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CULTURAL STUDIES

On the Day of the Dead

Hilda Johnston

Children, I know you have nothing to say. Yet over and over again you'll be asked to say it. And I'm not asking you to turn your umbrella of silence inside out, the ribs poking into a five-paragraph essay; I am only asking you to write a few sentences. My head is heavy too. It's the season. We aren't farmers, yet we know the harvest is over—a few wisps of hay blowing over the bare fields, small birds pecking for grain. Even the dead are uneasy. That's why we have All Hallows Eve and, in Mexico, The Day of the Dead. But this is not a gloomy holiday, as you can see by this altar. In Mexico, skeletons ride bicycles, play the guitar, or dress up to be married. Children eat sugar skulls decorated with flowers.

For our altar I brought a photograph of my uncle when he was a boy with his horse, some tomatoes, green peppers and a beer bottle. My Uncle made Jambalaya—that's a shrimp dish—with beer, and it's the custom to put a favorite dish of the dead on the altar. No, they don't eat it; the aroma is enough. And every altar has marigolds, which, they say, smell like bone and attract the dead. Now you'd think the dead, being all bone, would long for something more sensuous and fleshy like rose or honeysuckle, but maybe marigolds are all they can bear.

We also have Indian corn because each kernel is a seed. I know it's not until you're teenagers that many of you will begin to marvel at the properties of seeds, but at the harvest it is most important to garner the seeds. If we lose the seeds, we lose the thread. See these dry stalks of fennel. Each stalk branches into umbels of licorice-flavored seeds.

You can come up to the altar when you've chosen your skeleton. Remember, each of you is the skeleton of someone who has died. You can pick someone you knew personally or someone from history. Yes, you can be a horse . . . or, yes, a dinosaur. I imagine you are more familiar with dinosaur skeletons than with the lumbering beasts themselves. At least we were in my day.

Whatever skeleton you choose, you should write about what your skeleton remembers. The dinosaur must miss the ferny marshes of the Mesozoic. But the horse has a harder time of it. His fields are still here, a blue-red in the autumn sunset. The horse is like the girl who dies in *Our Town*—that's a play. She comes back, invisibly, and watches life going on without her. She misses everything. Yes, even homework—her pencils and her copybooks. Death turns everything upside down. That's why we invite the dead back, not just to give them a day off, though god knows they deserve it, but to clear our own heavy heads. It's as though all summer we've been squirreling away nuts and seeds and now we can't remember where we've stored half of them, and anyway we have more than we need and we'd really like to go to sleep, but first we have to make sure we can get through the winter, and that's why we save these seeds. And why we welcome the dead. Now I want each of you to imagine what your skeleton would miss should he come back to visit.

See **DEAD** *page 10*

THE BIG FRESNO FAIR

The Big Fresno Fair

A night out with my mom and Aunt Ella

Stephen D. Gutierrez

I was living in Fresno and inviting my mom and aunt to visit us when they could. They came up often, on the train, disembarking at the charming station in downtown Fresno. I met them under the quaint tile roof, greeting them on the platform and driving them home, my mom calling out, "Yoo-hoo," waving me down, and my aunt lugging a bag behind her, complaining all the way.

"Get in the car, Stephen," my mother said. "*Hay cholos* around here."

"*Ay*, don't be so prejudiced," my aunt said. "It's just like home, LA."

"It is, isn't it?" I had stopped at a red light in front of a taquería. Plenty more ran beside it. Brown buildings blended into the landscape. In LA, the working poor toiled in factories, not fields. Otherwise, the two cities shared a lot. I liked them both. They remained places where lower-middle-class Mexicans, like us, could feel good.

"Americans," my mother reminded me, taking it in. "*Mira nomás*, look at how Mexican it is."

But my aunt checked her. "See, Jo, it's Mexican this, Mexican that. But everywhere you go, you want to see where the Mexicans live."

"It's true. I love my people," she said, staring out the window. "But they're so poor. I feel sorry for them."

"Don't be so condescending," I said. "We're no better."

Then she agreed. "We're not, are we? Just poor Mexicans, too."

My aunt said nothing. She was the younger one: the rebel who had been a "career girl" into her late twenties, daring the barrio to call her an old maid, working as a secretary for a corporation and saving enough money to travel. She conquered Mexico with Capri pants that stirred the natives. She dropped in on Hawaii and broke some hearts.

"They asked me to dance all night, those guys! But Bev got drunk and we had to cut it short! Crazy Bev!"

Soon she met him, Uncle Eddie, a *tejano* with a booming laugh and a love for fishing and good tequila—and her, of course! she liked to laugh and say. She got married and slipped into the life of us, giving birth to three boys and living in a nice house in San Gabriel. She tagged along with my mom everywhere. They visited me because they liked Fresno.

"It's so, so Fresno here!" my mother had said the last time they came down, and looked around.

Fruit trees filled my back yard and the problems of the city receded.

"Yeah, Jo, so Fresno," my aunt reminded her. "You just like to come for the ride."

"I love it here, love it!"

"Well, I like it, too," my aunt said. "But I'm not in *love* with it. It's a nice city to visit, sure, and see you guys. But it's not the greatest city in the world, I don't think, yet."

"Close," my mom said, "to LA."

"To your LA, maybe," my aunt said, "not mine. I can barely breathe anymore."

"Better to breathe LA smog than Fresno air," my mom sang out. "LA! LA! LA!"

I like fairs, the sights and sounds, the excitement of it all. I like the rides whirring around me, and the people relaxing for a bit, and the games promising a small happiness. I enjoyed myself, walking around with my aunt and mom, Ben flinging his arms out in the stroller, wide-eyed and amazed.

"*Ay*, Jo, you're going crazy, I think," my aunt said.

"Maybe, but I know at least I'm in Fresno!" She sang again. "Fresno! Fresno! Fresno! LA! LA! LA! What a wonderful world we live in! Where are the Mex's?"

"In Tijuana," my aunt said, laughing. "Shut up now. You're in Fresno. They're going to deport you."

"*Ay*, Eleanor, you're too much."

"Well, you and your Mexicans all the time. I get sick of hearing you. Relax and enjoy Fresno."

She was the sane one. She nudged me all the time with her hip rectitude.

"All right, we're here!" I drove us up into the driveway. My wife Jackie came out and helped with the bags.

"Oh, Jackie, you look so good in that blouse. Is that the one Carmen gave you?" Carmen, the other aunt with the weird taste, picked a winner for once.

"Yeah, I like it a lot."

"It looks really good on you, Jackie. Let's get this stuff in the house and eat, I'm starving." Aunt Ella wasn't shy during those trips. Nobody was. "What shall we have for dinner? Mexican?"

"Whatever."

Bustle in the kitchen produced a good dinner, with coffee and dessert, and then a good time spent lying around followed. We sat in the living room talking, burping, loosening our belts; unbuttoning our waistbands. "Excuse me, that was gross."

"You're excused, dearie. *Ay*, *diós mío*, what was that?"

"That's the Fresno bugs slapping against the window screen."

"I'm really in the country, ain't I?"

"Not really. You're a good five miles from any field."

"They don't have fields anymore in Fresno?"

"They do, outside the city. It's not the same."

"What do they have now?"

See **FAIR** *page 10*

EDITOR'S NOTE

George Hitchcock, Jorge-of-all-trades

Stephen Kessler

When I was an undergraduate and aspiring poet at school in upstate New York in the mid-1960s I started reading the small-circulation independent literary journals known as little magazines. It was a volatile historical moment when cultural life was starting to erupt in all sorts of unpredictable forms, and one of those forms was this suddenly dynamic proliferation of creative periodicals run by eccentric individuals with a taste for poetry and some esthetic agenda or political viewpoint to promulgate, and read by a self-selected bohemian elite. One such journal was the San Francisco quarterly *kayak*, a remarkably lively magazine launched in 1964 and publishing some of the best poets, both famed and unknown, then writing in the United States. The editor and publisher of *kayak* was someone named George Hitchcock.

Like pretty much every other anti-Establishment poet in the country, I wanted to be in *kayak*, so I started submitting my poems—and promptly receiving them back along with shockingly irreverent rejection slips with deadpan regrets from the editor accompanied by a comical collage or illustration clipped from some 19th-century picture book featuring a man falling into a hole or being devoured by wolves or shot by a firing squad or suffering some other unfortunate fate. These rejections, in addition to being amazingly quick and thus sparing you the agony of suspense, had a lighthearted "tough luck" in the subtext—none of those "we-found-much-to-admire-in-your-work-but-due-to-the-large-volume-of-submissions . . . and-good-luck-placing-it-elsewhere" notes more typical of today's creative-writing-program-based reviews. No niceness or phony encouragement tainted *kayak*'s forthright rejections with insincerity.

When I returned to California for graduate school at UC Santa Cruz in 1968 I met George Hitchcock at a small gathering at the home of poet Morton Marcus, who had also moved there that year to teach at Cabrillo College. As destiny would have it, Hitchcock moved to Santa Cruz the following year to teach writing and theater at UCSC's new College V, whose academic theme was to be the arts. While continuing to collect rejections from *kayak* I gradually, in the course of occasional encounters, began to get to know its humorously grumpy editor. Near the end of my career in grad school, before flipping out and dropping out, I took George's poetry workshop, and when the term was over he invited me to serve as his teaching assistant next quarter in improvisational acting. This seemed to me very strange, as I had zero experience in theater, but evidently the teacher detected something in my poems or personality that he thought would enable me to improvise the role of his TA.

He was an influential teacher, more by example than direct instruction, to many other writers and editors, including this one, and a legendary figure in the literary culture of the sixties through the eighties, without ever making a spectacle of himself or trying to play the role of anyone's guru.

Instead I continued my graduate studies in various madhouses up and down the state, returning to Santa Cruz the following year unsure whether to resume pursuit of the PhD or take a leap into the unknown and try to be a writer. One night George's friend Kenneth Rexroth was giving a reading on campus and I happened to run into George on the way to the hall. I told him I was thinking about going back to graduate school but wasn't sure if I should. He asked, "Do you need the money?" I had a fellowship but also some family income, enough to live on. "Not really," I answered. He said, "Don't do it."

It was the best advice I ever received.

In those days before the MFA industry and Garrison Keillor made poetry a respectable occupation, to decide you wanted to be a poet was not a plausible career move. You were dooming yourself to a life at the edge of everything, with neither a guaranteed income nor any sign of societal acceptance. Hitchcock, with his own anti-academic history and a brief career in progress as an accidental professor, apparently had concluded that, at least for someone like me, unemployability was a better bet than professorhood.

Eventually my poems made it into the pages of *kayak*, and in 1975 George published my first book. The kayak imprint was a great endorsement, and though the book received mixed reviews, it did get reviewed, and at the premature age of 28 I was launched as an author. Hitchcock, in his gruff and subtle way, had given my so-called career a supportive shove. I wasn't the only poet, young or mature, for whom George had played such a role. Over the next several years I would meet many of them in the community that grew out of *kayak*, both in its pages and in the legendary collating parties where the magazine was physically put together.

Three or four times a year, on a Sunday afternoon, dozens of poets and friends of *kayak* would gather at George's house in Santa Cruz to collate, staple, stuff, stamp and send out the latest issue. George—a skilled printer, among his other crafts and arts—by then had printed the pages himself on a press in the shop on his property, and the issue would be assembled by his crew of helpers, whom he and his partner, Marjorie Simon, would supply with platters of cold cuts and plenty of beverages. It made for delightful social life—many good friendships and collegial acquaintances were initiated—and efficiently accomplished the mission of putting out the magazine. George was the director of this operation, positioning people on the assembly line and instructing them on procedures (if this was their first time) but otherwise assuming as low a profile as his leonine 6-foot-4 physique would allow. He ran things in a way that enabled his helpers to run themselves.

George Hitchcock, 1914-2010

JORGE HITCHCOCK

His poetry workshops worked much the same way. George rarely commented on students' writing, rather allowing participants to read and remark on one another's efforts. He didn't assert authority or try to push the poets in one direction or another, instead just listening attentively, sometimes making a brief comment, or starting an exercise with some object he would pass around the room—in his apartment at College V in the workshop I took with him in 1969, later in his living room in Bonny Doon or in the big Victorian on Ocean View in Santa Cruz—and turning the writers loose to riff associatively, giving free rein to their imaginations.

It was imagination that he valued above all—not autobiography or sentiment or ideas or noble thoughts or "spirituality"—but a sense of invention, discovery, astonishment and wit. In criticism, intellectual honesty was paramount. *kayak* ran from 1964 to 1984, a total of 64 issues, and that was that. George, as self-described "dictator" of the enterprise, was ready to move on to other things—more of his own writing, visual art, teaching, acting, directing, traveling. He'd been a merchant seaman, a journalist, a labor organizer, a gardener, an actor, a playwright, an investor (municipal bonds, he once counseled me, were the best place to put your money), a poet, someone you couldn't easily pin down with a limiting definition. After the earthquake of 1989 he and Marjorie left Santa Cruz and returned to his native Oregon, where he continued with his various activities, spending winters in La Paz, at the tip of Baja, where George, as "Jorge Hitchcock," frequently showed his whimsical, surrealish, sophisticated, mordant, quasi-primitive paintings and collages in local galleries.

George Hitchcock died at his home in Eugene on the night of August 27. He was 96 years old and had lived an extraordinarily creative and fully realized life. He was an influential teacher, more by example than direct instruction, to many other writers and editors, including this one, and a legendary figure in the literary culture of the sixties through the eighties—a model of independence, ethics and integrity—without ever making a spectacle of himself or trying to play the role of anyone's guru. He didn't like to be the center of attention but enjoyed providing a setting for others to interact and flourish. *kayak* was both a highly individual vehicle, a "one-man boat" piloted by the editor's singular vision, and a community effort created at his famous Sunday get-togethers.

At a time when the academic formalist model was fading as a viable style for contemporary poetry, and the New York School and Black Mountain poets and the Beat movement were on the rise, George took *kayak* in its own unique direction, cultivating an imagistic, surrealist, non-doctrinaire, irreverent, often political, sometimes polemical sensibility, and publishing a range of poets from W. S. Merwin and Raymond Carver and Anne Sexton to Robert Bly and Gary Snyder and Philip Levine, as well as many lesser-known bards like me. The magazine also printed letters and George's collage illustrations—always provocative and amusing—and had a section for criticism where I published my first book reviews. It was easily one of the most vital publications of that or any era in American poetry.

But his post-*kayak* years were at least as fertile, with a prolific output of art and a continuing creative evolution as an all-around man of culture who proceeded on his own path while also encouraging others—for example, endowing a poetry fund at UCSC for nurturing the art and its writers through readings and other programs.

His personal style, in the years I knew him, tended to tweed jackets, sometimes a cape, paisley ascots, rakish hats (often with a feather in the hatband), a pipe, a walking stick—a somewhat Oscar Wildean figure of anachronistic fashion—and a resonant tenor voice that bespoke his stage experience. He liked to dress up in a scary costume on Halloween and give the trick-or-treaters the fright of their night. The Day of the Dead, with its dancing skeletons and festive celebrations of the departed, was a holiday suited to his darkly comic temperament.

He hitched his kayak to a star and blazed a long bright streak across the sky.

Stephen Kessler is the editor and principal translator of The Sonnets *by Jorge Luis Borges (Penguin). An earlier version of this essay appeared online at news.santacruz.com.*

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BOOKS

An Inconvenient Man

Rebecca Taksel

Hitch-22: A Memoir
by Christopher Hitchens
Twelve (2010), 435 pages

Christopher Hitchens's *Hitch-22: A Memoir* opens with a quotation from George Orwell. Hitchens's sympathy with Orwell is profound and personal. The two are from the same stratum of the British middle class, for one thing. Hitchens writes that in his youth he "hadn't quite appreciated that actual fiction could be written about morose, proud, but self-pitying people like us, and was powerfully struck by the manner in which Orwell mimicked and 'caught' the tone. If he was reliable on essentials like this, I reasoned, I could trust him on other subjects as well."

The "essentials" for Hitchens are the essentials of the writer: catching the tone, getting the details right, choosing exactly the right words in the right combination, as Hitchens does with "morose, proud but self-pitying." Hitchens's manual of style must certainly be Orwell's brilliant, and unfortunately entirely prescient, 1946 essay, "Politics and the English Language," which exposed the developing art of using euphemism to hide the commercial, bureaucratic, and political agendas for which words like "cheat" and "lie" and "murder" might be inconvenient. One of the joys of reading Hitchens is discovering his zeal to use just such words. He is almost Homeric in his epithets, with "the homicidal *contras* " and " the mythical, primitive, and cruel Abraham and Moses" replacing wily Odysseus and rosy-fingered Dawn.

There may well be pockets of the left even now where it is inconvenient to be a fan of Orwell. As late as the 1990s a flurry of letters to the editor might still be got up in magazines like *The Nation* about the exact nature and the exact timing of Orwell's betrayal of the international proletariat as represented by Joseph Stalin. Hitchens, formerly a writer for *The Nation,* has certainly proved inconvenient to the left in the US and the UK because of his support for the invasion of Iraq. For some, that is sufficient cause to dismiss him as another turncoat neoconservative. Hitchens maintains that he did not "repudiate a former loyalty, like some attention-grabbing defection," but simply felt that loyalty "falling away from me."

It didn't have far to fall. There was the inconvenient matter of his earlier support for intervention in Bosnia. It was over the Balkans conflict that Hitchens broke with Noam Chomsky, calling him out for conflating Serbia with "Yugoslavia" and maintaining that "the old spirit of the Yogoslav socialist 'partisans' was much more to be found in the anti-fascist posters and slogans of the Bosnian resistance than in the fiery yet lugubrious, defiant yet self-pitying, race-and-blood obsessed effusions of the Serbs, 'socialist' though their nominal leader Slobodan Milosevic might claim to be."

Once again, Hitchens insists upon the actual words and deeds of the Serbs and Bosnians, and he does so from first-hand knowledge. He went to Sarajevo, and he was in physical danger there; he read those posters on the walls of buildings in the war-torn city. His advocacy of the overthrow of Saddam Hussein was similarly informed by his experiences in Iraq and his sympathy with the Kurds. Those experiences left him with a visceral hatred for Saddam, one based on facts that made Hitchens scathingly dismissive of attempts to paint Saddam as, for example, any kind of "secularist."

Anyone on the right who seeks to read *Hitch-22* as a neocon *apologia* will find the book and its author even more inconvenient. It is true that he sees no current viable governments on the left, only populist, nationalist regimes like that of Chávez in Venezuela, which he finds "repellent." But his reckoning is with everyone, not least himself.

For one thing, Hitchens does not make facile and simplistic comparisons between "left" and "right," communism and fascism, reminding himself instead that no fascist ever went through the soul-searching that Soviet-era communists did, wringing their hands and exclaiming, "How could such frightful crimes be committed in the name of Nazism?" or "Hitler has betrayed the revolution!"

Hitchens is also scrupulously fair in his comments about former friends and co-thinkers with whom he parted company over one issue or another, notably Chomsky and Edward Said. His admiration for Susan Sontag, of whom he paints a lively, nuanced, and affectionate picture, is not diminished by her failure to have embraced *him* unreservedly.

Most important, he is hardly uncritical of the people to whom his erstwhile leftist colleagues want to abandon him. About the war in Iraq, he says, "I probably now know more about the impeachable incompetence of the Bush administration than do many of those who would have left Iraq in the hands of Saddam." Writing about the immediate aftermath of 9/11, he remembers that "President Bush (who had run away and disappeared on the day itself) did his best to muddy the waters by saying that it was a matter of 'Amurrka' versus 'the terrists' . . . and didn't appear to acknowledge, or even to know about, the huge number of non-American citizens who had perished . . ."

Hitchens on 9/11 is nothing if not evenhanded, which in his case is all about spreading the guilt and folly equally: "Within a few days, the Muslim world had been infected by the base, hysterical lie that all Jews had left the World Trade Center just in time to avoid the airstrike." Oliver Stone, and the 'Reverends' (his quotation marks) Falwell and Robertson are ridiculed for portraying the terrible events as, respectively, an anti-globalization uprising and a merited punishment for American's tolerance of sexual deviance. "Next up was my magazine, *The Nation,* whose publishing wing cashed in with a hastily translated version of a deranged best-seller, alleging that the Pentagon had not been hit with a civilian plane carrying my friend Barbara, but rather by a cruise missile fired by the Bush administration."

That little phrase, "my friend Barbara," is Hitchens at his best. This is the Hitchens who writes so feelingly about his friend Salman Rushdie's terrifying ordeal upon the publication in 1989 of *The Satanic Verses*. Asked by *The Washington Post* to comment on the Ayatollah's *fatwah* against Rushdie, Hitchens says, "It was . . . a matter of everything I hated versus everything I loved. In the hate column: dictatorship, religion, stupidity, demagogy, censorship, bullying and intimidation. In the love column: literature, irony, humor, the individual, and the defense of free expression." He adds, "Plus, of course, friendship—though I like to think that my reaction would have been the same if I hadn't known Salman at all."

Hitchens simply refused to reason backwards from cherished and polite truths. He refused to write the sort of didactic prose beloved of left-wing ideologues. He refused, above all, to accept the split between what a religion purports to be and what its practitioners actually do.

Christopher Hitchens

The *fatwah* was a litmus test for friends, colleagues, and enemies. Hitchens criticized the neoconservatives who, while vehemently anti-"terrorist," relished the fact that this "radical Indian friend of Nicaragua and the Palestinians" had become a victim of terrorism. Besides, they seemed to have forgotten the dealings of their beloved Reagan with the Ayatollah in the Iran-contra matter. On the other side were the Marxists who "in their multicultural zeal" portrayed Rushdie's book as racist. Hitchens accuses them of "a wilful, crass confusion between religious faith, which is voluntary, and ethnicity, which is not."

On matters of religion, Hitchens is spectacularly inconvenient, again all across the political spectrum. He refuses to go along with the prevailing left-wing antisemitism which identifies Israel as the greatest human-rights violator on the planet while making excuses for all sorts of Arab terrorism and hate speech. His friendship with Edward Said was tested and finally broken as Said gradually revealed his disingenuousness. Said could agree with Hitchens that Yasser Arafat was "a thug and a practitioner of corruption and extortion" only to the extent that he aligned himself with America by appearing on the White House lawn with Clinton and Yitzhak Rabin. Arafat "had no right to sign away land," Said maintained. Hitchens comments, "Really? . . . How could two states come into being without mutual concessions on territory?" In a pox-on-both-their-houses sentence, Hitchens concludes, "The second so-called Palestinian *intifadah,* organized or incited in response to one of Ariel Sharon's staged provocations at the Al Aqsa mosque, reeked to me of racist and religious demagogy and of that dull, sinister, 'sacrificial' incantation that has since become so nauseating on a world scale."

Hitchens himself is not a Zionist, because he regards antisemitism as one "ineradicable" element of "the toxin with which religion has infected us." He sympathizes with European friends who tell him they are "prepared for the day when it happens again." After all, how could devout Christians and Muslims ever forgive the Jews for having "seen through Jesus and Mohammed?" He congratulates the Jews for that: "May this always be the case, whenever any human primate sets up, or is set up by others, as a Messiah."

Hitchens is particularly poignant when he writes about his mother's Jewishness, of which he was unaware until after her death, and which he embraces. He finds that he can live happily with the apparent contradiction of the Jewish atheist, and he identifies the cosmopolitanism of so many Jews, their involvement in struggles for other people, as, yes, Jewish! It is typical of Hitchens that the discovery of his Jewish roots was the occasion for a journey, in this case to Poland.

Hitch-22 was given the full publicity treatment by its publisher, and Hitchens made the rounds of the talk shows, being his usual articulate and often obnoxious self. What no doubt occasioned the heavy promotion of the memoir is the surprising success of his 2008 book, *God Is Not Great*. This full-out attack on religion surely should have shattered any idea that Hitchens was willing to be the darling of American rightists. Nor, for that matter, did the multiculturalist leftists give it the stamp of approval. And yet it sold, and sold, because it was wonderfully and outrageously refreshing. Hitchens simply refused to reason backwards from cherished and polite truths. He refused to write the sort of didactic prose beloved of left-wing ideologues who sound just like the moms and dads in the supermarkets engaging in painstaking, *faux*-egalitarian dialogue with their toddlers. He refused, above all, to accept the split between what a religion purports to be and what its practitioners actually do. In other words, he reported, vividly, in unvarnished phrases and exact words, which is what he has always done. *God Is Not Great* is honest, sharp, and hilariously funny. No one has drawn blood on religious topics like this since Lenny Bruce.

Good writers don't tend to be good ideologues, as many of them have found out over the centuries, often to the detriment of their health and safety. And Hitchens is a writer, comfortable with writers. His best friends, notably Martin Amis and Clive James, are literary men, not political pundits. Besides the numerous references to Orwell in *Hitch-22*, there are at least twenty to W. H. Auden and a dozen to Evelyn Waugh. If Hitchens has chosen to write essays and polemics rather than fiction or poetry, he has nevertheless brought all of himself, his feelings as well as his reasoning power, to his writing. *Hitch-22* begins with several chapters of autobiography, filled with emotionally honest passages about his parents, his schooling, his youthful bisexuality, his ardent leftist organizing. The book then branches out into essays both personal and political, and the tone throughout is essentially the same: for Hitchens, the political and the personal really are connected, in all sorts of unexpected ways.

Another poet who merits several mentions in *Hitch-22* is Philip Larkin, whose poetry Hitchens fell in love with in his youth. His admiration for Larkin was very inconvenient indeed for the young left-winger. Having found out that Larkin hated just about everything Hitchens embraced—the left, striking workers, foreigners, even London—the young man concluded that "you couldn't have everything." If readers of *Hitch-22* are willing to abandon the comfort and self-satisfaction of ideological purity for a few hours, they will certainly come to a similar conclusion. With Hitchens, you may not have everything, but you will have a very great deal.

Rebecca Taksel, a regular contributor, lives and teaches in Pittsburgh. Hitch-22 *and all the other books reviewed in this issue are available through Coast Community Library.*

WRITERS & WRITING

Writing Under the Influence

Carolyn Cooke

John Updike taught me everything I knew about sex before the seventh grade. A desolate January evening in 1972, an island off the coast of Maine, the usual frigid darkness already fallen over town: I'm sitting in a Windsor chair in the Jesup Memorial Library reading *Couples,* my hair still wet from swim team practice at the YMCA next door. The librarian calls my mother at home. Carolyn is reading adult materials, filthy books. Should she put a stop to it? I remember only being unwilling to leave the book, the chair, the library, to return from the ineffable almost erogenous zone where reading (and especially Updike) took me.

Updike's kind of realist fiction—besotted with the junk material of America, the ugliness rendered gorgeous but also recognizable—formed a perfect objective correlative for the kind of life-energy and freedom I yearned for, qualities I associated with literature, which I associated with men. I don't remember reading women before college, when a professor turned me onto Joan Didion. Her sexless prose, her chilly, neurotic habits of mind, her perfect pitch, opened worlds to me. But it was almost too late. I was like a dog tied up out back on a chain for years before being brought into the family fold. Once in the door, I had bad habits—chewed, yipped. Before Didion, my reading for pleasure (by which I mean self-recognition and self-invention) was all E. B. White, John Cheever, J. D. Salinger, Joseph Mitchell, Henry Miller, John O'Hara, James Baldwin, Theodore Dreiser, Richard Yates, Richard Wright, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Philip Roth and, of course, Updike.

These spiritual fathers—heroes and enemies—ruined me early. They're old or dead now; Salinger went this January—Updike, almost exactly a year before. How I miss the effete, prolific, claustrophobic, asthmatic, stuttering, psoriatic Updike! Rereading recently "The Disposable Rocket," a bold essay reasserting old saws about the differences between men and women—biology, destiny, the familiar trajectory of heterosexuality—made me cringe with familiar irritation and envy. There's nothing in "The Disposable Rocket" I haven't heard before—the entitlement, the argument that takes its conclusion for granted at the outset, the witty euphemisms that polished New Englanders use to lubricate direct and blunt speech and which Updike permits himself with such impertinences as: "From the standpoint of reproduction, the male body is a delivery system, and the female is a mazy device for retention. Once the delivery is made, men feel a faint but distinct falling-off of interest. Yet against the enduring heroics of birth and nurture should be set the male's superhuman frenzy to deliver his goods: he vaults walls, skips sleep, risks wallet, health, and his political future all to ram home his seed into the gut of the chosen woman."

The delicate through-line of woman-revulsion famously runs through Updike like a red line through a poisoned finger: The woman is a "mazy device"; bearing children are "enduring heroics"; the literal upshot of human sexuality is rammed "home" in the woman's "gut."

Psychosexually, Updike is all bad news. But because none of the women in Updike are real, our empathy remains with the hero, the alter-author. When I say "we" I don't mean that we all empathize with Updike, only that the books are structured this way. In the opening scenes of *Memoirs of the Ford Administration*, the Updike-like narrator takes a break from writing his book about Buchanan to have sex with his mistress. Here he is after the ecstasy and the denouement: "I itched to buck, to toss off this itchy incubus moistly riding my back . . . I should be correcting term papers or working at my book, my precious nagging hopeless book." It's beautiful—Updike's great gift—this soulful cruelty, this perfect existential freedom (maybe even compulsion) within formal discourse to say absolutely anything, well. (The taunt of an early critic—that Updike writes beautifully but has nothing to say—seems to me beside the point. The point of novels is not information but atmosphere; atmosphere is *how* the novel "says," and Updike's atmosphere is everywhere on his pages, as if testosterone were his ink.)

The taunt of an early critic—that Updike writes beautifully but has nothing to say—seems to me beside the point. The point of novels is not information but atmosphere; atmosphere is* how *the novel "says."

In "The Disposable Rocket" Updike quotes Byron in *Don Juan*, comparing the daily burden of shaving to the trouble of childbirth—an old joke. This sense of men's entitlement to degrade women's experience while simultaneously demanding their approval reminds me, rather fondly, of my grandfather, who used to regale his wife, my Nana, at breakfast with his light verse. Here's an example:

Let's weigh the burdens dealt each sex –
The 'Who fares worse?' which us perplex;
Who has the harder earthly fate,
The husband or his sleek-cheeked mate?
Agreed, the lady has to bear
The borning of the son and heir,
Nine months of cumbersome expansion
Before son enters earthly mansion;
That's brief and ends in joyous cry.
'How cute the cuddly little guy!'
True, that is the woman's cross to bear.
But wait: she has no facial hair.

Our job was to witness him, to laugh with him, to admire him—but also to accede to the force of his arguments, to follow his own example and not take ourselves too seriously. To parse the poem at all was to ruin it, to betray a mean-spirited, man-bashing feminism. To be silent was to urge him on in his production of couplets, croakers ("I'm dying, he croaked"), limericks, illustrated clichés, his annual Christmas poem, light productions that in fact meant so much to him—an unstoppable flow of modest literary ambition. The stuff ran freely through him, like chlorinated water from a tap: almost benign, almost wholesome.

He produced and recited daily for so long that Nana stopped listening until finally, in her nineties, she stopped hearing entirely. Once during a visit I came downstairs into the dining room to find Nana and my grandfather sitting at opposite ends of the French-polished mahogany table, tucking into their cereal. Their silver spoons ticked against the chipped Deruta bowls which Nana would, after breakfast, rinse and tuck into the dishwasher and which Gr. would remove again before lunch, wipe, unwashed, and put away. (He had no use for any technology but the radio that brought him the Red Sox and the monaural turntable on which he played his old Mabel Mercer records.) They sat across from each other in a deep silence of their own. Around them the air trembled with the high-pitched screech of the smoke detector, which had gone off over some sizzling bacon.

They're both dead now. Nana cleaned up after herself—left nothing personal, no surprise stash of love letters bound in ribbons, no diary. I'm the executrix (his word) of my grandfather's literary effects, which consist largely of multiple copies of his verses and lighter fare—poignant purple pages, mimeographed and stapled, held together by rubber bands. One volume is called "Hid Heart on Sleeve"; another, "Elbow Patches." They form a peculiar *oeuvre* for a man who could recite most of Edwin Arlington Robinson and Emily Dickinson and much of Shakespeare by heart, and I cannot stand to read them.

Once I loaded the whole stash into a box to take to the recycling center—and then drove around for a year before I put the box back in my office with the rest of his artifacts—his letters, his articles in the *Independent School Bulletin*, his six hundred watercolors.

A poet friend, S., and I used to debate whether Roth or Updike was the better writer. (S. preferred Roth for being Jewish and presumably earthier, and always referred to the other as John *Fucking* Updike as a comment on his almost mechanical rate of production.) We argued; once S. threw me out of his house when I compared Updike to Henry Miller (both Lutheran-bred, obsessed by and sparklingly articulate about the gritty materials of sex). S. worshipped Roth, and also Henry Miller and Bukowski and dared me, really, to take offense at passages like the one in which Miller compares late-night intercourse with a prostitute to sex with "a milkshake."

Updike is no less crude than Miller, in his way. In the mid-section of his memoir *Self-Consciousness*, he describes in the most provoking terms possible his contempt for his wife's and all his literary friends' anti-Vietnam-war activity and antigovernment idealism, which he despises as clubby and elitist, and which he rebels against by voting for Nixon. The scene culminates as he masturbates his wife's best friend through her ski pants in the backseat of a car while his lefty wife (the precise incarnation of half his readers) natters on about liberal politics. After the episode, Updike feels free of certain easy allegiances, solitary and redeemed.

S. thought such scenes from Miller and Updike must offend me "as a woman," imagining, I suppose, that I would identify with the prostitute or the wife as opposed to the central character, the alter-Miller or Updike, whose sensibility lives at the center of the scene. There's no such thing, really, as a "realist novel" or a "female reader"—or there ought not to be. Like most "African-American poets," or "Southern Gothic" fiction writers, or, say, transgender memoirists of Lebanese extraction, I'd prefer to read and write freely, unencumbered by limiting adjectives.

Roth and Updike always seemed to me like false opposites, two sides of one coin, set up as binaries to thwart the opposition—women, people of color, working class people who bang at the gates—echoing the similar false opposites of F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway. (F: "The rich are different from you and me." H: "Yes, they have more money.")

While S. and I wasted our evenings arguing about whether Roth or Updike had produced the more quintessential American novel, nailed it—Roth and Updike were essentially conversing amiably with each other, sparring and feinting, as if, in the end, the American novel belonged to one maternally smothered, privileged, precocious, heterosexually hyperactive male imagination or the other, as if the question were whether authentic American experience was more WASP-ish or Jewish. (Updike, born humbly in Pennsylvania Dutch country, was not a traditional WASP, and did not feel himself to be one, though he came early on to embody that animal in speech and manner.) He twice channeled a fictional Roth: *Bech: A Book* and *Bech is Back*—but the truth is that neither Updike nor Roth has written completely convincingly about anyone but versions of themselves. Updike's Rabbit Angstrom is a kind of exception, but only in that he's downmarket middle class—a car salesman. Otherwise, he's just like Updike: morally naïve, oppressed by domestic responsibilities, free and at home on the range of America. Roth never really gets into the mind of The Breast of that eponymous book or into the woman at the center of the awful sequel, *The Dying Animal*; it's always been hard for him to get into the mind of anyone who has much of a bosom. His best, most brilliant creation is Philip Roth, or versions of Roth, in early, hilarious caricatures such as *Goodbye, Columbus* and *Portnoy's Complaint* through the brilliant self-indulgences of the Zuckerman novels to the ambitious, competitive social novels, such as *American Pastoral* and *I Married a Communist*. The Roth vs. Updike argument is really about sensibility. It's about the tone in which American men of a certain generation seduce their women and live their lives; it's about the color of their conscience, and how they strive.

John Updike

I was ruined early by reading, hardened into a certain shape that was finally, seismically shocked and broken open by Virginia Woolf, Zora Neale Hurston, Grace Paley, Jean Rhys, Alice Munro, Elizabeth Hardwick, Elizabeth Bishop, Susan Sontag, Cynthia Ozick, bell hooks, Lydia Davis, Judith Butler, and Mary Gaitskill, all writers who gave me my first ideas about what it might mean to write about matters of the world, to write the kind of book I hadn't read yet. But it was Updike who taught me first in the Jesup reading room as I bent my chlorinated head over those pornographically thrilling, anxiety-riddled and woman-fearing pages, *You can say anything. There is nothing you can't say.*

Carolyn Cooke's novel, Daughters of the Revolution, *is forthcoming from Knopf.*

MEMOIR

The Distance Between Us

By Julian Hoffman

"I have kept asking myself . . . what the invisible connections that determine our lives are, and how the threads run."
—W. G. Sebald


DIMITRIS NOULIS

Now and then I see him again, though I never know precisely when the moment might be. He has a tendency to arrive unannounced. For nearly fifteen years our relationship has existed this way, fugitive and unreliable. But it remains charged with such significance that I'm willing to forgive its frustrations. We rendezvous on his terms, not mine, and always in the same remembered place. It's a whale-backed hill overlooking Morecambe Bay, and the season is never anything but spring.

I'd been living in the north of England when I first saw him. Having a few days off work, and feeling restless in the unfurling days of May, I traveled by train to the coast. Morecambe Bay is a vast and changeable terrain on the edge of Cumbria where water and sand verge on the indivisible, trading natures throughout the night and day. At low tide the sand ripples into the distance until the far ribbon of sea glistens and shines like the lights of an island. There is nothing solid about this coastal composition; the bay is constantly shifting, unsettled in its essence. When the sea begins its return it infiltrates the sand, slipping between acres of grains and sparking alchemical processes as it goes.

My train slowed above a sweep of red-streaked mud, crossing the causeway that spans the northern end of the bay. I found a room for the night in an odd, neo-gothic hotel in the quiet retirement town of Grange-over-Sands. Despite being lodged at the far end of the top, turreted floor, I seemed to be the only guest haunting the long hallways.

After dinner I asked the owner if he could recommend a walk for the following day. He seemed pleased with the possibility for conversation and showed me obligingly to an armchair in the lounge. Some minutes later he returned carrying a bottle of single malt cradled in his hand, two clinking glasses, and a map. Over the course of the evening, and the diminishing whiskey, he proposed a number of routes, but one struck me as particularly appealing. It began at the edge of town, where a ridge of rounded hills could be walked in one of two directions. If I made my way east, the owner told me, I could cut down one of the side valleys to a village pub serving home-brewed ales. In the glow of the late-evening whiskey his suggestion settled the matter with ease.

I left the hotel early, spring light beginning to skim the bay. Gulls arrowed over the seafront and the first of the day's therapeutic strolls started up along the promenade. I soon found the edge of town and felt the keen tingle that comes with walking in springtime. A dry stone wall crept up an emerald meadow and I followed its stride. It might have been there for centuries, yet its stones had stayed true to their precise and allotted sockets, as if the wall had pushed through the earth intact. Wildflowers unfolded with the morning, tiny dabs of promise scattered over the swelling green sward. A salt breeze stole up behind me and I glimpsed it disappearing into the meadow grass, riffling through like a village rumor.

Somewhere on the way up I turned to look back. The pewter and blue wash of Morecambe Bay shimmered away from me. It was mid-tide, so that much of the sands were still exposed, or glazed with a translucent, sunburst sheen. From high above I could make out the various patterns inscribed by an earlier incursion. Strange codes encrypted the shore: tide pools like blue eyes; long serrated reefs; cirques opening here and there. The waterscape entranced, the whole bay mimicking a minor archipelago. But its appearance was deceptive—over time the bay had claimed many lives, those unable to compass their way back over the shifting, water-filling sands.

I spun away from the bright bay and followed the stone wall that led me up the slope. When I reached the top I could see a range of hills strung out ahead of me. Each one rose and fell gently, as though surfacing for air. Wind and wild grasses had bequeathed them a sinuous shape, unbroken by boulders or trees. Where each hill fell away a smooth saddle held them together. Warmth filled the morning and a clear, burnished glow drifted from the sky, layering the grassy swells in light.

Some way ahead of me I saw a man walking east. He leaned a little to one side, as though being aided by a cane. Despite the distance that lay between us his presence was conspicuous atop the buckled ridge: nothing else broke the horizon of the hills and his clothes were the color of pitch.

The morning slowed while I walked, buoyed by the light, and the tender spring grasses gave way easily underfoot. Judging from his hesitant steps, and the distinctive black suit he wore walking, I imagined the man in the distance was elderly, carrying the elegant airs of a more decorous time. Although following in his wake I had the sense that we were walking the hills together, hoving in and out of view with the dipping and rising of the ridges. When I surfaced from one of the saddles he would be sloping down the next. Our paths were entwined in this way, this ebb and flow, this rise and fall, constant as the sea's slow advancing seep.

I've sometimes asked myself how often we enter the lives of strangers, where we're recollected from time to time without our knowing. Is each of us accounted for in the life of another, held there in memory like the man on the hill is in mine?

The distance between us gradually lessened. I'd closed the gap until I was near enough to make out the man's limp more clearly. He had to hitch his left leg, as if to swing it over a tangle of barbed wire, before he could steer it behind the other. Over the years his hair had thinned a little on top so that it hung in a dark disc above his ears. But the most striking aspect of his appearance was his black suit, matched by a pair of polished shoes: it seemed to react to the sun, radiating a dark luminescence as if lit from within. The man walked the furrowed hills alone, distinguished by sunlight. And I followed his every shining step.

I watched him slope into the next hollow, disappearing from view in the usual way, like a seabird sliding from a crest. But this time he didn't surface; the sun-washed grasses rippled without him where I'd expected his ascent. He must have finally tired, I reckoned, imagining him seated somewhere on the saddle, a white handkerchief dabbing his brow. But there was no sign of him when a few minutes later I reached the saddle myself. Great swathes of open meadow fell away to either side. Dark trees and villages studded the far valleys, but nothing stirred within sight. I scouted both sides of the hollow and then combed the flanking slopes. I ran on to the lip of the next hill and looked back over the route we'd just traversed, seeing how it curled in the distance toward the bright and shining sea. I turned around to scan the empty path that lay ahead of me, knowing it had been altered forever. The man was nowhere to be seen, and no sign of his passage lingered. He'd simply vanished into sunlight.

THE MAN ON THE HILL RETURNS FROM

time to time, as brightly lit in memory as on the hills above Morecambe Bay. In many ways he has changed the course of my life. They may seem minor and insignificant abstractions, like inconsequential grains of sand let fall through one's hand, but together they carry a weight, a solidity that keeps him grounded close by.

Each time I'm out walking and gain a hilltop ridge I unthinkingly scan its length for a dark, perambulating figure, hoping he has come back to me. I've exhausted long hours and days of my life delving without consequence into the mystery of his disappearance. And at odd and unforeseen moments—talking with friends over wine, sowing seeds in the garden, reading by the fire—I find him slipping easily into my company. The image of him walking the sunlit hills ahead of me arises, locking into place like a closing door. But during these unexpected visits I remember that he's always there, not coming and going via the door, but at home within. He's taken up residence in my memories.

What fascinates me about the man on the hill, however, is not who he was or where he went—though I confess to an unresolved curiosity on both fronts—but the nature of our relationship. Strangers can pass into significance after brief, nearly intangible encounters, courtesy of crossed paths and shared situations, a tenuous glance across a rain-scented street, a lit window revealing a midnight smile, an overheard conversation that lingers after leaving. I've sometimes asked myself how often we enter the lives of strangers, where we're recollected from time to time without our knowing, unaware, even, of the circumstances of our exchange. Is each of us accounted for in the life of another, held there in memory like the man on the hill is in mine, conjured from the thin spring air like a lost counterpart or spiritual sibling, a suggestion of life's myriad turns never taken? We brush against one another with the ease of a wind—occasionally traces must catch.

SOME YEARS AGO I TRAVELED FROM

Greece to Romania by train. After hours of indecision I finally choose W. G. Sebald's book *The Emigrants* as my companion for the long journey. *The Emigrants* is a beautifully haunting work. In it Sebald sketches four dislocated lives and guides us through a minor compendium of their emigrant memories and intimate habits, their passions and losses, their obsessions. Layer upon layer of detail is built into these stories, including black and white images—snapshots of people, domestic interiors, postcards and portraits, ticket stubs and newspaper clippings—but there remains a small knot at the heart of each life that can't be unraveled.

I began the book as my train pulled out of Salonika near midnight. I read for a couple of hours before switching off the overhead lamp to drift in and out of sleep as the train sped up and then slowed, sped up and slowed, rattling through the dark countryside. By morning we were in Sofia, and I returned to the book. Throughout the day, while crossing the pale, late-winter plains of northern Bulgaria, watching the low light flare off the swirling brown water of the Danube River, and rumbling past the oil derricks of southern Romania, I fell deeper and deeper into the lives of the emigrants. But there was something else that caught my eye, and it reminded me of the man on the hill: an enigmatic stranger passes through each of the stories.

Vladimir Nabokov was both a well-known writer and a noted lepidopterist, along with being an emigrant himself, having left revolutionary Russia with his parents in 1919 for a life that eventually took him to England, Germany, the United States and Switzerland. Sebald conjures Nabokov not as a famous author but rather as an ordinary, if magnetic,

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DISTANCE *from page 5*

individual whose life briefly coincides with those of the characters in the book. Staying true to the chronology and geography of the writer's life, Nabokov appears as a ghostlike apparition, minor and easily unnoticed, but there all the same, hovering like a translucent presence, woven into these imagined lives.

Nabokov first appears near the beginning of the book in a heavily shadowed, black-and-white photograph, almost a silhouette. He is standing on a ridge in the Swiss mountains, wearing a white hat tilted back on his head and carrying a butterfly net wedged beneath his right arm. What struck me about the photo was its strange resemblance to the place where I'd last seen the man on the hill. While Nabokov peers at something in the hazy distance, I found myself staring at the eerily analogous backdrop, a long sunken valley slipping away from the ridge and studded with dark trees.

In Nabokov's later appearances he is unnamed, and unknown to the characters whose lives he enigmatically enters. A woman recalls visiting a relative some thirty years earlier in a sanatorium in Ithaca, New York. She recollects looking through the patient's window at the same moment that "a middle-aged man appeared, holding a white net on a pole in front of him and occasionally taking little jumps." Separated from the incident by three decades, she retains this bright memory of a stranger who passed briefly through her life. The patient follows her gaze into the grounds of the sanatorium and says, "It's the butterfly man, you know. He comes round here quite often."

In another of the stories a painter recalls climbing a mountain above Lake Geneva when "a man of about sixty suddenly appeared . . . like someone who's popped out of the bloody ground. He was carrying a large white gauze butterfly net." The painter is so struck by the appearance of this stranger that he applies his artistry to a portrait, entitled *Man with a Butterfly Net*. The artist is ultimately dismayed by his work, however, as it "conveyed not even the remotest impression of the strangeness of the apparition it referred to."

Later a character recalls passing two distinguished Russian gentlemen, "one of whom was speaking seriously to a boy of about ten who had been chasing butterflies," while walking with friends in a German park in 1910. The man talking to the boy is recognized by one of the group as Sergei Muromtsev, who four years earlier had been elected president of Russia's first parliament, the Duma. The other man is Nabokov's father, while the boy is Nabokov himself. It is a scene lifted directly from the writer's autobiography, *Speak, Memory*, but what Sebald has done is to imagine the other lives intersecting at the same time, revealing the scene from another angle. Later in life, Sebald's character returns to the image of the young boy, durably stored away and still shining, when she is proposed to by a man considered unsuitable by her father. In that moment, "though everything else around me blurred, I saw that long-forgotten Russian boy as clearly as anything, leaping about the meadows with his butterfly net; I saw him as a messenger of joy, returning from that distant summer day." The relic memory of a briefly seen stranger finds its place in her life again. Inexplicably entwined, their paths converge a second time. The significance of small moments is to be found in their span; our lives are fashioned from such accretions.

I TOOK A BREAK FROM READING *The Emigrants* while crossing the southern plains of Romania. Opening the door to my cabin I stepped into a corridor of bright windows. The sun was draining from the western sky, laying a last wash of ochre light over the flatlands. Scattered oil derricks rose and fell into the distance, and the grasslands spilled away like the sands of Morecambe Bay. I watched the landscape slip by, my thoughts wrapped up in Nabokov's ghostly appearances and the way the man on the hill still walked ahead of me despite the distance of so many years.

Our beds were in fact pushed together, separated by only a thin, simple wall. While the train had coursed the dark countryside we had slept as near as lovers, oblivious and dreaming.

While I stood at the open window arms suddenly clasped me about the waist, cinching me tight. A rollicking laughter fluttered somewhere by my ear and I felt a trembling fear rise within. But I swung round in panic to meet the face of a friend. For a few seconds the two of us stood rooted to our spots, smiling idiotically at each other until I'd regained my calm. Then we embraced deeply.

Vasillis is Siberian, a wandering writer and painter who'd lived for some time in a village close to mine in Greece. We hadn't seen each other for a few years and when our excitement finally settled down, I asked him if he'd just boarded the train. "No, I've been on since Salonika," he said.

"In which carriage?"

"This one. That's my cabin there." Vasillis turned to point to the sleeping compartment next to mine. "Why? Where's yours?" he asked. I smiled and pointed to the adjacent berth, and then we laughed and embraced again in the rolling, sunset corridor.

Like me Vasillis was traveling to Bucharest, but only long enough to change trains for the Black Sea coast. It was already dark when we pulled in, and he had barely minutes to catch his connection. Watching him dash madly down the corridor, and then weave through the convening crowds, I realized how easily we might have missed each other. If either of our destinations had been earlier in the day we would have stepped off without knowing. Had we emerged from our cabins at alternative times, or waited on the steps by the carriage doors to gain a few precious seconds on our fellow passengers, we would never have understood how closely our paths had crossed. Human lives must be filled with such near misses.

I took a last look in our cabins before leaving and couldn't help noticing how the spaces were arranged differently. Vasillis's cabin was the mirror image of mine next door, so that our beds were in fact pushed together, separated by only a thin, simple wall. While the train had coursed the dark countryside we had slept as near as lovers, oblivious and dreaming, lost to our own secret worlds.

I stepped down from the train. The brakes hissed and water dripped to the oily tracks. Engineers tapped the wheels with metal rods, listening for the dull clang that would reveal a crack. I joined the passengers clouding toward the exit, one of thousands radiating from the station into their lives throughout the city. I looked at the faces jostling around me, listened to the unfamiliar tongue and wondered what connections might bind us, what threads might unexpectedly tie together. Somewhere amidst the gathering passengers might be a stranger whose memory would resurface at some undetermined time. Or I might pass a face already seen, long ago, and in some other place. I might recognize a limp, the tang of the sea brought in on the wind, spy a black suit and polished shoes slipping through the crowd, and at the last second see the sunlight being carried along, a dark and electric eclipse, until it vanished into the coastal air.

Julian Hoffman lives in northern Greece. His story "Ismail" placed second in the 2010 Carpe Articulum International Fiction Prize. (julianhoffman.wordpress.com)

BIBLIOTECA

News, Views, Notes, Reviews, Reports and Exhortations from Friends of Coast Community Library

PRESIDENT'S DESK

Book Blowout

Alix Levine

We've just completed the annual Labor Day weekend book sale. This year, for the first time, the sale took place in the library itself. For years volunteers have had to haul truckloads of boxes of books down to the Gualala Community Center for the sale. (Thanks to the Community Center for providing the space and the tables to set out our wares.) Moving the sale to the library was much easier on our volunteers' bodies and their gasoline costs too, since it was only necessary to bring out the boxes of books from workroom storage to set up our tables of books. We are grateful to St. Paul's Methodist Church and the Redwood Coast Fire District in Manchester for lending long folding tables to the library to display the books for sale.

In prior years the book sale has involved a much larger number of books, too many to even fit on the tables at the Community Center, leaving many to languish in open boxes under the tables, accessible only to the limber and dedicated shopper. Since last year's sale, the Friends have been more selective about which donations to keep in storage for the big annual sale. Outdated textbooks, tattered paperbacks, musty relics of folks' garage storage have always been disposed of. However, after a chance to sell at the monthly mini-book sale and in the kiosk around the clock column in the library, it is obvious some books are unsaleable, so disposing of them as we go along prevents overcrowding in our storage room. Thus, the smaller number of books and audiovisual items made it possible to hold the sale in the library with everything in easy view and a more organized arrangement.

Although the sale grossed more last year, expenses took a big bite out of our net. This year we cleared about $1450, slightly more than last year. Unfortunately, and not surprisingly, book sale earnings have been down for the past year or so. At the same time, expenses continue to rise as the Friends of Coast Community Library (FoCCL) take over payment for items that budget cuts no longer allow the County Library to pay for. Friends groups are taking on this burden at all the County branches. Accordingly, FoCCL is looking for new ways to raise funds to keep Coast Community Library operating smoothly.

I believe CCL has the largest group of dedicated volunteers of any library in our county. Without our volunteers we would not have our library. So many signed up to help with the Labor Day book sale, either setting up, taking down, cashiering, baking refreshments, creating signage and so forth that we were able to save hours of volunteer time and effort as many hands made quick work of the job. We value every bit of volunteer help, whether it involves a regular work schedule at the circulation desk, book processing in the work room, providing food for events, setting up classes and so much more. Everything that happens at CCL is the result of our neighbors' and friends' support in so many ways.

Special thanks go to Laura Ishimaru who has been the book sale chairperson for years and was the originator of the monthly mini-book sales, which have been a boon to our budget by providing some regular income each month. After years of tireless work, Laura is retiring from her labors on behalf of FoCCL for a well-deserved rest .

VOLUNTEER

Call Laura or Terra at 882.3114 to join our team at Coast Community Library.

Bill Bradd

Green Thumb

Jonah Raskin

Notebooks from the Emerald Triangle: Notes of a Renegade Gardener in the Far Hills
by Bill Bradd
Ten Mile River Press (2010),136 pages

A man whose face is blurred and unidentifiable graces the cover of Bill Bradd's heartfelt memoir, *Notebooks from the Emerald Triangle*. The man on the cover might be Bradd himself; then again he might not be. Next to him are half-a-dozen leafy green marijuana plants. I say marijuana but I'm not 100 percent positive. If I could smell them and touch them I would be far more certain about their genus and species, and I might be able to say whether they were sativa, indica or a cross. Not everything is what it seems to be in marijuana land.

Some years ago, I worked on a Hollywood movie about marijuana growers entitled *Homegrown* that stared Billy Bob Thornton, Hank Azzaria, Kelly Lynch and others. The producer paid tens of thousands of dollars for artificial plants made from silk and bamboo. On the screen, they looked real but up-close and on the set it was obvious that they were as fake as the bogus falcon in *The Maltese Falcon*. That same producer wanted everyone connected to the movie to say they were genuine, and I wouldn't go along with that request.

Bill Bradd knows marijuana land from the inside out. He also knows the fine line that separates the real from the unreal. Ambiguity and mystery tug at his imagination, and in *Notebooks from the Emerald Triangle* he presents a mystery story whose roots are tangled up in ambiguity. Nowhere does he come out and say point-blank, "I grew marijuana." Most criminal defense lawyers would pat him on the back for his caution. After all, the possession, sale, transportation and use of marijuana are illegal by federal law. Since 1970, there have been more than 20,000,000 arrests for violations of the marijuana laws in the United States—and mostly just for possession. So confessing to crimes involving cannabis, as it is now increasingly called, could lead to an arrest and a possible conviction.

Bradd says that you have to be insane to be a marijuana grower. "You cannot invent this kind of crazy," he writes. "You got to be crazy for a long time." I would add especially crazy if the growing is outdoors, visible to helicopters, and in direct sunlight. Growing marijuana in the Emerald Triangle —Humboldt, Mendocino and Trinity counties—and all over Northern California, as Bradd apparently did for years, means committing a felony in broad daylight and often with evidence galore such as scales, seeds, and the grower's own notebooks.

Committing crimes in broad daylight is, of course, a very American way of passing the time, and "renegade gardeners" and "guerilla farmers" take their place in a rogues' gallery of heroes that includes Jesse James, Billy the Kid, and the smugglers and bootleggers who operated during the Prohibition against alcohol, which taught the nation almost nothing about prohibitions of any kind.

Notebooks from the Emerald Triangle belongs to a tradition of outlaw literature. It's the kind of book that Henry David Thoreau, the author of *Walden* and *Maine Woods,* would have written had he been a marijuana grower in the woods of Mendocino or Humboldt. Bradd's book is about nature, woods, hills, and creatures including owls and deer. Thoreau also had a cash crop, though his was beans. Like *Walden, Notebooks* is about the little things that matter: socks, hands, a cabin in the woods, and the cats that inhabit the cabin. Bradd has a sharp eye for detail and an energetic prose style that carries the reader along. In one vivid passage near the start of the book, he writes, "I always love preparing to go into the hills for the first time, getting out the knapsacks and the water bottles, the medicine kit, finding the knife, dumping the old alder leaves into the compost, a spent band-aid, a dead wooden match, a used blue bandana, a very dead banana peel, a bottle of Vicks, and an emergency candle." Those details help, and the book works well when the descriptions are vivid and the reflections are ground in the real.

Notebooks is about "money trees," as he calls them, a phrase that seems apt and that ought to remind just about everyone who lives in the Emerald Triangle and far beyond, that writing about marijuana —pot, weed, cannabis, dank, ganga, grass, and whatever else one wants to call it—is a matter of nomenclature. The words and phrases used to describe the plant at the heart of the underground economy say a great deal about where one stands on the issue of legalization, for example—which is on the ballot in November. The words and phrases also suggest how and why one is connected to the shadow economy itself. To some it's first and foremost a plant; to others it's a drug; to still others a sacred herb. Of course, it's also a commodity that's bought and sold or bartered for goods and services. Even growers who love their trees and see them in all their beauty and majesty often can't help but calculate how much money they'll bring after the harvest.

> **Notebooks** ***belongs to a tradition of outlaw literature. It's the kind of book that Thoreau would have written had he been a marijuana grower in the woods of Mendocino.***

Bradd calls them "money trees" right from the start, and all the way through his book, which for my money makes him a trustworthy storyteller, though I don't trust him 100 percent. "I never made any money," he writes. "I just loved being in the hills, but even so I don't go back no more." Maybe he really did not make money. Still, it would be unwise to boast about profits made in the illegal marijuana trade. Moreover, once a grower, it's difficult not to continue to be a grower, and difficult not to go back after a break. The money beckons as well as the adventure, and the feeling of belonging to an extended outlaw family that's making history. Growers become addicted to the lifestyle, as Bradd seems to have done for a few seasons. I wouldn't blame him if he did go back.

See **GREEN** *page 8*

LIBRARY LINES

Film Feast

Laura Schatzberg

There were two or three movie theaters within walking distance of our apartment in the Bronx. At about 10 years old I was allowed to go with a friend to see a double feature on the weekend. Admission price was 25 cents and I had the same amount for treats. My favorite was the ice cream bonbons. I know I must have seen tens of films over those early years but few have remained in my memory.

It was only when I was a teenager that movies became "film" and that film was the new wave explosion of avant-garde cinema that reached the US from Europe, India and Japan. There were also many American films that are now seen as classics, and many of them are now available on DVD. Our library has many films on VHS that have been donated, but DVDs are not being donated, maybe because they are not cumbersome to store and the quality does not deteriorate much. In any case, the Friends have purchased classic DVDs to add to our collection.

For me, nothing is as captivating as my own imagination's creation of the visuals for a well-written story. A close second, though, is seeing the visuals and interpretation from someone else's imagination as translated to a screen. I prefer to finish reading the book before I see a film adaptation in order to have my vision firmly cemented in my mind. Obviously, the best way to view film is on the big screen at Arena Theater with my current choice of snacks, organic popcorn with brewer's yeast and salt. That is not always possible for movies that are not currently running or have not been chosen by the film club.

Some films do not translate well to a small screen, like the recently shown *Ran* by Akira Kurosawa, one of Japan's foremost directors. There are many, though, that are fine to see in small format, and some of the classics can be viewed again and again and the repetition only serves to refresh our enjoyment. Watching DVDs from the library in the comfort of one's home is not without other benefits. The bottom line is that there is no cost involved, unless you return them late and accrue a fine. Additionally, your snacks can be as unique as your pantry and fridge contents; your attire and appearance need only be presentable to yourself, and when you watch them is entirely up to you.

Films are an integral part of our culture through language, sound and story. Film plots, movie music and famous lines are so iconic that a mere hint will make an association common to most people. Revisiting the classics can refresh your popular culture vocabulary and improve your crossword puzzle success rate.

The new DVDs are flying off the shelves, so you may have to request them. A few of the films I have never seen, like *Gone with the Wind*, but I have seen clips from it so I am sure it will seem familiar. I plan to watch some of my favorites again and see how they hold up. *The English Patient*, *Gosford Park*, *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *Raging Bull*, *Thelma & Louise* and *Some Like It Hot* are all cinema classics that, in my opinion, bear seeing again. There are some titles I never heard of—*Dance with a Stranger*, *Celebration*, *The Butcher Boy*, *Heathers* and *Henry Fool*—I was probably out of the country or out of the loop when they came out. You may find that flipping through the DVD rack will reveal an unexpected old friend or a new experience from film history.

To see a list of our DVDs in the catalog, do an advance search and select the limits Coast Community and Video DVD. Put in the title keyword, the letter A. Some of the results may be missing or lost but most of them are either in our stacks or available for request.

Happy viewing.

GREEN *from page 7*

Near the end of his inspired account, he writes that "the adventures in this book were not unique to me. Other woods workers had adventures and stories. This is just my version." True enough; thousands of men and women have grown marijuana in the Emerald Triangle over the past 40 years. Many of them have exciting tales to tell about their encounters with the law and with thieves. But most of them haven't committed their stories to paper and published them. Bradd has and that makes him an uncommon woods worker.

He is an uncommon writer—unromantic and clear-sighted, though he also writes poetically, and in a kind of stream-of-consciousness way befitting a "notebook" as this book claims to be. "This time on the edge of my right ear, the ear I tug when I'm thinking about the river, the passage, the water hawk's search, the otter, the nest," he writes eloquently. "This kind of stuff, trying to weave it in, make it current, solve the puzzle of rent by understanding the angle of drop, by keening the terror from above." No one else could possibly have written with that language, and that rhythm.

Notebooks is one of a kind, and because it straddles a frontier that links the woods of oak and manzanita to the fabled woods of the "money trees," it will endure. In a rare moment of nearly full disclosure about his crop and how he handled it after the harvest, Bradd writes, "I give each bud one snip. It came from the jungle, so it should look like the jungle, not some Ivy League haircut." Fortunately Bradd is no neat and tidy Ivy Leaguer. His memoir is no ordinary garden-variety book either, but a wild narrative that takes readers down into the tangled underbrush, and into the life of a crazy, beautiful, sad, funny woods worker in the backcountry that is our own big comic, tragic backyard.

Jonah Raskin is the author of Field Days: A Year of Farming, Eating and Drinking Wine in California.

BOOKS

Lion Queen

A Ticket to the Circus
by Norris Church Mailer
Random House (2010), 399 pages

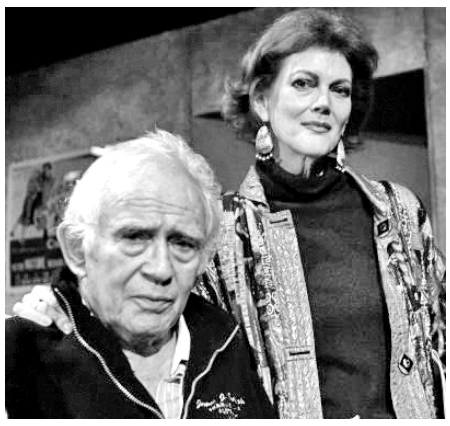
Norman Mailer was 83 in the final summer of his life in 2007 and having an enormous amount of trouble both walking and breathing. During that time, he often told his wife of 27 years, Norris Church Mailer, "When I'm gone and you write about me, I want you to say . . . " And her response was always the same. "No, I'm not going to write about you because no one would believe it."

Norman Mailer was a literary lion. He wrote 45 books. Norris was his sixth wife and mother to his eighth child. The first seven were scattered among the previous wives. One of his books, *The Armies of the Night*, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1969.

Norman was 56 years old when he married Norris in 1980. She was 33 but had been living with Norman for the past five years. By then, their son was two-and-a-half years old.

Marrying Norris was complicated. First, Norman had to get a divorce from his fourth wife, Beverly. Then he had to marry Carol to legitimize the daughter he had with Carol (Maggie) while he was still married to Beverly. Maggie was 9 then, and Norman didn't want her growing up knowing she was the only one of his children whose mother had never been married to Norman Mailer.

Norman was living with Carol and Maggie when he met and wooed Norris. They immediately moved in together. The marriage to Carol, by prior agreement, only lasted for 24 hours. As soon as the Haitian divorce papers arrived, Norman and Norris had their wedding.



ROBERT E. KLIEN

Norman and Norris Church Mailer

As Norris memorably puts it in this book, "I was no longer the tootsie; I was the wife."

Norman had left all his wives, including Carol, before any of their children were six years old. Norris knew this before she became wife number six , and she talks about it in this book. She attended many parties in New York City with Norman, and she writes, "Rude people—there are way too many rude people in this world—would ask, 'Which wife are you?'"

Norris would answer, "The last one." She was absolutely sure that she and Norman would be together for the rest of their lives. And they were.

Norris was born and raised in Arkansas. She met Norman when she was 26, and she had already been married and divorced and had a young son of her own. Matt was four then, the same age as Maggie. And Norris was the same age as Norman's first child by his first wife. And Norman was one year older than Norris' father.

Things were already complicated.

The two met in 1975. Norman, then 52, was on a lecture tour, and one of his old-soldier buddies from World War II was teaching at a college in Little Rock, Arkansas. At the time, Norris was teaching art at a local high school, and she knew Francis, who Norman fondly called "Fig." In fact, Norris had illustrated Fig's memoir. So Norris called Fig and got herself an invitation to a party Fig was throwing for his famous friend, Norman Mailer.

Norris had been divorced for one year. She didn't want another husband. The only serious man in her life was her son, Matt. She dated and slept with several men. One was Bill Clinton. She was impressed by his intelligence and charisma. She was positive he was going to be president someday.

Norman and Norris ended up having dinner. They ended up making love. They ended up making a life together, and she became stepmother to all those children.

Norris's son Matt also became a Mailer, and all nine children would gather for several weeks every summer in a huge house in Provincetown, Massachusetts. They also gathered in Maine.

During the school year, the kids were off with their various mothers while Norman and Norris stayed in Brooklyn with the two youngest boys. Norman wrote and traveled all over the world with Norris, who did some modeling while she wrote two novels, *Windchill Summer* and *Cheap Diamonds*.

In spite of Norris's vow to Norman that she was not going to write about him, scenes from their life kept coming back to her. So she did eventually write this book, but it's as much about her life as it is about the life they shared and the many famous people who wandered through: Lee Harvey Oswald, most of the Kennedy clan, Budd Schulberg, Gloria Steinem, Gore Vidal, Andy Warhol, Imelda Marcos, Ryan O'Neal, Ali McGraw, Tommy Lee Jones, Woody Harrelson, Fidel Castro, Francis Ford Coppola, Russell Crowe, Oscar de la Renta, Gary Gilmore, Mikhail Gorbachev, Muhammad Ali, Tennesse Williams and many others.

And, of course, Norman Mailer.

A Ticket to the Circus is a wonderful memoir. The book is wise, blunt, self-aware, candid and as deeply moving as it is entertaining.

—Kit Knight

BOOK BOX

Some Recent Arrivals at Coast Community Library

Adult Books

Alphin, Elaine Marie. *An unspeakable crime: the prosecution and persecution of Leo Frank*
Anderson, Paul. *Harvest the fire*
Baker, Ian. *The heart of the world: a journey to the last secret place*
Bielunski, Marlys. *Skinny beef*
Buckingham, Marcus. *First, break all the rules: what the world's greatest managers do differently*
Castillo, Linda. *Pray for silence*
Cather, Willa. *Willa Cather in Europe: her own story of the first journey*
Cleave, Chris. *Little Bee*
Cole, Richard. *Stairway to heaven: Led Zeppelin uncensored*
Coll, Steve. *The Bin Ladens: an Arabian family in the American century*
Coyne, John. *The caddie who knew Ben Hogan*
Crace, Jim. *The devil's larder*
Cunningham, Annalisa. *Gentle yoga for healing: mind, body, spirit*
Damon, William. *The path to purpose: helping our children find their calling in life*
De Blasi, Marlena. *That summer in Sicily: a love story*
De Lint, Charles. *Someplace to be flying*
Erdrich, Louise. *Shadow tag*
Gibran, Kahlil. *The broken wings*
Giffin, Emily. *Heart of the matter*
Goodkind, Terry. *Stone of tears*
Goulding, Edwin. *Fuchsias: the complete guide*
Grippando, James. *When darkness falls*
Haag, Michael. *Egypt*
Hamilton, Geoff. *The organic garden book*
Hannah, Sophie. *The dead lie down*
Hawken, Paul. *The magic of Findhorn*
Hendricks, Judith Ryan. *The baker's apprentice*
James, Theodore. *The cut-flower garden*
Johnson, Garth. *1000 ideas for creative reuse: remake, restyle, recycle, renew*
Katz, Jon. *A dog year: twelve months, four dogs, and me*
Kogan, Deborah Copaken. *Between here and April*
Krenov, James. *The impractical cabinetmaker*
Lackey, Mercedes. *Storm rising*
Levy, Shawn. *The last playboy: the high life of Porfirio Rubirosa*
Lowe, John. *Japanese crafts*
Mero, Laszlo. *Moral calculations: game theory, logic, and human frailty*
Michaels, Fern. *The marriage game*
Miller, Sue. *The senator's wife*
Moore, Gina. *The window style bible*
Mortenson, Greg. *Stones into schools: promoting peace with books, not bombs in Afghanistan and Pakistan*
Oster, Maggie. *Culinary herbs*
Poe, Randy. *Skydog: The Duane Allman story*
Regan, Laura. *Vanishing species: the wildlife art of Laura Regan*
Ruhlman, Michael. *The soul of a chef: the journey toward perfection*
Scottoline, Lisa. *Think twice*
Shalit, Willa. *Life cast: behind the mask*
Shanley, Karen. *Dogs of dreamtime: a story about second chances and the power of love*
Slater, Harrison Gradwell. *Nightmusic*
Sparks, Nicholas. *The choice*
Stein, Garth. *Raven stole the moon*
Strout, Elizabeth. *Olive Kitteridge*
Tatsumi, Yoshihiro. *A drifting life*
Traunfeld, Jerry. *The Herbfarm cookbook*
Valdes, Zoe. *La cazadora de astros*
Vinge, Vernor. *A deepness in the sky*
Wilson, F. Paul. *By the sword: a Repairman Jack novel*
Wissinger, Joanna. *Metalwork and silver*
Wright, Janet. *Reflexology and acupressure: pressure points for healing*
York, Taylor. *Mendocino: a novel of people and politics*
Zahn, Timothy. *Conquerors' legacy*

Juvenile Books

Aylesworth, Jim. *Old black fly*
Ayo, Yvonne. *Africa*
Balian, Lorna. *Mother's Mother's Day*
Bluemle, Elizabeth. *How do you wokka-wokka?*
Brumbeau, Jeff. *The quiltmaker's gift*
Christopher, Matt. *Double play at short*
Collins, Suzanne. *Mockingjay*
Crews, Donald. *Sail away*
Cronin, Doreen. *Giggle, giggle, quack*
Edwards, Pamela Duncan. *Dinorella: a prehistoric fairy tale*
Emmett, Jonathan. *She'll be coming 'round the mountain*
Gerrard, Roy. *Mik's mammoth*
Hague, Kathleen. *Alphabears: an ABC book*
Hoberman, Mary Ann. *The seven silly eaters*
Jones, Lynda. *Mrs. Lincoln's dressmaker: the unlikely friendship of Elizabeth Keckley & Mary Todd Lincoln*
Keene, Carolyn. *Uncivil acts*
Kenyon, Sherrilyn. *Infinity*
Lobel, Arnold. *Frog and Toad together*
London, Jonathan. *Red wolf country*
McFarland, Lyn Rossiter. *Widget*
Meadows, Daisy. *Amy the amethyst fairy*
Numeroff, Laura Joffe. *If you give a cat a cupcake*
Offill, Jenny. *17 Things I'm not allowed to do anymore*
Pullman, Philip. *Lyra's Oxford*
Roy, Ron. *The empty envelope*
Ryan, Pam Munoz. *Mice and beans*
Simon, Francesca. *Horrid Henry's stinkbomb*
Sloane, Eric. *A museum of early American tools*
Spires, Elizabeth. *I heard God talking to me: William Edmondson and his stone carvings*
Waber, Bernard. *Ira sleeps over*
Yolen, Jane. *How do dinosaurs go to school*
Young, Karen Romano. *Cobwebs*
Zolotow, Charlotte. *William's doll*

LIBRARY HOURS

MONDAY	**12 noon - 6 pm**
TUESDAY	**10am - 6 pm**
WEDNESDAY	**10am - 8 pm**
THURSDAY	**12 noon - 8 pm**
FRIDAY	**12 noon - 6 pm**
SATURDAY	**12 noon - 3 pm**

Coast Community Library
is located at
225 Main Street
Point Arena
(707) 882-3114

Unsolved Mystery

Pamela Malone

Conrad in Beverly Hills
by Jake Fuchs
Raw Dog Screaming Press (2010), 263 pages

The eponymous character of *Conrad in Beverly Hills* often says that he is "flummoxed," which is exactly how I felt reading this book. My quandary was, what was I reading? Was it an autobiographical novel, a fictionalized memoir, a pulp fiction detective story, or a satirical novel poking fun at academia? It was all of the above, which caused a certain confusion for me as a reader.

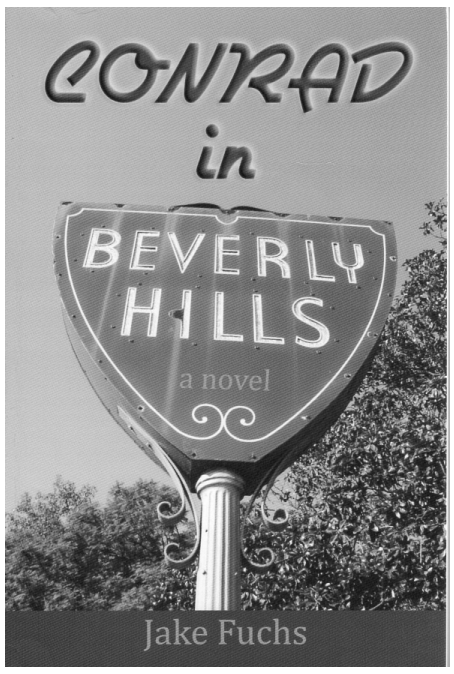
The premise is that Conrad Keppler, a college professor, is obsessed and haunted by his difficult relationship with his father, the screenwriter Morse Keppler. In order to deal with the psychic pain that persists after his father's death, Conrad writes a memoir in which he remembers a campaign he embarked on at age 12 to get his father to stop writing film scripts and switch to serious fiction.

To confuse matters more, the publicity that came with the review copy of the book protests too much, that the book is *not* autobiographical, while devoting much attention to the fact that Jake Fuchs is the son of Daniel Fuchs, who wrote three serious novels about Brooklyn life before moving out to Beverly Hills and writing film scripts. I had never heard of Daniel Fuchs, but after reading the accompanying material, I was certain this *was* fictionalized autobiography.

The novel deals with the pain an emotionally abusive parent can cause. From the time Conrad was a baby, the father's attitude was, get him out of here. This was because Conrad made too much noise when his father was writing. Add to this a mother whose role was to shush the boy up, and it's clear the only child had a lonely existence. This is made most poignant in a rare lyrical moment, when Conrad envies the weeping willow tree in his backyard.

"That was quite a tree we had . . . What I should have envied was that willow tree, because, though trapped in our backyard, it still enjoyed life. It never seemed to be weeping about anything. It exuded health, like a big strong man."

Meanwhile, Conrad is a boy without friends, a misfit, who becomes obsessed with his campaign to stop his father from writing film scripts—perhaps to get some needed attention from Morse. This campaign comes off a little false. If the boy was a nuisance when his father was writing film scripts, why would it be any different if his father were writing serious fiction?



The boy is embarrassed by the way his father fawns on movie producers, all of whom looked alike to the boy, whom he dubbed "The Irvings."

There's a not-so-subtle antisemitism expressed when it comes to Conrad's description of the people in the movie business. This brings up an interesting theme that could have been developed further, regarding Jewish identity. Conrad doesn't know he is Jewish, and only finds out when the other kids tease him for showing up at school on Yom Kippur. Later he will be at the other end of an antisemitic slur on the part of an Irish, has-been actor who has been a friend and surrogate father figure to the teenage Conrad. Morse Keppler, having grown up in hardscrabble Brooklyn bullied by Irish gangs, thought he was sparing his son from antisemitism by not telling him he was Jewish. But as Conrad ironically puts it, he's Jewish anyway, whether he identifies with it or not.

Fuchs is at his best portraying teenage angst. He is superb at catching that mixture of inarticulate cluelessness, awkward, confused sexuality, and bizarre acting out. Just as in his short story "Why I'm Thinking About Ed" [RCR, Fall 2007], Fuchs nails it when speaking from the teenage heart. There's a humorous scene when he's masturbating with his only friend, a possibly gay youth whom everyone else shuns, and a very stunning scene when his father tries to fix him up with an awkward girl, daughter of a director. Unfortunately, these vividly told scenes are too few and far between in the novel.

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Too much of the time, the first-person narrator's voice sounds like a patient in a long-drawn-out therapy session. This was my own observation before the narrator himself, Conrad the professor, remarks: "But what then, was I writing? What kind of thing? Why should I work? It's just therapy, isn't it?"

There is a perceived lack of distance from the subject matter. Perhaps a third-person narrator would have provided the writer a route to more insight and objectivity. While the character of Conrad is beautifully fleshed out, the father, mother and two girlfriends remain two-dimensional, almost cartoon figures. We are told the professor is divorced and has two daughters, but these characters never even attain existence on the page, which feels inauthentic.

This novel would have been better if it had been either a more consistent literary fiction, or a straightforward memoir. Two books that cover similar terrain, Jonathan Schwartz's memoir *All in Good Time*, and Delia Ephron's autobiographical novel *Hanging Up*, both take place in Beverly Hills and involve abusive or neglectful fathers who wrote for the movies. But there is a consistent authenticity in these books which is not evident in *Conrad in Beverly Hills*, as the writer swings from serious to satire, memoir to noir.

At a certain point, the book turns into a detective novel in which the professor is pursuing clues to unlock his repressed memories. A poster from one of his father's movies shows up with a slutty woman, Bellana, on the cover. He finds an unmailed letter from his now-deceased father, asking Conrad to finish an unfinished story Morse attempted to write describing his son's ill-fated campaign. This part of the book was a page turner, as clues mounted, and my own imagination ran wild as I tried to guess what traumatic event had happened to the boy regarding his father's writing for the movies. Did he catch his father in a compromising position with one of the bimbos that often showed up at the house, perhaps Bellana? Was the scene in the Valley a clue that the father wrote for the burgeoning porn industry? That might have explained Conrad's ambivalence towards sexuality. However, alas, there is no mystery to be solved. The book ends where it started. Conrad sits down at the computer, in what was once his father's house, and begins to write. Instead of writing the memoir we are reading, he writes a corny screenplay with a fantasy Walton-like happy ending for father and son.

Writers often go back to the same material. Given his gift for capturing what it's like to be a confused teenage boy, and his appealing sense of humor, I hope Jake Fuchs will revisit this material someday, either in the form of the short story, which he writes so well, or perhaps as a straightforward memoir, written with the insight this novel unfortunately lacks.

Pamela Malone lives in Leonia, New Jersey, and writes from time to time for the RCR.

READERS' LETTERS

Egregious mistake

I am both dismayed and saddened to see Carolyn Cooke's piece, "Fixing the Trimmer," on the front page of yesterday's RCR [Summer 2010]. The piece glorifies trophy hunting, a "sport" akin to baby harp seal bashing. Cooke's naive infatuation/bad judgment is her cross to bear; your mistake, as the editor who chose to run this piece and place it so prominently, is the more egregious.

Dorothy Ruef
Gualala

Moral vacuity

I have long admired Carolyn Cooke's writing in the RCR for its lyrical sensitivity to the rhythms of the natural world. That's why I was mystified by the moral vacuity of her recent essay about trophy hunter Merle Schreiner.

Cooke portrays Schreiner as a humble fixit-man who kindly gives her a behind-the-scenes tour of his hobby, big game hunting. But his humility is disingenuous. Trophy hunting is by its very nature an intensely competitive and ego-driven activity. It's about setting records; bagging the biggest, the wildest, the scarcest. That's why some of the animals whose severed heads hang on Schreiner's walls are among the rarest in the world: an endangered Grevy's zebra; a blesbok, which were hunted nearly to extinction; an oryx, some species of which are extinct in the wild.

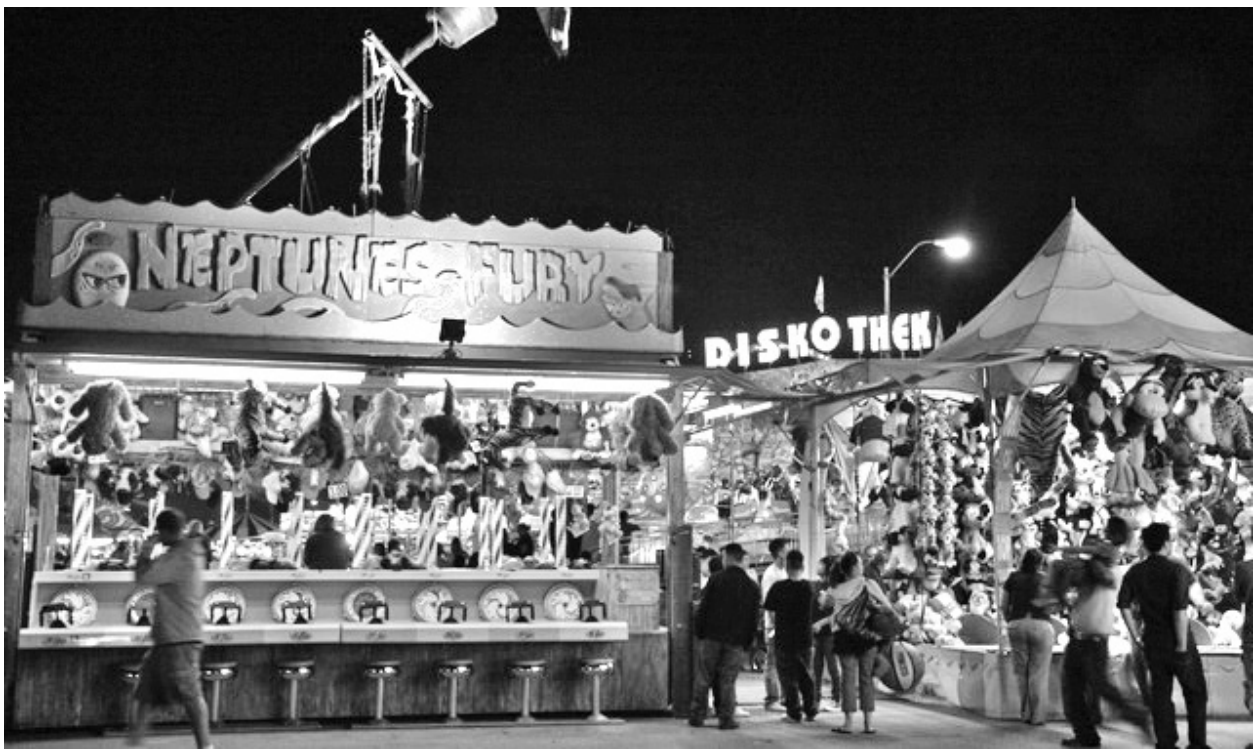
What does Cooke see in the story of Merle Schreiner? We never really find out. While her profile deliberately steers clear of judgment she also ignores the moral consequences of his actions. The reader searches in vain for any hint of compassion for his victims, at least one of whom was killed while drinking at a watering hole. (Some sport.) Cooke seems to have more feeling for her weed whacker than for the stolen lives of the animals whose remains are displayed in Merle Schreiner's grisly "museum."

Tai Moses
Oakland

WRITE TO US

The RCR welcomes your letters. Write to the Editor, RCR c/o ICO, P.O. Box 1200, Gualala, CA 95445 or by email to skrcr@stephenkessler.com.

FAIR *from page 1*



THE BIG FRESNO FAIR

"*Cholos*."

"*Ay*, Fresno."

My kid walked around and amused us, Ben in his toddling days. We marveled at him.

Fall hung in the air. The scent of the fields drifted into our living room. If it wasn't true, if what really came in sounded much like LA, cars streaming on a major boulevard less than a mile away and no particular scent but crisp autumn, you could imagine it, this Fresno. You could see it all, *campesinos* working the rows and rich, ripe fruit piling up on the ground. Fresno was enchanted and great.

We loved Fresno. Nobody complained, really.

On the third day of the stay, my mom made a suggestion. "Let's go to the fair!" She spotted the ad in the newspaper. A bunch of grapes clung under a trellis that spelled out FRESNO. We prepared to go, my wife staying home because she had to teach that night ("the damn university doesn't give me a life!"), and my son buckled in for the drive—strapped into his car seat, secured in the back. "Have fun!"

"We will!" We backed out of the driveway.

We caught the freeway and drove through industry to the Big Fresno Fair.

The fairgrounds are on the southeast side of town, a neighborhood of its own, tough and proud. The streets are dark at night, the houses adequately maintained tract homes with sloping patio roofs jutting out of the back, and nicely tended lawns. An occasional eyesore blights the block.

"I think Ron lives here," my mom said, referring to the Ron I never met, Fresno Ron, a distant relative.

Cousin Ron. They knew him better.

"Around here, somewhere."

"He does, doesn't he?" my aunt said. We stopped in the middle of the block. It looked like an LA street, a street in Rosemead, in Montebello, in any of the places we lived. Alhambra. Pico Rivera. It could have been my old neighborhood, with an extra sadness. An extra couple of decades weighing it down made the difference.

Cousin Ron was not to be found.

"He's probably sleeping anyway, let's go to the fair."

The Ferris wheel circled in the night, brightly lit, neon streaks staying. I like fairs, the sights and sounds, the excitement of it all. I like the rides whirring around me, and the people relaxing for a bit, and the games promising a small happiness. I enjoyed myself, walking around with my aunt and mom, Ben flinging his arms out in the stroller, wide-eyed and amazed.

"Hey, Son, look at that!" I squatted down and pointed at The Octopus twirling in the night. It was a writhing mass of colorful bulbs and screams. He banged his fists on the stroller.

"Time to eat!"

The usual fair food on our laps satisfied our hunger, topped by a fair sweet we ate silently and happily. "Shall we walk around some more?"

"Let's do it!" I popped up and led the way.

We explored the hall with the gems and flowers. "Wow, look at this, pretty, huh?" I pointed into a case of glistening rocks and rare minerals.

"Shall we go see the cows?"

"Let's go see the cows." We moved on next door to the livestock in the pens. We gazed into the eyes of the cows, waiting for answers. When they gave none, just lay in bovine majesty amid stacks of hay gazing back, chewing, we laughed. We headed outside again.

Brightly and lively as ever, the fair whirled and buzzed. My kid pointed to a ride, and we put him in a big orange fish, watching him go round.

"Hey, Benny! Go, Benny!" We ran around with him, smiling.

He laughed his head off.

"Okay, let's go home now!" We adjusted him in his stroller and paused on the concourse, watching the people.

"There they go, to spend their money!" My mother, the cynic, didn't believe in carnival fun for the poor. She thought they were dumb for spending their hard-earned cash so fast.

"On nothing, nothing." On the midway, she had provided a running commentary.

But the midway had struck me as beautiful. Working people blowing some steam with restraint and dignity heartened me. A farmworker pitched dimes to impress his *novia* standing off to the side biting her lip with the turns of his fortune. He threw the coins until he won a vase grand enough to satisfy him and present to her. Whole families carted stuffed animals bigger than any of them, and beamed. Old couples rekindled romance just walking around holding hands. The fair atmosphere worked on me.

Cholos sauntered past the booths with girlfriends clinging to them, but dove into a game on the sudden, pulling out wads of cash from baggy pockets. They acted nice and friendly towards the world. Bikers strolled the lanes, longhaired, pointy bearded guys taking dollars out of their chained wallets and throwing some on the numbers to impress their ladies. Nobody warred.

The Big Fresno Fair calmed. Peace entered into the night, and anybody caught stupid would be thrown out. Cops patrolled the grounds. On walkie-talkies, security kept in constant touch. A recent stabbing in Fresno wouldn't ruin it. Mellow blacks from the Westside blended in.

It was time to go home.

"Let's go home now, okay?"

"*Vamos*, before it gets too cold." We bundled ourselves up.

"My God, what is that?" My mother asked, approaching the gate with caution.

"I don't know, Jo, but let's get out of here."

Standing under the banners announcing the fair, in the far-reaching parking lot on the other side of the turnstiles, a new crowd had materialized, as if by premeditation showing itself as one. The hip-hop generation, mostly Mexican kids, Chicanos, but enough blacks and whites among them to make it interesting, entered the fairgrounds. "Hey, motherfucker, what you doing here? Bitch?"

They amassed on the concourse, sizing up the scene after a thorough pat-down search by a security detail enlarged for them. They stared and scowled. They wore oversized jeans hanging off their butts and white tee shirts advertising companies in bright letters. They seemed dazed by their own craze.

"Get you out of the way, bitch," to whomever.

Grunts back established a communication system. They moved on.

But more came in. They came and they came, hordes of kids looking so severely disconnected they scared you. They rushed through the gates, past the guards standing back and letting them roam free, letting them spread across the grounds until the whole fair seemed a tempest of hip-hop children bouncing around with a vehemence absent in the others.

"Motherfucking bitch!" Anthems of neglect pierced the night air.

Furrowed brows challenged the world to say something, anything, back. Perpetual squints sized up the enemy that might be you. Clenched fists and relentlessly moving mouths reinforced toughness. It wasn't fake, it was real. Danger bobbed along with the mob.

"Fuck him up!"

"I say I'll beat his ass!"

"What he say?"

"Nothing."

We stood by the bathrooms mesmerized. They passed in front of us jawing their concerns.

"Fuck him."

"That bitch don't know…"

We walked on. Behind us the fair streamed in violently bright colors. People screamed on rides and barkers kept up a patter.

"Did you see those two kids," my mother said, once we got outside.

"Yeah, I did! The two nerds?"

"Yeah," my aunt laughed with us.

Pooling their money at the entrance, two nerds had lurked, one white kid and one Chicano, wearing the right clothes the wrong way. They reminded me of me.

"Do we have enough to get in?"

"Count it, fool! We might have to break in!"

"That would be crazy!"

"Sometimes you have to do things anarchic."

"Retro juvenile you mean."

"Whatever." They plotted their mischief. It meant finding a way in and capitalizing on it.

It meant capitalism was your tool, not your master. It meant having fun.

"I accede to your plan, dumb ass!"

"Fuckface!"

"Did you hear them?" my aunt asked.

"Some of it."

"There they go, to spend their money!" My mother, the cynic, didn't believe in carnival fun for the poor. She thought they were dumb for spending their hard-earned cash so fast.

"What were they saying?"

"That they're going to get in free and be bad, bad boys."

We all started laughing, watching them skirt the entrance to another side of the fair.

They disappeared into the shadows. A thug group approached us.

"Then I told that bitch I don't need no shit from you. Know what I'm saying?"

"Fuck that bitch. Look at them bitches over there. Who those fools with them? They mad dogging us?"

"Hurry up, Stephen," my mother said, elbowing me. "This place is too rough for me."

"Yeah, it's kind of rough, Steve," my aunt said, whispering under her breath. We had reached the parking lot and were crossing the street soon.

"It is," I said. "And where were your Mexicans, Mom?"

"Everywhere," she said, "spending their hard earned money, like fools."

"But having a good time," my aunt said.

"Having a good time, I guess," my mom said. "But those kids of theirs, this new generation, ay, what are we gonna do?"

"Nothing," I said. "Wait until the poets arise and make sense of them."

"Will they come from them?"

"Never," I said, "they'll come from the ones who talk straight."

"And wear their pants up to their waists," my aunt said, stopping at the car and laughing. She imitated the two nerds back there talking.

"Look at the Ferris wheel," I said, "it's still spinning." I unbuckled my kid in his stroller and began to put him in his car seat.

"Hey you Mister Ben," I told him.

He waved a fist at me.

I put it in my mouth and bit it. "Learn to speak around your fist. Don't mumble."

"What are you talking about there," my mom said. She was standing beside me at the door.

"Everything," I said, "important to me."

The kid laughed. I kissed his hand and gave it back to him. Lights swirled and whirled behind us. The Ferris wheel turned.

Stephen D. Gutierrez won a 2010 American Book Award for his collection of stories Live from Fresno y Los *(Bear Star Press). He teaches at California State University, East Bay. This is his first appearance in the RCR.*

DEAD *from page 1*

The dinosaur is extinct. Yes I know, the seeds are lost. It must be a bit grim for a dinosaur to celebrate the cycle of life and death. But at least he has a skeleton. As they say on the day of the dead, he who was never born can never be a skeleton. Not *have* a skeleton but *be* a skeleton. It's an important distinction. A word can make a difference and so can a punctuation mark. Commas are important. Commas separate the essential from the nonessential. If I say my uncle who died last year made a delicious jambalaya, I don't use commas because that's how you know which uncle I'm talking about. But if I say John Smith, who died last year, was a good hockey player, I do use commas because who died last year is not essential to the sentence even if it is essential to John Smith. I'm afraid I'm confusing you. Why don't you write now from the point of view of your skeleton?

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