a mixture of poetry and prose, she commemorates a quarter century of Essence magazine and offers memorial pieces for James Baldwin and Malcolm X. Sanchez is at her best, however, when she places her speaker in the furious center of criminal action: a raped woman's detailed account of her attack, a woman trading her seven-year-old daughter for crack ("he held the stuff out to me and i didn't remember / her birthdate i didn't remember / my daughter's face"). A brilliant narrative is offered in the voice of a Harlem woman struggling with (and eventually hammered to death by) her Junkie granddaughter. After such emotion, Sanchez turns to a series of minuscule poems based on Japanese forms that blurt rather than intensify her breathless energy. (Apr.)

CHICKAMAUGA
In subject matter, many poems in the six varied-length sections here are akin to haiku: meditations that connect breaths of spirituality to pinpoints of time and space—details of a landscape, season, time of day. But Wright (who won the 1983 National Book Award for poetry) gives his observations a more intimate, personal turn with his conversational voice, which carries subtle King James Bible cadences in long lines swept in broken segments across the page. His concern here is "the two-hearted sorrow of middle-age"; as his attention shifts from the works of T.S. Eliot and Lao Tzu, to a dwindling orchard, to memories of Italy, there is an underlying sense that some search is over, that objects or events once inspiring now simply add to "the shadow that everything casts." Punctuating such sombre ruminations are images of sudden, fearsome flames: "My life, this shirt I want to take off, which is on fire . . . ." The
strain of these extremes often stretches the poetry to abstraction, but often, as in “Expectantly empty, green as a pocket, the meadow waits / For the wind to rise and fill it,” the themes of absence and loss are measured in the precisely distilled images for which Wright is known. (Apr.)

A SCATTERING OF SALTS
In his first volume of new poetry in seven years, the recently deceased Merrill (winner of Pulitzer and Bollingen prizes as well as two National Book Awards) returned to the short lyric and dramatic narrative forms that were overshadowed by his 1982 epic trilogy, The Changing Light at Sandover. This is a moving final collection, framed by the opening “A Downward Look,” which begins, “Seen from above, the sky / Is deep . . .” and the last, “An Upward Look,” in which a “departing occupant” has left a “heart green acre.” Complicated forms and rhyme schemes hold a rein on emotion, even as the poet delights in playing with language. Merrill’s ability to relate everything to the life of the Poet leads him to find—and demonstrate—significance on all fronts, whether grand, e.g., the diurnal rhythms in “An Upward Look,” or trivial: an insurance investigator’s insistence that a chimney be fixed before a fire is lit moves Merrill to consider his need to take risks in his work, and, later, to hazard merging into “the hearth of a lover’s eyes” (“Take Risks”). Here as everywhere, Merrill transforms the everyday into almost supernatural elegance. The poet’s own words, more poignant with his death, confirm what critics have long contended: “Eyes shut in all but visionary / Consent, he lets the words reorganize / Everything he lives for, until it all fits / Or until he forgets them.” (Mar.)
FYI: Merrill’s death on Feb. 6, at age 68, gives a powerful, posthumous impact to this collection, in which many poems capture the view of a man—one of the most talented and honored poets of our half-century—looking back on particular moments that shaped the arc of his life.

ORIGINAL LOVE
Peacock (Take Heart) moves away from her well-crafted formal poems, many virtually indistinguishable from those of a dozen other poets, to speak here in a voice uniquely her own. Explicit eroticism rivals that of Sharon Olds, while the angst welling up in some innocent rhymes echoes Sylvia Plath’s “Daddy.” As Peacock says in a poem offering instructions for suicide: “you feel pain / my darling thing, because you feel warm.” The woman narrating these poems hates her body and its demands as much as she hates her mother and her needs, especially the care required by her parent in her dying. Frequent sexual references seethe with undertones of sadomasochism. Exploring three loves—for lover, mother, self—Peacock presents a highly charged portrait of a woman moving out of a dysfunctional family, needing to be safely cherished by another before coming to terms with her past, and finally learning to love herself. Although burdened by knowledge of human fallibility, Peacock’s relentless search is derailed by neither illness nor death. (Mar.)

THE PLAGUE WORLDS OF LEWIS
Writing as a poet-philosopher, Roubaud, who teaches mathematics at University of Paris, casts a delicate net of language to apprehend ideas that most compel him. Here, as in Some Thing Black, he struggles with the premature death of his wife. Attempting to relate in some metaphysical equation the dead with the living, Roubaud posits that there are many, perhaps multaneous worlds (the rather awkward title is based on philosopher David Lewis’s book, On the Plurality of Worlds). He tries to place his wife’s nothingness within his realm of experience, exploring his own intimate, contradictory states of consciousness—pain, memory, daily routine—and the branching realities they suggest. The poems of the first two selections are filled with play of light and shadows, and define loss as if metered by questions, suppositions and impossibilities. The third section is a long prose poem in which he considers the idea of form as it exists in his own body, in the “grey-in-itself” void of all objects, and in the significance of an empty notebook. Precisely measured and deeply moving, Roubaud’s meditations are rendered in Waldrop’s translation with force and nuance. (Mar.)
FYI: Roubaud, like the late Georges Perec, a member of the experimental writing group, Oulipo, is probably best known for his Hortense books which are really cheerily silly—what you might have gotten if Lewis Carroll had been a frog mathematician and avant-garde novelist.

5° AND OTHER POEMS
Hart Crane once wrote to Sherwood Anderson of his hope to find a “form that is so thorough and intense as to dye the words themselves with a peculiarity of meaning.” For Christopher, that form is the title poem here, a dense and stunning, often elliptical sequence of 35 interlocking poems. Like the Arctic adventurer John Davis, who figures prominently in the poem, Christopher explores themes of spiritual transcendence, magic and history as they coalesce in the mind of the unnamed narrator one night on the streets of New York City (where the temperature is 5°). Displaying an almost Borgesian fascination with the underbelly of history, Christopher (In the Year of the Comet) cites Herodotus, lunar cartography and Harry Houdini, linking his poems to resemble a circular room of mirrors. The poems—each shimmering with immediacy—reflect the reader into such subjects as the Nazi occupation of an Aegean island or the friendship between Van Gogh and Gauguin. Along with this difficult but immensely rewarding poem are collected 25 shorter, mostly lyric poems. Notable among these is “Terminus,” a powerfully moving political poem written in response to atrocities committed in the Yugoslavian civil war. (Feb.)

PROVINCETOWN:
And Other Poems
Shifting his focus between crowded urban streets and the world of nature, Connellan keeps his moral compass pointed toward the poor and oppressed—whether they be immigrant chambermaids scrubbing floors on hand and knee or scallop fishermen enduring a Coast Guard strip search. The insistence with which the poet speaks for the underprivileged, however, often subverts the music and power of his work. The threat of violence and death and aging are also themes in this collection; many of the poems are written from motel rooms, reminders of our transience. Lyrical images occasionally flash: in “Winter,” “hardwoods, Maples Elms seem death bent . . .”; “Blue ice is breaking up / Ice cubes of sky shined on by bright sun.” In too few poems, “Maine” and the longer, six-part “Provincetown” among them, Connellann blends moral stance with the music of Pan’s pipes and is convincing. (Feb.)

BETWEEN ONE FUTURE AND THE NEXT
Diagon’s poems are acts of noticing, exal-
so as not to hear that eerie whistling in the air, he asked Grand if he was getting good results.

"Well, yes, I think I'm making headway."

"Have you much more to do?"

Grand began to show an animation unlike his usual self, and his voice took arduous from the liquor he had drunk.

"I don't know. But that's not the point, doctor; yes, I can assure you that's not the point."

It was too dark to see clearly, but Rieux had the impression that he was waving his arms. He seemed to be working himself up to say something, and when he spoke, the words came with a rush.

"What I really want, doctor, is this. On the day when the manuscript reaches the publisher, I want him to stand up—after he's read it through, of course—and say to his staff: 'Gentlemen, hats off!'"

Rieux was dumbfounded, and, to add to his amazement, he saw, or seemed to see, the man beside him making as if to take off his hat with a sweeping gesture, bringing his hand to his head, then holding his arm out straight in front of him. That queer whistling overhead seemed to gather force.

"So you see," Grand added, "it's got to be flawless."

Though he knew little of the literary world, Rieux had a suspicion that things didn't happen in it quite so pictorially—that, for instance, publishers do not keep their hats on in their offices. But, of course, one never can tell, and Rieux preferred to hold his peace. Try as he might to shut his ears to it, he still was listening to that eerie sound above, the whispering of the plague. They had reached the part of the town where Grand lived and, as it was on a slight eminence, they felt the cool night breeze fanning their cheeks and at the same time carrying away from them the noises of the town.

Grand went on talking, but Rieux failed to follow all the worthy man was saying. All he gathered was that the work he was engaged on ran to a great many pages, and he was at

almost excruciating pains to bring it to perfection. "Evenings, whole weeks, spent on one word, just think! Sometimes on a mere conjunction!"

Grand stopped abruptly and seized the doctor by a button of his coat. The words came stumbling out of his almost toothless mouth.

"I'd like you to understand, doctor. I grant you it's easy enough to choose between a 'but' and an 'and.' It's a bit more difficult to decide between 'and' and 'then.' But definitely the hardest thing may be to know whether one should put an 'and' or leave it out."

"Yes," Rieux said, "I see your point."

He started walking again. Grand looked abashed, then stepped forward and drew level.

"Sorry," he said awkwardly. "I don't know what's come over me this evening."

Rieux patted his shoulder encouragingly, saying he'd been much interested in what Grand had said and would like to help him. This seemed to reassure Grand, and when they reached his place he suggested, after some slight hesitation, that the doctor should come in for a moment. Rieux agreed.

They entered the dining-room and Grand gave him a chair beside a table strewn with sheets of paper covered with writing in a microscopic hand, crisscrossed with corrections.

"Yes, that's it," he said in answer to the doctor's questioning glance. "But won't you drink something? I've some wine."

Rieux declined. He was bending over the manuscript.

"No, don't look," Grand said. "It's my opening phrase, and it's giving trouble, no end of trouble."

He too was gazing at the sheets of paper on the table, and his hand seemed irresistibly drawn to one of them. Finally he picked it up and held it to the shadeless electric bulb so that the light shone through. The paper shook in his hand and Rieux noticed that his forehead was moist with sweat.
“Sit down,” he said, “and read it to me.”

“Yes.” There was a timid gratitude in Grand’s eyes and smile. “I think I’d like you to hear it.”

He waited for a while, still gazing at the writing, then sat down. Meanwhile Rieux was listening to the curious buzzing sound that was rising from the streets as if in answer to the soughings of the plague. At that moment he had a preternaturally vivid awareness of the town stretched out below, a victim world secluded and apart, and of the groans of agony stifled in its darkness. Then, pitched low but clear, Grand’s voice came to his ears.

“One fine morning in the month of May an elegant young horsewoman might have been seen riding a handsome sorrel mare along the flowery avenues of the Bois de Boulogne.”

Silence returned, and with it the vague murmur of the prostrate town. Grand had put down the sheet and was still staring at it. After a while he looked up.

“What do you think of it?”

Rieux replied that this opening phrase had whetted his curiosity; he’d like to hear what followed. Whereas Grand told him he’d got it all wrong. He seemed excited and slapped the papers on the table with the flat of his hand.

“That’s only a rough draft. Once I’ve succeeded in rendering perfectly the picture in my mind’s eye, once my words have the exact tempo of this ride—the horse is trotting, one-two-three, one-two-three, see what I mean?—the rest will come more easily and, what’s even more important, the illusion will be such that from the very first words it will be possible to say: ‘Hats off!!’

But before that, he admitted, there was lots of hard work to be done. He’d never dream of handing that sentence to the printer in its present form. For though it sometimes satisfied him, he was fully aware it didn’t quite hit the mark as yet, and also that to some extent it had a facility of tone approximating, remotely perhaps, but recognizably, to the commonplace. That was more or less what he was saying when they heard the sound of people running in the street below the window. Rieux stood up.

“Just wait and see what I make of it,” Grand said, and, glancing toward the window, added: “When all this is over.”

But then the sound of hurried footsteps came again. Rieux was already halfway down the stairs, and when he stepped out into the street two men brushed past him. They seemed to be on their way to one of the town gates. In fact, what with the heat and the plague, some of our fellow citizens were losing their heads; there had already been some scenes of violence and nightly attempts were made to elude the sentries and escape to the outside world.

O thers, too, Rambert for example, were trying to escape from this atmosphere of growing panic, but with more skill and persistence, if not with greater success. For a while Rambert had gone on struggling with officialdom. If he was to be believed, he had always thought that perseverance would win through, inevitably, and, as he pointed out, resourcefulness in emergency was up his street, in a manner of speaking. So he plodded away, calling on all sorts of officials and others whose influence would have had weight in normal conditions. But, as things were, such influence was unavailing. For the most part they were men with well-defined and sound ideas on everything concerning exports, banking, the fruit or wine trade; men of proved ability in handling problems relating to insurance, the interpretation of ill-drawn contracts, and the like; of high qualifications and evident good intentions. That, in fact, was
Linda B - talking to C's class, 1989

central theme: moment into wilderness
"didn't have a poem to put it in" (wagon)
next: S a O'Keefe painting & entry
stop 4 grounds herself: what is: poem or:

"my whole life is order of chaos"
- 'if they can do something to survive, they're
tamed s'thing, ordered s'thing.
- Kaplan: Dad a real ship
  ""it just had to get into night music."

Evelyn: image from Pirandello's film KAOS: beloved
crow # evil
- ordering them imagination, playing 1 mind

attract to make ear correspond to one eye
is seeing.
"music: real names, objects"

line ends: because music 2 kinds, or
  emphasis: ends go to begin 1 next line
Gone writing: See you in October.

named Ellen Gende (who is English by}

thought she could start her story later,}
pastry cook, his groom, two manservants and the official lamplighter, whose presence might have fed his illusions through a long life there.

At first, Napoleon expected some way out of his predicament. It never came, and the years that followed became an emotional and physical unraveling as extreme as the triumphs of his earlier career. We sense his growing awareness of the battle to be fought, this time not against a nation but for his sanity. At moments, the tale is reminiscent of some absurdist drama: Alfred Jarry’s “Ubu Roi” comes to mind. Hemmed in by boredom as much as by the Atlantic Ocean, Napoleon vacillates between elaborate attempts to keep up appearances — maintaining the illusions of courtly life — and emotional withdrawal. He himself had said that there “was only a single step separating the sublime from the ridiculous,” and Ms. Blackburn’s Emperor, reduced to cheating at cards, allowing an insolent daughter of one of his captors to tease him mercilessly, is a cruel bearing out of his point.

In despair, Napoleon retreats to his crumbling, rat-infested island home, a prison within a prison, spending hours in the bathtub, lost in thought, agonizing over plans and maps, analyzing his mistakes at Waterloo. Worn out, despairing, he died on May 5, 1821.

“What a novel my life is,” he is said to have once exclaimed. Indeed, the story of his last years is brimming with literary possibilities. This work fits into no clear genre, but we might borrow a term used by Ms. Blackburn, and refer to the book as a “remanence.” This, she tells us, is a term used by dowsers to describe “finding the memory of something that has vanished and left no trace of itself.” More books have been written about Napoleon, Ms. Blackburn notes, “than about any other human being, alive or dead, real or imaginary.” Yet relatively little has been written about Napoleon’s exile on St. Helena. Ms. Blackburn has brought her startlingly imaginative sensitivity — her divining rod — to bear on that curious episode, and recovered the traces of a vanished time.
ber 1934, researchers removed dusty Sinclair books from library shelves and combed them for damaging quotations. They discovered that Sinclair had attacked some of the most powerful interests in California: the press, the movie studios, the oil industry, the churches and the bankers. Some of the most alarming excerpts were 20 to 30 years old, but it didn’t matter: it was all grist for the mill.

Now, what would the Republicans do with it? The California Republican Party had grown feeble and its leaders knew that old-style politicking — parades, rallies, canvassing — would not turn the trick. So they had no choice but to invent the political campaign as we know it today. It would be a campaign directed by advertising wizards and political consultants — the much-maligned handlers and spin doctors of modern politics. It would also be the first campaign to feature tortured their meaning (always to the author’s disadvantage, of course). Often the excerpt came from a Sinclair novel, and in many cases the quotation reflected the opinion not of the author but of one of his fictional characters. In this way Sinclair was shown to be a Communist, a terrorist and an advocate of free love.

One widely circulated quotation found Sinclair declaring that while he once had respect for the sanctity of marriage, “as a result of my studies I have it no longer.” The words actually originated with a character in his 1910 novel “Love’s Pilgrimage.” In fact, Sinclair had been married to the same woman for more than 20 years. In another obscure novel, “100%,” one of Sinclair’s villains refers to disabled war veterans as “a lot of good-for-nothing-soldiers.” The candidate had to take the rap for that, too.

The front-page excerpts had a devastating effect on Sinclair’s candidacy. His friends tried to studio pressure to repudiate Sinclair. “I doubt if that’s important,” she replied, “or anyway not as important as this election.”

Sinclair sensed defeat. In his closing speeches he appealed to the unemployed to act in their own self-interest. If he lost, he explained, he could return to his first love, writing; what would they do?

On election eve, Sinclair wearily confessed to reporters: “I talk too much. ... I write too much, too.” A few hours later, voters confirmed his fears. Upton Sinclair drew almost 900,000 votes, the greatest total for any Democrat in the state’s history, but lost to his Republican opponent by more than 200,000. The following day, he apologized to his supporters; any Democratic candidate not burdened with the weight of a million words would have won, he insisted.

Yet it was Sinclair’s reputation as an author, along with his imaginative “I, Governor,” that made the campaign possible in the first place. And the effort was to think about something, he advised, that if you take your stomach and the You have to eat not to eat over. You know that I’m going to get to sleep, and whenever I have to sleep, I have to say words...
Laments about disappearing audiences and competing media.
What About the P.O.W.

America's Vietnam agony ended a generation ago but one issue won't go away—the fate of several hundred servicemen who disappeared after being captured in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. Few are likely to be alive. But their families are entitled to know anything the U.S. Government has learned about them, and anything it can still find out.

For the past year, the Senate P.O.W.-M.I.A. Committee has worked diligently to provide such an accounting. But this week President Nixon put his own security adviser, Henry Kissinger, in the front seat and the hearings were suddenly and dramatically deflected to a subject not even on the short list of policy battles.

The families so long deceived deserve better from their country than to be left to watch as self-indulgent politicians and strategists plunge back into the quagmire.

The Paris peace accords of January 1973 obliged North Vietnam to return all American prisoners of war. When Hanoi handed back 591 prisoners, the Nixon Administration proclaimed success. But Washington's own secret figures showed that hundreds more had fallen into enemy hands alive and renounced unaccounted for.

It now turns out that the Administration based its claim of success on semantic distinctions. Since Washington had no proof that the others remained alive in 1973, it listed them not as P.O.W.'s but as M.I.A.'s, missing in the families and for the prisoners' relatives.

For the next two years, the committee has been investigating the surviving prisoners, the committee's bipartisan wrong.

To its credit, turned over mass lists of prisoners at the time; James Schlesinger acknowledged that more could have been done.

But Mr. Kissinger, justification and corroboration if not credibility, he contended, was lacking. He bridled at the committee's suggestion that veteran turned senator of the WH's hand with Hanoi, was behind.

The families of the already lost far to arguments between political parties concerned. Senator turned them gain the fullest possible fate of their loved ones.

Unhealthy Price Controls

Doctors are shocked that even the American College of Physicians now believes Government should limit doctors' fees and hospital rates. Price controls, the organization contends in a health care plan it has just released, aren't desirable. But they're less horrible than the alternative— intrusive oversight by insurance companies and health maintenance organizations.

A cynical might suppose that the physicians know they'd do better under Government rate-setting, which they could evade or manipulate, than under tight supervision H.M.O.'s. But doctors who believe the plan would allow them to evade H.M.O.'s are in for another shock. This plan would propel H.M.O. growth.

The plan attempts to contain costs by marrying price controls and competition. That's an enlightened, challenging idea. But it is doomed to fail.

Health care is an $800 billion industry. It embraces thousands of price decisions involving constantly changing procedures. That's why it is folly for the plan to center on price controls. To ask a Government that can't manage insurance to control health care invites chaos and corruption.

The plan's novel impetus for managed care won't work much better. Under fee-for-service contracts, insurers have little contact with physicians other than to pay the bills. So they can't control treatment practices and, under the plan, can't control fees.

But the H.M.O.'s run their own hospital controls. That fact. H.M.O.'s exercise them a mighty could, for example, money, then use doctors by paying them.

But merely price H.M.O.'s can't be the solution unless the markets engage glaringly at.

That's unfortunate. Organizing the Jackson health-care system is.

It is called the individuals would offer at the work until the sophisticated buyer-sor is key because prevent H.M.O.'s. For example, among the crises, skipping on the chronically ill.

The physicians are their plan. It shows, important health business. But at its because neither price markets can solve
sensory penetration is complete. That is why his abstract thought is always deep reaching; it is really concrete, it passed through the channels of the senses. . . . Lawrence attempted some very difficult things with his writing. For him, it was an instrument of unlimited possibilities; he would give it the bulging of sculpture, the feeling of heavy material fullness: thus the loins of the men and women, the hips and the buttocks. He would give it the nuances of paint; thus the efforts to convey shades of color with words that had never before been used for color. He would give it the rhythm of movement, of dancing; thus his wayward, formless, floating, word-shattering descriptions. He would give it sound, musical cadence: thus words sometimes used less for their sense than their sound. It was a daring thing to do. Sometimes he failed. But it was certainly the crevice in the wall, and opened a new world for us.

Madmen who lose contact with reality usually regress to their primitive animal behavior and use primitive animal language. Some of our writers favor lavatory writing, graffiti, gutter language, army barracks or clinical expressions. At first this seemed an inevitable consequence of the age of the common man, of uneducated writers, of proletarian social realism and the naturalistic novel. But now I see another aspect of it. It may well be a sign of neurotic lack of sense of reality, that is, an effort to make one's experience real by use of brutal expressions, to shock one's self into feeling by the senses, again a perversion born of puritanism. To write aesthetically or emotionally about sensuality was not real. To be real, language must be violent, vulgar, and crude.

When it is not necessary (as when Zola transcribed the speech of the laundry women), then it becomes as much of an affectation of masculinity and reality as the affectation by ornamentation of aristocratic speech. Some gutter language may be natural, but it is not universal. The age of the common man was a democratic ideal; the speech of the gutter is not. It has become, unfortunately, a symbol for rebellion against authority and order, but its use had the opposite effect: it is not a sign of freedom, it is a sign of inarticulateness and anarchism. Deeper down, it is a degrading of the senses.

To my mind the only artifice in literature is insincerity, particularly when this insincerity is an affectation of simplicity. The true decadence is automatism and imitation. The only effete people, I feel, are those who consider every new word unknown to them indigestible and precious. There still remains to be achieved the enormous task of convincing man that poetic language is not merely an aesthetic luxury or a baroque ornamentation, but that it is the only expression we have for the complexities and subtleties of our emotions and perceptions as we know from the study of our dreams. The only unnaturalness of speech is a literal imitation of common speech. There is no language of the common man. There is the problem of inarticulateness common to all of us. Inadequate expression communicates only dim perceptions. The writer who was to have been the magician delivering us from our limited formulations chose to imitate our stutterings and fumbling and awkward silences.

What I am stressing is the use of language as magic, the use of rhythm and image. The fear of using the full span of language would be like denying ourselves the use of an orchestra for a symphony. James Joyce tried to tell us in so many ways that man's life does not take place on one level only but on several simultaneously. And we cannot express this with one string.

Every writer experiences moments of paralysis, blocks. Some react with anxiety. They feel they may never write again, that the source has dried up. Others take it philosophically and wait. Others, like me, seek the psychological origin of the paralysis. I am assuming that writing comes from a source which does not dry up, and I deal with the temporary obstruction. Having studied psychoanalysis deeply, I have observed that the flow of life is often interrupted by obstructions. In writing, a little sleuthing will lead us to the obstacle, and a little analysis will remove the obstacle.

I examine myself: Have I touched upon a taboo, a traditional taboo (religion, race, social) which still operates in me, controls me without my being aware of it? A taboo subject? A taboo feeling? Have I come upon an experience which might expose me, the author, to ridicule or misunderstanding?

Much of the time I found either a taboo or an inhibition (such
FRENCH LESSONS
By Alice Kaplan
(University of Chicago Press: $19.95; 222 pp.)

Reviewed by David Lehman

A Mind of One’s Own

A professor’s memoir asks: What should students know about their teachers?

The personal memoir as a literary form has never had it so good. The fall lists of major publishing houses include autobiographical works by all manner of folk, from former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher to former Harper’s editor Willie Morris, not to mention Hitler’s filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl, New York intellectual Diana Trilling, actor Tony Curtis and poets Donald Hall and James Merrill.

Alice Kaplan’s memoir, “French Lessons,” is unique in this company for the simple reason that, unlike the other authors, she is a writer in whose life most readers can have little interest except to the extent that her writing quickens it. In this, “French Lessons” succeeds admirably.

Kaplan, 38, a professor of French at Duke University, is at that stage in her academic career when people begin to substitute “accomplished” for “promising” in describing her. A scholar specializing

Please see Page 10

David Lehman’s books include “Signs of the Times: Deconstruction and the Fall of Paul de Man” and “The Perfect Murder.”

A Q&A WITH THE MAYOR

The Mayor of Los Angeles keeps 40,000 books in his house. OK, he bought 36,000 of them at a college close-out, but he’s still addicted to used bookstores. What does he do with all those books?

And what does he think of John Grisham, Evelyn Waugh and Proust?

Patt Morrison talks with Richard Riordan, Page 15.
Don’t Blame It on Montana

By Larry Watson
(Milkweed Edition: $17.95; 200 pp.)

Reviewed by Annick Smith

To look or not to look at the violence we have done and continue to do to each other in the American West, as everywhere, is an old quandary. For if you see violence and you are a moral person, you must act to stop it or suffer the consequences of guilt. But a great many of us are not all that moral.

“You know what your granddad said it means to be a peace officer in Montana?” says the alcoholic old deputy, Len, to David Hayden, the 12-year-old narrator of “Montana 1948.” “He said it means knowing when to look and when to look away.”

Sounds corrupt, this looking away by authorities sworn to prevent violent acts, or stop them, or punish the breakers of laws. To look or not to look, not to act are dilemmas we face everyday, decisions complicated and various as our lives, always compelling.

For instance, if your war-hero brother, who is a doctor, molest Indian girls under the guise of treating them, and you are the sheriff, should you arrest him? If you are a 12-year-old boy, and you see something that implicates your uncle in a murder, should you tell your sheriff father? If your husband is holding his brother under house arrest in your basement and your father-in-law sends his ranch hands to break out his favorite son, should you shoot at them? Or should you give up and run away in order to protect your only son from the knowledge that will shatter his innocence?

Those are some predicaments the Hayden family faces in “Montana 1948.” But beneath the specific plot points lie more universal questions. What is most, worth having and keeping, family safety and loyalty, community harmony—or justice?

Larry Watson’s spare novel, which won the Milkweed National Fiction Prize in 1993, is set in the fictional Montana town of Bentscot, on the hard, flat Big Sky landscape of the northern Great Plains. It is a border town 12 miles south of Canada, 10 miles west of North Dakota, and an hour’s ride toward sun-up over gravel roads from the Ft. Warren Indian Reservation, “the rockiest, sandiest, least arable parcel of land in the region.”

People stand out in high relief. Like the battered trees they have planted, the 2,000 souls in Bentscot can be rigid, thick-skinned, often silent. They adhere to a near puritanical code that values work, family and community cohesion. The common bloodstains—sex, envy, greed, violence—are secrets held close under the bark.

World War II reverberates in the background. Every remote and isolated community in the West was affected by the war. Cowboys went to war, Indians went to war, and white home folks helped in the war effort. Those men who saw combat in France or the Pacific came home looking for peace and stability. In 1948, says Watson, “the exuberance of the war’s end had faded but the relief had not.”

An abandoned ranch west of Helena, Montana.

The mundane workaday world was a gift that had not outworn its shine.

The August of this story buzzed with cicadas and snow with golden grain. It should have been a splendid summer for the sheriff’s son, David, a boy who liked to roam the countryside, ride his sorrel horse, Nutty, and sit content on rocks above the Knife River, “asking for no more discourse than the water’s monotonous gable.”

David narrates this story as a grown man looking back at one month that changed his life. We are sympathetic because it is a story of love and loss and betrayal, yet there is something unsatisfying about this child, this storyteller who listens at keyholes, spies on grownups from around corners, behind winds, through air ducts and heat registers. But perhaps spying is the most appropriate way to hear truth in a society that can only speak in whispers, a society that seeks to put walls around its young, blinkers on their eyes.

The summer of 1948 should have been a time of healing, yet old injuries persisted. Genocide and racial prejudice were horrors to fight in Nazi Germany, but another matter back home. At 12, David was beginning to understand how prejudice works. “My father did not like Indians,” David says. “No, that’s not exactly accurate, because it implies that my father disliked Indians, which wasn’t so. He simply held them in low regard.”

In Montana, Indians were (and too often still are) second-class citizens, treated by whites as backward and savage. The GI Bill sent young veterans off to college and up the social ladder, but college was not in the universe of possibility for most Indians—not even a war hero and athletic star like Ronnie Tall Bear. “I realize now how much I was a part of that era’s thinking,” David Hayden continues. “I never wondered then, as I do now, why a college didn’t snap up an athlete like Ronnie. Then, I knew without being told, as if it were knowledge that I drank in with the water, that college was not for Indians.”

It is Ronnie’s girlfriend, Marie Little Soldier, who begins the tragic chain of events by falling sick with pneumonia. She works as a live-in housekeeper for Wesley Hayden, sheriff of Bentscot, and Gall, his wife. Marie takes care of the Hayden’s only child, David, and he loves her with the chaste, adoring love of a pre-pubescent boy.

With Marie sick in their house, it is only natural that the Haydens call Wesley’s brother Frank to treat her. Frank is a physician, a war hero, an athlete who married the prettiest, daintiest blond beauty ever come to Bentscot. “Frank was witty, charming, at smiling ease with his life and everything it is,” David says. “Alongside his brother my father soon seemed somewhat prosaic. . . . Nothing glittered in my father’s wake the way it did in Uncle Frank’s.”

Marie gets hysterical at the idea of being treated by Dr. Frank. She insists that Gall be in the room when Frank is with her, and later accuses Frank of molesting Indian girls. Grandpa Hayden dismisses Frank’s attraction to “red meat” with his characteristic laugh, “a deep, truculent oh-oh-oh.” The old man can’t believe Wesley’s torment about whether to look away or not. No real man would shame his brother, put him in jail for no natural desires.

Gail Hayden is not forgiving. She insists that her husband do his sworn duty to God and society. “That’s not the way it works,” she says when Wesley claims to have solved the problem with a handshake. Frank, says Wesley, has promised to “cut it out.” The damage that has been done cannot be undone, it can only be stopped. Gall won’t buy this evasion. “Sins—crimes—are not supposed to go unpunished.”

Because “Montana 1948” is so intense, so short, so straight-to-the-kill, it would be a disservice to discuss its denouement in sequence or in detail. Only know there will be murder. There will be suicide. There will be breaking of fruit jars in the basement.

Larry Watson is one of those good writers few people know about, a writer whose work is worthy of prizes such as an NEA creative writing fellowship (1987) and the 1993 Milkweed Fiction Prize. His first novel, “In a Dark Time,” was published by Scribner’s in 1980, and his chapbook of poems, “Leaving Dakota,” appeared in 1983. Watson knows his plains firsthand, having been born and raised in North Dakota.

Perhaps style is the reason Watson’s name rings like a new bell even though he has been publishing for 13 years or more. The style of “Montana 1948” is as thin, clear and crisp as a North Dakota wind. It mirrors the landscape of his story, it is appropriate to the plain-spoken characters he creates. The style is so plain you may be tempted to think it is artless. Not so. Try to tell a complicated moral tale with no embellishments. Try to create vivid, living characters who speak truly. See if you can make us keep turning the pages.

In the epilogue, David’s wife Betsy wants to visit his childhood home in Montana, but David, like his mother and father, will never go back. No one in his tight little family has ever discussed the summer of 1948. “Like people too polite to mention that someone in our midst is bleeding from an open wound,” he explains, “we don’t talk about it.”

Betsy, however, is an outsider, not too polite, not too repressed to ask. At a Thanksgiving dinner at the Hayden home in Fargo, Betsy remarks to her father-in-law, “David told me all about what happened when you lived in Montana. That sure was the Wild West, wasn’t it?”

The old, lame, sick with cancer lawyer and ex-sherriff Wesley Hayden (not such a far remove from John Wesley Hardin) slams his hand down on the table so hard the dinnerware jumps. “Don’t blame Montana!” he shouts. “Don’t ever blame Montana!”

Which is a fine way to end this moral fable and small bit of Western history. It is always us humans who carry the guilt, who can be blamed. Never the weather. Never the place.
Textured tales of William Trevor

The Collected Stories
By William Trevor
Viking, 1,261 pp., $35

By Madison Smartt Bell
Special for USA TODAY

Why are there no American short story writers like William Trevor? There are a few who might be his equals: Paul Bowles, Eudora Welty, George Garrett, Peter Taylor and Elizabeth Spencer, but none of these is quite in first youth. Of course, Trevor's mastery of the form is virtually without compare in the United Kingdom, too, where he is rivaled by no one but V.S. Pritchett. Trevor's new and massive Collected Stories makes a suitable companion to Pritchett's Complete Collected Stories published in 1990; the two books frame between them the finest accomplishments in the English short story since World War II.

In some sense Trevor's newest work suggests the closing of a circle, with many of the stories set in the terrain of his childhood and youth: Ireland during and after World War II. Trevor is an Anglo-Irishman, and his Irishness is never particularly vehement, nor does he show much evidence of the love-hate affair with the home country that tormented James Joyce (though the newer work includes two fascinating Joycean revisions: "Two More Gallants" and "Music"). Among great Irish writers he may be the most temperate, and also the most cosmopolitan; his first five collections seem as strongly centered in English middle-class life as in Irish, and many of the stories in his most recent two volumes are set in the Diaspora of cultivated English and Americans abroad.

The blood and agony of Irish history from Trevor's birth till now have left a mark on him, though without ever becoming his central subject. He knows the embattlement of the Protestant in a Catholic land, but has not made the issue a crusade. Politics is present only as it affects the lives of his characters; he may come nearer to dispassion on political matters than any other Irishman.

He scales his social situations rather small, is best at turning out the dramatic possibilities of a country village, a delimited urban neighborhood, or more narrowly, the microcosmos found in a boarding or manor house, a cocktail party or a foreign pensione. But the perversity of Irish politics finds its analogue in the private lives of his characters. Missed communication, the hinge of so many plots, happens not because these people cannot say what they mean but because, perversely, they choose not to. The stories are full of people wrecking their lives out of "good sense," doing harm to each other for the most excellent reasons. That "cobweb of human frailty" is Trevor's world.

But what sets his stories so completely apart from almost anything in contemporary American short fiction is their depth. Trevor's remarkable expository skill is, but for him and a few others, a lost art. Even the stories touched with melodrama or whimsy are deeply credible because he grounds his characters so in their own histories that they cannot be disbelieved.

This element has dropped out of the American short story since Hemingway experimented with excising it 70 years ago; the large influence of Raymond Carver's reification of the Hemingway method has reduced the action of our most typical stories to the flatness of behavioral paradigm. Trevor's approach is so refreshing it is almost a shock. He has trained himself in writing captivating summary; where for most other writers the exposition is no more than a necessary, doughy wrapper on the meat of the subject, with Trevor exposition is as much the heart of the matter as event. His characters are so extraordinarily memorable because they have memories themselves.

Each of Trevor's stories has the rich potency of another writer's novel; and this volume offers seven collections, plus change, for no more than the price of one and a half. It is a textbook for anyone who ever wanted to write a story, and a treasure for anyone who loves to read them.

Madison Smartt Bell's new novel, Save Me, Joe Louis, will appear in May.
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team, Houston, I have to stick with the team from Texas. It all
adds up to 45.

Continued: Look for the "Challenge" winner in Monday's USA TODAY.

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The Head in the Tupperware Bowl

A Southern novel in which even the dead bodies don’t distract us from the humor.

CRAZY IN ALABAMA

By Mark Childress.


By Robert Plunket

If the great English writers like Evelyn Waugh and E. F. Benson represent humor at its most sublime, their counterparts from the American South seem to have cornered the low end of the market. Southern humor is the macramé of literature — hokey, fuzzy around the edges, resolutely middle class and much too cute for its own good. Believe me, I know what I’m talking about. Not only am I descended from several prominent Southern families, but I have also spent a great deal of my adult life in the South, mostly at the Atlanta airport.

The first thing I don’t like is the names. I make it a point to eschew any book with characters named Aunt Earlene or Meemaw or my own personal bête noire, the double nickname, as in Joe Bob. Never in my life have I come across anybody with a name like that, and as I believe I have mentioned, I am considered something of an authority on what makes Southerners tick. There are no double nicknames in my family (although there is, come to think of it, a female cousin in East Texas who is named after a fruitcake).

Anyway, this is only to show you the frame of mind in which I approached Mark Childress’s novel “Crazy in Alabama.” You can imagine my feelings when I discovered the leading character was a 12-year-old boy named Peejoe. And there was further bad news: he has a wacky Aunt Lucille who has just murdered her awful husband, Chester, and is toting his head along with her, in a Tupperware lettuce keeper, as she flees to California in a stolen Cadillac to pursue her dream, a recurring role in “The Beverly Hillbillies.” Yikes, I’m thinking, get me out of here.

Well, it is a measure of Mr. Childress’s skill as a novelist — not to mention a triumphant example of style over content — that he soon had me eating out of his hand. I don’t know how he did it but he managed to confront every cliché, every convention of the genre head on and pound it into submission, so that his novel seems not only fresh and original but also positively inspired.

“Crazy in Alabama” is actually two different stories that alternate. The first concerns Peejoe’s coming of age during the summer of 1965, as the town swimming pool in Industry, Ala., is painfully integrated. The second details Aunt Lucille’s cross-country crime spree, her sexual awakening and her overnight television stardom. Guess which one I liked better.

Actually, Mr. Childress’s portrait of the civil rights struggle in a small Southern town is surprisingly entertaining. I mean, it’s morally uplifting and all that, but what really makes it work are the vivid characters, both good and bad, and the well-described chain of events. Many of these are not comic — they include numerous murders and a lynching — but there is an upbeat quality to the narrative, and all the dead bodies never distract us from the fact that we are clearly in Humorland. There is also a cameo appearance by Martin Luther King Jr., and it is indicative of the tone of this book that absolutely no fun is made of him. If Mr. Childress has a flaw as a humorist, it is that he picks safe targets.

The livelier half of the book, and what really makes it special, is the adventures of Aunt Lucille. A voluptuous blonde on the wrong side of 30, she would feel quite at home in the back seat of Thelma and Louise’s Thunderbird. Free for the first time from her oppressive husband and her six bratty children, she’s on a roll, seducing police officers and gas station attendants, winning a fortune in Las Vegas, meeting Cary Grant. Finally her dream comes true: an appearance on “The Beverly Hillbillies.” Lucille is a great big glowing star of a fictional character, and even when she is engaged in some completely immoral activity, she retains our sympathy and our approval.

But all good things must end, and when Lucille’s luck runs out she must return from Hollywood to pay the piper. So, to a certain degree, must “Crazy in Alabama.” As all the threads of the plot begin to resolve themselves, the energy and giddiness disappear and the novel becomes much more ordinary. Fortunately, by this time we’ve had so much fun we don’t care so much.

In a strange sort of way, Mr. Childress, the author of three previous novels, “Tender,” “V for Victor” and “A World Made of Fire,” reminds me of another Southern humorist, certainly my all-time favorite. I refer to Minnie Pearl.

I have, during the lengthy period of my Southern studies, done much research into her life and career. So I know Minnie Pearl. And while Mark Childress is no Minnie Pearl, there are certain similarities. Whether she was really funny was open to debate. But no one could deny the force of her enormous charm and delightful personality. It’s a particularly Southern quality, and Mark Childress has it in spades.

Robert Plunket is the author of the novels “My Search for Warren Harding” and “Love Junkie.”
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— Ross Thomas

"A stunning narrative talent."
— New York Times Book Review
RODDY DOYLE’s fourth novel sounds great even before you open it. Singing out from the front cover, the title feels braced and ready to go: “Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha” (Viking: $20.95). It makes you laugh, which is surprising—surely a title containing laughter is pushing its luck? But Doyle does this all the time: his books fizz with phrases like “They roared” and “A giggle ran through her, and out” and “Bimbo burst his shite laughing.” By rights, you should resent this blatant signposting, but somehow you just follow instructions; far from congratulating himself on his own jokes, Doyle genuinely seems to be letting the characters loose and jumping on for the ride. In place of Joycean invisibility, the author refined out of existence, we have an author shouted down by his own creations.

There are enough of them. Doyle sets all his tales in Barrytown, a fictional district of north Dublin, which, for all its other virtues—tolerance, initiative, Gauness—could never be described as a haven of monastic quiet. Opening his first novel, “The Commitments,” was like walking into a party in full swing: you could hardly hear yourself think, and soon you stopped thinking altogether. (The Commitments were a soul band, after all.) Whole pages went by in a chorus of cursing and dropped consonants:

—Tell us an’annyway. Are yeh in a group these days?
—Am I wha?
—In a group.
—Doin’ wha?
—Singin’.
—M’l Sirgin’? Fuck off, will yeh.

—I heard yeh singin’, said Jimmy. —You were fuckin’ great.
—When did you hear me singin’?
—Christmas.
—Did I sing? At the dinner dance?
—Yeah.
—Fuck, said Declan Cuffe. —No one told me.
—You were deadly.
—I was fuckin’ locked, said Declan Cuffe.

This is more artful than it looks. Doyle buries the patter along by using dashes rather than quotation marks. (I guess this makes him the Emily Dickinson of north Dublin, though she might not welcome the comparison.) The effect is to blur speech and action together, until you can’t tell where one ends and the other begins. To complain that Doyle characters never do anything except talk is beside the point, because to them talking is doing—a moral chase, with its own brand of violence and charity, shoving the world remorselessly onward. Their closest relatives are the Bostonians of George V. Higgins, with their own essentially Irish gift of tongues. The friends of Eddie Coyle would get on famously with the friends of Roddy Doyle.

Paddy Clarke is in many ways a departure. Ten years old, a bright kid, often near the top of his class, he has almost the whole book to himself. Never before has Doyle used a first-person narrator, and it takes you a few pages to acclimate to this singular atmosphere. Where its predecessors crackled with excess, the new book is deadpan: it doesn’t chime in your face but dips into pathos and bemusement. Paddy hasn’t had time to tire of the world. It’s still growing on him, and he logs that growth with curt
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rather solemn amazement, pausing every now and then to unload a newly acquired fact: "Snails and slugs were gastropods. They had stomach feet." Or "The life expectancy of a mouse is eighteen months." You laugh in recognition: if none of us can retrieve our innocence, we can all remember our eagerness to get rid of it—that ludicrous, undiscriminating appetite for scraps of knowledge. Doyle has perfect pitch for this, tuning in to the frequency of a child's mind and summoning an odd poetry out of Paddy's scrambled sensations:

Kevin poked my eyes the way the Stooges did it—we were in the field behind the shops, all of us—and I couldn't see for ages. I didn't know about that at first because of the pain. I couldn't open my eyes. It was like all the headaches I used to get; it was like the headaches you got when you ate ice-cream too fast; it was like being hit with a soft branch across the eyes.

Where does this flawless re-creation come from? From snapshots of a real childhood, for a start: the novel is set in the late nineteen-sixties, and Doyle himself was born in 1958. Until recently, moreover, he taught English and geography at Greendale Community School, in Kilbarrack, north Dublin, where he must surely have spent his days besieged by an unrelenting army of Paddy Clarakes. But beyond that there is another, ancestral voice: nobody can create an Irish child without hearing the tones of Stephen Dedalus. "When you wet the bed, first it is warm, then it gets cold. His mother put on the oilsheet. That had the queer smell." From the first page of "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man" it's a short ride to page 8 of "Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha": "I liked halibut oil. When you cracked the plastic with your teeth the oil spread over the inside of your mouth, like ink through blotting paper. It was warm; I liked it. The plastic was nice as well." These clipped sentences betray a formidable tradition of truth-telling, a ruthless reduction of ornament brought to perfection in Ireland, barely noticed in England, and weirdly transposed into the idiom of Hemingway and the pulp novelists. It's a style that will do for kids and tough guys but nobody in between: for those who tell everything they know but don't know much, and those who know but won't tell.

Paddy Clarke is a kid who dreams of being a tough guy, and the dream springs back: "He was groaning. I got around him. I punched the side of his face; it hurt me." The book smarts with all the hurting that goes on; though Paddy is not much older by the end of the book, he is definitely a little wiser. As the tale hops from one schoolboy antic to the next—killing a rat and setting fire to it, stealing magazines from the local shop—we become aware of an unwelcome backdrop, a mist stealing in to darken Paddy's contentment, with the chaffing between his parents taking on a shriller, more fractured edge. The very structure of the book feels under threat; it is the least tightly plotted of Doyle's works, with free-floating paragraphs stirred by sequence rather than consequence, and there is a danger that readers will get irritated and start to skim, hardly aware that the tale is drifting toward its submerged climax. Paddy's naughtiness shades into delinquency, although he himself can hardly tell the difference, let alone give a reason; he catches unhappiness off those closest to him, the very people who are supposed to make him happy. When the title finally comes into play, on the penultimate page, the "Ha ha ha" is not a laugh at all but a public mockery of a fatherless son.

All this is delicately handled, and it's hard to cavil at Doyle's achievement; but I must confess to nostalgia for the days when he put that delicacy to rougher uses. Most people were first turned on to Roddy Doyle by the 1991 movie of "The Commitments," and, more recently, by Stephen Frears' tender and ebullient version of "The Snapper," Doyle's second novel. He is a gift to the cinema, with his ready-made chunks of dialogue and the solid geography of his settings. But you could say the same of Elmore Leonard, and look at the hash the movies made of him. What gives Doyle the edge? It can't be his plots, which are hardly plots at all but, rather, humdrum events that take root and spread through a community; band discovers soul, girl has baby. But the life of that community, as in old Hollywood musicals, feels non-stop yet honorable: it bristles with folk who shock us by persisting in thinking well of each other, as Doyle does of them. His critics argue that this is no more than thinly veiled sentimentality, a complacent belief that, whatever happens, Irish eyes will carry on smiling around the clock. But you never get the sense of Doyle laying anything on us, and the characters them-
selves tend to mock each other's aspirations and check any fuzziness of feeling before it gets out of hand; that was certainly the guiding principle of the Rabbitte household, home to his first three novels. Here is Jimmy Rabbitte's dad, Jimmy Sr., breaking down in front of his daughter in "The Snapper":

He pulled the sleeve of his jumper over his fist and wiped his eyes with it.
—Sorry, Sharon.
He looked at her. She looked as if she didn't know how she should look, what expression she should have.
—Em—I don't know what to say. That's the first time I cried since your granny died. Hang on; no. I didn't cry then. I haven't cried since I was a kid.
—You cried last Christmas.
—Sober, Sharon. Drunk doesn't count.

Only the best novelists have the nerve to do this: set people on the track of firm feelings and then pull them off, distract the flow of tears with second thoughts. A sentimentalist presumes that we follow our hearts even when they are not worth pursuing; an empiricist like Doyle knows that hearts run on devices as well as desires, and prefers to think of us as scruffy emotional tacticians. His stories are more, not less, moving for this: Jimmy Sr.—a bit player in "The Commitments," a reluctant grandfather in "The Snapper," and finally the central figure in "The Van"—is a touching study in frustration and semi-articulated love. When he loses his job as a builder, we get the full force of human redundancy, of time and effort drooping uselessly in his hands. The relish of plain pleasures, always acute in Barrytown, takes on a new and elegiac sting:

My God, he'd never forget the taste of the first cup of tea in the morning, usually in a bare room in a new house with muck and dirt everywhere, freezing; fuck me, it was great; it scaled him on the way down; he could feel it all the way. And the taste it left; brilliant; brilliant.

That is an object lesson in style indirekt libre, trickiest of all narrative immersions—the capacity to describe a character's environment as he would describe it himself. To get the point of Doyle's heroes, you don't need a taste for Dublin, or soccer, or foul language, though these are the prime components of their lives; all you really need is an appreciation of the word "brilliant." Jimmy's tea is brilliant, Paddy has a teacher who is brilliant at football, and James Brown singing "Get Up (I Feel
Like Being a) Sex Machine” is, it goes without saying, fuckin’ brilliant.

This is typical Doyle procedure; the more a word is bounced around in common use, the more eagerly he reaches out to grab it for himself. Not for him the patient crossbreeding of phrases, the Nabokovian chuckle of joy as one nets a rare adjective on the wing. In Doyle’s world, indeed, a new word poses a bit of a threat. When the pregnant Sharon Rabbitte complains that her uterus is pressing on her bladder, her father is taken aback: “I don’t want to hear those sort o’ things, Sharon, he said. —It’s not right.” Paddy Clarke goes one better: he gets a kick out of using long words for the first time, often without a clue to what they mean. “Renegade renegade renegade!” he and his friends shout. “Substandard substandard substandard!” Even more invigorating is the panic-stricken plunge into an oath:

F*ck was the best word. The most dangerous word. You couldn’t whisper it. . . . When it escaped it was like an electric laugh, a soundless gap followed by the kind of laughing that only forbidden things could make, an inside tickle that became a brilliant pain, bashing at your mouth to be let out. It was agony. We didn’t waste it.

The agony is ecstasy: Paddy is on the brink of the great Celtic discovery that bad language is good for you, that foul mouths clean the air.

There’s something cheerily democratic about this conviction, which brushes aside any warnings you may have heard about the sick state of English. Doyle has heard this language for himself—in the classroom, on the streets—and he can vouch that it’s alive and well. Eliot once pointed out that “an artisan who can talk English beautifully while about his work or in a public bar, may compose a letter painfully written in a dead language bearing some resemblance to a newspaper leader.” The language of most contemporary fiction is, by these standards, close to death, so we might as well rejoice when we meet the living thing. Roddy Doyle is that rare species: the artisan who comes home from the public house and makes art from what he heard there. The commitments played soul because, as one of them said, “anyone with a bin lid can play it. —It’s the people’s music.” But they were hardly needed; the people were making enough music as it was.
THE WRITING LIFE

The Terrain Of the Artist

This is one of a series of occasional essays by authors on subjects that concern them in their creative lives.

By Breyten Breytenbach

WRITING IS a transcription of the real; in other words, a spinning out of the known or of that which has been experienced. But writing also explores the unknown nooks and crannies of our mental surroundings, and in so doing it modifies our expectations. By identification it invents the real.

Perhaps I’m particularly aware of this dual capacity of the act of writing—giving account while inventing itself—because it started in all seriousness for me with a moment of embarkation which was also a break with my past.

In the beginning there was leave-taking. I can just about name the date when I found myself suddenly stripped of all previous certainties. At the age of 20 I left South Africa, and so left behind a country, a continent, a youth, a language, an identity and perhaps also a memory. What came after would have to be imagined. In due time I realized that the past too would need to be invented so as to give depth and coherence to the ongoing. Many years down the road I was to learn that “identity” was a temporary awareness which meets and mates moment to moment—a line of recognition flowing from the pen and the brush. It would be a shifting alliance of emotions and remembered movements and convictions, an observation point and a conduit of experience, the place where appearance and substance could create a tension of consciousness but which could live only in movement. “The placing of I,” if it may be so described, would in fact be a process. Language was to be the history of sedimentation: a topography of absence. Identity was to be discovered by location. Henceforth the place will be the writing, continually coming into being and dissolution.

Maybe the ear and the eye and the nose and the hand are neutral tools of perception and expression. But the very idea of hearing, or of seeing, and the act of transmission (transgressing the silences of the heart) are conditioned by memories linked to the first awareness of place. This place is not less true and safe for being partially imagined. From the moment when South Africa slipped beyond the horizon and be-

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BOOK REPORT, By David Streitfeld
The Writing Life

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came unattainable, it was changed into the bed-
rock of my experiences.

In a recent autobiography (called Self-port-
rait/Deathwatch) included as an appendix to Ju-
das Eye, a volume of poems published in 1988, I
tried to describe how my severance from South
Africa—and more precisely from a region at its
southwestern extremity known as the "Boland,”
the Upper Country, a land of vineyards and
mountains where I was born—had to jump from a free fall away from
the strictures of the tribe. I then wrote that
my expectations, my apprehensions, my instinctive
recognition of the right position and place (read
for this the unquestioned sense of belonging),
the means by which I experienced space and rhythm
and structure or the way of my relationship to
the environment and to other people, my notion of
breath and/or being is a man whose life and art are
profundely marked by exile. In exile from South
Africa, in veered flight across Europe, or in lonely
contemplation of the grim square-footage of a
Prussian prison cell, his theme has been one of
orders, and his 55 years have been punctuated by
troubled journeys among them.

He was born in Bonnivieria, South Africa, in
1920, the son of a family whose restlessness and
lack of success kept his family on the move. By
the time Bretenbach was 13, his father had a
small store and a little farm about 20 miles
away in the hinterland. They were poor Afrikaners, aware
of the social cleavages that separated them from
"the rich people on the hill." His father's ances-
tors had come from Germany in the 18th centu-
ry; his mother was a Coetsee, a descendant of
famous vintners, although Bretenbach suspects
that her forebears may have been white off-
spring of a colored slave who adopted that histor-
ic family name. In any case, the Bretenbachs
considered themselves Afrikaners through and
through; there was no pretense of a tie to Eu-
rope, no link to a mother country.

His childhood was happy enough, filled
with the convivialities of a musical home and a
gregarious extended family. As the law dictated,
he attended white schools, registering the ab-
surdity of that separation only vaguely, and
noting somewhere at the edge of consciousness
that a few of his classmates were actually
colored, passing for white.

By 18 he was grasping every nuance of the
hypocrisy—having become by then a rebel who
was a junkyard of music and poetry. He deci-
ded to study fine arts at the University of
Capetown, the English language school that
accepted non-white students. There, he im-
mersed himself in courses on poetry, piano
and, most especially, painting. But 1959

Breyten Bretenbach

BY RICH LIPSEY—THE WASHINGTON POST

brought with it a new wave of political oppres-
sion: A law was passed segregating the univer-
sity and shipping the black out to colleges in the
 bush. "There was a sense of gathering
doom... The police would come around, pok-
ing into our parties, looking for mixed couples,
our records, searching houses for what they
called 'illegally serving al-
cohol to blacks.' It was too much. Within
months he dropped out and worked odd jobs to
buy boat fare out of South Africa. By year's
end he was "summing his way through Eu-
rope,” and two years later, he settled in Paris
to paint. It was the heyday of Keroauc, Gins-
berg, Cocteau—there were 66,000 aspiring
painters in the city. But he begun to make his
mark: First a group exhibition in the Musee
d'Art Moderne; soon after, one-man shows.

Although his Afrikaans poetry was garn-
ered real recognition at home, he hardly had oc-
casion to speak his native language any more.
He began teaching English and doing transla-
tions in order to survive. Sputtered by the gov-
ernment massacre of 78 South African blacks
protesting the law in 1960, he started
work on behalf of the dissident movement. In
1962 he met and married Hoang Lien Ngo, a
young Vietnamese woman studying at the Sor-
bonne. It was then his troubles began in ear-
nest.

In 1964, when Bretenbach tried to return to
South Africa to collect a literary prize for his first
volume of poetry, Die ysterheike most sweat ("The
Iron Cow Most Sweat"), and his first book of sto-
ries, Karoo-Werf ("Cataract"), his wife was
denied a visa. By South African law, their mar-
riage was illegal, a contravention of the ban on
mixed marriages and a violation of the Morality
Act that forbade sexual relations between races.
They were warned that if they stepped foot in
South Africa, they would be arrested as crimi-
nals. For the next nine years, Bretenbach fought
against his virtual exile, with no shortage of
influential South African literati agitating on his
behalf. Finally, in 1973, during a rare and brief
period of liberalization—and perhaps in part due
to the fact that his brash collection of poems,
Stry, had made him a hero to South African you-
ths—and he and his wife were allowed a 90-day
visa. The result of that visit was his impassioned
travel book (written in Afrikaans), A Season in
Paradise.

Now totally radicalized, Bretenbach was
working tirelessly for the African National Con-
gress, the principal engine against apartheid.
In 1975 he entered South Africa under an assumed
name, was arrested, tried for "terrorism," sen-
tenced to nine years in prison and thrown into
solitary confinement. While he was there, offi-
cials accused him of planning a Russian subma-
nine attack on the prison island and singlehanded-
ly organizing a vast plan to destabilize the
country. His case became an international cause
celebre. Released seven years later, he wrote (in
English) his explosive prison classic, The True
Confessions of an Albino. A novel followed and
several volumes of poetry before he

his next major work, Return to Paradise (1991), which these pages described as a book
written with a wild heart and an unrelenting eye... fueled by the sort of rage that produces
great literature.

Still residing in Paris with his wife—they
have no children—Bretenbach is a frequent crit-
tic of post-apartheid South Africa. "There is
something to live for now," he says, "but there is
also a enormous difference between rich and
poor, a great integrity. I fear that it may be
smashed in two years time." It is, he adds, a place
that "must keep investing itself to stay alive." Its
future will depend on the vitality of its ongoing
revolution. It won't be easy, he says, that nation
will be a fear shoot through with rays of hope.

—Marie Arana-Ward
From the Yom Kippur War and the Entebbe rescue to the strike on Iraq's nuclear reactor and the dawn of peace, the renowned author of *The Winds of War* continues the epic saga of Israel he began in *The Hope*, bringing history to life through the stories of four Israeli families.

"Heroism and historical grandeur... Wouk is still a master of the historical novel."
— *Los Angeles Times Book Review*

"Herman Wouk has the touch... the ability to tell a story that grips you from beginning to end."
— *San Francisco Chronicle*

"His fictional characters humanize history."
— *Washington Post Book World*

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Abandoning conspiracy theories, his own included.


Beyond presenting what is likely to be the best understanding of what actually happened on June 5, 1968, Mr. Moldea is stinging in his criticism of shoddy work by the Los Angeles Police Department. One is left with little doubt that the police mishandling of the investigation set the precedent for much of the later conspiracy conjecture. Moreover, despite repeated vows by officials investigating Senator Kennedy's murder that they would not repeat the mistakes of the inquiry into the assassination of his brother, government and law enforcement resistance to any public release of information about the case insured just the opposite: that a public already suspicious of "official" conclusions and eager to embrace conspiracy theories concluded the secretiveness was evidence of a cover-up. Mr. Moldea pinpoints much incompetence and negligence, but not the cover-up of a murder.

Mr. MOLDEA dedicates the book to his writing coach, Nancy Nolte, and properly so, because this is the best written of his books, finished in a clear and easy style. The book does stumble from time to time, however, with occasional repetition, a couple of outdated paragraphs about the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and a few instances of unnecessarily dramatic prose; for example, Mr. Moldea's description of himself in interviews, becoming fixed on someone "like a cruise missile" or ready to "go for his throat." But these minor glitches in a treatise that over all is a notable success for its solid reporting.

At the end of his book, in a brief but critical portion, Mr. Moldea speculates about why Sirhan Bishara Sirhan killed Robert F. Kennedy. Rejecting Mr. Sirhan's previous justification — Robert Kennedy's pro-Israeli politics — he paints a disturbing portrait of the assassin. Mr. Moldea reveals Mr. Sirhan as having a "confused life," flirting with "fringes of the occult and an individualized but unsophisticated form of left-wing politics." In Mr. Moldea's picture, Mr. Sirhan was a "desperate young man, somehow losing all hope" — someone who had, Mr. Moldea writes, "decided to make his mark, even if it was by committing a terrible and violent act." The description is remarkably like that of another 24-year-old sociopath, Lee Harvey Oswald, who had crossed the path of another Kennedy five years earlier.
about healing those wounds from her past, she chose her vio-
tim and became instead journeymate and celebrant, whose praise of life
wrapped her audience into the ex-
halation with her.

Mr. MOYERS nowhere needs to show he
chose his authors, but his "diversity" and "popul-
ist" intent ( كانت white men or non-populist wom-
en) are the apparent criteria. No Allen Ginsberg, no John
Deacons, no John Ashbery, no Lou-
ise Gluck, no Charles Wright, no James
Merrill, no Frank Bidart, no Jorie Grahm. It is a misrep-
 resentation of the achievement of con-
temporary American poetry
 to concentrate so tidily on "the Other" and to emphasize
poetry readings over books; but Mr. Moyers likes crowds and life
narratives and poetry groups.

In Bergen County, New Jersey, octogenerarians and 12-year-olds read each other's poems in a
program called Joy.

To be free, any art re-
quires both gifts and training. This fact — taken for granted in the
production of violinists or lithog-
raphers — recurs in all art in the
United States with respect to
poetry. You might as well hold
thos Bergen County octogenerai-
s and 12-year-olds a violin
piece and say, "Play!" Even the
imprisoned Bill Moyers would see.
I feel sorry for the good poets who joined in Mr. Moyers's effort,
no doubt in the hope of finding
something for poetry. But it is never a
service to a complex practice to
dumb it down. What, then, should be
done to make poetry widely available?

Poetry is language used in a
special way — not merely to con-
evolve emotion or to purvey infor-
 mation or to facilitate conversation
or to sum up an argument. It is
language used with particular atten-
tion to binding its phrases together by sheer intrinsic
reason. These associations need to
be emotional, logical, allusive, sym-
bolic, phonetic, rhythmic, or at least a combina-
tion of several of these. This is why
the language of ably written poetry
seems so magnetic to the reader,
(as well as more dense) than the
language of conversation or of
journalism: many overlapping as-
sociative patterns are at work at
the same time in poetry. To
give people an appetite for this use of
language would prepare them to
relish poetry; to give them an
awareness of the language present in all accomplished poe-
ty, oral as well as written, ancient
as well as modern — would enable
them to discern the line between
the inept and the talented.

It is not difficult to give children
a heightened sense of language. You do it by emphasizing group
recitation of appealing poems with
strong rhythm (such as "Oh Susanna," "Edward Lear"), by choral
crying of folk songs with striking melodies (as in "The Orator"
"The Rime of the Ancient Mari-
nor"), and by asking them to learn
by heart moving poems by powerful
writers (Shakespeare, Blake,
Dickinson, Housman, Keats). These
pleasures, so helpful in increasing
reading skills, have been aban-
doned in most schools. Such
pleasures also develop taste, just as
musical training does.

Mr. Moyers's worry about losing
the young; so do orchestras and
opera companies. Poetry, too, has
lost its place in many elemen-
tary and secondary school training in art
history, music appreciation and the
like. Poetry disappears from the
audience for complex art also
disappears. And training in appre-
ciation, to have its full effect,
needs to be accompanied by prac-
tice — by the learning of drawing,
the playing of an instrument and
the encouraging of varied forms of
written composition. When a cul-
ture thinks this important, it is
done; if not, there is plenty of first-rate art that has immediate
appeal to the young (see "The Rat-
to-Light: A Psychology of Poetry,"
compiled by Seamus Heaney and
Ted Hughes, for instance; or, in
"World Poetry," edited by Banesh
Schubert; or, in
painting, portraits and history
painting). The peculiar preference of
American schools for the third-
rate — poetry is one reason for an
explanation, but I can't give it.

In the absence of a wide-ranging
artistic curricular in the schools,
there is any way for us to bring
poetry to the people, as Bill
Moyers wants to do? There is
reason to not begin, as Mr. Moyers
did, with television programs on
poetry and poetry books. But let
us not treat the poets not as people who have had hard lives or who
are battling cancer, but rather as ex-
erts in imagination, language,
and literature. Let us ask them —
and show visually — what imagi-
native spin they have put on phe-
nomena in their poems, and why
and how this imaginative transfor-
mation of reality occurs. Let us
inquire — and illustrate with film
c lips — what aspects of language
appeal to them, what reworkings,
hallowing, and why. Let us dis-
cover which previous authors or
poets they find important, and how
the same time devoted to them —
 a few
minutes on, say, Neruda, a few
more on, say, Langston Hun-

Let us not ask
what other arts — sculpture, jazz,
marquetry, whatever — are im-
portant to them, with illustrations.
Experts on science are asked about
science and about the teach-
 ing of science; let us ask these experts on the art of poetry about
its past and present, and about
what poetry is in a democracy in
poetry would be. Let them critique the
choice of poetry in current
books; let them talk about the re-
 alities of teaching poetry in the
United States.

Gossip is not poetry; autobiog-
ography is not poetry; "celebration" is not poetry. Poetry is one of the most
complex of the cultural avatars of the
workaday. It is also one of the arts helping to
construct the American present.
To be freed from the poetry to the
people through television (or journal-
ism or trade books or textbooks)
needs to be measured as how the past of
poetry is part of its present and of
its future.
Earth-plane dimension in the latter half of the 20th century. Consequently, "My Lucky Stars" is, as the author's life seems to have been a guileless but nonetheless spirited romp.

Raised in Virginia, a member of the proper, suburban middle class and plucked from the chorus of "The Pajama Game" in the best storybook tradition to go on for the incapacitated Carol Haney, Ms. MacLaine soon found herself basking in the setting sun of Hollywood's golden age. That is, she was Jerry Lewis's love interest in "Artists and Models," the 1955 antepenultimate venture of his partnership with Dean Martin, the deterioration and demise of which she was thus situated to observe, and to which she devotes a chapter. And in 1959, she was reunited with Mr. Sinatra (and united with Mr. Sinatra) for Vincente Minnelli's "Some Came Running," and was thus in on the beginning of what is commonly known as the Rat Pack, but which Ms. MacLaine assumes was not usually known as the Clan.

Her memories of working with both actors (she appeared in several more movies with one or the other, and in 1999 toured with the then 77-year-old Mr. Sinatra) are affectionate but not sentimental, more than might be comfortable for the latter, who is reported to have remarked, in response to his depiction in "My Lucky Stars," that he's doing it for a buck. It is true that owing to her lack of guile, Ms. MacLaine is not always the most reliable narrator (her admiration for the social paradise of postrevolutionary China in her second book, "You Can Get There From Here," springs to mind). But Mr. Sinatra's reputed attitude is, in fact, perfectly consistent with the portrait Ms. MacLaine draws. And one can, at least hope, that Mr. Sinatra is in his heart of hearts still the friend whose struggle to express the nature of his fondness for Ms. MacLaine led him to tell her, "Oh, I just wish someone would try to hurt you so I could kill them for you."

Actually, whether fate—which in her cosmology is predetermined by mutual agreement when we are disincentive entities before each lifetime—finds her a fer-de-lance in a sea of feisty, ladylike kind of a way that leads one to suspect that she gets too hungry for dinner at 8. "That settled his hash," she remarks, not atypically, of a conflict with Laurence Harvey in which she was the winning party by chewing a clove of garlic before a love scene. Ladylike feistiness is too little practiced these days, and the reader is thus grateful that Ms. MacLaine had the opportunity to hang around with men like Mr. Sinatra and Mr. Martin, who called her "kid," "baby" and "sweetheart" and generally knew how to treat a classy dame, even one who is also a progressive diva and a bitte spiritualist.

Ms. MacLaine is not, nor does she aspire to be, much more than a story she has written. An engaging storyteller, particularly where she personally seems the most engaged. At worst, her anecdotes are breezy and entertaining, and at best they are informed with a fierce emotion. Particularly moving is her account of her love affair with Robert Mitchum, with whom she co-starred in the 1962 "Two for the Seesaw." The simplicity with which she evokes Mr. Mitchum's overall air of adaptive resignation — "He saw himself as a common stiff, born to be lonely, who should expect nothing from life except that the roof doesn't leak," she writes — is as humble and heartfelt as sweet charity itself.

But Is It a Movie?

A novel about a screenwriter in Africa satirizes Hollywood fantasies.

MASAI DREAMING

By Justin Cartwright.


$23.

By Linda Simon

A MAGINE Joseph Conrad writing for Vanity Fair and you'll have a sense of Justin Cartwright's sharp new novel, "Masai Dreaming." Like Vanity Fair, it's glib, sexy and obsessed with movies. But the heart of the story is dark indeed. "Masai Dreaming" is about the atrocities we commit when we transform history into romantic mythology, moral tale or social theory. It's a satire on Hollywood's trite fantasies, but at the same time it questions our attempts to distill into schemes and formulas "the facts out in the field, or what we would call the real world." In other words, it's about the limits of art — and the limits of reason.

Tim Curtiz, a London-based journalist, is in Africa researching the life of a beautiful French anthropologist, Claudia Cohen-Casson, who went to live among the Masai in the late 1930s, intent on studying "the earlier stages of human life, the savage stages through which the human race had passed so unevenly." Her findings, she hoped, would contribute not only to the field of anthropology but to the understanding of modern savagery among supposedly civilized nations.

Late in World War II, Claudia interrupted her research, rushing home in an attempt to persuade her father and brother to escape from Nazi-occupied Paris. But her father refused to leave, insisting that he was in no danger because the Germans valued his work as a doctor and hospital director. He soon learned he was wrong; betrayed by a compatriot, the three were captured and sent to Auschwitz.

Claudia's story is the stuff of Hollywood dreams, and Curtiz has been sent to the Masai by a trendy producer, S. O. Letterman, to gather material for a screenplay, "a re-creation of colonial Africa, as seen from Santa Monica Boulevard," filled with passion, duplicity and, Letterman hopes, high-priced stars. Certainly the material is there: the elegant Claudia (who might once have been played by Ava Gardner) had an affair with a powerfully handsome Masai warrior, which briefly interrupted her affair with a debonair Englishman (Stewart Granger? David Niven?). Add murder, angry lions and tribal rituals, and you have all the ingredients of a major motion picture. "Out of Africa" meets "Stoah."

Yet as Curtiz immerses himself in Claudia's past and discovers uncomfortable parallels to his own life, he finds himself unable to write a "treatment." He cannot contrive the kind of screenplay that Letterman hopes will lure Julia Roberts and Mel Gibson to sign on as stars. "Movies," Letterman reminds him, "are about two huge faces on the screen coming together and eventually embracing." As Curtiz peels away layers of complexity, Letterman urges him toward further simplification. Claudia, he says, needs to be the kind of romantic heroine with whom everyone wants to identify. Her exploration of Masai culture ought to become a search for a "universal spirit." Letterman insists. "The movie must speak to everybody, not just people interested in historical dilemmas and dialectics."

Mr. Cartwright (whose previous novels include "Interior" and "Look at It This Way") was born and raised in South Africa and has taken a turn at film directing, so he knows the territories intimately. His Africa is desperately mired in the past. Here British clubs cling to their rituals with as much tenacity as painted warriors. And here, as well, tribal leaders try to reject the Western lenses that threaten to distort the meaning of their culture. Yet even as sympathetic an intruder as Curtiz inevitably looks through these lenses. Yet even on the trail of love may "go off the scent of Africa: woodsmoke, hiders, cattle and dust;" but they still remind Curtiz of "heavy metal rock stars primed and primed for sex."

But if pop culture gives us easy metaphors, theories of human behavior can be equally inadequate. When Curtiz reflects on the work of eminent social theorists like Claude Lévi-Strauss, Marcel Mauss and Émile Durkheim, he sees that concrete evidence did not distract them from constructing their hypotheses about so-called primitive cultures. "The facts are wrong," Durkheim once exclaimed when his theories were questioned. "Durkheim meant, I think," Curtiz adds, "that his insights had an independent value and truth." To what extent can we trust those insights? This question is central to the novel — almost as weighty a problem as the casting of Claudia Cohen-Casson.

Whose plays the French anthropologist will, after all, invest the story with an indelible independent truth. As Mr. Cartwright evokes our cinematic experiences, we realize how much the world according to Sydney Pollack or Steven Spielberg has become the world as we know it. If we've seen "Last Year at Marienbad," we can picture the chicken at the club where Curtiz dines. If we've seen "The Crying Game," we're prepared for unusual sexual deceit. And if we bristle at the thought of Julia Roberts playing Claudia, it's because we know with deep and unanswerable certainty that the role must go to Julia Ormond.

Linda Simon is the director of the Writing Center at Harvard University. Her most recent book is an anthology, "Gertrude Stein Remembered."

THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW 13
Poetry for the People

Bill Moyers's enthusiasm is democratic, pluralistic and multicultural.

By Helen Vendler

The interview with Quincy Troupe might have served to remind me that Mr. Moyers's book displays no guilt with respect to homosexuals or the handicapped -- apparently, funding foundations have not yet got around to demanding equal time for these (perhaps more discriminated against) Others. There are no sympathetic interviews with a paralyzed poet or a deaf poet or an openly gay poet, to whom Mr. Moyers might pose the same ingratiating questions about their victim status that he puts to his other Others.

For instance, he says to Lucille Clifton, a black poet, "Listening to you recite your poems I imagined you having had a very hard life." Ms. Clifton tries to assert her own unwillingness to be cast as a victim: "I don’t know if I think I’ve had a hard life, but I have had a challenging life. Everybody’s life is more difficult than people think, but I was blessed with a sense of humor." Her honesty doesn’t change the interviewer’s tone. Here and throughout his interviews, Mr. Moyers forces the conversation toward his leading ideas. These have a lot to do with people’s ‘very hard’ lives (sometimes, of course, it’s their parents’ or grandparents’ lives, but that doesn’t matter, the generational sequence is there, Issel to Nisei).

Mr. Moyers is also concerned with the fun poetry can be, especially when it regains its putatively original tribal and communal form of people having “the time of their lives” by sharing in a poetry reading or poetry festival: “Nowhere will you find language more verdant and vibrant, an atmosphere more festive.” (Frankly, I find language more verdant and vibrant in Dante, but of course his poetry does lack a festive atmosphere.) There is no harm in any of this, perhaps, but it does sell poetry short by featuring it as a ritual tribal in which “spontaneous audiences gather around young people reading their newly minted poems in the gazebo on the village green.”

Mr. Moyers’s earnestly proclaimed love for poetry turns out to be a love of its human narratives, its therapeutic power and its unifying messages. (He wriggles with the difficulty of praising cultural difference and cultural unification at the same time.) The poets themselves try to return Mr. Moyers to what he is missing: to imagination, to language, to rhythms, to structure. But these are not grieft for television, and Mr. Moyers’s style of interviewing was formed by television, with its abhorrence of analytic talk. So each interview is relentlessly diverted from the discussion of poetry itself to human-interest topics, which usually produce statements of thoughtless banality.

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Here’s the Nicaraguan poet Daisy Zamora, for example: “I think it’s hard in all parts of the world to be a woman because we women don’t know what we are. … For a man, there is nothing particularly strange about deciding to be a poet or an engineer. What seems to be simple for men is difficult for women.”

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And writing a poem is a solitary act. Though Mr. Moyers pays lip service to that solitude (in a genuinely creepy metaphor), he quickly leaves composition aside in favor of reception: “I used to think of the poet as living a lonely existence, waiting in solitude for the Muse to appear on beads of sweat coaxed from a secret chamber deep in the soul. That is true in a way, but it is not the whole truth. Poets love each other’s company, and they love an audience.”

Question: Have you ever seen the Muse appear on a bead of sweat? Have you ever seen a bead of sweat coaxed from a secret chamber? For that matter, have you ever tried to coax a bead of sweat at all? Has Mr. Moyers ever thought about the difference between composition and recitation? Or between recitation, for that matter, and group therapy? “Linda McCarriston held a packed house in silent thrall,” he writes, “as she read her poetry about the torments of a family ravaged by her violent father. … As she read on, into poems
Power and Romance Among the Old Negro Elite

By MARGO JEFFERSON

The Negro elite of Boston had a servant problem in the years before World War I, for, as Dorothy West explained in her first novel, "The Living Is Easy," "experienced domestics from the South could not be induced to work for people of color." Why should they, when it meant they would have to "use the back doors of a social group who could not use the front doors of their former employers."

Negro society (and that, or "colored society," is what it was called) adjusted by hiring European immigrants, newly arrived ones who worked hard and willingly "until their more sophisticated countrymen explained the insurmountable distinction between a man who looked white and a man who was white." Still, taking the long view, Negro society contained no more than 20 families at the time, and "since most of their number could not afford maids, there was not really a servant problem."

By the early 1950's, the decade in which Ms. West's second novel, "The Wedding," is set, Negro families have Negro maids who serve them faithfully and they summer on mostly white Martha's Vineyard in an enclave of cottages hidden by a rough winding path that gives them a sense of being "as exclusive as the really exclusive — the really rich, the really powerful — who also lived at the end of impressively bad roads to discourage the curious."

Impressively bad roads discourage the curious. Rigorously codified manners and rituals discourage outsiders. And marriage is meant to ward off intruders of all races, keeping this fragile, rarefied world intact and apart. But the daughters of Dr. and Mrs. Clark Coles are not doing their part. Liz, the elder, has married a dark-skinned man and had a child with dark-tinted skin; nevertheless, he is a doctor, in line with the family tradition that "all men were created to be doctors, whose titles made introductions so easy and self-explanatory."

Her sister, Shelby, has strayed even further, for though it is a good thing in this world to look white, it is not a good thing to be white. (That "white blood," so-called, is supposed to flow chastely through one's blue veins as the legacy of a well-born ancestor at least a century old.) Shelby could have had her pick of "the best of breed in her own race"; instead, she has got herself engaged to a "nameless, faceless" white man who plays jazz.

Meanwhile, Liz and Shelby do have a grandmother who is white and who is relieved that the family balance is tipping back toward the Anglo-Saxon. But her granddaughters tend to think of her as a fair-skinned Negro, which makes her prejudices tolerable if not exactly benign.

The novel takes place in just 24 hours, but it extends back through six generations. The men in question never appear, but they dominate everyone's thoughts; the sisters conspire and compete to see whose choice is more distressing to which parent, and whether each will get what she wants and still want it once she has it.

Every wedding seems to attract unwanted guests. In fairy tales, they are powerful intruders who come bearing threats and curses. In life as social realists know it, they can be the bride's own fears about her family legacy, about generations of marrying and being given in marriage for every good and bad reason. Ms. West provides one intruder in the form of a black entrepreneur, a nouveau riche charmer who wants Shelby for himself despite three divorces, three children and a current, fourth wife. (His children have their reservations. As the oldest says: "I don't like mothers. They make me nervous. They cry too much. They get mad too much, they call Daddy 'nigger.'"

But Ms. West gives the better part of her book to the past: to the unhappily married parents of Shelby and Liz (he with his faithful mistress, she with her dusky lovers), and to their ancestors, a long line of preachers, professors, doctors, former slaves and former slaveholders, schoolteachers and socialites, making their way from Reconstruction through World War II, mingling their blood and their ideals, coordinating their ambitions and their skin tones.

This is what gives "The Wedding" its force and intelligence. Ms. West is compassionate about what history asks of people and unsparing about what they ask of themselves and each other. What she lacks is the true novelist's gift for intricate plots that feel inevitable and intricate talk that feels spontaneous. The novel is just one of many forms: why do so many writers yoke themselves to it in the belief that it is the highest and the best? Ms. West has the mind of a historian and the sensibility of a memoirist. "The Wedding" falters as a novel; it takes its stand and holds its own as social history.
From Plain to Fancy, Chefs Cook Up A Storm in Atlanta

By BRYAN MILLER

ATLANTA — Until fairly recently, Atlanta's major contribution to American gastronomy was Coca-Cola. Today, however, there is a vibrant and growing restaurant scene on all fronts, offering everything from haute French to homely Southern fried chicken.

The steady growth in restaurants — the number has increased 40 to 50 percent in the last five years, according to industry estimates — is often attributed to the 1996 summer Olympic Games, which will attract hundreds of thousands of visitors to Atlanta. But restaurateurs point out that the Olympics haven't arrived and that their places will have to stay in business when the games are just a memory.

"The restaurant growth in Atlanta really is tied to the tremendous growth of Atlanta in the last five years," said Anne Quatrano, a chef and owner of Bacchanalia, a two-neighborhood restaurants, bistro and the like. White-tablecloth restaurants are very visible, but they are not growing as fast as the little casual places."

French, Italian, contemporary Southern, Asian cuisines — all have flourished. The growth has attracted chefs from other regions, and their efforts have had mixed results. Nationally known chefs like Jean Banchet of Chicago and Jean-Louis Palladin of Washington were both briefly involved in ventures that did not work out for them, but Mr. Banchet is back here planning a Mediterranean bistro in Buckhead that he hopes to open late this spring. His two-year partnership at Ciboulette, a French restaurant in Midtown, ended when his co-chef, Tom Coohill, bought out his interest.

"We had a different approach to food," Mr. Banchet said, adding that he still believed Atlanta was a thriving restaurant city.

"You can't charge more than $50 for dinner here," he said, "and the style is very casual. B..."
The Living Arts

The New York Times

THEATER REVIEW

Scrambled Stroll Through the Forest of Arden

By BEN BRANTLEY

"Believe me, if you please, that I can do strange things," Rosalind announces mysteriously toward the end of Shakespeare's "As You Like It." The line has been spoken by actresses like Vanessa Redgrave and Katharine Hepburn, but it is difficult to imagine it ever having the profound pertinence it takes on in the mouth of one Adrian Lester, a tall, gangly man playing a woman in man's clothing.

When the words were delivered late Tuesday night at the Majestic Theater of the Brooklyn Academy of Music, an audible sigh of appreciation rippled through the house. Even more than the standing ovation that followed, that sigh was an ideal tribute to what Cheek by Jowl company of London had achieved: a sustained conjuring act that celebrates the basic power of theater to bewitch, to teach and above all to transform.

Working with an all-male cast on a black-and-white stage, the director Declan Donnellan and the designer Nick Ormerod have created a sparkling "As You Like It" that finds the magic in the metamorphosis of performance. People who want to relive the excited childhood shivers of first seeing a play come to life had better get to Brooklyn by Sunday, when the production ends its run.

The fact that men are portraying women here is less a statement about sexual role playing than about playing roles in its broadest and most resonant sense. Just as the actors invent the characters, so do the play's extremely varied characters gradually find and form their truest selves in the school for love that is Shakespeare's Forest of Arden, and the two processes eventually meld in our minds.

The troupe first toured with the play in 1991, and there's the occasional feeling that some of the jokes have over-ripened. But there's still a spontaneous-sounding spirit of discovery, a sense of actors and characters learning to find their way through what Rosalind describes as "the briers of the working day world." And the play's finale, a blending of discordant elements into harmony (nicely underscored by Paddy Cunneen's eloquent vocal arrangements), seems truly earned.

The production begins starkly: the cast, all in black tuxedo pants and white shirts, stands formally as Michael Gardiner, the actor who plays Jaques, speaks the world's most quoted line: "All the world's a stage." Then in the manner of a disarmingly casual Prospero, Mr. Gardiner surmises the play into being by simply smashing another man's face with what looks like mud.

That actor is the appealingly gawky Scott Hardy, the ill-treated Orlando who delivers the comedy's first speech. He does so with such visceral immediacy that it joltingly catapults us onto another level of perception. And so the conjuring act has begun. What follows is a series of quick scenes in which the spoken word fluidly assumes flesh, and the play's exposition has never seemed less tedious. Using overlapping dialogue and action, Mr. Donnellan has found an ineffably theatrical equivalent for the cinematic dissolve.

The director seems to be betting brazenly that we'll give ourselves over to the most improbable illusions. He ups the ante by casting against type and doubling actors in bizarre combinations of parts. Orlando's wizened servant Adam, for example, is played by Richard Cant, a spry young man who later shows up as the rustic wench Audrey.

And then there is Rosalind, portrayed by Mr. Lester, who adopts a liquedly feminine carriage but is unmistakably a man. Does it work? Suffice it to say that when Rosalind, Continued on Page B2
A Muse Who Has Moral Conviction

ANNA KISSELGOFF

The Lewitzky Dance Company presented, which opened New York premiere of the performance at the Joyce Theatre on Tuesday night, November 30, appeared last week on stage for the first time.

Lewitzky, its founder and director, has played a special role in shaping dance in the United States. He is a master of technique and a visionary choreographer whose work has been seen throughout the world. Lewitzky's dancers are known for their precision and strength, and his company has been a driving force in the development of modern dance in America.

The Lewitzky Dance Company is known for its innovative and dynamic performances, which often push the boundaries of traditional dance forms. Lewitzky's work is characterized by a strong sense of structure and form, combined with a depth of emotional expression that resonates with audiences.

The concert included a range of works, from early pieces to recent commissions, showcasing Lewitzky's versatility and depth as a choreographer. The dancers' technical prowess and emotional commitment to the pieces were on full display, captivating the audience from start to finish.

Lewitzky, 78, continues to shape dance with his innovative work, and the Lewitzky Dance Company remains a vital force in the world of contemporary dance.
Opting for the Short Form

KEY WEST TALES
By John Hersey
Knopf. 227 pp. $22

THE CHILDREN IN THE WOODS
New and Selected Stories
By Frederick Busch
Ticknor & Fields. 338 pp. $21.95

HAUNTED
Tales of the Grotesque
By Joyce Carol Oates
Dutton. 307 pp. $21.95

By Alan Ryan

HERE ARE probably as many ways to write a short story as there are writers... or, for that matter, short stories. Three recent collections by distinguished writers suggest three approaches that, while not in competition with each other, vary significantly in style, appeal and, alas, effective-ness.

Of the dozens of books John Hersey published in a career that lasted half-a-century, only one was a volume of short fiction, the 1990 Flong and Other Stories. This seems a shame now, after his death in 1993, because the posthumous publication of Key West Tales confirms once again his mastery of the form.

The 15 stories of Key West Tales display the qualities that made Hersey such an eminently readable writer. His prose is clear and clean, unfussy, economical, and he makes us confident at all times that he is saying exactly what he means to say. His characters come instantly to life, and telling details make them more vivid as their stories progress.

Some of these stories, all of them set in Key West, have historical settings and relate tales of famous visitors. Jefferson Davis, for example, released from prison and now an object of worship to some and scorn to others, displays a casual bravery without even rising from the table at a welcoming dinner in his honor. Harry Truman copes with a crisis without permitting it to disturb his morning constitutional or the languid air of a vacation. And John James Audubon, in a relaxed frame of mind, takes lively pleasure in killing hundreds of birds in a revealing man-behind-the-myth story.

Other tales, set in modern Key West, open locked doors to reveal the secrets of local characters: A mother and son search for each other in the midst of a car parade; a fannatical windsurfer rides the wind into a new life; an obese woman gets a painfully clearer image of herself than any mirror could provide; a man who had always been strong and independent continues affecting others even as he lies helpless with AIDS; and a naval officer retires from active duty in a story that not even he realizes is not really about himself.

Among the many qualities that make these stories so vivid in Hersey’s casual expertise on a wide range of subjects. Whether he is writing about windsurfing, naval ceremonies, a wedding dress, or presenting a set piece describing a slave funeral, he does it with such offhand ease that the special knowledge seems to be the reader’s, too.

Key West Tales has all the marks of a master who knows what readers want: a good story; characters who, but for the grace of God, might be us; and writing as bright and clear as ice.

Frederick Busch has other interests, evidenced in The Children in the Woods, a book that includes eight uncoupled stories together with 15 drawn from earlier collections. Thematically unified, this collection shows Busch probing again and again at the soft parts in all of us, the parts we try to hide beneath the outer shell that gets us through the long days and the longer nights. These stories are about fear—of loss, of abandonment, of loneliness, of death—that rises up to grip us when we least expect it.

In the first story, "Bread," a brother and sister come to clean out the house of their parents, who have died in an accident and, inevitably, the survivors must confront both past and future. In "The Wicked Stepmother," a daughter explains to her brother about their widowed father’s love for a new wife who threatens the children’s memories and stability. And in "Is Anyone Left This Time of Year?" a man returns—alone, for the first time—to an Irish bed-and-breakfast and must come to terms with his own loneliness and that of the people who run the place.

Busch’s first-person narrators rarely focus on a telling or dramatic moment in their lives. Rather, these are slice-of-life stories that might have happened on any day, and not just on the one chosen for dissection. And perhaps that is why Busch himself sometimes seems uncertain that he has conveyed his point.

At the end of one story, for example, he writes, "She diminished, standing up at them, like the pretty girl in the horror film who at last understands what has come for her." And again, at the end of another: "We’re trained, I told you, to ferret out the stigmatized (as the Romans would say) that is lost or hidden in the hundreds of millions of words. Maybe I just did..."

Busch’s writing is consciously literary and so carefully considered as to seem, at times, almost didactic. In one story, he writes: "Leonard held my hand, then put it down as you would place Baccarat on a marble table." This is fine and clear and vivid, even intense. But then Busch adds, quite needlessly, "with deference to its quality, with care because it was fragile."

Often in these stories, it seems that an enormous gap opens between, on the one hand, the depth and width and sheer intensity of the narrative diction and, on the other hand, the quotidian banality of the lives and deeds being narrated. Means and matter are out of synch here; the means are the meaning, and the matter hardly matters at all.

JOYCE CAROL OATES tumbles into another, even deeper, trap in the 16 stories of Haunted Tales of the Grotesque, all of which have appeared in magazines ranging from Autumn to Glamor to Ott Mick. In earlier stories, Oates has written with great success about the psychology of fear. These tales, however, were deliberately written as examples of the horror genre, and Oates displays only her failure to observe or understand the time-honored (because effective) conventions of this literature.

Nearly every story is perfectly predictable, whether it’s about children sneaking into a haunted house, a teenage girl falling under the spell of a mysterious stranger, or the woman who suddenly spots a house that looks exactly—I mean, exactly—like the dollhouse she had as a child. And the most shocking revelation in these pages, unworthy even of a beginner, is this, complete with italics: "She’d never left her hotel room."

Working in this genre, Oates inherits a tradition of elaborate writing from the pen-ny-per-word rates of the 19th century and the pulp magazines of the 20th. Alas, this servility does not endow her natural prolixity. Why write a paragraph where a page will do? In the hands of a master—Lovecraft, say—the slow accretion of suggestive detail and the growing weight of loaded language can leave the reader shivering. Oates just makes you want to scream.
Publishers, journalists and miscellaneous invitados.

For the public—a roughly estimated 1 million vacationers and thousands of tourists—the nine-day “week” (July 9-17) offers many of the usual carnival attractions: terrifying rides, games of chance and skill, dance contests, food and drink, rock and salsa concerts as well as this year’s major musical attraction, a concert by Georges Moustaki, survivor of the great era of the French chanson and a sentimental favorite among Europeans of a certain age. But amid the games and the fast food stands there is space for book stalls and author signings, for a regular schedule of radio interviews and debates about political corruption, for an exhibition of photos of the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, and another of the comic-book art of Jose Munoz and Carlos Sampayo, Argentinitans living in Italy whose graphic novels about a seedy American private eye named Alack Sinner have achieved a kind of cult status.

Fairgoers are invited to nightly copas con los escritores (“drinks with the writers”), as well as the roundtables. The Semana Negra organization also publishes a very professional daily paper, A Quemarropa (“Point Blank”), which chronicles and expands on the events and themes.

There are also a number of sui generis events: singer Moustaki and New York crime novelist Jerome Charyn taking on an Astralian ping-pong team, for example (the local guys won). And the opportunity to contribute to “1.5 Kilometers” of books for paper and book-starved Cuba.

The writers get to pontificate on such themes as “Science Fiction and the Police Novel,” “Mexico Black and Beloved,” “The Latest on the Editorial Crisis” and “Italy as Material for a Novel Negra”; to eat and drink heartily and to stay up very late. On the opening day of the festival, they are delivered to Gijon in style on a private train from Madrid and greeted by a brass band and cheering crowds. Following a reception in the town hall, hosted by Gijon mayor and Semana Negra supporter Vicente Alvarez Areges, they adjourn—Continued on page 15.

of Deception

to count backward is his dark response to one of Nicolo’s reports), complete with hints of adventures with enticing names (“The Maestro and the Chamber of Lies,” “The Maestro and the Arno Serpent”), with Nicolo playing the role of the ever-willing, often bewildered, and eternally naive Watson.

The story begins in a reasonable fashion, with a troupe of commedia dell’arte actors on the one hand, the Duke and a party out hunting on the other. Somehow connecting them is an assassination attempt, thwarted by Nicolo. Simple enough, but in the background lurks King Louis of France and the Borgian Pope Alexander VI, laying a plot against Milan.

“Weav," asserts Leonardo, “is always preceded by a kind of general insanity,” and so it proves, as Herman gives himself over to the spirit of the times.

The first warning of the madness is in the names. As multisyllabic and thick on the ground as any Russian novel, they may prove difficult for the inattentive or interrupted reader: One actor is called variously Arlecchino (his stage character), Corio (his own surname), or Simone (his first name). The Duke of Milan is Ludovico Sforza (Il Moro). Madonna Valentina Gaddi and Madonna Terese Ottone and Madonna Maria ChiGi move through the pages alongside Cardinals Belgado, Castagno and de Celano. To further complicate matters, one must differentiate Dino Spada from Mino Spiniolo and keep track of three Annas, two Francos and at least five Francescoes. Even Herman seems to find his plethora of characters slippery: the falconer’s associate Mino Spiniolo is later referred to as a carpenter and then a kitchen worker, and the author overlooks one or two bodies along the way.

“War," asserts Leonardo, “is always preceded by a kind of general insanity.”

Herman’s difficulty in keeping track of his corpses is understandable, given the sheer numbers. After 20 deaths he does not even bother to identify them, but by that time the dead are stacked like cordwood: kitchen maids and cardinals, army officers and spies, incompetent assassins, gentlewomen and courtiers. Maestro Leonardo has no scarcity of material for his anatomical and pathological studies. And the variety of methods! Agatha Christie would be green with envy. They are poisoned and stabbed, strangled and defenestrated, drowned in a cesspit and in a moat and in a horse trough, crushed by a marble block and a huge cross and the clapper of a church bell, stomped by a stallion, eaten by rats, smothered in bird droppings, swallowed by a snake and torn to pieces by falcons.

The convoluted plot seems bent on driving the duke, if not the reader, mad. “God’s blood! The world is collapsing around my ears,” the duke moans, while the reader, particularly the reader who has opened the book expecting a mystery novel, may wonder at the collapse of the plot. The answers to the two central mysteries being investigated by Leonardo and Nicolo are all but lost in the stampede, and in the end the main characters are hurled off stage. Of course, the facts of history determine how a historical novel has to end, even if storytelling suffers. (Although why a tale set in 1498 that refers to chocolates, thermometers and centimeters should concern itself with historicity is difficult to say.)

But heavens, this is not a mystery! This is farce, a grand and sweeping mockery of the darker side of human affairs, when one murder begets 10, when the pope’s son makes war on a rightful ruler, when the only rational man in the city is tried for heresy, when the man who stands tallest in ethics and education is the dwarf, and when, finally, only the comic book has the sense to close the scene on the theme of Herman’s story is absurdity and excess, and that is precisely what the reader gets.
What Stories Do That Movies Can’t

RARE & ENDANGERED SPECIES
A Novella & Stories
By Richard Bausch
Houghton Mifflin. 257 pp. $22.95

By Jonathan Penner

FICTION’S good for little. It can’t show, as movies do, how things look and sound. No ox-eyed actors make characters come alive. And a social occasion it isn’t.

Fiction is, however, the royal road to the human heart. That’s its raison d’être. The stage and screen must stop at sensory representation. But fiction lives in the very vessels of thought and feeling, memory and desire.

If you doubt that fiction owns the advantage, try expressing this in a movie: “As Jack came in, the phone chimed: from its cheerful insistence, probably Myra. No, probably Myra’s mother. His anger fizzled into fear, he felt his toes curl in his boots.”

Two of the nine stories in Richard Bausch’s Rare & Endangered Species make wonderful use of the capacities unique to fiction. In “High-Heeled Shoe,” the character Dornberg finds an enigmatic and troubling shoe. This homely object proves to be the grain of sand around which forms a luminous psychological drama.

Effortlessly spinning off complications and surprises, the story widens to include Dornberg’s condition as father, husband and adulterer. Missing the chance to confess his sin, he carries it unrepented. In a final nighttime scene, he waits for his wife to call him in from darkness literal and spiritual.

“The Person I Have Mostly Become” is an artful tale of disintegration following a socioeconomic plunge. In the unnamed protagonist’s childhood, his mother had a maid. But now he’s an adult and unemployed, his wife is impatient, his son fears him and his old mother works as a maid herself. His mother touts him for a position working for her own employer. But when they arrive for the interview and he sees his mother’s servility toward her “lady,” his helpless anger costs him the job. Swung by passion, the protagonist yet retains a capacity for introspection. It’s his inner struggle, which we’re privileged to watch, that gives this story its power.

In other stories, unfortunately, the viewpoint character—that mind and heart through which the story flows—is left opaque. Even when an interlocutor makes an especially piercing remark, one to which the protagonist would surely have an inner reaction, we often don’t learn what it is. We learn only his spoken reply, or even less: that he “gave no answer.”

With nobody’s consciousness to consult, exposition is relegated to “establishing scenes” of dialogue, much as in a play. The characters faithfully discuss what the author wants the reader to know.

Bausch has a terrific ear, especially for sarcastic sniping. But dialogue babbling on for pages—at times unnaturally efficient, at other times inefficiently natural—shrinks the characters to talking heads.

Another disadvantage of relying so much on dialogue is that it tends to slow the fiction down to “real time.” We advance no more quickly than the characters can converse. Fiction has ingenious engines to accelerate through time and space, but they don’t operate when people are talking.

One story, “Aren’t You Happy for Me?,” consists mostly of phone conversations. The protagonist, speaking with his daughter, hears that she’s marrying her elderly ex-professor. Next the professor is put on the line. Not only do we rarely enter the protagonist’s head or heart; because this is telephone talk, he can’t even see the other parties—or, of course, can we. The material is cleverly chosen and potentially full of feeling. Yet the technique Bausch has chosen squeezes the story dry.

The collection ends with a novella, “Rare & Endangered Species,” told in six titled sections. Here are many unusual characters and relationships, any one of which could be the meat of a novella. But the length of the piece exacerbates the problem of relying on speech. Burdened with exposition—which narrative can carry so lightly—the dialogue strains and stumbles. Though each section has its own ostensible viewpoint character, switching between them scarcely changes (as it should) the lens through which we see an imagined world.

THE TROUBLE with slighting point of view shows plainly in the keystone section. Here the viewpoint character is Andrea, an elderly woman. After a long conversation with her husband and friends, she checks into a motel. Meeting a lover? No, we’re startled to find that she’s here to commit suicide.

Though Andrea is the viewpoint character, Bausch keeps us out of her head in order to save a plot surprise. In movies and plays, where you can’t enter heads, those surprises work. But in fiction, they reduce the characters to finger puppets and leave the reader feeling equally manipulated.

Bausch shows elsewhere in this collection (and in earlier work) that he can indeed, and very well, tell a story from the inside out. Clearly his sketching of surfaces here is a conscious artistic choice. But that choice forces him often to work against his medium, demanding from it what it grudges, and spurning its abundance.
Palestine
And Its
Destiny

THE POLITICS OF DISPOSSESSION
The Struggle for Palestinian
Self-Determination, 1969-1994
By Edward W. Said
Pantheon. 450 pp. $27.50

By Michael Lerner

THERE'S LESS to celebrate in the
peace accord between Israel and
the PLO than meets the eye, ac-
cording to Edward Said. While
tens of thousands of Palestinians jubilantly
cheer Yasser Arafat's recent visit to Gaza,
Said rejects Arafat's characterization of the
agreement as "the peace of the brave" and
sees it instead as a fatal betrayal of Pales-
tinian dreams, "an instrument of Palestinian
surrender, a Palestinian Versailles" negoti-
tiated by a PLO leadership increasingly un-
democratic and out of touch with the needs
of the Palestinian people. Warning of the
dangers of undemocratic rule by Yasser
Arafat and his coterie, Said has a prescrip-
tion: "Palestinians should thank the men in
Tunis for their past contributions, but they
should then take the next logical step and
demand that they resign."

Said is a respected English professor at
Columbia University—author of Culture
and Imperialism and Orientalism—and his
powerful assaults on Western intellectual
arrogance in its attempts to frame all expe-
dience in the epilogue that the accords might
lead to independence, he would have done
better to focus less attention on denouncing
them and more on what could be done to
build support within Israel for an extension
of the forces of hopefulness and reconcili-
ation.

The cessation of hostilities between Is-
rael and Jordan, recently celebrated in
Washington, may help to alleviate Israeli
fears—though its ominous renegotiation of
Jordanian power over Islamic holy places in
Jerusalem is likely to intensify Palestinian
insecurities. The wave of bombings against
Jews around the world in recent days, how-
ever, is likely to make Israelis less hopeful
that any accommodation between Palestinians
would ever yield an end to the violence.

Said is persistently tone-deaf to Israeli
concerns. That persistence throughout this
book exemplifies how the Palestinians might
still undermine the fragile Israeli coalition
willing to take risks for peace: the refusal of
even the most enlightened Palestinians to
seriously acknowledge the legitimacy of Is-
raeli security fears, the inability to distin-
guish between "liberation struggle" and acts
of terror against random Israelis, the inabil-
ity to recognize Zionism as the na-
tional liberation struggle of the Jewish
people (however distorted the ultra-nationalist
wing of that movement was at some mo-
ments), and hence the inability to talk in a
language sufficiently sympathetic to the
fears of Israelis to be able to convince the
Israeli public that the risks of peace are
worth taking.

Said's one-sidedness is the perfect
complement not only to Hamas (Is-
lamic fundamentalists who Said insis-
tists are not terrorists because they have
renounced the use of force against the
PLO, as though their ongoing murder of
Israelis still does not register in Said's
mind), but also to tens of thousands of Is-
lamists who still hope to continue...
to crystallize into a mold. People accept constricted lives because they find it easier to surrender to such molds. But within these molds man dies. Men who live only by habit and routine die.

THE WRITER AS PROPHET

The writer may be a prophet. When Franz Kafka first described the experience of a man who feels small, lost, and confused in a vast world of impersonal institutions and bureaucracy, his reaction seemed subjective, exaggerated, abnormal. But now that we have caught up with such a world the sensation has become familiar to us. I understood Kafka not when I first read him but when I tried to find an office in the Empire State Building through hallways which looked absolutely identical. Kafka was not ahead of his time. He was sensitive to the possible developments of standardization, its effect on us, its dehumanizing process. We were slow to realize the new kind of anxiety which vast, anonymous, headless organizations would cause a human being. The writer, in the case of Kafka, accepted his sensitized (unanesthetized) reaction to a new situation just emerging. Anyone dealing with bureaucracy, passport departments, tax papers could have developed and expanded his anxiety, his feeling of being caught in a vast machine, into the drama fully done by Kafka. Other writers might dismiss such a mood, such a state of mind carelessly and never enter fully into it. The subjective experience of a writer is not unique. It is something he shares with others. What may be unique is his way of expressing it, because each new experience requires a new form of expression. He has to feel his way, invent new words for a latent, potential, as yet unexpressed emotion. He has to light up with his expression worlds which may never have been lighted before.

By annihilating one sense, such as physical vision, an artist seeks to develop other senses, just as the blind develop other forms of sensitivity, and the mute sign language and other expressions. Writing is subject to the influence of other arts. Robbe-Grillet writes scenarios. His skeletal novels took their structure from

a stringent scenario. In films we accepted abrupt transitions, jump cutting, fadeouts, flashbacks, fluid dream sequences, superimposition of images.

We must continue to make the contents of the unconscious as clear as the contents of the conscious mind.

Poetic prose might be compared to jazz. Jazz does not work unless it swings. The beat must be constantly tugged and pushed across the familiar line of the four-four balance until the real rhythmic message is felt more than heard. Classical jazz cannot swing because the composer's notation is too rigid. Duke Ellington said: "We're going to do this thing until your pulse and my pulse are the same!"

I am concentrating on the writers who have attempted this fusion of conscious and unconscious. The novels of Maude Hutchins, witty and intelligent, are subtle blends of reality and unconscious streams of consciousness. Anna Kavan explored the nocturnal worlds of our dreams, fantasies, imagination, and nonreason. Such an exploration takes greater courage and skill in expression. As the events of the world prove the constancy of the nonrational, it becomes absurd to treat such events with rational logic. But people prefer to accept the notion of the absurd rather than to search for the meaning, the symbolic act which is quite clear for whoever is willing to decipher the unconscious. The writer who follows the designs and patterns of the unconscious achieves the same revelation.

Anna Kavan made a significant beginning as a nocturnal writer with House of Sleep and achieved this kind of revelation with a classic equal to the work of Kafka titled Asylum Pieces in which the nonrational human being caught in a web of unreality still struggles to maintain a dialogue with those who cannot understand him. In later books the waking dreamers give up the struggle and simply tell of their adventures. They live in solitude with their shadows, hallucinations, prophecies.

We admire the deep-sea diver exploring the depth of the ocean. We do not admire enough those who are able to describe
claimed by science, a freedom from time, a freedom from geography. The realist has been too much of a map maker, tracing roads already in existence. We should also have aerial photographers to reveal virgin lands. The realists have been eager to reproduce a still, static image rather than a mobile one. They were the ones who could not imagine the world round, or that we could ever fly. It was Leonardo da Vinci, the wild dreamer, who gave us wings.

The pessimism which has colored present writing would not exist if men had not turned their backs on the science of human nature in favor of all the other sciences. It is a curious fact to observe that the human being has almost vanished from science fiction. It is also strange that, just as we were about to discover our power to change destiny, we surfaced to an almost completely external world where the human being is more than ever in danger of annihilation, not from bombs, but from passivity.

The future novel has to learn to deal with the many new dimensions we have opened into the personality of man.

Dr. Otto Rank predicted a new structure of the personality. The writer will be responsible for inventing a form of writing to contain this.

Dr. Rank also said that the artist is primarily an individual who is unable or unwilling to adopt the dominant ideology of his age, whether religious, social, or other, not because it differs ideologically from his own but because it is collective. For out of his conflict with collective ideas is born the tension which makes us renew our ideas and forms.

The writer acts upon his environment by his selection of the material he wishes to highlight. He is, ultimately, responsible for our image of the world, and our relation to others.

Today we know more about ourselves just as we know more about the universe. Just as the scientists discovered that matter could be disintegrated into energy, the psychologists discovered that the personality could be broken down into its multiple components with a corresponding release of energy. The concept that man is simple is no more true today than the nineteenth-century concept that matter was unchangeable. Proust decomposed personality only to apply the concept of relativity to the emotional nature of man.

The poets were the first to perceive that too clear a conscious knowledge, too analytical an understanding may bring us intellectually nearer to reality but may, on the other hand, diminish in us the capacity for the sensation of reality itself, for feeling.

Today we have more to synthesize, and we have begun to take both man and his psyche apart to watch "how the flowers grow." Proust fragmented the personality as though he were examining it under a microscope. Then with psychology we realized the most important part of man, the psyche, was invisible to the naked eye. We found the old synthesis as false as old notions about science. Having dismembered and fragmented man in order to attain a proof of relativity, we had to reassemble him in a new way. We have far more elements to reassemble. We have to include the expansion of the universe and new powers of communication which have progressed much faster than our power of assimilation and synthesis. This demands an even stronger, more flexible individual core than in the past: first, to resist disintegration in the face of pressures and apparent chaos; second, to relate all the new knowledge in a different structure; and, finally, to integrate all these new dimensions.

Much has been written about the fragmentation of the novel, but this reaction stems from an outmoded concept of wholeness. Wholeness, in the past, was a semblance of consistency created from a pattern, social and philosophical, to which human beings submitted. This artificial unity of man was dissolved by a new vision into the selves which were masked to achieve a semblance of unity, a new vision into the relativity of truth and character. Man is not a finite, static, crystallized unity. He is fluid, in a constant state of flux, evolution, reaction and action, negative and positive. He is the purest example of relativity. We as novelists have to make a new synthesis, one which includes fluctu-
perience. But all we know about religious mysticism suggests that very careful disciplines and rigorous forms of training would have to be developed on which those who used the psychedelic drugs as an adjunct to religious experience could draw. It also seems clear that in our own American tradition, one test of whether such a development was in fact a religion would be its social relevance. For unlike those Eastern religions in which mystical experience is a purely individual spiritual belief, Western religions contain the expectation that religious experience benefits not only the visionary but also others who share his faith...

It must also be recognized, however, that there is no necessary relationship between the use of drugs and religious experience. The ordinary LSD “trip” has no more necessary relationship to mystical experience than the drinking of ten cocktails...

From a point of view the battle between those who wish to enlarge their experience through the use of LSD and other drugs and those who are exercising all their powers to prohibit this use is a very old one in Western cultures. On the one side are those who believe that control over consciousness is crucial to human living and that loss of control inevitably leads to the emergence of dangerous, bestial impulses. On the other side are those who believe that control of consciousness is itself inimical to true spirituality.

I am quoting this because it is important to the modern writer. The whole trend is as important as the emergence of psychoanalysis. In spite of its enemies, in spite of that sector of the people who remain prejudiced, it has altered the consciousness of our time, influenced us even against our knowledge. It has penetrated, infiltrated, affected all our thinking, arts, and living. The same is true with LSD. Whether we use it or not, are for or against it, it has already changed and altered our consciousness and our vision. There is a parallel between the problems of religion and the problems of creation, imagination, and poetry.

Freedom of the subconscious for the artist is equally crucial. The enrichment and the risks are equal, the belated canonizations similar. The fact is that even hostile antiart elements are subliminally influenced by the artist. And the real issue—of who, and how, and when we used means of expanding consciousness—has the same answer: The only one who can allow his unconscious to be free is the one who can understand its meaning and control its destructive aspects. After all, the most bestial and dangerous human being we have known in our time, Adolf Hitler, did not take LSD.

In short, every form of experience has its negative and positive side. Religion and art can supply experiences without use of drugs if one does not believe in them.

A good substitute for drugs would be the artist’s vision. The artist, by a long discipline of fighting rationalizations, conventions, and clichés, achieves a freedom of vision which is exactly the one sought from drugs. Drugs merely remove the conscious controls, the built-in defensive masks. The poet, film-maker, painter have a natural access to his unconscious, and if one trusted him, one would share his visions. I took LSD to see if the world I described in my poetry resembled the world of LSD, if it was a different world from that of the images inspired from dreams or poetic states. It was the same, only intensified and concentrated in a way that would ultimately consume or unbalance a human being.

One might translate Margaret Mead’s words for the writer. The question of validity has troubled every artistic group that has accepted the possibility of creative artistic experience.

The most valuable contribution of American writers has been in the realm of rhythm. There was rhythm in Kerouac’s On the Road, rhythm in Daniel Stern’s After the War, a rhythm taken from jazz in Stanford Whitmore’s Solo, as well as an original attempt to write the equivalent of jazz. There is a long, tidal rhythm in Marguerite Young’s Miss MacIntosh, My Darling.

But the danger for American writers is that while in motion they are effective, but when depth and reflection are necessary or inevitable, they occasionally flounder because they have not learned to stop the physical action and watch the psychic action.

Every new development in one art is often paralleled in another medium. Jazz, collages, mobiles, animation in films, the combination of several arts have all indicated ways of renewal for the novel form.

Jazz was bound to have its effect on writing. The fluctuations
and rotations of mobiles were bound to affect writing. From the early days when it was found that the drumbeat affected soldiers because it paralleled the beating of the heart, rhythm has been a way to influence impetus. Rhythm in poetic prose has the same intent.

The use of rhythm as magic in writing is similar to the drumming in jazz. Rituals, costumes, gestures at ceremonies all are intended to move and sweep us into experience. We have observed Indian and Mexican fiestas in which music, color, and rhythm create a contagious, engulfing atmosphere, never realizing that we ourselves have banished from our civilization the arts which have the power to move our senses and our emotions, to heighten our sense of life. It is this lack which I believe to be at the base of the fascination for drugs.

To demand of the novel an objectivity which condemns us to be mere spectators is to deprive ourselves of the original intent of the novel derived from the Italian word novella—the never-before-experienced.

Rhythm is what animates poetry, sets it in motion, gives it levitation. It is rhythm which appealed in jazz, the rhythm of life, the pulse, the beat. Rhythm is inseparable from life, from the senses, from a sensory way of perceiving life.

The rhythm of Seduction of the Minotaur which takes place in Mexico is slower than the rhythm of the descriptions of New York in The Diary.

The importance of rhythm in my estimation is a measure of the difference between a live book and a dead one.

My brother, the composer Joaquin Nin-Culmell, told me once that when people approach him he bears them in terms of sound. They make a sound impression, a musical impression. This may be valid for a composer. But each art I became familiar with I felt related to the art of writing. When I first frequented painters (as a model), I watched the mixing of paint and discovered the range of colors. Then I began to observe people in terms of their coloring, the colors they wore and lived with. From painters I learned the difference between transparency and opaqueness.

When I was with musicians, I learned from my brother to think of people in terms of the music which expressed them. When I studied dancing I became more observant of people's way of moving and standing and sitting, the way they handled their bodies, hands, and feet.

A new novel by Daniel Stern, After the War, has a definite tempo which is sustained throughout, perhaps because he is an excellent cellist.

Not all rhythm can have the swift pace of jazz. In my novels movement is not always a matter of tempo but also may be a matter of gradations of awareness, emotional fluctuations, immersions into experience and drawings away, flashbacks, and futuristic descriptions of potentials in character usually seen by the lover. The illusion of romantic lovers in our modern times becomes the vision into the potential of the loved one. A fast tempo is not possible to reflection.

A constant rhythm expressed in the lyrical passages can create another kind of rhythm that asserts the power of the imagination to rescue itself from tragedy, from ugliness, from anxiety, or from the neutral becalmed regions of nonexperience.

**Bigness Is Not Greatness**

Americans, accustomed to thinking predominantly in terms of high numbers, with a great many digits, applied the same measurements to the novel. A novel was great only if it was big and crowded with people, numerically and geographically immense, historically all-encompassing, a Cecil B. De Mille epic. The close study of one human being is as important to a community as the study of mass movements.

What determines the length of a fictional piece is not always easy to say. Occasionally I have dwelt on a character who I believed would be material for a full-length novel. When I began to write Stella in Ladders to Fire, I thought I would have more to
The One Who Had Fun

Poetry, as a consequence of the social condition, is still the home of the true writer, who, like the bird that is a bird of passage, is a bird of passage.

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Love

How to Choose A Mansion

Castlebro, wedding planners and managers of events, suggests:

Choose the house you want at least 6 months before the wedding, especially if it will be a formal event, to make sure it is available and can be reserved in time to meet all 338 guests.

The first step is to find out if the house is available on your date. Ask if the house will allow you to book it on the date and whether or not you will be able to choose the ceremony time.

Discuss whether the location is really appropriate for the event. Ask if the house has a lot of family and friends who will attend and also if there will be a lot of non-family members present.

Try to rent chairs and tables from the outside, the hotel, or the nearby marriage company. Ask about outside vendors who can provide food and drinks. Consider whether there will be enough space and personnel to accommodate the guests.

Ask if the room will allow you to have an open fire inside the house during the wedding.

Ask if the house will allow you to have a dog or other pet in the house during the ceremony.

Ask if the house will allow you to bring your own food and drinks into the house. A lot of people prefer to have their wedding at a house where they can bring in their own food and drinks.

Ask if the house will allow you to have a dance floor or other entertainment. Many people prefer to have a dance floor or other entertainment at their wedding.

Ask if the house will allow you to have a photographer or videographer in the house. Many people prefer to have a photographer or videographer in the house during the wedding.

Ask if the house will allow you to have a band or other music in the house. Many people prefer to have a band or other music in the house during the wedding.

Ask if the house will allow you to have a food truck or other outdoor dining in the house. Many people prefer to have a food truck or other outdoor dining in the house during the wedding.

Ask if the house will allow you to have a bar or other drink station in the house. Many people prefer to have a bar or other drink station in the house during the wedding.

Ask if the house will allow you to have a fireworks display in the house. Many people prefer to have a fireworks display in the house during the wedding.

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Books of The Times

A Family Confronts the AIDS Crisis

BY CHRISTOPHER LEHMANN-HAUPT

The phrase in the title of Alice Hoffman's touching but too schematic new novel, "At Risk," applies as much to the artistic gamble the author has taken as it does to the medical and psychic states of her characters.

For her subject is the dying of a young girl, the sentimental dangers of which Oscar Wilde aptly summed up when he said that it would take a heart of stone not to laugh at the death of Little Nell in Charles Dickens' "Old Curiosity Shop." Moreover, Ms. Hoffman's Amanda Farrell dies of AIDS, a subject so close to the news and so surrounded by controversy that it would be challenge enough for the author simply to keep her artistic distance.

"At Risk" does succeed in overcoming those obstacles. From its opening sentence, we know we are in a world that is specific and alive: "There is a wasp in the kitchen. Drawn by the smell of apricot jam, lazy from the morning's heat, the wasp hovers above the children. All through town a yellow light is cast over the green lawns and the rhododendrons. By dusk there will be a storm, with raindrops that are surprisingly cold, but of course by then the birds in the backyards and out on the marsh will have taken flight."

This simple, brick-solid prose—which will seem pleasantly familiar to readers of Ms. Hoffman's previous six novels, most memorably last year's "Illuminations"—soon establishes that the Farrell family of Morrow, Cape Ann, Mass., is made up not of stick figures, but unique living people.

There is Ivan Farrell, an absent-minded astronomer who wants to offer the gift of "pure science" to his children; his wife, Polly, who makes her living as a photographer, capturing light; 8-year-old Charlie, who lives to explore the woodlands around his house and dreams of the flesh-eating dinosaur, Tyrannosaurus rex, and 11-year-old Amanda, a champion gymnast in the making who, when she throws herself onto the uneven parallel bars, becomes "a creature Polly cannot name, one made up not of flesh but of points of brilliant light."

It is not so much that Amanda is dying of AIDS contracted from contaminated blood transfused during an appendectomy. It is that Ivan's science fails, Polly's light goes dark, and Amanda is figuratively escorted to the underworld by Laurel Smith, the town spiritualist, whom Ms. Hoffman somehow makes both endearing and authentic, even though her apparent power to commune with the dead has more to do with neurosis than clairvoyance.

The problem is that even though "At Risk" seems spontaneous and original, a reader never escapes the sense of a blueprint behind it. For instance, one is initially relieved that in the character of Amanda Farrell Ms. Hoffman has selected what in a narrow sense might be considered the most innocent possible victim of AIDS. But sooner does one begin to feel misgivings about this judgment, when Ivan, Amanda's father, calls an AIDS hotline, and through it meets Brian, a dying musician who has picked up the virus either from love making or from sharing a needle with an infected needle. The symmetry of Brian's presence in the story is a little too neat.

Similarly, with other plausible occurrences in the story, one can't help being conscious of obligatory scenes being played out. There is the one in which Amanda's brother, Charlie, discovers that his best friend can't play with him anymore, and the one in which parents demand of the school board that Amanda be quarantined. There is the scene where the orthodontist refuses to take off Amanda's braces. And as a final didactic note, Ms. Hoffman writes a postscript asking that donations be made to the American Foundation for AIDS Research.

Well, why not? This is the way it happens in real life. This is how meaningless death causes suffering. And besides, Amanda's death isn't entirely pointless. She herself learns bravery in the face of the inevitable, and all the other major characters grow in their various ways.

Why not, then? Because for all the craft with which it is written, "At Risk" doesn't escape the limitations of art that tries too conscientiously to teach a lesson. One can't forget that Ms. Hoffman is writing the news. And a dimension of tragedy is missing.

Ms. Hoffman's image of angry words that "fall across the table like splinters of glass" brings to mind Stephen Dedalus's great, if somewhat priggish, defense of classic tragedy against didactic art in James Joyce's "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man": "A girl got into a hansom a few days ago," Stephen tells his companion Lynch, "in London. She was on her way to meet her mother whom she had not seen for many years. At the corner of a street the shaft of aerry shivered the window of the hansom in the shape of a star. A long fine needle of the shivered glass pierced her heart. She died on the instant. The reporter called it a tragic death. It is like the girl in Stephen Dedalus's parable. Ms. Hoffman's Amanda Farrell is the victim of a random accident. There may be lessons to be learned from it. But in Alice Hoffman's treatment, it occurs too circumstantially to engage our deepest moral sympathies.
The Jazz Festival

Celebrating Buddy Rich Musically

BY JOHN S. WILSON

A gathering of Buddy Rich's friends in a program called "A Celebration of Music" at Carnegie Hall on Friday evening managed to achieve several rewarding moments despite some jarring miscalculations.

The event, part of the JVC Jazz Festival, was produced by Mr. Rich's daughter, Cathy, who brought together such one-time associates and admirers of Mr. Rich as Stan Getz, Mel Tormé, Joe Williams, Jon Hendricks, Annie Ross and Louis Bellson, as well as the Buddy Rich Big Band, now under the leadership of the saxophonist Steve Marcus.

Mr. Bellson, the only contemporary of Mr. Rich who rivaled him as a showmanly virtuoso drummer, gave the evening a drumming identity with one of his skillfully structured showpieces backed by the Rich band, a situation that was almost an evocation of Mr. Rich. Later, when the band played the "Porgy and Bess" medley that was part of Mr. Rich's repertory, Danny D'Imperio, who is now the drummer in the band, gave a remarkably accurate impression of Mr. Rich (who died last year), both as drum soloist and band leader.

Mr. Getz, backed by a trio, wisely had the microphones turned off while he played a beautifully phrased and balanced ballad, thereby avoiding the ricocheting echoes of amplification that plagued most of the other performers. They were particularly damaging to the fast, tricky lyrics sung by Jon Hendricks and Company. Mr. Tormé, with the sensitive accompaniment of John Campbell, pianist, Jay Leathart, bass, and Donny Osborner, drums, managed to skirt those amplification dangers in a brief set that was a summation of his polished talents as a singer.

Wiggins Survives

The veteran pianist Gerry Wiggins, who has accompanied countless jazz and pop singers of note over the years, is one of Art Tatum's most self-effacing disciples. Mr. Wiggins, who gave the eighth and final concert in the JVC Jazz Festival's early evening solo piano series Friday, devoted most of his energy to very familiar standards. Among other tunes, his program included "Mood Indigo."
THE WESTERN LANDS

By William S. Burroughs.

By Jonathan Baumbach

The public perception of William S. Burroughs is that he has written one aberrant masterpiece, "Naked Lunch," and has subsequently given us obsessive variations of diminishing interest on that brilliant early novel. More accurately, Mr. Burroughs has gone his own outrageous way and literary fashion has gone virtually in the opposite direction. At a time in which trendiness seems the highest virtue and banality passes regularly for wisdom, art that requires imaginative participation is perceived as an uncontrived annoyance. The avant-garde novel, as we've been told in these pages and others, is a thing of the past. It is dead; it is the ghost of its former self; it has run out of readers. (The reader part may be true, though that is commentary more on the state of our literacy than on the vitality of post-modern fiction.)

"The Western Lands," the third part of a trilogy that includes "Cities of the Red Night" (1981) and "The Place of Dead Roads" (1984), seems like nothing else being published in the United States today. That is not in itself cause for recommendation, though given the sameness of much recent fiction, it can't help but be a move in the right direction. Like other Burroughs novels, with the partial exception of "The Place of Dead Roads," the present book has little or no consecutive narrative. It is made up of bizarre anecdotes, which fit into one another like Chinese boxes, and comic routines, which tend to be as irrelevant and obscene as Lenny Bruce at his most subversive. Although the novel is mostly about its own process, the ostensible issue is how to find one's way to paradise on the "most dangerous of all roads." The Western Lands is the Egyptian name for Paradise.

"The Western Lands" might be seen as a pilgrim's progress in the guise of a touring vaudeville show through the more remote provinces of hell. The novel starts with an old writer, William Seward Hall (a Burroughs stand-in), attempting "to write his way out of death." Hall sends out his characters, Joe the Dead, Kim Carson (the gunfighter from "Dead Roads"), and some other souls into the wilderness. The novel is about" Laugh, and I’ll laugh with you. Weep, and I’ll weep with you. Whatever you do, I’ll do."

Jonathan Baumbach is the author of eight books of fiction, including, most recently, "The Life and Times of Major Fiction."

Where the Outrageous Go in Springtime

TWO WEEKS IN THE MIDDAY SUN
A Cannes Notebook.
By Roger Greenspun.

By Diane Jacobs

There's something outstanding about the very notion of the Cannes Film Festival, which lures thousands to a Mediterranean town during the so-called week of May so that they can spend most of their time in the dark. Though less selective than New York and not as esteemed as Venice, Cannes surpasses its rival festivals in sheer flamboyance. Here are the biggest stars, the most prestigious jurors, the most sought-after new films and — since it's first and foremost an industry trade fair — the most outrageous hacksters and richest plâté de foie gras.

While notorious for starlets stripping on tabletops, Cannes has also, over the past 40 years, seen the international premieres of such classics as Ingmar Bergman’s "Seventh Seal" and Federico Fellini's "8." "Amarcord," as well as "discovered" Australian cinema and given countless struggling independent film makers the exposure they could never find elsewhere. Yet, except for Irwin Shaw’s novel "Evening in Byzantium" and Michael Ritchie’s film "An Almost Perfect Affair," few books or movies have explored this yearly rite of spring. So Roger Ebert’s "Two Weeks in the Midday Sun" is welcome.

Mr. Ebert, the Chicago Sun-Times film critic and half of the Siskel and Ebert television duo, does not try to cover all aspects of the Cannes experience. Instead he seeks to capture its atmosphere through primitive but appealing pen-and-ink sketches and amusing anecdotes about characters like the producer Menahem Golan, who "had lunch with Jean-Luc Godard at the Majestic Hotel and wrote out a contract on a table napkin, committing Godard to make a Cannon Films version of "King Lear," with a screenplay by Norman Mailer and a cast including Woody Allen." Essentially a diary of Cannes 1987, Mr. Ebert’s 12th visit to the festival, the book proceeds from a first night when the jet-lagged critic dozes through "Rumpelstiltskin" to the announcement of the Palme d'Or (Cannes' grand prize) a fortnight and many white sauces hence.

Throughout his text, Mr. Ebert imbibes capsule film reviews and some thoughtful star portraits, but his book is best when affectionately describing outrageous Cannes regulars like the jack-of-all-trades Billy Baxter or rummaging about such sites noires as the French telex system and the malevolent gendarmes. While major 1987 events, like the exclusive dinner for the Prince and Princess of Wales, are duly reported, the book never builds to a climax, nor does it stretch for larger truths. Even the frenzy of Cannes’s final days is mentioned rather than dramatized. But if Mr. Ebert has constructed not so much a book as a volume of discreet impressions, these are sharp, wry and — for this Cannes veteran — right on the mark.
Poetry and Word Processing: One or the Other, but Not Both

By Louis Simpson

I wanted to learn something about word processors. "The Water Processed Book" by Processor. I know the novelist who swears by his, and he cannot drive a car. And it's not because I write short poems and don't use many words. In writing, I don't want a machine that makes rewriting easy. If I think I can easily change the next word and have nothing about what I'm writing, then the nature of my writing changes. Poets don't think they're just writing — they think they are listening to a muse and that she doesn't stammer. A pressure to say everything and no other drives the poem forward from phrase to phrase and line to line. The idea of perfection — call it an illusion if you will, but I had said, "Even after J. B. died and went to a better house," the tone would be quite different. The second version is more amusing, and some may prefer it, but I didn't want to be satiric. I wanted the poem to seem true.

As I have said, poets do have to make changes, but they cannot think so; they must think that the next word and phrase will be perfect. At times, and these are the happiest, they have the feeling that words are being achieved at absolute finality. The word processor works directly against this feeling; it tells you your writing is not final. And it enables you to think you are writing when you are not, when you are only making notes or the outline of a poem you may write at a later time. But then you will feel no need to write it.

Poets, indeed, are a strange race, "wrecked," as one of them put it, "solitary, here." They don't think like the majority. Sometimes efforts are made to redeem them and bring them into the fold. Some years ago C. P. Snow spoke of "two cultures" and deplored the ignorance of science among people who were otherwise educated. He called for universities to make courses in science obligatory. I wondered what universities he had in mind, for the one I went to had indeed required attendance in such courses, and I found myself, as a last resort, taking a course in astronomy. One night a week, with others who were in the same fix, I went to an observatory on Morningside Heights and peered through a telescope at the cloud of dust and chemicals one kind of culture produces. As the sky could not be seen, we pointed the telescope at Times Square and read marquees advertising "Let Freedom Sing" and "Star and Garter" (featuring Gypsy Rose Lee). We studied the face that smoked a Camel and puffed smoke rings.

E OR 200 years, ever since the French erected a monument to reason and humanity around it, science has been the prevailing faith. And now science's child, technology, appears to be on the verge of a total triumph. I think, however, there is a resistance. I find it in myself — it seems to have been born with me — and I think there is a minority that feels as I do. We feel a truth in us that is difficult to express, for it involves our whole being. This truth has one thing to say at a time and only one way of saying it — an absolute language and form. Our task is to listen to it. Poetry isn't writing, not really. It is the art of listening.

This way of thinking is opposed to that which deals with ideas, ideas received in the marketplace, processed and carried to market and sold again. For that kind of commerce the word processor is ideally suited. We can always change our ideas. There's no truth in us, only an idea that serves the occasion. We ourselves are merely an extension of the machine, the part that puts in ideas.

I won't be using a word processor tomorrow, or a hundred years from now. I'll still be listening for the voice of the absolute. Edmund Wilson, a writer of prose, said verse was a dying technique. But, in fact, it is not a technique, and we who write it are not dying as long as we believe in a reality that speaks in uncertain terms.

This essay is based on a talk given last year at a New York University dinner celebrating the Elmer Holmes Bobst Writing Awards.
Frederick Barthelme’s Spilled Bean

To the Editor:

 Anyone who reads Frederick Barthelme’s stories knows that what he does he does very well. He’s a talented professional. His essay “On Being Wrong: Convicted Minimalist Spills Bean” (April 3), however, contains some telling contradictions.

 He deplores, for example, the habit his detractors have of lumping him together with Mary Robison and Ann Beattie and Raymond Carver as “minimalists.” But how much more deplorable his own willingness, later in the essay, to lump together as “realists” an indistinct horde of entirely unnamed writers. Just who are these hacks whose bad prose and philosophizing characters and barren big ideas constituted, in his mind, the sole literary alternative to the academic post-modernists who trained him? Presumably he is reacting here to some inept (and equally unnamed) critic who somewhere defined the difference between “Moon Deluxe” and “Dubliners” as the relative presence or absence of “big ideas.” But does the ineptness of one’s detractors give one the right to make one’s rebuttal irresponsibly vague?

 If Mr. Barthelme had confined his essay to a single sentence — “I write the way I do because that’s the way I am and many people seem to like it” — and then, to be consistent with his anti-trancendent views, let his fiction speak for itself, there would be no problem. But if he wants to persuade us that his brand of fiction is superior to all those other unspecified “realistic” brands, if he, at the end of the essay, insists on asserting that “knowing something . . . even if it’s only temporarily known, is better than knowing nothing in lofty and permanent terms,” then I, as one of his unpersuaded readers, claim the right to invoke the more or less randomly chosen example of Flannery O’Connor. Here is a writer who, like Mr. Barthelme, wrote about the contemporary American South and who had, again like him, a wonderful ear for the way ordinary people speak and a wonderful eye for the details of life in the modern world. But if, as I feel, a single story by O’Connor — “Good Country People,” say, or “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” — outweighs in its power, its depth and its drama Mr. Barthelme’s entire oeuvre, it’s precisely because O’Connor chose to “know nothing in lofty and permanent terms”: to dedicate her writing to the mystery of human existence rather than to the temporary knowledge of strangers’ faces in a supermarket. And having had, I’m sure, more direct encounters with skunks than catching a whiff of one on a late-night highway, she would not have been so sentimental as to assert that skunks smell good. There are ways of writing about the modern world that involve getting out of the car. JONATHAN FRANZEN

 Jackson Heights, Queens

 The problem with Mr. Barthelme’s musings is that they revolve around a couple of garishly painted cardboard masks which, upon being rotated, prove to be empty. The difficulty is not maxim and mimin, but rather, talent and no-talent. Although my tastes happen to lie with such “maximalists” as Melville, Proust, Joyce, Nabokov and Thomas Lynch (none of whom are mentioned by Mr. Barthelme), the obverse of their genius is not the crabbled drab little muse of Ann Beattie, Mary Robison et al., but rather the spare one of (to take only the greatest example) Samuel Beckett. Here we may find not the easiest Won tennes of the graduates from Iowa and Hopkins, but a hard won reduction, a painful stripping away of richness, a barren of bone. If you subtract from a ledger brimming with abundance, you may end up with value; start with a few ragged ciphers and the result is inevitable.

 This result is apparent, to pick at random, in Raymond Carver’s “Boxes” (included in “Best American Short Stories 1987”): “The crows fly off, back to their wire. Jill picks at a fingernail. My mother is saying that the second-hand car dealer is coming around the next morning to collect the things that she isn’t going to send on the bus or carry with her in the car. The table and chairs, TV, sofa, and bed are going with the dealer. But he’s told her he doesn’t have any use for the card table, so my mother is going to throw it away unless we want it.”

 In contrast with these murky slap-dash awkwardnesses, consider a somewhat less well-known minimalist: “Francine Ley sat in a low red chair beside a small table on which there was an alabaster bowl. Smoke from the cigarette she had just discarded into the bowl floated up and made patterns in the still, warm air. Her hands were clasped behind her head and her smoke-blue eyes were lazy, inviting. She had dark auburn hair set in loose waves. There were blush shadows in the troughs of the waves.” (Raymond Chandler; “Nevada City”)

 The most inattentive reader will deduce that these two have little in common but their initials (those “blush shadows” would never have made it out of the muddy ink pit of the first). For the clarity of the second, R.C., we have to check our irons at the door. And sit down at our desk. And stop worrying about the drab, indeed minimal effort we must if we are to be writers in anything but name. JOHN MELLA

 Chicago
used as problem solvers. In dry shade, for example, there's Oregon grape holly (Mahonia aquifolium), while Solomon's seal (Polygonatum) appreciates damp shade. Mr. Rice's droll style itself should lighten the spirits of those disheartened by vexing gardens.

THE ART OF THE KITCHEN GARDEN. By Ethne Clarke. Illustrated by Sharon Beeden. 168 pp. (Knopf, $24.95.) KITCHEN HERBS: The Art and Enjoyment of Growing Herbs and Cooking With Them. By Sal Gilbertie. Photographs by Joseph Kugiel-sky. Recipes by Frances Towner Gietd. 251 pp. (Bantam, $24.95.) Don't be fooled by the title of Ethne Clarke's book, which in no way belies the extent of her exhaustively researched look at the plants that Western man has grown for his table—fruit trees and flowers, vegetables and herbs. Although Ms. Clarke's focus is the period from the Middle Ages to the 18th century, she also liberally intersperses backward glances (as when we learn that the Roman naturalist Pliny "noted nine types of lettuces ... some of which had red-tinted leaves") as well as glimpses of the present (references to the latest cultivars, like Burpee's recently introduced Purple Ruffles basil). There is truly something for everyone in this artfully organized, handsomely illustrated work, which provides advice on everything from training a fruit tree cordon to making potpourri and a 17th-century apple cream. Ms. Clarke has achieved a smooth blending of captivating historical details and solid gardening information. In "Kitchen Herbs" by Sal Gilbertie, an aspiring herbal cook can learn from a third-generation nurseryman. Abundant photographs make this book more colorful than Mr. Gilbertie's two previous works, and, as ever, his homespun conversational style makes it a pleasure to learn from him. Nearly three dozen culinary herbs come under scrutiny here, with growing hints and herbal lore informally blended with kitchen advice. One only wishes there were more. Roughly two thirds of the

trade relations but to the intimidating achievements of their British garden counterparts (that specter of Tories in the perennial patch). Prose with a particularly jingoistic ring may be found in "The New American Garden" by Carole Ottesen, whose ideas on an indigenous approach to landscape design are unequivocal. Ms. Ottesen does make a knowledgeable case for the use of native species, such as prairie grasses like Panicum virgatum, as well as planting styles with meadowlike massings that are neither demanding nor environmentally destructive. But her "manifesto for today's gardener" (as it's called on the jacket) does grind the patriotic ax a tad heavily. Also, the author's debt to her former employers—Oehme, van Sweden & Associates, who were early vocal advocates of this admittedly inspiring approach—should have been more fully disclosed in both her text and picture credits. In "The American Weekend Garden," Patricia Thorpe takes a similar route, but tempers dogma with a friendlier sell. Just as in her first book, "Everlastings," Ms. Thorpe's sensible ideas are presented in a spirited, flowing style, with first-hand admonitions on coping pragmatically with a tract that must maintain itself while the gardener is elsewhere. There is creative advice on the use of a wide range of sumptuous species, from old roses to woodland primulas and roadside Queen Anne's lace. And she is persuasive in reminding readers of the importance of acquiring a sense of the place they expect to enrich, as well as the time they expect to devote to it.

GARDENING BY MAIL 2: A Source Book. By Barbara J. Barton. Unpaged. (Tusker Press/Publishers Group West, Paper, $16.) Giving the lie to the coffeeetable book syndrome, one of the year's most useful publications is this unillustrated, uncolorful, unpretentious compendium (originally published in 1986 and now revised and updated), whose subtitle could have been "Everything You Need to Know to Mail Order Any Garden Object You Could Conceivably Hang on For." Using her computer (and private press) in an enterprising manner, Barbara Barton has created the ultimate in reference guides by organizing America's multifarious mail-order services into their most accessible form. With humor and crisply worded data, and cross-references galore, Ms. Barton covers the garden field from acacia seeds to Zingiber (the magazine of the American Ginger Society), with every imaginable hose, hammock and humidifier in between. This is the one catalogue no armchair gardener can afford to be without.

### Answers to Quiz

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I PLEDGE ALLEGIANCE . . .
The True Story of the Walkers: An American Spy Family.
By J. Anthony Lukas

There is a scene in a recent British film that sticks in the mind: John Gielgud, as an upper-class civil servant, seated in his tastefully decorated Georgian town house explaining to an outraged Michael Caine that his betrayal of the realm was "not a moral decision but an aesthetic one." In his exquisitely modulated Oxbridge accent, Sir John speaks for all those well-born wailals — Phibbs, Burgesses, Maclean, Blunt and the rest — who passed military secrets to the Russians out of a muddle of forbidden homosexuality, pinched snobbery and overwhelming arrogance.

For a time in the mid-1930's, the pseudonymous from Wisconsin, Joseph McCarthy, managed to persuade many of his countrymen that American treason had been perpetrated by a similar class of desiccated aristocrats, typified by Alger Hiss and his patron, Dean Acheson.

Whatever evidence can be produced for that scenario, it is surely not true today. As spy case after spy case bubbles to the surface in the 1980's, it is clear that spies are the product less of a haughty elite than of an American lumpen proletariat — rootless, bored, resentful and mercenary.

In "I Pledge Allegiance . . ." Howard Blum portrays the most celebrated of this banal new generation of traitors: the maritime clan led by a retired Navy chief warrant officer, John A. Walker Jr., and encompassing his brother Arthur, his son, Michael, and his best friend, Jerry A. Whitworth — all of whom have either pleaded guilty or, having been convicted of passing Navy secrets to the Russians, have been called, the most damaging spy ring in American history, then surely they were also one of the most witless, squalid, inferior and limpspotted bunch ever to go to boot.

Mr. Blum captures this ambience nicely in his opening pages, which present Rachel, Michael Walker's wife, as she performs in a "camouflage-colored G-string, khaki pasties, and a toy revolver stuck into a red plastic holster strapped loose around her waist" at Donald's Go-Go near the naval base in Norfolk, Va. There she encounters five members of a rock band called Elvis From Hell, who invite her back to their apartment and persuade her to repeat the act for their video camera. Fourteen months later — after Michael's role in the spy ring has surfaced — she returns to Donald's to hear the song that Elvis From Hell has written about her. It is called "Wife of a Spy."

This is potent material, and if the rest of "I Pledge Allegiance . . ." lived up to the first six pages, it would be compelling indeed. Unfortunately, Mr. Blum, a former reporter for this newspaper, fails victim to the error that the critic Yvor Winters called the "fallacy of expressive form" — the notion that the best way to depict the disintegration of modern civilization is in chaotic prose; by extension, the best way to communicate any idea is through the language inherent in that idea.

Thus if the Walkers are crude and clumsy, Mr. Blum's writing is often crude and clumsy as well. We get sentences like "Anyway, she was in love, sort of" and "She was convicted, play in a real load." A bit of this goes a long way. There is nothing wrong with using the vernacular, nothing wrong with capturing your characters' style in the language you use. But after 438 pages the relentless thud of this dictation takes its toll.

The greatest weakness of this book isn't Mr. Blum's fault at all. His protagonist, John A. Walker Jr., the career Navy man turned spy master, simply isn't a very interesting figure. Mr. Blum strives valiantly to overcome this obstacle, additionally selecting tales of Mr. Walker's Navy high jinks and barroom pranks. We hear about the time he tried to smuggle Peg Leg, a onelegged hooker, on board ship in his duffel bag, the time he painted a smiling face on a sailor's rear just before the doctor examined him, the night he threw a granul-calcium powder and bug-juice cocktail party in a radio shack. This may sound like hilariously stuff around the barracks, but it doesn't move very well to the printed page.

As to what drove this amiable out into a second career in espionage, Mr. Blum argues that it was less money than the electric thrill it sent through his otherwise mundane life. For others in the family, cash apparently played a larger role, but for the ringleader, the author makes clear, it was all an exciting game and "Johnny was having a blast."

Indeed, some of the scenes in which Mr. Walker and his K.G.B. masters, Aleski, Alexei, play hide-and-seek through the Maryland countryside with 7 U cans as their principal clues do indeed sound like an elaborate children's game — and the Walkers often seem like oversize children playing at a sport whose implications they barely comprehend.

Mr. Blum seems less interested in those implications than he is in the game itself — on which he has clearly done prodigious research. He strongly suggests that naval investigators and the F.B.I. were less effective than they might have been, but he never really examines Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger's contention that the K.G.B. regarded the Walker spy ring as "the most important" operation in its history.

Given the sensitivity of the purloined data, this may be a difficult assertion to test. But it leaves us with a tale of bumbling adolescents at play in the fields of Armageddon, a troubling vision indeed, but one whose long-range significance is difficult to gauge.

LONGING FOR BLACKNESS

COME TO AFRICA AND SAVE YOUR MARRIAGE
And Other Stories.
By Barbara Thompson

Ms. Thomas gives us a group of stories about people who might have been minor characters in that novel — Peace Corps volunteers, foreign academics and Agency for International Development advisers, Indians and white hunters left behind by colonial empire. American blacks looking for a place where blackness is the norm. These people don't belong to Africa. Most of them are engaged in projects that are actually not working, curing disease or famine or inventing consistent technical vocabularies where language hasn't caught up to importing Europe. All that they want is to be saved from some sickness of the soul — they seek a witch-doctor cure of one alienation by another.

Barbara Thompson's interview with Peter Taylor appears in the fall issue of The Paris Review.
Longing for Blackness

Continued from preceding page

stumbled into a three-year drought of which Addis Ababa has not officially taken note and perhaps never will. He and his team vaccinate the tribesmen where they find them, when they’ll consent, while around them swirl rumors as ubiquitous as the sand that gets into everything — currently that “women are laying their babies in the road” when a vehicle approaches. He realizes that he can’t even interpret “if they’re trying to get you to stop so they can beg food, or if they want you to run over them.” It’s mutating people against disease so they can die of starvation.

Not every story is bleak. There is the rollicking mixtape of Gwendolyn Johnson, born in Mississippi and educated at Howard University, who comes on a “minority summer opportunity” again in Lagos, where she discovers, simultaneously, that everyone is like her — “I see that person there ahead of me standing in the dark shadow of a porch and I don’t have to worry or even go close up to see his face. I know he’s black!” — and that she is, for the first time in her life, desirable. Fat, nearly six feet tall, she is a “goddess,” Adegeji, her Yoruba lover, tells her, rejoicing. “In Nigeria, a substance economy, only the rich or foreign have flesh on them; it is as much a luxury as the multicored four-inch platform sandals she wears. The other Yoruba households visit Adegeji’s village. There Gwendolyn leaves her fancy shoes as well as her lover with the young woman who turns out to be his wife, who is “lean from hard work.” Moderately chastened, she goes back to Lagos to write her thesis on “Cottage Industries in Polygamous Yoruba Households,” in which she urges that developmental cash focus on the women.

Many of Ms. Thomas’s stories turn on these failures of connection, misapprehension based on false assumptions, superficial likeness. In “Choobeedo Yum-Yum and the ABC,” a black American bureaucrat who tries to join the revolution finds that nothing is straightforward, that he himself is a hybrid who may not belong anywhere, has been formed without his consent by white American, starting with the white woman who adopted him when he was 10 years old.

If there is salvation for the people in Ms. Thomas’s stories, it lies in their reconnecting with the living spring of the spirit. For the failed artist Christine in “Jim Chance” that spring first reveals itself in the deep, watery heart of the baobab tree far out in the Selous game reserve: 1,600 years old, the cavity in its trunk large enough for two to stand abreast, it holds out to her the promise of secrets that only her own hand, making drawings, can reveal to her, of magical connections, the oneness of creatures and things and an “energy . . . not entirely her own.” For Marlene in the title story, too, it will be in the creation of her own hands that she finds the direction for her life. When her husband takes off to meet his lover in Paris, she cashes in half of the marital assets and sets up as a potter again, taking from Africa when she finally goes the talisman of a great classic African beer pot, so big it has to be carried in the plane on her lap “like a baby.” Like Christine’s drawn images, which come to her from beyond merely personal consciousness, Marlene’s pot carries her to music: “. . . often wonder how I made it. The walls are too thin to hold the curve or to have survived the fire, and the symmetry is perfect only in the darker room. The real magic in Africa, Maria Thomas is saying throughout these stories, rests in the traditional sense of the unity and harmony of all creation, the link between creator and created, animate and inanimate.

There’s Still a Peace Corps

Maria Thomas and her husband signed up for the Peace Corps in 1971, expecting, since both spoke Spanish, to be sent to Latin America. When they told us we were going to Ethiopia, we had to look it up on a map,” Ms. Thomas said. In her telephone interview from Liberia, where the couple live, 16 years and 4 African countries later. During the succeeding years in Nigeria, Tanzania and Kenya, where her husband worked as an economist, “I realized that there were a lot of stories about Americans living in Africa that were not being told,” Ms. Thomas said. Her collection of short stories, “Come to Africa and Save Your Marriage,” draws on actual events and people to tell readers that “there really are a bunch of us out here, doing all of kinds of different things. There’s still a Peace Corps, there are technocrats, there are embassy employees, there are teachers.” The author said she was interested in the problems inherent in transplanting oneself to an underdeveloped country. Life in the midst of poverty, without electricity, mechanics, conveniences, even, at times, water, creates one set of constraints, another is an inner life of deprivation: “One of the problems, of course, is the realization that you’ve never going to understand the people you’re living among. It’s called the ‘conspiracy of opacity’ — each side tells the other what it thinks the other wants to hear.” The hardships notwithstanding, Ms. Thomas’ greatest fear is eventually having to leave for good. “We had an idea that all we had to do was transfer technology over to these people and they would join the world,” she said of the American aid projects that first brought the couple to Africa. “After 39 years of trying, it seems as though it all has been a failure. You have the sense of a flame dying out.”

The Fantasy Trade in Shanghai

JULIA PARADISE
By Rod Jones.

By Wray Herbert

T is difficult to read Rod Jones’s haunting first novel, “Julia Paradise,” without being reminded again of Joseph Conrad. It is not only the colonial Far East setting — in this case Shanghai — but also the kind of Westerner found there. Like the trader Almayer in Conrad’s own first novel, or the skeptical Axel Heyerdahl in his more mature “Victory,” Mr. Jones’s Kenneth (Honeyed) Ayres is stuck, spiritually more than actually. He is a British psychoanalyst and expatriate in Shanghai, struggling to write his thesis on a schizophrenic woman in the early 1920’s and stayed. He has no motive for being there; it evades what he is doing in such a way that he finds himself and his Chinese lover, the woman of his life, in China.

And what a childhood it was, involving years of sexual abuse at the hands of her deeply troubled father and an early case of hysterical muteness. She describes her early years to Ayres in intimate detail, and indeed the talking cure. Her symptoms disappear, and she returns to the mission, but Ayres is obsessed. It seems he has a sexual compulsion of his own, and Julia Paradise’s eroticism has kindled a fire in his mind. He begins spending more and more time in his darkened room with his opium pipe.

Outside his room, and outside his nasty, self-centered medical care, China is in a state of political upheaval and chaos. Chiang Kai-shek has begun what is to be his unsuccessful campaign to drive the Communists from the country. But Ayres is oblivious to politics, and that, Mr. Jones seems to be saying, is his failing. Stuck with his dreary Freudian vision, he doesn’t notice a powerful political vision that is transforming the 20th century — the vision of Karl Marx.

Freud and Marx are played off each other in this novel, the latter’s ideas embodied by the German intellectual, Ferdinand Lassalle, revolutionary and lover of Julia Paradise. It is she who finally transforms Ayres, providing him with a vision of the future and awakens him to a sense of commitment to people that had never informed his healing practice.

Despite the precision of Mr. Jones’s prose, there is a repetitiveness in this, theme. Did the childhood events that Julia Paradise narrated really take place, or were they fantasies? Or did she invent them deliberately as a part of another’s universe? This is a book to be read and reread. So rich are its pages that I found myself backtracking constantly to uncover a detail that, apparently unimportant, later took on significance.

The eminent critic of Julia Paradise, Mr. Jones — a 34-year-old Australian writer — has skillfully entwined the personal and political aspects of a committed life, and in Ayres he has offered a model for moral victory over our darker impulses. It is a remarkable accomplishment.
Tribal Rites in Westchester

OBJECT LESSONS
By Anna Quindlen.

By Anne Tyler

READERS familiar with Anna Quindlen’s essays — her “Life in the 30′s” pieces and syndicated Op-Ed columns for The New York Times — will not be surprised to learn that her first novel is intelligent, highly entertaining and faced with acute perceptions about the nature of day-to-day family life.

The family at the center of “Object Lessons” is a gigantic tribe of Irish Catholics based largely in New York’s Westchester County in the 1960′s. John Scanlan, the tyrannical patriarch, made his fortune manufacturing rosaries and communion wafers. He has since branched out into several other industries, all of them profitable, and he uses his wealth to control his grown children, dispensing tuition money here and orthodontists’ fees there with no return expected except total obedience and devotion. For most of his offspring, this seems a small price to pay. But for Tommy Scanlan, who’s enough of a renegade in his own quiet way to have married an Italian girl, it becomes more and more of a burden.

It is Tommy’s daughter who offers us the clearest window into the Scanlans’ world. At age 13, Maggie surveys her various relatives with the sharp and dis-passionate vision of a child on the verge of adulthood. She is just old enough to begin to decipher the clues; she can put together bits of the grown-ups’ gossip; she can slip easily over the border from Scanlan country to the cemetery in the Bronx where her other grandfather serves as caretaker. And when John Scanlan makes a final effort to tighten his hold on Tommy — presenting him with a palatial house that lies practically next door — Maggie has a firsthand look at the wheels and gears that operate behind the scenes of family life.

Other viewpoints are presented, too — Tommy’s, as he is torn between loyalties, and his wife Connie’s, as she deals with a pack of disapproving in-laws and a daughter who seems at times to be one of the enemy. But it is Maggie, feisty and charming and stubborn, whose outlook prevails, and it is she who makes this essentially a coming-of-age story, an account of how one young woman decides who she’s going to be for the rest of her life.

As you might expect from a nonfiction writer making her first foray into fiction, Ms. Quindlen shows some uncertainty as a storyteller. She has trouble getting started, for one thing. The novel begins too slowly, with portentous generalizations: “Ever after, whenever she smelled the peculiar odor of new construction, of pine planking and plastic plumbing pipes, she would think of that summer, think of it as the time of changes.” And on the next page: “Afterward, all the rest of her life would seem to her a hereafter. Here and

Anne Tyler’s latest novel is “Breathing Lessons.”

Continued on page 9
The SEVENTH Commandment

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Tribal Rites

Continued from page 7

hereafter, and in between was that summer, the time of changes."

Add to that a sort of backstitch, advance-and-retreat approach to narrative — a preference for flashbacks over events recounted as they occur — and you can see why the reader sometimes loses a sense of forward pull. Nearly every scene detours into the memory of a preceding scene. A chapter in which Maggie, egged on by her companions, strikes a match to set a fire in a newly built house contains no fewer than six flashbacks, albeit brief ones; as a result, we gradually forget about that lighted match. On some occasions, the remembered scene is much more important than the one we’re about to witness. When the police arrive later to interrogate Maggie’s mother about the fires that have been started in the housing development next door, they do so not in real time, so to speak, but in Connie’s memory as she’s accompanying her mother-in-law on an errand hours after the interrogation took place. Why should this be? For most novelists, the flashback is a last resort — nowhere near the first choice among methods of propelling a plot along.

But plot, of course, is not paramount when a book is so rich in other qualities. “Object Lessons” succeeds because of its close attention to character. Just listen to the brassy, gruff, entirely credible voice of old John Scanlan railing against “the Vatican follies,” as he calls the modernization of the Roman Catholic church; or watch Tommy wistfully reflecting that a man without a family “must have all night to read the papers, even the box scores for teams not in New York.”

It rings true that city-bred Connie should distrust “the sneaky sounds of the suburbs, the hissing of the sprinklers, the hum of the occasional car, the children’s voices calling to one another, carrying so clearly that they had learned to whisper anything important,” and that after John Scanlan suffers a life-threatening stroke, his sickbed scene could be derailed by a family business discussion. (“Do you think that crucifix is too large?” a son asks when he observes his sister, a nun, fingering her rosary in the hospital. “We’re thinking of scaling it down. I think it’s too large. I’d even like to remove the Christ figure and keep a simple wooden cross, which seems more in keeping with Vatican II to me. But Dad says he thinks the nuns wouldn’t stand for it. We could cut a good bit off the manufacturing cost of each one if we made the cross half again as big.”)

Nor are these characters static; no one is simply set in one position and forgotten. Even Mary Frances, old John’s meek wife, is capable of surprising us, as she proves when, toward the end of the book, she suddenly tells Connie how she has felt all these years about her large flock of children. And Connie herself, at one point, has an unexpected new slant on her relationship with her husband’s relatives.

But most fluid of all is young Maggie; it’s a pleasure to watch her grow into her own personality. “This family has a future,” one of her aunts says. We who have followed Maggie through the course of this engaging book can wholeheartedly agree.
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Shelby Hearon

The prolific novelist again tackles her favorite theme in her latest novel—the effects of determinism on a person's life. How much do time, place and lineage affect what happens to our lives?

BY BETH LEVINE

PW gets off the train at North White Plains, N.Y., and is greeted with a hug by effervescent Shelby Hearon. She escorts us to her house in style, driving a lemon-yellow 1970 Buick in mint condition. (“It was part of my trousseau,” she confides.) It's a car that any one of her characters—forthright, intelligent, inquisitive Southern women—might drive, and hers is a home in which one of her characters might live. Its decor reflects a paradoxical nature—Americana print wallpaper and simple wood furniture mixed with such startling touches as a giant wood-and-wool sheep in the living room and a papier-mâché pig in the dining room. The oversize plastic light bulb that dangles over the dining-room table is the same one the character Lutie possessed in Hearon's novel Group Therapy.

Settling in for the afternoon, this lively, articulate woman can’t wait to start talking, and not just about her latest novel, Five Hundred Scorpions, out this month from Atheneum (Fiction Forecasts, Feb. 27). Talking, she says, is her way of processing and analyzing her thoughts. Leaning back in her chair from the dining-room table, against shelves full of books by and about Freud, his disciples and his patients, Hearon plunges right in.

Beth Levine, a freelance writer in New York City, contributes frequently to PW.

"Is there free will? Can you act? Can you change, or does your 'blank'—parents, family, hometown, race, class—determine you? I want the answer to be no, but I think we make a mistake if we don't deal with how much is determined.

"The big three—Freud, Marx and Darwin—formed my thinking, and they are very much determinists. I'm still wrestling with the issue in my novels, although I'm tackling different sides of it," Hearon remarks.

The determinist question is the reason 56-year-old Hearon started writing in the first place. She was born in Kentucky, raised in Texas and married after her graduation from the University of Texas in Austin. Following the birth of her two children ("Anne and Reed—I'd like their names to be in the interview"), the urge to write descended on her as a way of sorting out who she was.

"When my children were in nursery school, I felt the need to write out of that feeling of being both a mother and daughter. I was acting out of an idea that I was passing down family myths, passing on family scripts that I hadn't even read. Unless we are aware of what's going on, we can become unfulfilled wishes of the generation before us," she notes.

Despite the claims of being a mother and wife, she worked for five years on her first novel, Armadillo in the Grass. She had no formal education in creative writing, knew no agents and had no contact with other writers. She felt her way completely by instinct.

"I worked on the manuscript for two years," she recalls, "and then read it over and realized it was terrible. I threw it all away. I worked on it for two more years, read it over and felt I had 10 good pages. In the first draft everything was dead, but I couldn't see why. In the second draft, I knew those 10 pages were alive, so I could see what was wrong and what was right."

Upon completion, she submitted the work—unengaged, in a plain brown envelope—to Knopf, where it was picked out of the slush pile and published to much critical acclaim. It was another five years before Hearon finished her next novel, The Second Dune, but agents were still intrigued by this unknown writer. Hearon decided at that time to go with Wendy Well and has stayed with her. The Second Dune was sold to Knopf, and the next three novels went to Doubleday. By the time she had written her sixth book, Hearon felt that she wanted to be back with a small, quality house. "Atheneum felt like a Son-of-Knopf, literally and figuratively, so I went with them. I've been really happy there. I like everyone, and they've taken good care of me," she reports.

Her need to sort out and process her world has moved Hearon through five more novels and a coauthorship with former Congresswoman Barbara Jordan on Jordan's autobiography. It also has resulted in her winning grants from the Guggenheim, National Endowment for the Arts and Ingram Merrill and has made her much sought after as a lecturer and teacher. (She is spending this spring teaching at the University of California, Irvine campus.)

Hearon attributes her prolific na-
ture to determination as well. "I start each book as a lab experiment. I propose a theory I hope to prove, usually dealing with the effect of time, place or family on people. But what I usually discover is that I have rigged my experiment. I am testing something else I was not allowing myself to know about, and I sometimes don't realize that until I'm all done. These new issues lead me to a new book and a new experiment.

"For example, in Group Therapy I was dealing with mothers and daughters. One of the characters in that book asks, 'Whatever happened to men?' My answer was A Small Town, in which I say, 'This is what happened to men—here are the father, grandfather, uncle.' It seemed a natural progression from there to deal more directly with men in Five Hundred Scorpions.

"Actually, I got the idea for that book after watching the movie Charriots of Fire. I thought the real story there was, What happened to the runner after he got to China. Was he any different? What happens to someone who actually gets to where he wants to go? Does he grow, or is he only acting upon?"

To compare Hearon's work to a lab experiment, however, is too cold an analogy to give full measure to the strong sense of place that suffuses her novels. Her characters are so much products of their environments that the setting often becomes a character itself. This is not happenstance, as Hearon is meticulous about her research. She travels to every town she writes about and often subscribes to its newspaper. She went to Mexico to find the town that would become the focus in Five Hundred Scorpions, spoke with townspeople to learn the legends, read several studies made of the place and even made the same torturous climb up the Aztec pyramid that her Virginia gentleman does in the novel.

"I always begin with place," Hearon explains, "because it is so determining. I always want to walk the ground and get a feel for its power, its limitations. From that I find out who would live there and what could happen there.

The issue of place—mental and physical—is a very crucial one for this transplanted Southerner in her day-to-day life as well.

"In Group Therapy, I posed the question, Can you run away? Are there times when you should stop dealing with a situation and just leave?" She continues: "I was not encouraged to write in my first marriage. I was into role-playing anyway. 'Cheeky' in the kitchen, Brigitte Bardot in the bedroom and Maria Montessori in the nursery. I was very fragmented."

The opposing pulls at her time during this period took their toll and forced her to confront the fight-or-flight issue. When she first started writing, she could never find enough time in which to do it. In typical Hearon fashion, she did a time study of her day to figure out why that was.

"I found out that I was spending seven hours a day on clothes!" she exclaims. "Washing them, folding them, shopping for them, hanging them, putting them on and pulling them off little people. I was so shocked, I have never used the washer or dryer again."

The happiness that the author now exudes derives, no doubt in large part, from her relationship with second husband and philosopher Bill Lucas. He, too, found little encouragement to work in his first marriage, so when the pair met, the attraction was instantaneous. "I met him at a dinner party, and I decided that night that this was it. I had new respect for the old saw 'love at first sight.'" she recalls.

In 1981, as a pledge to their commitment to each other's career, they left the South and moved to Westchester so Lucas could take a teaching post at Manhattanville College and Hearon could be nearer the publishing scene. Another tangible symbol of their mutual support and encouragement is the freestanding blackboard, chalked over with logic theorems, that takes up half of the living room.

"I got that for him because I wanted him to feel free to work in every room of the house," she explains. "He does, and I do, too."

She laughs, "We say that we used to have rich interior lives, and now we have rich exterior lives."

They work together a lot, processing, always processing. "Bill's work is very different from mine so we have a fertilization, a synergistic effect. Since he's a philosopher, he starts with very specific instances and then builds a theory. I start with a theory, then to have it translate into streets and faces. We get to the same bridge by different paths. It's wonderful to have a good home situation. I'm amazed at how much more productive and energetic we are."

Indeed, writer's block doesn't seem to be a problem Hearon faces much. Her novels have been coming out at a rate of about once a year. She is now in the midst of researching a novel set in San Antonio and, true to form, has a current subscription to the San Antonio Light.

Hearon leans forward intently. "I start out each book by collecting little pieces of paper in folders—stacks of notes, research from primary sources. I cut out photos of people and clothes. I try to find out what different people eat, what issues they'd be concerned with."

Another part of her research is to figure out each character's time frame. "Maybe I read too much Proust and Mann at an early age, but I think everybody operates on a very different time cycle—garden time, church time, political time, geo-logical time, semester time. In my writing, I like to have a number of time cycles running concurrently to give the various levels to a book that we all have in our lives. It also gets back to what I was saying about determinism because you are always bound by the time frame you go by."

"It all eventually gels in my head and has a Pygmalion effect. I build to a center point, and then the characters come alive. When I finally see them, like a movie on the wall, I watch them for a while, and then I can start writing."

Hearon never moves on to a new novel until she is finished with the proofs of the last one, so she won't "mess up the voice." But that doesn't mean she doesn't have ideas already kicking around. Other possibly projects include two sequels to A Small Town, which she is hoping to call Merechants of Venice and The Doctor's Daughters.

We break for lunch, and Hearon puts out a wonderful spread. Her interest in food is another detail that often enters her fiction. "Growing up, I saw food as the most benign aspect of family life. I see it as the currency of love," she says. "My son, Reed, must have picked that up. He's now a chef in Santa Fe."

It's hard to resist Hearon's warmth, and sitting on the train back to Manhattan, the interviewer feels as if she's just spent an afternoon with an old friend, in a household brimming with talk, food, family, curiosity and good feeling. The image rises of Shelby Hearon in her study, watching her "movies on the wall," while Bill Lucas ponders at a chalkboard; and it makes us smile.
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‘I Can’t Stand Your Books’: A Writer Goes Home

By Mary Gordon

A FRIEND of mine who is intensely interested in the fulfillment of immigrant fantasies recently asked me if my family was proud of me. I was able to say with perfect frankness that they were not, that, except for my mother, one cousin and one aunt, they considered me an embarrassment or a lost soul. This led me to wonder about the connections among my family’s reaction to me, the place of the writer in the Irish-American community and the faintness of the Irish-American voice in the world of letters.

Let me begin with my uncle’s funeral. My uncle was a lovable man, heroic, even, in a way particularly Irish Catholic. He was the most nearly silent man I’ve ever known and perhaps the kindest. Like many Irishmen, he married late; he devoted his young manhood to family responsibilities. When he was 40, he met a young, beautiful, intelligent woman — a semiprofessional tennis player, a Wellesley gradu-

ate who shared his passion for sports. In the early 1950’s, she had done the daring thing of touring Europe alone on a motorcycle; she did the equally daring thing of wearing pants to our family gatherings. When my uncle announced to his mother that he was to marry this woman, my grandmother took to her bed for a week. Only with his wife’s encour-
agement, my uncle finished his teaching degree and, at 45, got his first full-time job. But the real focus of his life was supporting her in her career as a tennis

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Psychoanalysis and Homosexuality/3
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At Your Mother's Knee

BLACK SHEEP AND KISSING COUSINS
How Our Family Stories Shape Us.
By Elizabeth Stone.

By Jack Kugelmass

A PSYCHOLOGIST in her 40's happily recalls an oft-told story from her childhood. "My father said that when I was born I had the long thin nose of my mother's family. He said he went into the hospital nursery and he went like that to me... and he made it the small round nose of the Mercusius. I loved that story! And I believed it until adulthood. Finally one day I thought of that story and I said, 'Well, a minute! There is such a thing as genetics!' I had taken science courses in college, but it never occurred to me that my father's story didn't really explain how I got my nose.

According to the narrator, the Mercusius saw themselves as rich, kind and generous. When an uncle would say, "He's a Mercusius," it was a point of high praise. That's why I loved the story of how I got my nose. It meant I was more like my father and his family, and that's the way I wanted it to be." When families put meaning into a mere physical trait, they are building on a common belief about blood and relatedness. However, a family achieves cohesiveness not from the biological fact of shared blood but from shared social values; therefore, the meaning of being a family must be rebuilt in each generation. Family stories are much to insure that cohesiveness.

Elizabeth Stone, who teaches English and media studies at Fordham University, begins "Black Sheep and Kissing Cousins" by narrating a story about her great-grandmother. She had gone against her father, a wealthy Sicilian landowner, and had run off with a poor but musically talented postman. The story has held the author's fascination, not only because it presented her with a family member who was rebel and egalitarian but also because it explained her family's tendency toward artistic rather than materialistic pursuits.

Not all family stories are

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I Can't Stand Your Books

Continued from page 1

player; he coached her, accompanied her all over the country to tennis tournaments. They were perhaps the most happily married in exile I have ever known, but I never saw them touch or even stand near each other, or address each other an intimate word. My aunt became, in time, an ardent feminist, and my uncle accompanied her to E.R.A. rallies. This shy, silent man stood in groups of women and carried signs saying “E.R.A. Today.”

When I went to his house the day after the funeral, attached to his refrigerator with a magnet was a list of members of Congress who needed to be written to in order to enlist their support for the E.R.A.

I loved my uncle very much; so did everyone else who stood before his coffin. We all wept. I held my baby son in my arms and wept, leaning my cheek against his for comfort.

Who could imagine a situation in which an attack was less expected, less appropriate? Yet, one of my uncles chose this time to say to me: “I just want to tell you I can’t stand your books. None of us can. I tried the first one, I couldn’t get past the first chapter. The second one I couldn’t even get into; I didn’t even want to open it up. I didn’t even buy it; I wouldn’t waste the money.”

Well, it would have been easy to laugh, but I didn’t laugh, or easily, to say, “A prophet is always without honor in his own family.” But who is with honor in my family? Not my cousin the doctor. Not my cousin the businessman, with his million-dollar house. The honored person in the family is my cousin the nun. She walked into the funeral parlor; if the family could have carried her on her shoulders, they would. She came up to me, after a while, and took my hand. “Mary,” she said, “I just need to tell you that I think your books are dreadful. I know that many people find them good, but I don’t. They’re just too worldly for me. Of course, I do understand that a lot of hard work went into them.” Later, she said to one of my aunts, “She didn’t really want to put all that sex in those books. The publishers made her.”

They all thought my books were dirty. This brings out an aspect central and important to the Irish character: sexual puritanism. It is different in its flavor from Anglo-Saxon Puritanism, and also from the French Jansenism which is its historical source. There is nothing thin bloomed about it, and nothing of the merely finicky. Because it exists alongside a general sense of the enjoyability of life, a love of liquor and horses, a sense of the importance of hospitality, and of the beauty of the earth. And it lives and is able to be robust and lively. It would be easy to say that the source of it is the Roman Catholic Church; for certainly the folklore of the Celts abounds with heroes, male and female, who shy away from nothing in the body’s life. Yet it is not only Catholicism that explains it. The Italians are Catholic, and the French, and the Spanish: these races are emblems in the popular mind for warm bloodedness, for sexiness and for romance. Of all Catholic countries, only Ireland came up with men who believed what the church told them about sex. Only in Ireland are the churches filled with a near-even mix of male and female. Only in Ireland would a man married at 30 be thought of as marrying young.

I think that what is at the root of Irish puritanism is a profound fear of exposure, shared by both men and women in an oddly equal degree. “Silence, exile and cunning,” said Stephen Dedalus, is the only route to survival. Cunming, of course, is understandable: it is the coin of exchange of any oppressed group. The wily slave, the tricky peasant is a staple of every folklore in the world. Silence, too, is another form of “protective coloration” not unknown to the oppressed. But exile, the ultimate, most deeply willed concealment of identity, is the most singular part of Joyce’s formula. To be an exile, to choose exile, is to put oneself among a group of people who will always have to struggle to understand one, to put oneself in a situation where one’s gestures are not readily legible, where one is not given away by a word, a look, a tone of voice. To be an exile is to be permanently in disguise; it is an extreme form of self-protection. And self-protection is an Irish obsession.

Irish puritanism is only a metaphor, as it is really in all of us, for an entire ontology. I am convinced that this desire to hide for self-protection is at the root of a great deal of Irish behavior — the pretend behavior that was shipped successfully from Ireland to America. This is, of course, another reason why the Irish, a people so imbued with the power of the Word, do not value writers in their midst. A writer speaks out loud; a writer reveals. And to reveal, for the Irish, is to put oneself and the people one loves in danger.

In “That Most Distressful Nation,” Andrew Greeley says of the Irish-American terror of standing out that “if brilliance and flair are counterproductive, the slightest risk-taking beyond the limits of approved career and personal behavior is unthinkable. Art, music, literature, poetry, theater, to some extent even academia, politics of any variety other than the traditional, are all too risky to be considered. The twofold devastating things that can be said to the young...Irishman who attempts to move beyond these rigid norms are ‘Who do you think you are?’ and ‘What will people say?’ The second of these two questions, ‘What will people say?’ is used by nearly all but the most courageous parents from every ethnic group. But the first question is, I think, a rarer one. It is, after all, the ontological question. ‘Who do you think you are?’ The implied answer, or the implied right answer for the American Irish, is ‘I’m not much.’ This answer contains the Augustinian world view that so permeates the Irish; it isn’t mere immig- rant inferiority. ‘I’m not much’ doesn’t mean, ‘I’m not much but the WASPs are a lot.’ It means that the human condition isn’t much, and anyone who thinks it is is merely a fool. And better, far better, to be invisible, than to be a fool. And the proper response to the fool is ridicule.

Irish ridicule is different, for example, from its black counterpart. “Black ridicule,” Andrew Greeley says, “is an exercise in verbal skill, designed to display virtuosity in the ability to be outrageous. Irish ridicule is intended to hurt, to give as much pain as is necessary to keep each other at a distance.” I agree with Father Greeley that Irish ridicule is intended to hurt, but it is also a bALKed expression of love. It is also a desire to protect, or at least to urge self-protection upon the victim. It is the stick to be used in the front of the fray member of the herd, to urge him or her back to this or her proper place, the place of hiding. It is a language whose purpose is two levels of concealment. It conceals the speaker’s ignorance, hostility, and it urges the victim to conceal him or herself. The Irish are masters at the language of concealment.

May this obsession with concealment? It is not simply the manifestation of the fear of an oppressed group. Certainly Jews have been least as oppressed as the Irish, to say nothing of the blacks. Yet neither American Jews nor American blacks have shown the Irish reluctance at self-expression. One understands the factors that have enabled the Jews to turn their pain into literature. I spoke with
Richard Fein, the Yiddish scholar and translator, who suggested some of the extraordinary articulateness of the Jews. The Jews, he said, are a people brought up on critical commentary upon a text; it is natural that this process would transform itself into fiction. The impact of the Yiddish among immigrant Jews, the Yiddish press's policy of translating and serializing the best of European fiction, the fact that among Jews there was a presence of intellectuals—all factors the Irish miss in their experience—can account for the audibility of the Jewish-American experience, the silence of the Irish Americans. None of the advantages of Jewish immigrants, and their advantages were far fewer than those of the Irish. Their literacy rate was much higher than among the Irish; they were even more cut off from ancient poetic traditions than the Irish, and intellectuals were certainly much rarer among them. Yet from the time of slavery onward, blacks have expressed their sense of pain and injustice in language: the poetry of spirituals, of the blues nowhere has its counterpart in anything. There is no Irish Langston Hughes, no Irish Jean Toomer, no Irish Richard Wright, no Irish James Baldwin, no Irish Toni Morrison. The great linguistic facility of the Irish restricted itself to its own two forms: popular journalism and political speeches.

I have been for some time puzzled, unable to explain why the creative Irish—those of the country of Goldsmith and Swift, of Maria Edgeworth and Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw, above all the country of Yeats and Joyce, the country of O'Casey and Synge and Yeats and O'Flaubert—produced so little in its American literary branch. It would make good sense to teach a course in the American Jewish Literature Experience, or American Black Literature. But a course in American Irish Literature would take up barely half a semester. You could begin, if you were a loose constructionist, with O'Neill and Fitzgerald, but the majority of their work would have to be excluded. You could go then to James T. Farrell, whose Studs Lonigan recorded the self defined as a subject that, in my mind, with sloppiness that borders on the dime novel—the experience of the Chicago Irish in the 1920's and 30's. You would have to jump, then, to J. F. Powers's brilliant tales of 30's priests. Then you could go on to William Alfred's "Hogan's Goat," to Elizabeth Cullinan, to Maureen Howard and William Kennedy. After that, there would be nowhere to go.

WHAT happened to make the Irish so unengagingly silent? In part, it is the lack of an audience. Whereas American Jews and American blacks seem patently exotic—the Irish, ages, spoken different languages, with sloppiness that borders on the dime novel—the experience of the Chicago Irish in the 1920's and 30's. You would have to jump, then, to J. F. Powers's brilliant tales of 30's priests. Then you could go on to William Alfred's "Hogan's Goat," to Elizabeth Cullinan, to Maureen Howard and William Kennedy. After that, there would be nowhere to go.

I WANTED to say, of course, that not everything about the Irish Catholics is harmful to a writer. For one thing, the Irish are always interesting. There is the wit, and the refinement of language that the sense of necessity for constant ridicule engenders. And the very hiddleness of the lives of Irish-Americans makes them an irresistible subject for fiction. One has the sense of breaking into a private treasure, kept from the eyes of the most, and therefore a real piece of news. I once wrote that "Irish Catholics are almost always defending something—probably something indefensible—the C.I.A., the virginity of Mary, which is why their parties always and in fights." The problem is that the Irish-Americans are nearly always defending the wrong things, needless to say, people find nothing worth defending, and the posture of the mistaken defender is compelling to the spirit, whether its bent is political or romantic. The Irish have always been in the back of their eye the vision of the ideal. Therefore, they must always be failures. For it is impossible to live up to the ideal; but to be so close to making eaters and readers happy all the time.

Continued on next page
The art of suspense

Twenty years ago, I used to walk along the lakefront for the sheer joy of being there, and I have a dream of the things I might one day write. I wrote some, too. Fiction and journalism, then as now. I drank on words. They poured out of me like water out of a pipe. I read and tried to imitate the best and most difficult: Kafka, Faulkner, Dostoevski. But mostly I was in the world of James Joyce. He destroyed me, I must confess. Joyce once said that he had devoted a lifetime to writing his works and so it was not too much to expect people to devote a lifetime to reading them. When I first came across that quotation, it seemed to be the summation of the writer's proper attitude toward his work and his audience, the aesthetic of the raised middle finger. I don't think his work has gone wrong with literature ever since Joyce.

So I'll share a few thoughts and prejudices about fiction. I've come to them slowly. They have formed in the shadows and corners of my work.

When I am working on a piece of fiction, I don't only have to imagine characters and name them like children, knowing that they might mind my wishes and might not. I also have to imagine a reader, someone to whom to tell the tale. Once a tale has been told, I genuinely believe it no longer belongs to the author. And if he fails to make a connection with his audience through the words on the page, he has failed. The idea that there is some kind of relationship between writer and reader, at least in contemporary fiction, has suffered a studied neglect. As with any farrago of marriage, the blame for the deterioration is probably shared. But I am here to take the audience's side. A lot of authors have not been keeping their part of the bargain. In my time, both authors and readers have found themselves drifting into empty encounters in an attempt to satisfy their natural appetites, indulging in the literary equivalent of one-night stands.

Contemporary fiction is being pulled to two extremes. On one side, you have works that appeal to professionals—other writers and their pilot fish in the critical and academic establishments. These tend to be self-conscious, highly stylized, and lifted as if by an element of suspense from the general, literate audience. One example: a recent novel by a critically acclaimed writer, John Barth's "Sabbatical." It is a spy novel, but isn't one conceived. Barth does not let you believe any of it for an instant. He undercuts the plot and characters at every turn, for the reader to regard the artifact. It is as if Barth were rather embarrassed by the story he has chosen, as if it were beneath him. For me, I found the whole book annoying. If the man had a story to tell, why not tell it and let me decide what to think of it? And if he doesn't believe in stories, why not find some other line of work?

William Gass, Robert Coover, Don Delillo and Donald Barthelme are other writers who have expressed the alienation that the profession seems to require of a serious author. In reaction against this fashion, a counter-fashion has developed: a kind of photo-realism in words. I mean the other Barthelme, Frederick, or Alice Adams, or Raymond Carver. The writers who slice the gilt edge of life so thin that you can see right through it.

The general literate audience, people who read for serious pleasure, find much of this stuff ultimately unsatisfying. Much as I admire the pure craft in the work of these highly gifted individuals. I read them only out of a sense of obligation. They are as sad and empty to me as prayer is to one whose faith has lapsed.

If they represent the blue end of the spectrum—cool, detached, self-regarding—then the Robert Ludlums, Danielle Steels and Harold Robbins represent the red. I do not find even the consolation of craft in their work. I cannot get through their books. But I believe that they understand something that their critically acclaimed counterparts do not. They know their readers' appetites. They pandy to all the huts, but among these is a lust for a story, and I do not count that as a weakness in a vice.

The strength of this junk fiction is that it manages to satiate the ancient yearning to be told—a tale—which is as old as the camps and the awareness of the distinction between a story and fiction and a lie. But in the end, these tales don't express anything of importance. Yet readers may prefer in a book that is at least what is barbarously called a "good read" than to be mired in one true without communi- cation of any kind. I do not believe that anything makes this split in the world of letters inevitable. For myself, I think it is possible for fiction to build on the same character and audience in a common theme. And I think that serious adventure is one way to revive narrative fiction. The element of suspense can play a vital part in our literature, and serious writers have a lot to learn about this discredited technique.

Just think of the richness of the tradition: Melville's sailing tales and Conrad's stories of subversion and the sea. Crane's war novel. Defoe's great adventure. Cooper's original American spy story. Henry James' Princess Casamassina, and his tales of the haunted. The origin of fiction was in this kind of storytelling, in the epic, and it may be that this is the form that gets the closest to the world their readers knew—or believed that somebody like them did.

Stories of mystery and suspense do not have to be shallow, though most of the contemporary books in these genres are marked by the failures of conscience and courage. Crane's book helped to establish and brilliantly criticized the naturalistic idea of human behavior. Defoe examined the new individualistic spirit of his age by shipwrecking it on a desert island. Melville's concerns were dark and ultimate, nothing less than a quarrel with and about God. And if any author has reached deeper into the complex nature of evil than Conrad, I do not know who it would be, except perhaps Shakespeare, who knew how to tell a pretty good adventure yarn himself.

A piece of fiction is essentially a thought experiment, first for the author and then for the reader. What if a man were to sail up a river to discover what another had found at the heart of darkness? What if a young fellow were aboard a ship whose captain is obsessed? What if a soldier ran from battle and later discovered that nobody knew? What if a man were to go to sea on a plot, never to return? The most fascinating question is also the most basic one: Why?

For me, writing a novel ("Fragment"") gave shape to the examination of human freedom and responsibility. Writing espionage novels ("Convergence" and "Mass") became a way of testing the consequences of the philosophy of radical skepticism and puzzle out what a life of nuclear anxiety has done to our age. I have just finished a book that begins as an investigation of a murder and ends as an investiga- tion of the meaning of sexuality and inheritance. I am working on one in which a career of espionage culminates in question the basic nature of personal identity. For me, these thought experiments have all yielded fascinating and unforeseen results and the use of an element of suspense was no impediment. It was an essential part of the unique process of thought that is narrative. Fiction is a way of knowing, and suspense can be a powerful metaphor for the search for meaning.

Because fiction is a vision in the form of a narrative that engages readers in difficult and profound choices as if the choices were their own, these books do the whole work of literature. But tales that make the choices easy or as if they do not matter are cheap goods, no matter how stylishly or fabulously they are written or how cleverly the authors manipulate the reader's appetite to find out what comes next. Satisfying the yearning for story is, in the end, a writ- er's duty. To write a story that says something new about the world through characters who have some- thing at stake. That is what makes the difference between a fiction and a lie and gives a teller of stories his only claim upon your time.

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A fragment of 'Mass'

Jack Fuller's third novel involves a newspaper reporter, Stan Majewski, in covering a story that leads to terrifying consequences.

The traffic lights blinked yellow and red. Majewski paused at every one, using the time. At some point in a big, complex story you always found yourself mired in details. The more informa- tion you got, the more confused you became. You could not get beyond the parts to the whole. Sometimes, if you were under pressure from the desk to produce or if you thought somebody else was onto the story, too, you forced yourself to write what you had. You skipped over the lead because you still didn't know what the damned thing was all about. Instead, you backed into it, putting together one true fragment after another, building the story from paragraphs. Then you shifted the graphs around until they lined up like magnets, pole to opposite pole. And when you had enough of them in a row, you could go back and read it over to see what the thing was trying to say.

But more often the facts did not line up neatly. Pieces were missing. The connecting points repelled one another. The chain did not hold. And somehow you had to discover why. Maybe some sun information had slipped through your defenses. Maybe you had let yourself be lured into following another trail that concentrated hard enough, you might be able to feel where the story. It was only a matter of digging for facts. It was a whole way of seeing. And this was not just because it was a fresh angle on something when your nose is pressed flat up against it. That was Majewski's trouble now. The fat man had gotten too close.

A tribute to Foster McGaw

President Arnold R. Weber wrote this tribute to the late Life Trustee, Foster G. McGaw, after McGaw’s death on April 16.

Foster Glendale McGaw, it has been said, was a man who “…dreamed dreams and saw visions of colleges, universities and seminaries where students would be blessed by his generosity, and of hospitals where healing ministry would be strengthened by his labors.”

He was one of those very special individuals who made his dreams become reality and his visions a blueprint for the future.

He will be remembered for his extraordinary business acumen. Foster McGaw founded American Hospital Supply Corp. in 1922 on his 25th birthday and he nurtured it into one of the leading health-care firms in the world. He moved beyond the truancy of entrepreneurship to the creation of an enduring economic institution.

He will be remembered for his strong belief in God, a dedicated Christian whose high ethical standards demonstrated that it is inconsistent on exceptional quality and service was good business and a foundation for exemplary citizenship.

He also will be remembered for his vigorous, yet unobtrusive, philanthropy. Foster McGaw supported education, medicine, the life of the church, the arts. His generosity helped countless thousands in his lifetime, and it will benefit generations yet to come.

For Foster McGaw, his sense of charity was an obligation engendered by his achievements. The more one person has in talents or means or both, the more one owes to others,” he once said. “Sharing the greatest joy of all.

He was a man of genuine humility, a man who clearly understood and accepted his destiny as part of a larger design of service. He believed that the wealth he acquired was, in his words, “…property properly belonging to God, and that he was “…only God’s steward “…in the management of that property. That stewardship role, with his wife, Mary, as his willing partner, was responsible for gifts of more than $100 million to some 300 institutions and organizations.

At Northwestern University, his gifts resulted in McGaw Memorial Hall, honoring his father, the Rev. Francis A. McGaw, the Alice S. Miller Chapel and Religious Center, named for his mother, and The McGaw Medical Center of Northwestern University.

The Presbyterian Foundation and the Presbyterian Home in Evanston were supported by his generosity and the Mary W. McGaw Infirmary at the home is named in honor of his widow.

Loyola University of Chicago named its 460-bed teaching hospital in Mr. McGaw’s honor in 1972; a library at McCormick Theological Seminary to Chicago and the music building at the College of Wooster honor his parents.

There were other beneficiaries of his generosity. National College of Education, Evanston Hospital, Berea College, Lake Forest College, Lake Forest Hospital, and Dartmouth College were among his philanthropic interests.

This was a man of remarkable strength and courage, yet a man of sensitivity. In his remarks at the dedication of the Alice S. Miller Chapel and Religious Center in 1963, he said:

“Like a large, bustling university, crammed full of competing interests for the student’s time and attention, should have one facility which is apart from all others, a place where the soul may find quiet and repose—may be stimulated—in may just meditate. One’s character and personality cannot be fully developed unless the soul finds a purpose.

“Let it be ‘sacred’; let it be a place where souls may come, with joy to know this possession of yours will give us joy the rest of our lives. How wonderful it is to still have what you give away.”

In so many ways, the Miller Chapel and Religious Center stands as the most appropriate tribute to the man who so generously gave of himself. It has a presence, a spiritual truth. It has beauty, yet it is functional. And perhaps most importantly, it is dedicated to family.

On the occasion of Mr. McGaw’s 75th birthday and American Hospital Supply’s golden anniversary, J. Rocose Miller, then chancellor of Northwestern University, said:

“His life is one that goes far and above beyond the usual Horatius Alger story. A business success in and of itself was never Foster’s goal. His goal was to see that success carry about the ideal that had been instilled in him by his mother and father—a goal to create and build help a larger society and a healthier condition of man.

We are better for having known Foster G. McGaw. He combined a capacity for virtue and enterprise that left a special mark on the community and the nation. Because he had a clear sense of purpose in the larger world and defined his role in ethical terms, he made a difference. We are grateful for the standards he set and the goals that he attained.

John Evans Club

Founded 32 years ago by a group of devoted alumni, the John Evans Club is a recognition society for donors who pledge at least $15,000 over a 10-year period or at least $5,000 by bequest. Since 1994 through April 1996, members have contributed a total of $120,000,336. In March and April, cash gifts totaled $1,619,838.

Living memberships now total 1,438. (A membership includes both husband and wife.) New members who joined from April 15, 1996, to June 25, 1996, include:

Mrs. (CS 42) and Mrs. K. Brooks Abernathy of Winnetka, Ill.

Mrs. (CS 46) and Mrs. Gerlad Allan of Evanston

Mr. (EB 39) and Mrs. Donald B. Anderson of Glenview, Ill.

Mr. (EB 64) and Mrs. M. Douglas Anderson of Syracuse, Ind.

Mr. (CS 57) Robert R. Balsamder of Grassfield, Va.

Mr. (CS 57) and Mrs. (CS 69) Garry Bang of Evanston

Mr. (J 54) and Mrs. (Ms. J 56) J. Thomas Beatty of Chicago

Ms. (E 81) Diane Reu of Redwood City, Calif.

Mr. and Mrs. (CS 47) Clinton R. Black III of Winnetka, Ill.

Mr. (ES 56, L 59) and Mrs. (Ed 57) Lawrence Block of Highland Park, Ill.

Mr. (ES 56) and Mrs. (CS 56) James P. Bragel of Evanston

Mr. (S 49) and Mrs. Jack E. Brown of Paradise Valley, Ariz.

Ms. (CS 76, GS 78) Cita Blumenthal of Evanston

Ms. (GS 78) Joanna A. Collins of Rosemead, Calif.

Ms. (E 81) Robert E. Cooper of Los Angeles

Mr. (Ed 60, GS 60) and Mrs. (Ed 62) Joel J. Creabine of Glenview, Ill.

Dr. John D. Davis of Chicago

Mr. and Mrs. (SS 60) Philip L. Emrich of Arlington, Va.

Dr. (CS 46, D 52) and Mrs. (R 56) Richard G. Fisch of Pebble Beach, Calif.

Mr. (EB 42, GS 50, L 50) and Mrs. R. James Gurney of Evanston

Mrs. (CS 48) Marjorie Habermann of Chicago

Mr. (S 83) and Mrs. (Ed 65, GS 69) Gilbert A. Haggart of Glenview, Ill.

Mrs. (CS 66, GS 82) Susan Davis Heiner of Winnetka, Ill.

Rear Adm. (CS 36) and Mrs. F. Woods Hinrichs of Beverly Hills, Calif.

Dr. (Ed 66, G 68, L 71) Sheila Kaster Kelz of Evanston

Mr. and Mrs. (J 57) Richard Kleinach of Huntington, N.Y.

Mr. (J 69) Laurence C. Koonicki of Northbrook, Ill.

Mr. (EB 39) and Mrs. Richard E. Lasser of Evanston

Mr. (L 50) and Mrs. (Ed 56) Stanford D. Marks of Chicago

Mr. (CS 76) Stephen C. Marquardt of Chicago

Mr. (J 62) and Mrs. (S 61) Michael A. Miles of Lake Forest, Ill.

Mr. Thomas Jackson Minar of Wilmette, Ill.

Ms. (CS 71, GS 73) Robert E. Nissen of Evanston

Ms. (CS 76) Meule Nolan of Chicago

Ms. (ES 45, G 65) Sandi L. Pery of San Diego, Calif.

Dr. (CS 65, M 69) and Mrs. (CS 65, Ed 69) Lloyd L. Peterson of Greensboro, N.C.

Ms. (CS 53) Mary Price of Glenview, Ill.

Mr. (TJ 73) Joseph W. Rattaner of Calgary, Alberta, Canada

Mr. (L 60) and Mrs. Jerry M. Reinbold of Skokie, Ill.

Mr. (CS 76) and Mrs. (CS 76) Timothy Rivelli of Hinsdale, Ill.

Mr. (S 52) and Mrs. Thomas G. Roche of Lake Forest, Ill.

Mr. (ES 56) Sanford Sacks and Dr. (CS 57) Susan Riemer Sacks of Scarsdale, N.Y.

Ms. (Ed 76) Kathryn Schwab of Wilmette, Ill.

Dr. (J 59) Peter H. Smith of San Jose, Calif.

Mr. (TJ 35) and Mrs. Antonin M. Stibera of Park Ridge, Ill.

Mrs. (CS 36) Edwin Sunderland (Mrys Jane) of Alton, Ill.

Ms. (Ed 66) Carolyn Trutner of Winnetka, Ill.

Mrs. Marcelle Schaefer Veraguta of New Orleans, La.

Dr. (CS 66) and Mrs. Robert V. Wacha of Palo Alto, Calif.

Dr. (CS 66, M 69) and Mrs. (CS 66, CD 69) Arnold L. Wagner of Evanston

Dr. (EB 66) Joseph H. Wender of New York, N.Y.

Ms. (Ed 54) Helen A. Widen of Evanston

Mr. (CS 51) Donald L. Williams of Winnetka, Ill.

John Evans Club events during the year include dinner, the June-Moon monthly brunch and other programs. Membership inquiries from alumni are invited to write to The John Evans Club, Northwestern University, Department of Alumni Relations, Evanston, IL 60201.

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Verlag (which Iwanami Shoten is doing in Japan, selling out its allotment of each volume before publication). For Mitchell Beazley, Motovun Tokyo sold an Atlas of Archaeology (to Doohasa, a new direct sales enterprise); for Rizzoli, a 10-volume 100 Great Painters (to the same house). For Milan's Jaca Book, he placed a History of Ancient People and Places (with Tokyo's Librio, which serves the library market). There is a new Leonardo da Vinci facsimile from Italy's Giunti (it went to Iwanami, which has also taken on Giunti's multivolume illustrated catalogue of Leningrad's Hermitage Museum). In the other direction, Aoki was in Motovun last summer to talk up a major project done by a Japanese TV and book house, which has acquired world rights to books about the Sistine Chapel restoration. Motovun's new Swiss-based publishing house will produce the book for sales in the U.S., U.K. and other markets; London's Frederick Muller has world English rights.

"If the subject is right," Aoki tells PW's visitor, "we can find a market here. The Japanese don't have the editorial talent to do an international book like a specialized atlas or a monograph on Western art. The Japanese also want good books on history—even history in cartoon strip form."

Selling Japan

PW readers have already been introduced to the intrepid partners who sell Japan's books, and its culture, around the world (in "International Front," May 18, 1984). Since last autumn their Japan Foreign Rights Center has a London office, run by Akiko Kurita, once part of the Japan Uni team; partner Yumiko Bando, formerly rights manager for a Japanese children's book house, runs the Tokyo side. The Center has an ambitious program that goes beyond the sale of individual titles for translation. Because of the difficulty of the Japanese language, the Kurita-Bando team does best with children's books and other pictorial projects, and with coproduced nonfiction.

With internationally known Mitsumasa Anno, winner of last year's Hans Christian Andersen award, the Center has set up a schedule of publications in the English-language market extending to 1987. It has also begun to publish a twice-yearly Japan Book News, the first periodical on Japanese publishing and books in the English language. Issues number one presented important writers, recent books, interviewed Mitsumasa Anno, discussed how-to, photography, technological titles. The second issue, just published, focuses on children's books in time for the Bologna Children's Book Fair.
‘SENSIBILITY’
and the Novel

By Robert Ward

A writer finds much new fiction lacking in identification with American life

I was talking to one of the most famous writers in America. She said: “I don’t read contemporary novels anymore. I hate most of them. Nobody writes with any real passion.”

Two days later I was on the phone with a playwright friend, who said: “I haven’t read a good book in ages. I mean the literary stuff, not the junk. There’s no weight to any of it. No worldview. Just one more novel about some guy’s midlife crisis, or how lonely some writer is now that he’s famous, or some woman rediscovering marriage for the ’80s, or that horrible meta-fiction where we’re supposed to be thrilled because the writer can really use words!”

In the past 10 years I have had these conversations—or ones dishearteningly similar—maybe a thousand times. More times than I care to remember I’ll walk into a good bookstore with that old tingle of expectation that this time, surely, one of my old favorite writers has pulled something off. I don’t necessarily mean something Great and Immortal, but passionate, exciting, something that gets my blood stirring. But over and over again now one picks up new books and after a glance gets that sinking feeling. Yes, it’s well written, and yes, God knows, it’s clever and professional; but where’s the passion, the feeling that the writer really cares urgently about something?

Over and over among literary friends I hear the same complaint: What happened to writers who had a really larger vision of the world, who went into the real world and observed how other people lived—authors like George Orwell, Richard Wright, adventurers like Henry Miller, bold artists like Theodore Dreiser, even Dickens and Defoe? Writers who were able to submerge their precious selves into the difficult but rewarding task of creating characters who were unlike themselves. Writers, like Tolstoy, who took real chances and understood that personal fates were tied up with great historical moments. Writers who wrote passionately, and compassionately, about the poor, who had a sense of injustice as well as a sense of mystery...

There are a million people coming through the creative writing programs, and all of them can sling words, but where is their spirit, their will to engage things outside their narrow little class of friends? Where is their desire to connect and understand? And how did this sorry situation come to pass?

Of course, one common villain all writers scream about is the publisher. Publishers don’t care about serious fiction. They won’t publish anything downbeat. If you’re not already a name, forget it... The gophers go on and on, all of them at least partly true.

But allow me to offer up another explanation—and one writers themselves don’t like to hear. Bear with me while I briefly tell this writer’s tale.

Like many novelists in the past, I come from humble origins. My hometown is Baltimore. My great-grandmother was a child laborer in a cotton mill, and was saved from a flu epidemic when the mill owner’s wife took pity on her and nursed her back to health. That freak occurrence is all that stands between me and oblivion. My great-grandmother later married a janitor named James Weaver, and they had three children, two boys and my grandmother Grace.

Grace Weaver was a brilliant and studious girl, a Methodist of deep faith and with a profound commitment to social justice. I have her journal, and in it she describes how her own father wanted badly to be a painter but because he had no education and no money he saw “his youthful hopes crushed.” Her own son, my father, also had exceptional talent at painting and even won a scholarship to the Maryland Institute of Art. But the Depression swept his hopes away as well, as it did those of millions of others.

By the time I was growing up, without anyone ever saying it directly I was made to feel that any hopes of doing anything exceptional—especially becoming a writer—were simply ridiculous. “You’ll learn,” my father used to say. “You think you’re so smart but you’ll see!”

My grandmother, Grace, was another matter, however. She read, and encouraged me to do the same. Her idea of a great writer was George Orwell. Together we read all his books, talked endlessly of his commitment and courage. My father loved him too. In one of his rare good moods, he would say, “He lived among the poor. He was brave.” But there was a sadness in my father’s voice that said Orwell had been brave in a way he could never be.

I hated that sadness, and the defeat in his eyes. But I began to hate myself as well, for I felt that same fear filling me up too. All around me I saw old friends succumbing to rotten jobs, killing themselves with drugs and booze. Only my grandmother and books kept my spirit, damaged as it was, still alive.

Finally, I went to college. Not much of a place, only a state teacher’s college, but once there I was taught English by men who seemed infinitely more well-bred than I. Several of them had studied down South, and their model of literary excellence was the Fugitive School. I never mentioned to any of them the dream that I might someday become a writer, for I realized how hopelessly I was rearing my high school education had been. I did not even know what a simple sentence was. I was lucky, though, because one man worked with me, making me write essays seven and eight times, until finally there was a day when writing became easier.

Because these men seemed to embody a kind of grace, an aristocratic command not only of literature but the world itself, I worshiped them—and that is not too strong a word. My teachers exposed me to a whole new way of looking at books. For openers they all agreed that, yes, George Orwell was an “exemplary man,” but, in fact, he was a “journalist.” There was a certain “crude power” in his work, but after all, it wasn’t really the work of an artist. An artist was Henry James. In fact, he was the supreme artist of American culture. Another artist was James Joyce, a...
genius who “expanded the frontiers of fiction to a new level of consciousness.”

The effect of these lessons on me was nothing short of revolutionary. Now I do not blame my teachers; they were good men who spent endless hours with me teaching me to write and to think. But beyond exposing me to new “difficult” books, they hammered home one lesson over and over again, and that was this: the highest literary ideal was the cultivation of sensibility, and the highest sensibility one could aspire to was that of the Ironic View of Life.

And why was this so? “Because, Mr. W., it is the most inclusive and complex view. People say one thing in public but act quite differently at home. They profess ideals, and even mean what they say, but darker sides of their natures often prevail in spite of their best wishes. Look at what James shows us about the world of fashionable protest in The Princess Casamassima.”

So when I passed a small voice inside me wanted to protest such “wisdom.” I can remember wanting to object: “Well, I know people who really do care about things, and who try like hell to remain consistent with their beliefs, who aren’t rich old hens pretending to care about the poor, but spend many of their waking hours actually helping people!” But, of course, this was cool, detached, ironic, civilized English class, and any outburst of this kind would have been met with a firm, polite, ironic putdown.

Besides, this pontificating voice was gradually overwhelmed by my romance with High Art. Already I had adopted most of my teacher’s attitudes toward art and life: here was a shining world I could believe in. Like my few literary friends on that sorry campus, I decided once and for all to be an Artist. Life, after all, was short and art was long. (What was inferred was the astounding idea that art was only tangentially connected with life at all.)

And what of the poor? What of my former passion for George Orwell? Well, as one professor told me, “If you waste your time writing about people whose chief preoccupation is simply making ends meet, then you limit the sphere of sensibility (which after all is the thing) to such a minuscule point that no real, complex, multi-hued art can be created. Remember, real art is beyond passion, and even beyond such a worthy idea as social justice. Leave such things to the pamphleteers.”

What saved me from becoming a cold-eyed snob with a myopic view of not only literature but of life itself was the now discredited and ridiculed ‘60s. Suddenly, all around me, people of my generation were taking real chances with their lives, apparently oblivious—or perhaps even uncaring—that all their efforts would ultimately be judged “highly ironic.” People were heading to Mississippi to lead voter registration drives and dying for their beliefs. Older misguided types (thousands of them) were walking out of schools, leaving high-paying jobs to defy the draft, and living with a sense of adventure that seemed positively euphoric.

I split from school and moved to San Francisco, and even though I knew that much of what I was seeing was folly, much of it insane, I loved it then and I would never betray it now. There was hope and a feeling of love in the air, a feeling I had experienced with my grandmother, but never anywhere else. Every week a new smart writer would come in and write a little putdown of the scene, with the usual cheap irony. But in fact, many of these observers were afraid—afraid that they hadn’t lived intensely enough, hadn’t really taken chances, that what I asked them then and have seen since, their fears were not groundless.

I paid a price for my euphoria—an addiction to speed, and crushed hopes. But the important thing is that I was there. I lived those years, and my ironic vision was tempered by real love, real life.

In the end I went back to academia, but it didn’t work anymore. I had seen too much ever to think that art was superior to life, or that books could be “taught.” All books—even Henry James and James Joyce—were the property of readers, not teachers. I felt a despair just walking to the class, instructing people on the “thematic unity of Faulkner.” Having written one book by now—a book that took five years of stumbling and agony to write—I knew that art was created by passion, and by the ability to listen to one’s own voice, no matter what.

I escaped teaching via journalism, for I knew that if I were to write anything of any real value, fiction or nonfiction, I would have to satisfy my now completely awakened urge for more life. Through journalism I got glimpses into many lives, and though those glimpses were often cursory and unsatisfying, they made me want to know more about people. Above all I wanted to gain a mature version of the spirit I had first sensed through my grandmother: I wanted to learn to love people, even in their weakness. And once I knew that (and it took a long time), I knew I would have to go home.

Back to Baltimore, the very place I thought would crush me. Back to the streets my grandmother grew up on, back to the docks where my grandfather had been a freighter captain, back to the steelworkers’ hall, the corner bars where people sat chewing over hard times and the Orioles. I had to learn how to listen all over again, not to the language of professors but that of working people; and I found that their language was the secret language of my own sensibility, my own heart.

After four years I finished my new book. It’s about unemployed steelworkers, about the people I grew up with and then became ashamed of, the people I had wanted to escape. I had traveled so far only to end up writing about what was there all the time right in front of my nose. I know now that one can write about the so-called average man with all the passion and intelligence (and even some of the irony) with which one can write about the genteel life; that poor people aren’t less complex, they simply have less money.

And there is one last irony worth considering. The writer-professors in their cozy English offices are always whining about publishers not caring about “real books.” About serious publishers, not merely commercial ones (you know who you are). But meanwhile, the editors at those same houses are worrying about why the serious books they do have the nerve to sign don’t sell. What neither group sees is that of all of them went to the same schools, and for the most part had literary educations twice as refined as my own. Both editors and writers share a belief in the Tower of Sensibility, and the Proper Literary Subject (well-to-do middle-class people). They shake heads. They worry about “the death of literature.”

It never seems to occur to either group that they are snobs—that many editors and many writers hold the average American in contempt. It never seems to occur to them that the novels they publish frequently have nothing to say, and are written by myopic, narcissistic bores. These are books that scream: “Look at my life! Look how my therapist treats me! See how sad my celebrity has made me! My cocaine! My country house! My tenure! My precious, narrow, cultivated little self!”

Perhaps books will someday become extinct, as has so often been predicted. But if so it won’t be because of Walkmans and VCRs. It will be because both writers and editors unconsciously conspired to give up on the novelist’s real job: creating a fictional world that reflects true, lived experience. To do this of course, writers might have to step off the campus. They would certainly have to give up some of their shimmering solipsism, and learn to see the real world anew. Most painful of all, they would have to put their talents to creating characters unlike themselves, in a spirit of complex compassion and love. That, I think, would be a sensibility worth savoring.
Snatched From the Jaws of CBS
It started in New York, where the William Morris Agency's literary development team, Phyllis Levy and Paul Lus- sier, recommended that Son of the Morning Star be brought to the attention of the Mount Company, a Morris client. The action then shifted to the Coast: Morris vice-president Arthur Axelmann urged Thur Mount, former Universal feature production chief, and his TV executive v-p Nicolette Brey to give Evan S. Connell's Custer biography-cum-Battle of the Little Bighorn replay an overnight reading. They took on this not inconsiderable assignment and by next morning had decided they wanted it for a mini-series.

Mount, Brey and Axelmann thereupon set up an appointment with Tom Tannerbaum, president of Viacom Productions, who agreed to back the Mount Company on the project and instructed Axelmann to negotiate for the rights.

At this juncture the North Point Press bestseller became caught up in a battle of its own between rival camps in Burbank and Studio City, mini-series headquarters of NBC and CBS respectively. CBS let Axelmann know that they were buying Son of the Morning Star for in-house production and didn't need any outsiders.

CBS hadn't bought it yet, however. Axelmann called Connell's literary agent in New York, Elizabeth Mckee of the Harold Matson Company, and made his bid on behalf of Viacom. Meanwhile Mount phoned Connell in Sausalito, Calif. The two of them talked Custer for several hours. Axelmann then rang Steve White, NBC's senior v-p of movies and mini-series. "I don't want to get in the middle of a bidding war," said White, "but I do want the book."

After three days of further bids and counterbids, with the threat of action by competitors not hitherto involved, Axelmann made Mckee an especially attractive offer, conditional on her not returning to CBS to get it bettered. She accepted. The deal: $60,000 as an option for two years against a purchase price of $150,000, for up to three hours; $40,000 for each hour thereafter, 4% of 100% of profits, and the services of Connell during production as creative consultant. Viacom and the Mount Company will produce Son of the Morning Star for NBC.

Plans for Black Robe
A second work of historical re-creation, in fictional terms this time, has been optioned for filming. Again, the adaptation probably will be for long-form TV. Before there were books in the stores, International Cinema Corporation had put money down toward acquisition of Black Robe, Brian Moore's account of the perilous journey through the Canadian wilds by a 17th century Jesuit priest and his Algonquin guide whose "savage" customs he deplores.

ICC has grown to be one of Canada's most important picture companies. Headed by Denis Heroux and John Kemeny, it has delivered such features as Quest for Fire and Atlantic City, along with a number of mini-series. Under the contract negotiated for Moore by Ziegler Associates in Los Angeles, collaborating with Timothy Knowlton of Curtis Brown, New York, the author's own adaptation will be used in the joint ICC-Telefilm Canada production. The total price, if all relevant clauses are called into play, could hit a quarter of a million dollars.

Catalina's Wide Net
As noted here March 15, Ruth Gruber's Haven, about a Nazi refugee resettlement program during WW II, is currently in development for ABC-TV. Not mentioned was that the three-hour dramatization is to be co-produced by Columbia Pictures Television and the Catalina Production Group.

Catalina merits notice as a vigorous presence in motion pictures and television, also active in live theater—an increasingly rare combination. Columbia Pictures is its regular partner for small screen entertainment. For the big screen it has several properties in preparation with 20th Century-Fox, ABC Features and other major companies. Roger Berlind is its customary associate in stage ventures. At the moment they have a musical running Off Broadway, In Trousers, and a revival of Blue Denim is about to open in Los Angeles. Looking to the future, they have taken an option on John Nichols's 1963 novel The Sterile Cuckoo (McKay) through Tim Knowlton for another stage musical.

In the film area, Catalina, in partnership with Cimarron Productions, has made an outright purchase of Five Good Boys by Leo Rutman (Viking). This is to be done as a theatrical feature. Jerome Siegel on the Coast represented Rutman. Three titles have been optioned by Catalina for TV movies on the Disney Channel. Two are by the same author, Herb Payson: Blown Away (Sail Books) and You Can't Blow Home Again (Hearts Marine Books). Agent: Stuart Miller of APA, Los Angeles. The third for Disney is Happy Endings by Margaret Logan, acquired through Larry Mirisch of Triad Artists, Los Angeles, acting on behalf of Ellen Levine in New York.

Pleasures, edited by Lonnie Barbach, Ph.D. (Doubleday), has been optioned with Columbia Pictures TV and is being adapted for ABC-TV. Cooperating agents for Barbach: Tony Krantz of CAA, California, and Rhoda Weyer, New York. Finally, Roses by Barbara Cohen, a children's book (Lothrop, Lee & Shepard), has been optioned for an undetermined TV outlet through Patty Detroit of Ziegler Associates and Dorothy Markinko of McIntosh & Otis, New York.

Short Subjects: Triple threat barely suffices to describe Naura Hayden, who has written, starred in and was executive producer of a movie, The Perils of P.K. Now she has placed novelization rights with Dell, with release of film and paperback set for next September. Perils boasts a comedy cast including Dick Shawn, Louise Lasser, Larry Storch, Kaye Ballard, Professor Irwin Corey, Anne Meara, Sammy Davis, Jr., Jackie Mason, Sheila MacRae, Virginia Graham and Joey Heatherton. . . . Hudson Hills Press has sold a British edition of its new British Watercolors: Drawings of the 18th and 19th Centuries from the Yale Center for British Art to Orbis in London. . . . Another art book covering one more century has been adapted to an hour-long video tape: Bradley Smith's Erotic Art of the Masters, 18th, 19th & 20th Centuries (Gemini Smith). Being released this month by Vestron, the tape has been retitled The Secret World of Erotic Art. Sales of the book since 1972 total some 398,000 copies. . . . World Almanac Publications has sold German rights in The Omni Future Almanac to Verlagsgruppe and German rights in Moonlighting with Your Personal Computer to Kosmos. . . . Sidwick & Jackson has closed for U.K. rights to The Fully Effective Executive by Gerald Keshel, Ph.D. (Contemporary) through New York's Pine agency. . . . Doug McClelland's Hollywood on Hollywood, which has just been published by Faber & Faber, will be the main summer selection for the Movie/Entertainment Book Club.
UNLIKE babies, not all stories come from the same place, and not all people who create stories go about it in the same way. Every writer who has succeeded in bringing a story to life has also managed to kill a few, usually by force. Most of us have lost a few along the way too — stories that started as ideas, stories that came from arguments or from a desire to set the record straight.

Students who want to write stories are often puzzled about how to begin. How do writers get started on a story? they ask. And, once started, how do writers keep their stories alive? Do storytellers have extraordinary lives? Do they write only what they know? It's not difficult to find examples of authors who have addressed these questions. They give their answers in journals, in letters and in essays written to turn a buck on the modern reader's peculiar fascination with writers as people. There are some surprising similarities in the responses they give.

Virginia Woolf, in her diary, described her early work on a book entitled "The Moths." (Woolf never wrote a book with this title. The work eventually became "The Waves.") She wrote:

"Now about this book, The Moths. How am I to begin it? And what is it to be? I feel no great impulse; no fever; only a great pressure of difficulty."

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The Ugly Historians/14
ordinary partnership is designed to help managers meet this crisis head-on. It offers practical solutions and guidelines for bringing integrity back to the workplace, showing—through a wealth of specific real-life examples—how ethical management translates into winning strategies for raising employee productivity, improving management communications, strengthening customer ties, and building long-range profitability and success.

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Letters

Waging Justice in Charleston

To the Editor:

Fred Hobson's interesting review of "A Passion for Justice," the biography of Judge J. Waties Waring of Charleston, S.C., by Timsley E. Var- 
brough (Jan. 19), intrigued me very much, for when in 1969 it was announced by my adoptive mother, Dame Margaret Rutherford, O.B.E., in The London Daily Telegraph that I was engaged to marry John- 
Paul Simmons, the black son of a Charleston Baptist minister, Charleston society, which had accepted me into its exalted ranks when I bought an old house in Ansonborough, was aghast. One of the threats I received was: "You will finish up in exile like Judge Waring"—and indeed I did.

Someone who shall be nameless even put over the wire that I was marrying my Butler, so that Princess Margaret asked my mother if indeed it were true. My mother replied: "What would it matter if he were a good Butler?"

When our wedding presents arrived from Lon- 
don and were left in crates in the driveway of our home, they were set alight by a firebomb and de- stroyed. The firemen swept the charred remnants onto the roadside, where the next morning the white chief of police personally arrived on a motor- 
bike to give me a ticket for obstructing it.

Thank God that today Charleston has some- 
what changed and has the regular black police chief and one of its finest white mayors.

Like myself, Judge Waring might have been called a "heretic," but Mr. Hobson says, but the black people of Charleston, including my own daughter, Natasha Manipualt Simmons, should bless him.

Dawn Langley Simmons

Guides to the Bible

To the Editor:

Elizabeth Struthers Malbon's review of "The Literary Guide to the Bible" (Dec. 20) shares with the book itself at least one major flaw. Missing from the book and ignored in the review are the conservative, evangelical scholars from other countries, churches and theological nuances. They cannot be discounted as unworthy of an audience on the basis of ideology, since the same universities have granted doctorates to these as to scholars who appear in the book. The same publish- ers have released their work. They read papers at the same scholarly societies. There is no more dis- tance between the positions of some evangelical scholars and some of these who wrote for the book than there is between the writers themselves.

The editors are not wrong for not including at least one evangelical scholar, but they are incor- rect for failing to acknowledge that choice. Your reviewer is wrong for not noting and commenting on this, as she does so competently on other factors.

Wallace Alcorn

Austin, Minn.

To the Editor:

The reviews in the Dec. 20 issue of two new books on the Bible, "Congregation," edited by David Rosenberg, and "The Literary Guide to the Bible," edited by Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, both pointed out that neither collection depended in any way on actually being able to read the Bible. That is, no knowledge of Hebrew was required at all (to say nothing of Aramaic, for Daniel), and in the case of the Alter-Kermode book the editors even made a point of their "preference" for the King James "version" of the Bible.

This is disturbing, and particularly because it is part of an equally disturbing trend in academic circles. Probably no scholar would presume to teach, much less write a book or even an article about, a literary text in Greek, French, German or any other language which that scholar was unable to read. Yet there are courses, and indeed books, about the Bible in English and comparative litera- ture and "religious studies" departments where exactly this is done.

The Bible is written in Hebrew. It is, aside from some parts of the Torah (Pentateuch), extremely difficult Hebrew. It escapes me entirely how any- one can say anything of any possible interest about the "literary aspects," or any other aspects, of books that he or she cannot read.

All English translations of the Bible are bad; some are terrible (such as the King James version especially), and some are just incorrect, but none of them are good.

Norman Roth

Madison, Wis.

Tibetan Religion

To the Editor:

Although Alexandra David-Neel was undoubtedly a very unusual and interesting person, and her extensive travels in Tibet deserve attention, Jam- willew van de Wetering's review of "Forbidden Journey" by Barbara M. Foster and Michael Fos- ter (Jan. 18) was marred with errors on Tibetan Buddhism.

As a Tibetan Buddhist, I have been taught by lamas and my parents to practice compassion. I have never heard of tantric Buddhism, though rich in ritual and symbolism, referred to as following a "demonic way." Mr. van de Wetering's statement gives the impression that Tibetan tantric Bud- dhism is an extremely negative or evil practice.

This totally contradicts what Tibetan Buddhism is about.

It is unfortunate that The Book Review did not find a more informed person to review this book. There are numerous students and scholars of Ti- betan Buddhism in America who would never have made such an irresponsible remark.

Punsog N. Tethong

New York

Jawmillew van de Wetering replies:

Tantric Buddhism, or Vajrayana, has to do with spells and ritual first taught in Tibet by the eighth-century Indian master Padmasambhava.

The discipline aims at helping us to evoke an in- ward drama of self-development and spiritual growth, in which we do battle with a number of demons. Mr. Tethong objects to my use of the word "demonic."

When I studied with Lama Trungpa Rinpoche at his retreat in Scotland in the 1980s, I was de- lighted to hear that even the most fearful demons in tantric Buddhism ultimately symbolize compasion. Our struggles with these dark forces from the subconscious ultimately result in providing the clearest light, in which opposing opinions merge and reinforce each other. If this basic teaching is true, my irresponsible remark and Mr. Tethong's corrective slap may serve to enhance an essential Buddhist beauty.

Feminism and Marxist Feminism

To the Editor:

In her review of Nancy F. Cott's "Grounding of Modern Feminism" (Jan. 19), Nina Baym writes: "The most alarming possibility — that the welfare of one group of women might actually require the exploitation of another group — was not faced then, nor is it today, except by feminists who are also Marxists." What a ridiculous statement!

I am first a Christian, second a feminist and third a libertarian. That many professional women, campaigning for "women's rights," are sweating their household help is hypocritical and wrong. You don't have to be a Marxist to figure that out.

Joyce H. Mann

New York

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Waiting for the Story to Start

Continued from page...

...Ever since I write a little sketch, to amuse myself. I am not saying, I might say, that these sketches have any relevance. I am not trying to tell a story. Yet perhaps it might be done in that way. A mind thinking. They might be islands of light — islands in the stream that I am trying to convey; life itself going on. The current of the moths flying strongly this way. A lamp and a flower will win the centre. The flower can always be changing.”

Joyce Carol Oates spoke of a similar percolating condition in which she gave short shrift after completing “Wonderland”: “At times my head seems crowded, there is a kind of pressure inside it, almost a frightening physical sense of confusion, fullness, dizziness. Strange people appear in my thoughts and define themselves slowly to me.”

I

In his essay “The Art of Fiction,” Henry James described not his own method of beginning but that of “an English novelist, a woman of genius”: “There’s no way you can get the impression she had managed to give in one of her tales, of the nature and way of life of the French Protestant youth. She had been asked where she learned so much about this recondite being, she had been congratulated on her peculiar opportunities. These opportunities consisted in her having once, in Paris, as she ascended a staircase, passed an open door where, in the household of a pasteur, some of the young Protestants were seated at table round a finished meal. The glimpse made a picture, it lasted only a moment, but that moment was experience.”

Thus James lays to rest the old chestnut “write what you know.” The necessary experience can be had in one moment on the right staircase. “Of course all writing is based on personal experience,” Margaret Atwood observed in an essay on this subject. “But personal experience is experience — wherever it comes from — that you identify wish, imagine if you like, so that it becomes personal to you.”

The writer, James concluded, must always be “one on whom nothing is lost.” Flannery O’Connor puts it a slightly different way: “There’s a certain grain of stupidity that the writer of fiction can hardly do without, and this is the ability of having to start, of not getting the point at once. To begin, then, young writers must feel the pressure to begin. They must open their eyes to the world and ‘experience’ what’s out there.

What next?

William Faulkner, in an interview he gave during his last stay in public reading, was asked about the beginning of “The Sound and the Fury.” “That began as the story of a funeral,” he responded. “The first thing I thought of was the picture of the muddy seat of that little girl’s drawers climbing the pear tree to look in the parlor window to see what in the world the grown people were doing that the children couldn’t see.”

Here are John Fowles’s published “Notes” on the beginning of “The French Lieutenant’s Woman,” in which he describes not only how he got started but how the story stayed alive for him, almost insisting on being written:

“It started four or five months ago as a visual image. A woman stands at the end of a deserted quay and looks out to sea. That was all. This image rose in my mind one morning when I was in bed asleep. It responded to no actual incident in my life (or in art) that I can recall, though I have for many years collected obscure books and forgotten prints, and sorts of fragments and memories from the last two or three centuries, relics of past lives — and I suppose this leaves me with a sort of dense hinterland from which such images pop down to the coast of consciousness. ‘My “stills” (they seem almost always static) float into my mind very often. I ignore them. The best way of deciding whether they really are the door into a new world.”

“So I ignored this image; but it recurred. Imperceptibly it stopped coming to me. I began deliberately to recall it and to try to amplify and hypothesise why it held reality as well as in fiction. As writers begin, it is this sense of an intrusion of reality that sends them off into fiction in the form of an image that, as Mr. Fowles puts it, is “the door into a new world.”” Reality, Gustave Flaubert wrote to his sentimental mistress, Louise Colet, “if we are to reproduce it well, must enter us until we almost forget.”

The desire at the start is not to say anything, not to make meanings, but to create for the unwary reader a sudden experience of reality. No writer has put this more succinctly than Joseph Conrad, who described his purpose as always to “render the highest possible justice to the visible universe.” This is a definition of purpose I think few writers would dispute. It’s a laudable goal, rendering justice, and should be distinguished from passing judgment, which is not the fiction writer’s province.

A second requirement of the developing story is a sense of free play. Most of us can claim to have been visited by an image like John Fowles’s woman on the quay, but few of us have any idea how to make her turn her face to us so we can make out more about her. It won’t work to try to force her; if you want to know someone, in life or in art, you always have to wait. In his “Notes,” Mr. Fowles makes this observation about his steadfast lady, who has by this time, through his patience, revealed to him her face, her name, her situation, but not her soul.

I was stuck this morning to find a good answer from Sarah at the climax of a scene. Characters sometimes reject all the possibilities one offers. They say, in effect: I would never say or do a thing like that. But they don’t say what they would say; and one has to proceed negatively, by a very tedious kind of trial and error. After an hour over this one wretched sentence, I realized that she had in fact been telling me what to do: silence her was better than any line she might have said.”

Joyce Carol Oates has described this same obstinacy of the deep mind: “My characters really dictate themselves to me,” she reports. “I can not force them into situations they haven’t themselves willed.” Perhaps Faulkner explained the writer’s relationship with his characters by his answer to a naive question about whether, when his characters got into some sort of trouble, he didn’t feel tempted to help them out. “I don’t have time,” he replied, “by that time I’m running along behind them with a pencil trying to put down what they say and do.”

This element of surprise is the most difficult for critics and students to understand. Their notion is that writers have set out to create something “meaningful,” and that to do so they must work with clues to its meaning, usually symbols that have to do with colors or nature, the location of a river or a train track. Many students want to believe that writing is a kind of craft, a superior form of cooking and weaving, in which the writer is in total control from start to finish. No amount of denial is sufficient to obviate this notion, their impasioned cry, “No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader,” falls on deaf ears.

Margaret Atwood goes so far as to call this element of surprise the pivot upon which the question of “art” turns. “Nevertheless,” she declares, “art happens. It happens when you have the craft and the vocation and are waiting for something else, something extra, or maybe not waiting, in any case it happens. It’s the extra that comes out of the hat, the one you didn’t put there.”

I think the resistance to this notion of surprise is caused by the fact that good stories don’t seem to be accidental. They look meaningful, they contain symbolic patterns; you can take them apart and find pieces that fit right back together again. They are organic, like flowers; they have an internal and external structure. In fact, like the hands that deal them out, they show their cards now and then; they appear to have a subconscious as well as a conscious level. This analogy of thinking may explain why stories are so important to us and why they appear to be so meaningful. Stories think, and they do it the same way we do. They talk straight to the heart, to the heart, but they have always a deep, symbolic understanding of reality that can dictate what happens on the conscious level. They speak to us as dreams speak to us, in a language that is at once highly symbolic andchildishly literal. They mirror our consciousness exactly because they are composed through a process both conscious and subconscious.

He mirror the contemporary story often holds up to the reader reflects a world that is so rapid, so devoid of hope or humanity that the writer may be reduced to presenting it as if there were a stack of obsolete snapshot; there’s just no point in trying to say much about such pictures. This “reality” looks like a nightmare from which it is impossible to wake us. Yet we cannot need, read and pay people to write stories. In a world where the ultimate power to destroy all human life lies in the hands of people we can neither admire nor trust, and with the knowledge that this extraordinary power is held by people we may even despise, one must assume that the average person is making stories till the end. Otherwise we would simply go mad from anxiety.

Teaching people to write stories requires, first of all, that for a while they look at life with all their eyes and ears, to take off the blinders and let the images pour in — a necessary first step toward taking life seriously and, in a way to start thinking reasonably for themselves and for the world we can finally see.”
Time’s golden handshake

Through Thomas Love Peacock’s novels, such as Mr Panascope, “the chemical, botanical, geographical, astronomical, galvanistical, musical, pictorial, bibilographic . . . philosopher.”

I have had to rescue Coleridge from that hypnotic mendacity. Similarly, it has taken a remarkable biography by Claire Tomalin, a masterpiece of sympathetic detection, to rescue the figure of Ellen Ternan — Dickens’ secret companion from the crushing, sentimental fiction of Lucy Manette in A Tale Of Two Cities, or the taunting sexuality of Estella in Great Expectations.

What I am suggesting here is that the truth of biography is different from, not superior to, the truth of fiction. The two forms embody radically separate ways of investigating human nature. The novel is always ultimately an imaginative extension of the self, while the biography is an imaginative reaching out towards the other. The novelist has the final, absolute command over his creations; the biographer works in subtle, historical subordination or dependence. It is an epistemological difference. Sylvia Plath once said that poetry was like a closed fist, while the novel was like an open hand. In this sense, biography seems to me like a hand-shake: a hand-shake extended through time, which can range in feeling from the subtlest caress, to the most exhuasting kind of arm-wrestling. I have certainly experienced both grips.

Novelists rightly argue that they can get inside their characters in ways forbidden to the biographer. Certainly the biographer is limited by his documentary sources, and even Lytton Strachey felt constrained to quote an authority for his description of Queen Victoria eating a soft-boiled egg for breakfast. As Desmond MacCaughy said, “the biographer is an artist upon oath.” But it is these limitations which provide the fascination and power of the form. The raw chronological data of a life can be composed into dramatic scenes, flashbacks, or historical panoramas; extracts from letters can be worked like dialogue; and diaries and journals can provide the interior monologues of private thought and speculation.

Moreover, biography faces the challenge, increasingly rare in modern fiction, of presenting the “whole man or woman” in the perspective of an entire life. It continually asks that most pertinent question: how close can we really get to another person? How well do parents know children, husbands know wives, friends or lovers or simply working colleagues know each other? How well does the artist know himself or herself, and the forces that drive or inspire? Biography can also trace that most modern sense of multiplicity within personality, of all our self-contradictions and fragmentations. What novelist could present the supreme improbability of the author of The Ancient Mariner serving as a trooper in the Light Dragoons, and find the connection between the two? There is, finally, a sense in which biography remains blessedly free and untrammelled, compared to fiction. All novelists are now doomed to work within a roaring factory of academic criticism, a ceaseless chatter of thesis and theory, and the distant pounding of the Great Tradition. No such weighty theoretical superstructure exists — yet — for biography. On a recent visit to Toronto University, where one of the first courses on “Life Writing” is being set up, I found the scholarly bibliographies wonderfully silent before 1980. English biographers in particular feel themselves to be essentially mavericks, unattached to institutions, free to range and experiment, and working in a literary green-field site. No doubt this will all change when the first Chair in Comparative Biography is founded in some grove of academia. But for the moment I think we all share the feeling of working in a Golden Age of literary biography.

Perhaps what we were doing at the Law Society was a legal or constitutional matter after all. We were making a modest Declaration of Independence, of imaginative autonomy, from the Old Empire of Fiction. As we ran up the flag and won the debate (though not the champagne), some of us could hear the distant chukle of our patron saint, that sober Edinburgh citizen, James Boswell, lawyer, free spirit, and biographer.
The con and the cop

By Tim Pulleine

There is at present a trend in the American cinema to adapt the work of such largely unsung, and often seamy, exponents of paperback crime fiction as Jim Thompson, Charles Williams (the current The Hot Spot), and now Charles Willeford. But where some of the source works, such as Thompson’s novels of the 1960s, have been adapted with relative ease, Willeford’s novel from which Miami Blues derives was first published as recently as 1984, and that may explain why the adaptation is less self-conscious than in some other examples of the genre.

In a fashion not untypical of this sort of story, the protagonist here is a psychopath lurking behind an almost aggressively “normal” exterior — in this case, an ex-convict (Alex Baldwin) who arrives in Miami to start a new, though far from reformed, existence. He sets up home with an amateur prostitute (Jennifer Jason Leigh), and after crossing the path of a homicide cop (Fred Ward) succeeds in stealing the latter’s credentials and using them to further his own nefarious ends.

The earlier stages of the picture show the writer-director George Armitage satisfyingly in command of his material. There is a nervous vitality about the handling, which drives events forward while still keeping the viewer in a pleasurable state of uncertainty.

Despite this dexterity, however, and the sharpness of the playing, the latter part of the narrative — divested of the alises which lend the novel its texture — seems attenuated. In the process, the grotesqueries, like the doing-yourself surgery performed by one of Baldwin’s associates, threaten to unbalance the tone, which is a shade or two lighter than Willeford’s. But even if the ultimate descent of nemesis seems unduly casual, Miami Blues retains a pithiness and snap which lift it above the norm of most recent policiers.

Made two years ago and possibly now opening in London to coincide with the redgrave family outing in the theatre, Margarethe Von Trotta’s Italian-made Three Sisters represents an updated paraphrase of the play, set in Italy’s groves of academe in 1980, but perhaps in spirit a few years sooner). The themes of ennui, and of love and marriage as a potential snare and delusion, are all in evidence. But the predominant effect — given the intimations of ecological concern and media satire, not to mention a snatch (vanished romanticism) of Bette Davis in Now Voyager on TV — seems to suggest a homage less to Chekhov than to the earlier films of Antonioni.

The overall impression tends to be not so much second- as third- hand, but that surface is seductive enough, what with violins on the soundtrack, and the illustrious trio of Fanny Ardant, Greta Scacchi and Valeria Golino in the leads.

No grandfather, deep-rooted in his native soil, ought to have any difficulty in responding to his grandchildren’s request “Tell us a ghost story, Grand-dad”. In my native county of Wiltshire we have plenty to choose from, for one county collection, compiled some twenty years ago, comprises no fewer than 275 tales and is by no means exhaustive. It includes, for instance, none from my own native village, and I can think of at least three.

One is of an invisible ghost, which has been revealing its presence, by the rustling of curtains, chilly draughts, and movements of furniture, at intervals for more than a century. The house is fairly modern but occupies the site of one older.

I used to know an old man who had lived in this cottage as a boy and who has told me that once May three of his little sisters were playing along a lane which happened to be a section of the ancient Roman Ermine Street, was caught in a torrential storm. Seeing a thatched cottage a little way up a lane, she went there and asked for shelter. A tall old man, with long grey hair and a beard, beckoned her inside.

She was invited to sit by a fire which burned in an old-fashioned grate. The old man stood smiling at her but did not speak. When the storm was over she went on her way, but at her destination her friends were surprised to see her arrive stone-dry. When she related how the landlord had taken refuge in the cottage they were puzzled. They told her there was no cottage on that road — only an old ruin that had been derelict for fifty years.

A few weeks later she passed the smell of decay was everywhere.

A story which defies any logical explanation concerns two children who were left with a housekeeper while their parents were abroad. This happened in the 1940s. When the parents returned they were told by one of the boys of a “man in white” who came to talk with them. From him they learned the Ave Maria, which they had not previously known. The house where they had been staying had been occupied, some two hundred years previously, by an order of white friars!

A delightful ghost story with a happy ending relates to Philip’s House, Dinton, in Wiltshire, which used to be the home of a family of country gentry but which now belongs to the National Trust. It is often left for conferences, seminars and similar functions.

A feature of the building is an impressive series of rooms, linked by a trap-door, descending to a spacious hall. Not so very long ago a woman attending a course there came out of her own room one night and saw the elegant figure of a lady in flimsy clothes floating down the staircase. Naturally she told her story the next day, with the result that on subsequent nights a number of watchers were waiting for the ghost without being rewarded. At the social evening on the final night of the course, another member of the group confessed: “I hope you will forgive me, but that was my wife who visited me. I thought of Regency ladies floating down the steps on their way to a ball, with horses and carriages waiting outside. When feeling it must have been, i

Oddities

By Ralph Whitlock

Then there was the story of two men, still alive in my time, who said they were walking through the woods one snowy night when they saw a woman walking ahead of them. Not recognising her, they hurried to catch her up, curious to know whom it could be that time of night. As they drew nearer she disappeared, and, looking down at the snow, they realised with horror that she was leaving no footprints!

I dare say that any village in all England could match this modest score of mine. Some are more convincing than others. I like the one, from north Wiltshire, of a teenage girl who, in the 1930s, while cycling along a lane which happened to be a section of the ancient Roman Ermine Street, was caught in a torrential storm. Seeing a thatched cottage a little way up a lane, she went there and asked for shelter. A tall old man, with long grey hair and a beard, beckoned her inside.

She was invited to sit by a fire which burned in an old-fashioned grate. The old man stood smiling at her but did not speak. When the storm was over she went on her way, but at her destination her friends were surprised to see her arrive stone-dry. When she related how the landlord had taken refuge in the cottage they were puzzled. They told her there was no cottage on that road — only an old ruin that had been derelict for fifty years.

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There was irony, he said, in the fact that "Born on the Fourth of July" — originally rejected by many studio executives — would be released only a few weeks after the United States invaded Panama. "It's a reflection of the same kind of Viet- nam-style thinking," he said. "That we can set other people's houses on fire in order to make an enemy movie."

"Norigia would make a great movie," Mr. Stone said. "Graham Greene could have helped. Is it a movie he'd like to see?" Stone added, "Norigia in a second! If Shakespeare were still alive, he'd hate him. I love Central America as a canvas." It was there that he directed "Salvador," his last film, a portmanteau multi-storied, multi-continent, played by James Woods, caught in the fall of 1986.

Mr. Stone stood to get more coffee; he stretched. He is six feet tall. His hair is the color of a black Ace comb. He was still in his Concord clothes, which included a black T-shirt under an aqua work shirt with an unbuttoned button-down collar. He sipped some coffee, then said it was better than "Born on the Fourth of July." It's not a film after a decade after the first, stillborn attempt to film it. In 1978, with Al Pacino, he cast Leonardo DiCaprio as director, the film, with which he'd been working for years, three days of shooting. Then the financing fell through. Stone remembered that "I needed to do 'Platoon' first," Mr. Stone said of the 1986 film he wrote and directed, which won four Academy Awards, including best picture and best director. But "Born" has more layers to it. It encompasses the 'Platoon' experience. Although two share the same screen, "Platoon" — Tom Berenger and Willem Dafoe — appear in "Born," the film, that much as a sequel to "Platoon," an expansion," he said.

He said "Platoon" helped create a climate in which a movie about an anti-war veteran could be made. The cover of Time magazine, as "Born" was the week it was opened, and "And this new generation of kids — we're not saying the war didn't happen, but they really have a need to know about it." Stone said.

He could have made "Top Gun II," and instead he's killing himself on crusades in our film for nothing," he said. To keep expenses down on the $15 million film, Mr. Cruise deferred his customary $10 million movie paycheck for a percentage of the box office, which will earn him multimillions only if the film is a hit.

With "Born on the Fourth of July" has come catharsis, the director says.

"The other side of the coin to Ron in the 60's was Jim Morrison," Mr. Stone said. "Ron will direct in the spring. Val Kilmer, who played Tom, got the rival pilot in "Top Gun," will take the role of Morrison, the charismatic lead singer of the Doors, who died in Paris in 1971.

A Different Role Model

Morrison's father had been in the military, and Jim went exactly the other way," Mr. Stone concluded. "Ron was the good boy, and Jim Morrison was the bad boy. I can shed some light on that. There's a lot of the bad boy in me. There was a lot of the rebel: I really wanted to find the bottom of the barrel. That's why I became a wiper in the Merchant Marine. That's why I went to Vietnam. When I was there, I wanted to be at the lowest level, the guy who cut point that English-I speak, English-I say. Still I am. I identify with Morrison. He was a shaman. He was a god for me, a Dionysian figure, a poet, a prophet."

Mr. Stone said, "If I'd like to bring his life out into the light."

He also identified with Mr. Kovic, "I can relate to Ron's story with that of other Vietnam veterans. "Born" Ron had the radicalization experience of the veterans' hospital, and I didn't. But I ended up as a lot longer role for me to turn against the war than Ron and on that, the movie is closer to my experience. I believed in the domino theory for a lot longer than R".

"I think the Vietnamese have gone beyond the war and just bring their lives back," he said. "But they've gone to a level of frustration and embarrassment."

He was toyed with his empty coffee cup, then said: "If I felt as we were ghosts wandering through a landscape we'd inhabited a long time ago."

Oliver Stone is Ready to Move On

Continued From Page B1

3 Jazz Musicians Given U.S. Arts Fellowships

Three jazz musicians and composers — Cecil Taylor, Matthew Shipp and Gerald Wilson — have been awarded fellowships as part of the National Endowment for the Arts. The fellowships, worth $30,000 each, have been awarded without consideration of the artists' exceptional artistic merit in the field of jazz. A panel of jazz musicians and composers chose the winners.

Mr. Russell, who plays piano and drums, is based in the San Francisco Bay area of the Living Time Orchestra. He has taught at the Lewisohn Symphony School of Music, University of Wisconsin, the Vassjade Summer School in Denmark and the New England Conservatory of Music.

Mr. Taylor, pianist and author, has taught at the University of Wisconsin and Glass-
Knowing, and Even Loving Portia

By MERVYN ROTHSTEIN

"Portia had never been an attractive character to me," Geraldine James says. "I didn't like her. I found her rather insufferable. I'd played Jessica, Shylock's daughter, about 10 years ago, and I thought the play was fairly horrible. So when Peter Hall first asked me if I was interested in playing Portia in 'The Merchant of Venice' with Dustin Hoffman as Shylock, I truly said, 'No.' I said, 'I really don't think she's a very nice character at all.'"

Fortunately for New York and London theatergoers, the idea of being directed by Sir Peter and acting with Mr. Hoffman intrigued her, and Sir Peter persuaded Ms. James to change her mind. The critics, both in London last summer and now in New York, have highly praised her performance as the "lady richly left" in Belmont who must marry the suitor who chooses the right casket and who later must judge Shylock's demand for a pound of his debtor's flesh.

The 39-year-old British actress, who is probably best known to American audiences for her portrayal of Sarah Layton, the unmarried daugher of a military family in the television mini-series "The Jewel in the Crown," also changed her mind about Portia.

Infuriating but Honest

"I love her," Ms. James says in her dressing room at the 46th Street Theater before the first of the day's two performances. "She just becomes endlessly and increasingly fascinating to me. It took a long time for me to realize it. But I like her so much because she's so honest. I think of integrity as one of her overwhelming characteristics."

"Yes, I found her infuriating," Ms. James continues. "But she's so human. You can't ignore her. And that's not because she's noisy. She's just so positive. If she feels cross, she's positively cross. If she's in love, then, my God, she's loving. And if she's getting somebody back for what they have done, then she really goes for it."

Ms. James's contradictory feelings about Portia mirror those of many critics and scholars, who have described the Shakespearean heroine as noble, simple, humble and pure but who have also called her affected and pedantic and the least lovable of Shakespeare's comedy heroines. Ms. James maintains that the contradictory reactions are natural when discussing a character who has so many contradictory aspects. Here is a rich woman whose father in his will has forbidden her marriage to one of her suitors unless he passes a difficult test: choosing which of three boxes, one of gold, one of silver and one of lead, best conveys her qualities. When a Moroccan prince arrives to take the test, Ms. James says, Portia at first seems to be very nice to him. But when he makes the wrong choice, Portia dismisses him contemptuously, saying, "Let all of his complexion choose me so."

Spoiled Amid Prejudice

"And I think for line for me," Ms. James says. "I talk to actresses who say, 'She's a horrible woman because look how dismissive she is of all black people.' Fine. It's true. She does say things that are really unaccept-able thing to say. But let's look at the sort of person who would say that and you wonder about all these wonderful romantic speeches and how the mental ability and sense of truth she has in the court scene," when Shylock is demanding his pound of flesh from Bassanio.

"Yes, she's a very spoiled rich girl who grows up in a world full of the most appalling prejudices," Ms. James continues. "And it's important that we acknowledge that. The job for us in this production is to show these characters, these Christians, realistically for what they are. This play is about people's intolerance to each other: men to women, whites to blacks, Christians to Jews and parents to children. Shylock and Jessica, the old Gobbo and the young Gobbo — it's all about intolerance between people who are close or could be close."

Many critics and scholars have noted the inconsistency between Portia's famous speech about "the quality of mercy" and the lack of mercy she shows Shylock.

All Talk, No Action

"Peter's key to this whole thing was that the people who talk most easily about mercy are the people who do not hand it out," Ms. James says. "So she goes on and on about mercy and then hands out precisely none. But I think I entirely agree with him. I think it's a lot more complicat-ed."

"Portia could walk into the court-room and go: 'I'm sorry, there is no argument here about a pound of flesh because there is an ancient law in Venice which says that even if you think you're being somebody else you lose all your money. So you've had it, Shylock.' She could do that, but she doesn't. Now she either doesn't because she's cruel or because she wants to give Shylock a chance to step down, to drop his demand volunt-
How Hatred of a Character Changed

Continued From Page B1

...tarily. She's saying, 'For God's sake, don't be stupid. You must be merci-
ful. Mercy is everything.'

"When she talks about mercy, it's as if every fiber in her being is hum-
ing. It's the most dear thing to her.

It's what has got her through this thing with her father's will. If she did-
n't believe that we have to do what is good and what is right, she'd have
said, 'Stuff this, I'm not having any-
th ing to do with it.'"

Later in the scene, when Shylock has been forced to acquiesce and she
tells him that his life will be saved only if the Duke says so, Portia is not
being merciless, Ms. James says. "She knows the Duke is going to save
his life because she believes in mercy," she says.

Generosity Gone Awry

"And I think that what she does next is even more generous, because
what she does is to ask Antonio what mercy he can render to Shylock. She
says that Antonio now will do some-
t hing marvelous — Go on, Antonio,
you let him off the hook. And Antonio
turns around, to the horror of Portia, and
says to Shylock, Well, you've got
to be a Christian. And that wasn't on
Portia's mind at all. I don't think she's par-
ticularly keen about that. I think she feels appalled by what hap-
pened. I know that if Peter was sitting
here he'd probably say I was wrong.
But having played the part as often as
I've played it, that's what I've come
to think."

There have, of course, been many
interpretations of Portia over the last
400 years, but Ms. James says she
and Sir Peter did not consciously try
to make hers the same as any of the
others or different.

"What Peter did feel strongly
about," she says, "was making Bel-
mont into a real world and making
Portia's problem a real problem —
the problem of Portia's father leaving
her in his will with a seemingly im-
possible and intolerable situation.
The difficulty with Portia and her
Belmont scenes is that they are more
unbelievable than the other half of
the play. It's easier to be gripped by
the Shylock-Venice side of the story
than by the tertiary creature who's left
with men picking boxes. It's bor-
ing and obvious. You know the right-
bloke will pick the right box."

Critics have commented on the
ease and clarity with which Ms.
James delivers Portia's lines. Ms.
James, who has done very little
Shakespeare professionally — a cou-
of Imogen in "Cymbeline" for Sir
ple of parts in repertory and the role
Peter — credits the director for her
success.

Mr. Hoffman also came up with
something in rehearsal that proved to
be very interesting, she says. "He
said that American actors tend to
stress the little words — it's what we
English love about American actors,
because it's so natural. They tend to
go for the pronouns, whereas the Brit-
ish tend to go for the verbs, the nouns.
Dustin tended to say things like 'what
you believe,' whereas Shakespeare
does 'what you believe.' Stressing the
big words in Shakespeare tends to
make it clear — go for the words that
move, the words that are about a
verb. That's Peter Hall's way."

A More Physical Portia

Mr. Hoffman has been helpful in
other ways, too, Ms. James says.

The way he approached the role was
the way he approaches a film part —
by the character," she says. "Be-
cause British actors hold Shake-
spere in such great reverence, we
tend to go for the word, which tends to
make things very intellectual. A
great lesson I learned from Dustin
was the physicalization of the charac-
ter. I know I play a lot more physical
a Portia than I might have, and I
learned that from Dustin."

At the end of the trial scene, Mr.
Hoffman as Shylock is beaten and
ridiculed by the anti-Semitic citizens
of Venice, a scene particularly appal-
ling to modern audiences. Many crit-
ics through the years have, of course,
condemned the play as anti-Semitic.

"When Peter and I first talked
about it," she says, "and I said, 'No, I
think it's a horrible play,' he said,
'Our job is to show that it is not
Shakespeare who is being anti-Se-
mite, it's the people. What caught my
imagination when Peter said he
wanted to do the play — aside from
the fact that Dustin was playing Shy-
lock — was that he said he wanted
people to lose their preconceptions.
He said he wanted to prove that it was
not an anti-Semitic play but a play
about anti-Semitic people. He said,
'You're going to play one of those so-
called heroines as a complete anti-
 heroine.' Us actresses, we all want
to look like wonderful princesses and
be sweet and lovely. And it's very dif-
ficult to walk out and risk 1,100 people
hating you. But it's also infinitely
more interesting."

Ms. James, who was born in Maid-
enhead, Berkshire, London — "a home
counties girl, a middle-
class girl" — decided at an early
age to try to play those wonderful
princesses. "I found out when I was
very young that I could make people
laugh," she says. "I think I was a
dreadful showoff."

In school she sometimes played
male roles in Shakespeare: Richard II and Malvolio. "I think I was
dreadful as Malvolio," she says with
a laugh, "but I think I was rather good
as Richard." In her last year, her
class was taken to Stratford, "and I
saw Eric Porter play Lear in Trevor
Nunn's production, and I was com-
pletely gob-smacked by it."

"And I saw Vanessa Redgrave
doing 'As You Like It' in '84, and a lot
of Janet Suzman's work. And I re-
member just suddenly thinking, 'Imaginem being able to do that, just
being able to feel it.'"

She ended up in a drama school
called the Drama Center, "and they
made me believe I actually could
act."

"And I really have been very lucky,
because I got work fairly easily when
I started." She has acted in films and
television as well as on the stage, and
hopes to return to movie-making
after finishing her New York run as
Portia.

But for now, it's time to get ready
for the day's two stints as the woman
she has learned to love. "What I find
extraordinary," Ms. James says, "is
that Portia seems to me to be so com-
pletely contemporary. Shakespeare
writes such wonderful parts for
women, parts that work so well to-
day."

She smiles. "I think," she says, "he
really liked women."
jewels, reflects the fantasy mood. It is part of a mild strain of ethnic-inspired clothing for spring offered by major designers.

Easier to buy sweaters and T-shirts than to get a carton of milk or fill a prescription. After all this expansion, fashion retailing seems due for a contraction, and stores have been dropping like flies.

By all fashion appearances, one should now get ready for the touchy-feely, ecologically aware 1990’s. Billy Crystal’s classically mid-80’s imitation of Fernando Lamas, “It’s not how good you feel, but how good you look,” is about to be turned on end. Taxi, the fashion magazine, already has a “healing editor” listed on its masthead.

An article in the January 1990 issue of Glamour tells of a personal shopper who handles only clients who are in therapy. She is said to take “emergency phone calls from anxious clients out shopping alone.”

Hello, I’m feeling this uncontrollable urge for a bolero.

**Lacy Looks, Lacy Prose**

“Are you invited on a wondrous journey through time where faint, haunting visions stir the imagination. Like Strauss melodies linger on the evening breeze as dancers in swallow-tailed coats and lustrous gowns sweep gracefully around a Victorian ballroom.”

The lacy prose embroiders copies of a new magazine, Vintage Fashions, which answers the question, how many beaded sweaters can you really fit into your closet?

The first issue, out this month, includes articles on the Opulent Era, collectible costume jewelry, mesh purses, ruched ruffles and the “Byronic man.” A feature on “Hatpins: A Political Point of Reference” begins, “The historical and legal ramifications of hatpins are truly astounding.”

**New Men’s Wear Team**

Dolce & Gabbana, an Italian design team that has gained an international reputation with a small, privately shown collection of women’s clothing — very feminine, lots of chiffon — will enter the men’s wear business. Domenico Dolce and Stefano Gabbana, the designers, will show men’s knitwear, shirts, pants, coats and jackets at the Milan, Italy, men’s wear fair this month.

The collection will have about 140 “very masculine” styles, said Long Nguyen, a spokesman for the company in New York.
Suburban Journal

After 5 Years, the Lawnmower is Passed

By MICHAEL WINEGIRP

With the outbreak of war, could anything seem more trivial than a suburban feature column? And yet this is how I’ve spent my last five years, often rising at dawn to get over the Throggs Neck Bridge to beat the traffic to reach another suburb.

For what? To watch Joe Dore, a boy who loves cars, compete in the Chrysler/Plymouth troubleshooting contest. (“I’ve been thinking about it a year.”) To experience the efficiency of a Montclair, N.J., carpool that’s been commuting to New York for 28 years. (“May I introduce the carpool president?”) To sit in a Connecticut garage listening to the new Imperial Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan complain about how hard it is to get his hat to stand straight up. (“As wizard I’m going to change the lining; this muslin is uncomfortable on your head.”) To be in Wanapae, N.J., on Good Friday morning for a demonstration against a nursing home’s accepting AIDS patients. (“Well, don’t put them in our backyard. We believe in Nimby, too! Nimby! You said it, Nimby!”)

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It is a strange moment for me to be saying farewell. Suburban reporters don’t rank very high in the best times and war makes you feel smaller than usual. Every suburban reporter I know sat glued to the TV Wednesday night listening to the brave CNN reporters describe the bombing of Baghdad.

And yet, I loved being the reporter for this column, and wonder if I’ll ever enjoy a newspaper job as much. Writers can be divided into two schools: those who describe life’s external dramas, like politics and war, and those who focus on the internal. In this column, you write about the internal lives of ordinary people, like the New Jersey social worker of the year who is depressed because her Christmas bonus was so small. Or what it’s like having a bright daughter who’s in high school and wants to get married.

Occasionally a column would become news. One on Sen. Alfonse D’Amato’s efforts to spend Federal money for a swimming pool in his hometown led to a series of articles. More typical was Sister Maeve McDermott, who keeps open a Jersey City Catholic school that has almost no Catholics because 500 black Baptist children need a decent education.

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The other day I was in Rye Neck talking to students about war. One of the most affected was Lani McCann, whose father is in the Reserves. Her father had explained that if he were called, money would be tight. How would that affect Lani? “No more unnecessary clothes shopping,” she said. Is there anything more at the heart of suburban America than the right to do unnecessary clothes shopping? We are a lucky, spoiled people and nowhere is this more evident than in our suburbs. It is no coincidence that this column is recognized early on by the importance of the Home Shopping Network.

I did my share on these excesses: Rich homeowners outraged about what would happen to their property values if a developer built mere $1 million homes; a man who had watched videotapes of 6,000 hockey fights (“It’s a hobby. Like stamps.”)

But they were not the heart of this column. I became a reporter because I felt writing about social issues in a useful way could make a difference. All the social problems of cities exist in suburbia; they just aren’t so overwhelming.

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I found no shortage of suburbanites with courage to do right. The majority of Granby, Conn., overcame a loud minority so a boy with AIDS could attend school. Pam Miller, a model foster mother, stood up to a system that insisted on returning her foster child to the mother — who then beat the girl to death.

In the suburbs you could get glimpses of a new, better world. There was Gregory Haynes, the valedictorian at virtually all-black Roosevelt High, whose dream was to be a great dentist. Jodi Levine and Jennifer (Weasel) Kiesel, fifth graders, led their girls’ basketball team to victory against boys teams in Plainview, N.Y. Jodi and Weasel weren’t feminists, they didn’t know what Title IX was, but their lives were forever different because of such things.

At times I ached to come in from the suburbs and write about New York City. I did my damndest to find a suburban angle to the painful Daily News strike, without success. But I found plenty of labor issues out here, like a three-year Colt strike in Hartford.

You can see the suburbs changing. Today most every town has a group home for the mentally ill or retarded. This has been a favorite issue and is why I am leaving Our Towns — to write a book on the battle to establish one such home. I will miss this. I never tired of meeting new ordinary people who weren’t so ordinary. It was always something new.
Olav V, Norway’s King 33 Years And Resistance Hero, Dies at 87

By PETER B. FLINT

King Olav V of Norway, who as Crown Prince was a national symbol of resistance to Nazi Germany’s occupation of his country in World War II, died yesterday after a heart attack, the Palace announced. He was 87 years old.

Olav, the oldest monarch in Europe, was widely revered by his subjects in a reign that began in 1957. A constitutional sovereign with a sense of history and humor, he mingled freely and informally with his subjects. They in turn loved him as a father figure and fondly termed him a “folke konge” (a king for all the people). His royal motto was “My All for Norway,” first chosen by his father, King Haakon VII.

King Olav traveled throughout much of the world and made more than a dozen trips to the United States, including several secret wartime visits. He was an ardent and adept sportsman into old age, and won many ski jumping and yachting competitions, including a 1928 Olympic gold medal for 5.5-meter class sailboats.

Olav’s egalitarian geniality was epitomized in a popular photograph of him in the early 1970’s, carrying skills aboard a local train on the way from the royal palace in Oslo to a nearby slope. At the time, his subjects were being exhorted to use public transit to conserve oil, nearly a decade before North Sea explorations made Norway an important oil and gas producer.

Offered to Lead Resistance

In 1940, when Hitler’s troops swept over southern Norway, Crown Prince Olav, the King and leaders of the parliamentary Government held out for two months in the north woods against nightly air raids and advancing German troops. As the leaders prepared to retreat to England, Olav offered to stay behind to help preserve Norway’s free democracy and to lead a resistance, but he was overruled by the others, who opposed the offer as too hazardous.

In the wartime Government in exile in England, Olav became the top envoy to the United States, helped build a fighting force of free Norwegians, often attended his exiled Government’s Cabinet meetings, made radio broadcasts to his countrymen and, as the general commanding the armed forces, received a triumphant homecoming after aiding the 1945 allied liberation of Norway.

In 1957, when Olav became King at his father’s death, Trygve Lie, who was Norway’s wartime Foreign Minister in exile and then the first Secretary General of the United Nations, offered this tribute: “King Olav is very knowledgeable in many fields, and his excellent memory has impressed experts in many areas. His wide knowledge of American history, industry, agriculture and economy was greater than that of any other Norwegian I met during the war.”

A Norwegian king’s royal duties are mainly ceremonial, but King Olav, like his father, succeeded in his main duty to epitomize national unity.

Mario Siletti Dies; Acting Teacher, 65

Mario Siletti, an acting teacher who helped found the National Shakespeare Conservatory, died on Jan. 7 at New York University Medical Center. He was 65 years old and lived in Green Village.

He died of pneumonia, said Albert Schoemann, a co-founder of the Conservatory.

For 25 years, Mr. Siletti taught acting at the Stella Adler Studio, New York University and the National Shakespeare Conservatory, which he, Mr. Schoemann and Philip Meister founded in 1974.

At the age of 4, on the Lower East Side, Mr. Siletti began acting in productions by the Italian Theater, which his father, Mario Sr., had founded.

The son, christened Alexander Edward Christian Frederick, had been born on July 2, 1903, at the British royal estate in Sandringham, England, to Princess Maud, a daughter of Britain’s King Edward VII. Haakon soon renamed his son Olav, a heroic name of Viking rulers.

The Crown Prince graduated from at the Norwegian military academy, Balliol College at Oxford, where he majored in economics and political science and was a champion fencer, and Norway’s war college, where he graduated fourth in a class of 18.

At 25, he married Princess Martha of Sweden. The couple traveled widely, including an extensive 1939 journey in the United States. They established a friendship with President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who arranged for wartime sanctuary near Washington for Crown Princess Martha and their three children. She died in 1954 and King Olav did not remarry.

The couple’s son and two daughters all married commoners, leading the Palace to announce that the royal line was closed.