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the Pacific Rim Review of Books

Issue Twelve Fall/Winter 2009

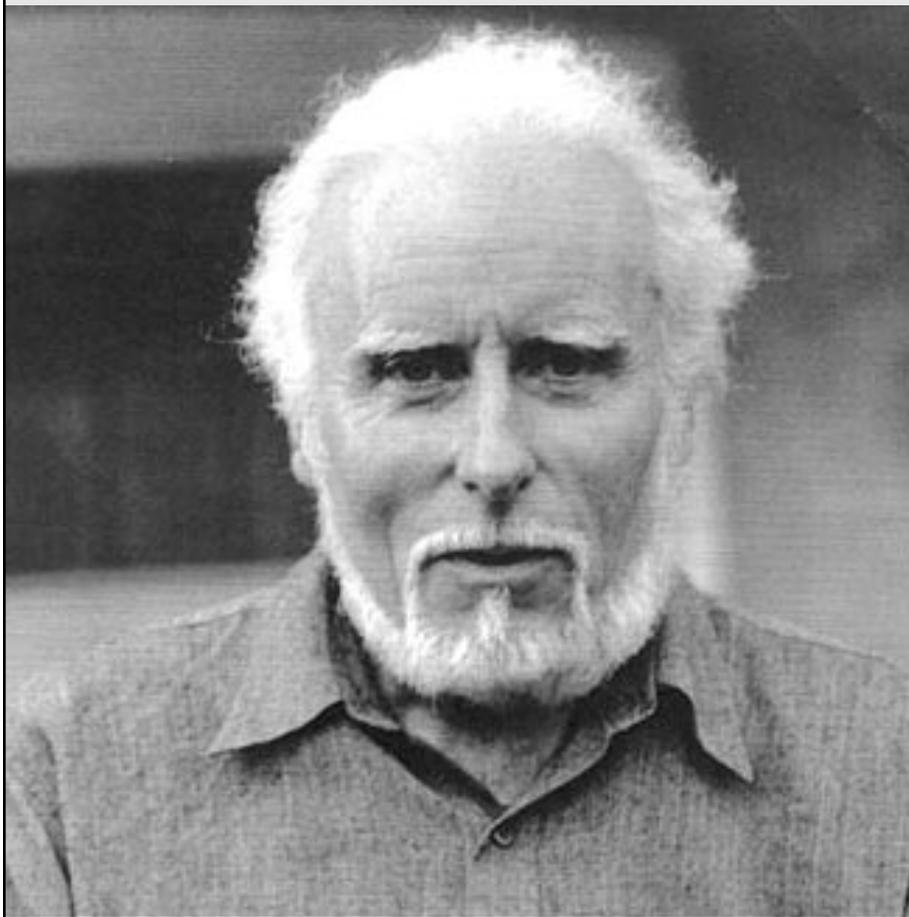
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AN AUTUMN HARVEST OF WRITERS & BOOKS

**'THE HOLY CURSE' OF POETRY:
DAVID DAY ON JACK GILBERT'S
THE DANCE MOST OF ALL**



Jack Gilbert

**READING CHINA & EAST ASIA:
"ZEN BAGGAGE" AND
"ANOTHER KIND OF PARADISE"**

**GWEN POINT ON
JOHN RALSTON SAUL'S
"A FAIR COUNTRY"**

**LINDA ROGERS REVIEWS
THE YEAR OF THE FLOOD
BY MARGARET ATWOOD**



Margaret Atwood

**PHILIP K. DICK BY RICHARD WIRICK
& SAMUEL R. DELANEY
BY CAROL COOPER**

**ROBERT PRIEST PONDER'S
SUSAN MUSGRAVE**

**PLUS: ROBERT DUNCAN, SATCHMO, LONNIE
JOHNSON, LUISA MARIA CELIS, CYNTHIA FLOOD,
IAN TYSON, MIKE O'CONNOR, 108 B.C. POETS**



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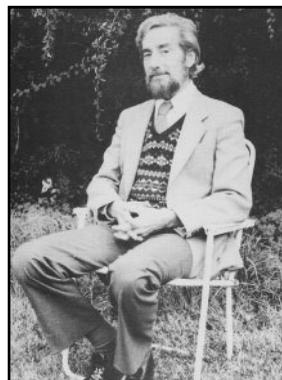
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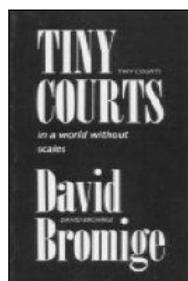
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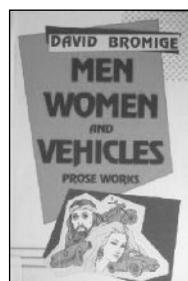
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This issue of the
Pacific Rim Review of Books
is dedicated to the memory of
David Bromige (1933-2009).
Poet, teacher, mentor, and a key
figure in beat and language poetry
in both the U.S. and Canada.
He will be missed.



*Tiny Bricks in a
World Without
Scales.*
Brick Books



*Men, Women and
Vehicles: Prose
Works.*
Black Sparrow
Press.

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'BRAINS, BATS AND IMPLANTED THOUGHTS': THE PERPETUAL LIFE OF PHILIP K. DICK

Richard Wirick

Most people know Philip K. Dick for stories that inspired movies such as *Blade Runner* and *The Matrix*, films that defined the language of latter day science fiction cinema and its extraordinary advances in special effects. After writing hundreds of stories, numerous novels, essays and screenplays, Dick joined those writers who turned aside from their work and made an eccentric public life their final art, though his work as a serious writer was never that far from serious readers' attentions.

He died in 1982, broke, decrepit, most probably mentally ill. He had been man-handled by publishers, agents, studios. He loved to quote William Burroughs' definition of the paranoid, applicable to himself then as well as to reams of his characters: "He's the one with all the information."

The premises of many of Dick's stories entailed problems that I and my fellow philosophy students and teachers at Berkeley had wrestled with the decade prior to his death. Two of these questions have occupied the philosophy of mind since at least the Second World War, and have galvanized the attention of philosophers and neuroscientists right in tandem with their hold on the imaginations of filmmaking acolytes throughout the 80s and 90s.

The first question served is the sole vibrating note of *Blade Runner's* entire narrative tension: do robots, computers or zombies [viz. "Replicants"] in any sense "think" or possess something akin to human consciousness? If so, how could that be tested and what would count as proof or lack of proof for that hypothesis? Lovers of the film will recall Harrison Ford's final decision to scrap his mission and explore the artificial romantic mental states beamed to him by Sean Young. They are compelling enough to make this writer fall in love with her at the time, and leave it to professionals of one or another ilk to distinguish from the real thing.

The second question, explored more in Dick inspirations like the *Matrix* series and "Minority Report," is more subtle: even if one grants that *we humans* have consciousness, how do we know it was not something implanted in our brains like a computer program, complete with a false but plausible "memory" and reasonable expectations for a similar future?

The first question is easier to answer than the second. It is fairly clear now that machines — fear not — can in no sense have conscious states similar to those of humans or other sentient animals. The difference between thinking and consciousness is important, and the fact that computers or robots can perform the former but not the latter is not merely academic or semantic. It is valuable to our understanding of the world and our concept of rights and duties — what we feel is ethically owed by one person to another.

Don't get me wrong: machines, including robotic machines performing computations, can think thousands of times as fast as human brains. They can calculate and retrieve stored data ("memory") far more rapidly than our processes would allow. The ability of machines to perform these mind-like functions has resulted in a great leap forward for human intelligence, and has made life immeasurably better and easier for all of us.

But consciousness has certain features that make it something else, something that can only be *experienced* in a human or animal brain. The object experienced is not what is unique; rather, it is the experiencing process itself. It stands alone in the singularity of its features, and thus has an irreducible quality that cannot be assembled from something else or reproduced. In fact, philosophers of mind have come to call consciousness's objects *qualia*, borrowing from Medieval church philosophers'



Philip K. Dick

The legacy of World War terminus has diminished in potency; those who could not survive the dust had passed into oblivion years ago, and the dust, weaker now and confronting the strong survivors, only deranged minds and genetic properties. Despite his lead codpiece, the dust — undoubtedly — filtered in and at him, brought him daily, so long as he failed to emigrate, its little load of befouling filth. So far, medical checkups taken monthly confirmed him as a regular: a man who could reproduce within tolerances set by law. Any month, however, the exam by the San Francisco Police Department doctors could reveal otherwise. Continually, new specials came into existence, created out of regulars by the omnipresent dust. The ads ran: "Emigrant or degenerate! The choice is yours!" Very true, Rick thought as he opened the gate to his little pasture and approached his electric sheep. But I can't emigrate, he said to himself. Because of my job.

Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

term for the aspects or characteristics of a thing.

Consciousness cannot be accounted for with most, or perhaps any, descriptions of it. One can explain what causes the brain processes of a bat as it flies along sending out and feeling the return of its radar, but that (in an example given by one philosopher) would not give us the qualitative experience of bat-ness. Our own experience provides material that enables us to *imagine* the consciousness of a bat: we can, however, limited our experience, think of what it would be like to have fur and webbed feet, extremely poor vision, to sleep upside down and eat insects. But this would tell us only what it is like for us to behave like a bat, which is not what we want. We wish to know what it is like for a *bat* to be like a bat. But the limits of *human* experience make this almost impossible.

So the experience of bat consciousness, like the experience of human consciousness, is irreducible, unique and incapable of production. Its most important features, what it would be like to *be that way*, is exactly what is most accessible about it. (We could imagine a computer program that approximates to the feelings of consciousness as closely as software designers can get it, and some have come pretty close. But there would be sense of whether the program is actually conscious unless we were the computer running the program.) So all the descriptions in the world come up against the bare wall of consciousness irreducibility. The particular feel of bat thoughts and bat sensations? Forget about it. All we can do is pretend. We can never partake.

Now back to Dick and his "Android Sheep" story, and its adaptation in "Blade Runner." For Ford and Young are flying off together at the end of the film, she as slim as a whippet in her lovely red dress and Ms. Marple Replicant hair bun, she can have every conceivable problem-solving and computation ability her creators what to bestow on her. Maybe she can man the aircraft better than Ford. She may be capable of calculating the velocity, altitude and clocked nautical miles of the ship ten times — a hundred times — as well as her human passenger. But without a brain inside her, she in no sense possesses consciousness. Her mental events have every feature of conscious events except the feel of them. She lacks the *qualia* of human-ness.

Ultimately, it may not make that much difference, even if their relationship is meant by its creator to flourish. Young-the-Replicant could perform any conceivable acts of outwardly recognizable love, loyalty and cruelty that mark any relationship. The would simply be performed without the first-order level of awareness that we have characterized as consciousness — the textual vividness that Robert Nozick called consciousness's *felt quality*. Ford would never have to know, and he would have no evidence — short of mangled descriptions of her own thoughts — to suspect she was anything other than human.

None of the above is meant to say that conscious agents cannot act in non-conscious, automatic ways in much of their experience. The drudgeries of daily life, our programmed manner of conducting it, are things that make humans a most fertile field in which to plant the race of Replicants. The Replicants in the movie have sen-

sory motor systems that carry out forms of behavior in a non-conscious way, but only because the Replicants have no consciousness. We, on the other hand, can possess the magic stuff and still operate without it. Many mental processes going on in conscious subjects are entirely non-conscious. Both human and Replicant reach for their keys in the same way, affect certain body postures or run after an object that might get away all in the same manner. The reason conscious agents like humans don't *think* these procedures through is that it would be inefficient to bring the behavior to the level of consciousness. We perform them without being conscious of them, though we could be if we wanted to.

* * *

So machines can't think. Not even computers. But forget for a minute the fact that when machines compute and predict, they do it in a way that doesn't involve the dimensionality and particularity — the *consciousness* — that makes up *our* thoughts. Dick's stories were more interested in having us disprove the second question we asked. What if all of our experience, the totality of our consciousness, were something inserted into our minds like an implant? Such a "consciousness chip" would contain an entire false memory system as rich or bare of experience as could be designed. We would possess reams of experiences we never had but which we accept as our proper history of consciousness, precisely *because* they have the vividness we just described and because we have nothing else to compare them to. In *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Erdrich*, Dick posited earthmen on Mars who ingest a drug that makes them hallucinate an entire life back on earth, "Perky Pat Layouts" containing surfers and Barbie dolls as real to them as the "felt life" they currently experience trying to colonize Mars.

If drugs can induce a *state* of consciousness, why can't software designers do drugs one better, producing vast false histories and personalities built out of them, slide by slide and flash by flash, from the whole cloth of binary instructions?



Philip K. Dick with kitty

Philosophers have come up with scenarios that are even chillier. Hilary Putnam and Robert Nozick offer the notion of brains bubbling in vats, capable of selecting this or that experience as though it had been lived by a human containing that brain. We would like to think that we'd rather actually *write* a great novel or actually save some tsunami victims, as opposed to plugging into a canned virtual presentation of our performing these tasks. The moral high ground, the morally attractive choice, is to actually perform the experience we desire rather than just, well, *experience* it by downloading it into ourselves.

So what saves us, really, from the "false" true experiences as opposed to the "true" true experiences? Certainly partaking of either of the two, without standing back with any kind of detachment, makes them seem identical, and identically attractive. Hilary Putnam's Howison Lectures, one of which I attended as a barely conscious undergraduate, offered the essential scenario of the "Matrix" films nearly thirty years ago: brains in a vat hooked up to a program that "gives [them] a collective hallucination, rather than a number of separate hallucinations." What happens is that since semantics derive significance from a community, the vat-brains' reference to, say, climbing the side of a building like Spiderman means simply the image of such Spiderman-like climbing. Their reference is not to the actual behavior of

going up a building wall with suction cups or climbing pitons. The vat-brains are speaking with a vat-language entirely different from ours, and who are we to say what they perceive is not as "real" as what we perceive?

The way out of this trap is in several steps. The first is to grant that the *real* consciousness (consciousness with its higher-order reality) comes with several aspects, several indicia of reliability that its creations do not possess. First, we can get a certain common sense assuredness, however, weak, that the imagined matter *flows from* the imagining entity. The thought or vision or creation will seem to *spring from* or *emerge out of* the creating thing, and not the other way around. Again, we have a conviction, an intuition, that the create world issues from an effort we expend, a natural impetus

(continued on page 17)

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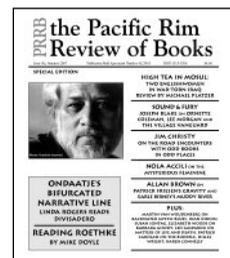
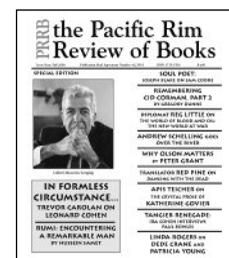
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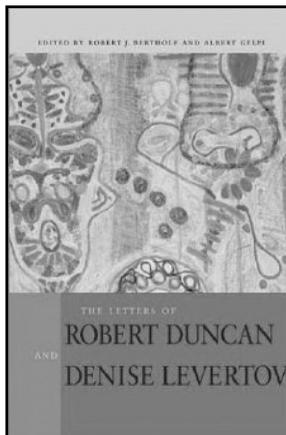
ROBERT DUNCAN, DENISE LEVERTOV, CHARLES OLSON

Paul Nelson

There may be no other document of the culture of postmodern North American poetry more comprehensive than *The Letters of Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov*. This is an eight hundred plus page book that constitutes the bulk of how the most idiosyncratic twentieth century poetry friendship played out. Duncan and Levertov are two of the most important poets of the second half of that century, both being associated with the Black Mountain School, though Levertov never attended or even visited the school and Duncan taught there only briefly. Yet it is the development of what they termed the *Organic* approach to poem-making that allows us to identify them with Black Mountain, and it is the development of that approach which makes this friendship critical for poets seeking to use a poem-making process to deepen their consciousness.

Robert Duncan was born in Oakland, California in 1919 and, along with Charles Olson, was one of the leading voices of the New American Poetry, as determined by the influential anthology of the same name, based on a poetics that diverged from the reigning school of North American Poetry. The New American Poetry was more interested in utilizing forms indigenous to North America, rather than extend the British Literature tradition. Denise Levertov was born and raised in Ilford, Essex, England, married an American writer and moved to the U.S. in the late 1940s, yet was also associated with the Black Mountain School because of her poems published in the *Black Mountain Review*. Levertov was drawn to the organic form as practiced by William Carlos Williams and had a substantial correspondence with him. She, too, was included in The New American Poetry anthology.

The friendship of Duncan and Levertov, as Belle Randall's careful reading of the letters suggests, was "free of the demands of physical intimacy; a relationship entirely of inclination..." and between two poets who "shared an almost religious reverence for the mystic properties of language, a fondness for cats and Victorian Fairy tales" (Randall 134). It began with the first of Duncan's letters, which was fan mail misunderstood by Levertov as an insult. The letter also became the first poem in a book of poetry by Duncan ironically called *Letters*. It ended with a difference of aesthetics, with Duncan convinced that Levertov was losing her creative energy and human potential in her anti-Vietnam War activities and with her suggesting Duncan was "arrogant, disgustingly elitist and offensively patronizing" (693, 683). Yet to suggest that this falling out was limited to an aesthetic disagreement is misleading, or at least only a partial representation of the truth of the situation. For Duncan the poetic gesture was more than a vocation, it was a life-path and reflection of cosmology. While the same could be said for Levertov, she did dedicate large amounts of time to her duties as mother, homemaker, teacher and anti-war activist, Duncan comes across as more interested in sharpening his craft, his potential (potency?) and most importantly his *perception*, on which his poetry was entirely dependent, while Levertov was determined to oppose the Vietnam War in such a way that her own development was stunted, at least in Duncan's view.



The Letters of Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov

Ed. by Robert Bertholf and Albert Gelpi
Stanford University Press, 2003



Denise Levertov at the Living Theatre, 1959

As early as 1956 Duncan writes about what would turn out to be the main difference between what motivated each of them: "It is only when the voice in writing lifts into the language itself speaking that the truth of the made thing presides. The feeling of what is false for me is the evident *use* of language to persuade" (34, emphasis his). Already in this letter we see the underpinnings of the organic from Duncan's perspective. This is six years after the original publication of Olson's "Projective Verse" which was critical to Duncan's development as a poet. Olson called for a verse with the ear as measurer and speech where it is least logical and least careless. Projective Verse as envisioned by Olson is a process in which "one perception must immediately and directly lead to a further perception" (Olson 240). (In the best of this kind of writing, we get the political drift of the writer, but she reaches a state deeper than the usual political dialectic, confirming a statement associated with Albert Einstein, that "sometimes two sides disagree because they're both wrong.")

So Duncan referring to the "voice in writing" is quite specifically referring to *listening* (as Olson had called for it) and, in a sense, *transcribing* that inner impulse which those with aural empathy can develop.

Fifteen years later Duncan, having further developed his poetic theories through the dialog with Levertov, goes on to elaborate what was at the core of what he felt was her inner conflict and that he felt was communicated in an unconscious manner through the content of her anti-war poetry: "And that painful conflict appears again in the realm of the poem between the idea of poem as revelation, as primary knowledge of the truth of things – and of the poem as a vehicle for personal, social, political or religious convictions" (687). This is not to say that one approach is right, and one wrong, or one better than the other, but Duncan was betting everything on the organic. Now here she was, in his eyes, abandoning that approach to communicate those political convictions. Also, she did not seem, or was unwilling to understand what was at the core of Duncan's trouble with her most strident anti-war verse. A look at how these differences manifested in verse is called for.

Denise Levertov: "Life At War"

*The disasters numb within us
caught in the chest, rolling
in the brain like pebbles. The feeling
resembles lumps of raw dough*

*weighing down a child's stomach on baking day.
or Rilke said it, 'My heart . . .
Could I say of it, it overflows
with bitterness . . . but no, as though*

*its contents were simply balled into
formless lumps, thus
do I carry it about.
The same war*

*continues.
We have breathed the grits of it in, all our lives,
our lungs are pocked with it,
the mucous membrane of our dreams
coated with it, the imagination
filmed over with the gray filth of it:*

*the knowledge that humankind
delicate man whose flesh
responds to a caress, whose eyes
are flowers that perceive the stars,*

whose music excels the music of birds,

(continued on page 20)

'THE HOLY CURSE' OF POETRY: ON JACK GILBERT

David Day

Jack Gilbert was never one to rush into print. 'Publish or perish' was never his motto. He published his first book *Views of Jeopardy* (twenty years in the making) in 1962 at the age of 37. His next book *Monolithos* did not appear for another twenty years, in 1982 when he was 57. His third book *The Great Fires* was published twelve years later in 1994 when he turned 69, and his fourth, *Refusing Heaven*, was released in 2005 as he reached the age of 80.

So, I didn't expect this: a new book of Gilbert poems after a gap of only four years! Who would imagine at 80, Jack Gilbert would suddenly decide to switch gears, and rocket ahead with this publication of *The Dance Most of All*.

In a memorable 2005 review of *Refusing Heaven* entitled "Coming to the End of His Triumph: A Retrospective on Jack Gilbert" Dan Albergotti wrote:

"Jack Gilbert is nearly finished with his greatest poem. I believe we can hear an allusion to its impending completion in the following lines from "A Brief Defence"..."

*If the locomotive of the Lord runs us down,
we should give thanks that the end had magnitude.
We must admit there will be music despite everything.*

"Despite everything, Jack Gilbert has made a stubborn music with his poems and with his life, and this fourth book is his final gift to those who will listen..."

My surprise – and I assume Albergotti's – about the appearance of this new book was also allied to the knowledge, and I'm giving away no secrets here, that Gilbert has been bravely struggling with increasing degrees of dementia for most of the last decade and is currently very frail indeed.

Consequently, I was fearful that this new book might bypass Gilbert's notoriously ferocious editorial zeal, and like so many other poets in their waning years, this selection might have been cobbled together from poems he had rejected from previous collections.

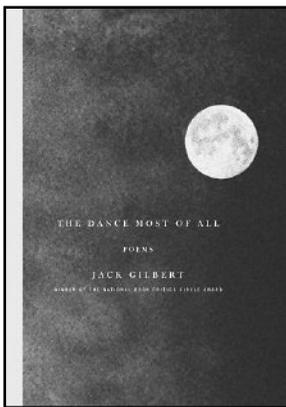
Thankfully, my fears have not been realized. I have no idea what the editorial process was, but this is a fine, strong collection and I am glad that we have it.

This book adds to the depth and breadth of Jack Gilbert's "greatest poem". It is also a very brave book. Gilbert was never one to turn away from emotionally painful issues or personal tragedy. There are poems here that are heartbreaking and prescient. One of these is "Winter Happiness in Greece" written when he knew his condition was worsening.

*"The world is beyond us even as we own it.
....Our soul and the body hold each together
tenderly in their arms like Charles Lamb
and his sister walking again to the madhouse.
Hand in hand, tears on their faces, him carrying
her suitcase. Blow after blow on our heart
as we grope through the flux for footholds,
grabbing for things that won't pull loose.
They fail us time after time and we slide back
without understanding where we are going"*

There are many more beautiful and painful poems confronting old age and death in this book, but none of them have a hint of self-pity. In an interview in 2005, Gilbert explained the title of his book *Refusing Heaven*:

"I think of heaven and think that I wouldn't want to just float around in happiness, in a place without imperfection, where you don't fall in love. I picture everything there being one colour. I can't imagine anything better than being here on earth."



The Dance Most Of All
Jack Gilbert
Knopf, 2009

Gilbert's poetry celebrates life, not despite pain, but accepting pain as an essential part of being alive. In this new book, we find this stated explicitly in the poem "The Mistake":

*"There is always the harrowing by mortality,
the strafing by age, he thinks. Always defeats.
Sorrows come like epidemics. But we are alive
in the difficult way adults want to be alive."*

Personally I was very much moved by the opening poem in this collection where he reflects on how in an old villa on the mountain above the port on the isle of Paros where he and his wife Michiko "had spent their perfect days", and walk down to the village along a stony riverbed and dirt road, and adding "Neither of them knows/ she is dying". I was moved, not the least because I had often walked that down that riverbed and dirt road with them.

I have read all of the poems Gilbert has allowed to be published over the years, however, this book has given me a perspective on Gilbert's work I never quite suspected before. And a parallel to another poet I never before would have imagined to have compared him with: Robert Graves.

It never occurred to me to ask Jack Gilbert what he thought of Graves, but this last book made me realize how much they shared as "serious romantics" (Gilbert's term).

It became extremely clear to me that the poems in Gilbert's *The Dance Most of All* are without doubt the product of a dedication to the same set of romantic ideals of poetry that Robert Graves so elaborately outlined in his *White Goddess*.

Indeed, looking back through all of Gilbert's life and work we see deep and serious romantic love as our one consolation of our life here on earth. It is through this love that we – for brief moments – don't feel utterly alone in the universe, and suffer from "alienation from one's own kind" (as Dudley Fitts wrote of Gilbert poetry.) In his case, consolation came in the form of his three muses: the three great loves of his life: Gianna Gelmetti, Linda Gregg and Michiko Nogami.

In this book, it is hard to look at such poems as "Cherishing What Isn't", and not see some manifestation of Graves' Triple Goddess:

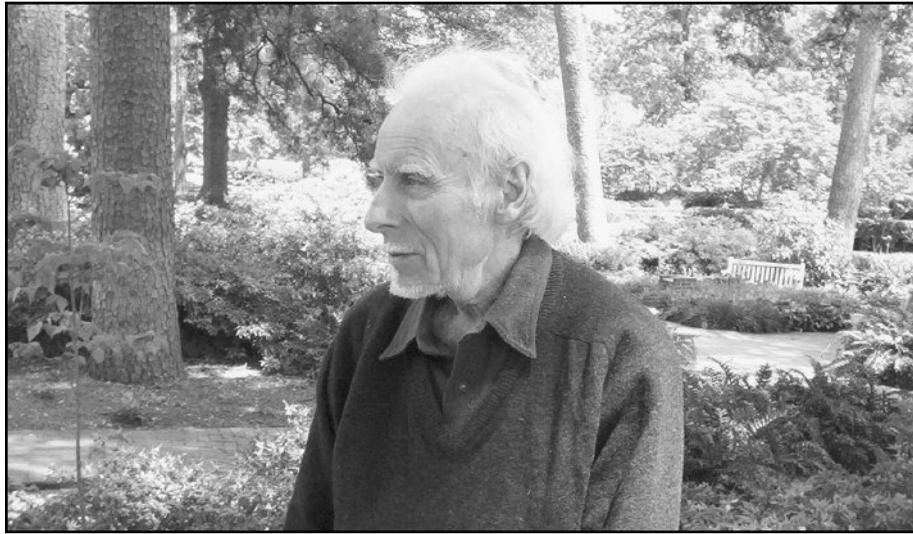
*"Ah, you three women whom I have loved in this
long life, along with the few others.
And the four I may have loved, or stopped short
of loving. I wander though these woods
making songs of you. Some of regret, some
of longing, and a terrible one of death.
I carry the privacy of your bodies
and hearts in me..."*

In another poem in this book "*Becoming Regardless*", Gilbert assesses his life, and again we seem to enter the ancient classical world and traditions of Graves' Muses:

*"I begin to see them again as the twilight darkens.
Gathered below me and to the right under the tree.
Ghosts are by their nature drawn to the willows.
They have no feet and hover just above the grass.
They seem to be singing....
...It would
erase my life to find I made it up. Then I see them
faintly dancing in the dark: spirits that are the invisible
presence of what those women were. There once was
a Venezia even if there is not now. The flesh thickens
or wanes, but there was somebody I knew truly. Three
of them singing under the willow inside my transience."*

I suppose I always saw Gilbert as aligned with Ezra Pound's aesthetics and consequently in opposition to the poetics represented by the traditional forms of Robert Graves.

To a large degree this is true. In his language and diction, Gilbert is very much in the modernist tradition of Pound, Eliot and William Carlos Williams. We see that



Jack Gilbert

in many aspects Gilbert's poetics are the opposite of Graves.

In a 1990 interview Gilbert said: "Mechanical form doesn't really matter to me... Some poets write within form with extraordinary deftness. But I don't understand why... It's like treating poetry as though it's learning how to balance brooms on your head...."

"There is usually a minimum of decoration in the best. Both the Chinese and the Greeks were in love with what mathematicians mean by elegance: not the heaping up of language, but the use of a few words with the utmost effect."

However, in their belief in the importance of the subject of poems and the sacred calling and dedication of the poet, Gilbert and Graves are as one. Both have cultivated solitude to better pursue poetry as a spiritual quest. Both chose the life of the exile: Graves in the Balearic Isles; Gilbert in the Cyclades. Graves withdrew from British literary life; Gilbert from America, as one critic put it, to better understand "the universal human heart unpolluted by the distractions and temptations of modern life."

"There are many themes for the journalist of verse, yet for the poet... there is no choice... there is the single infinitely variable Theme... the single poetic theme of Life and Death... the question of what survives of the beloved."

It was Robert Graves who wrote this, but it just as easily could have been Jack Gilbert. In a *Paris Review* interview, Gilbert claimed he couldn't understand why poets allowed themselves to be distracted by trivial themes: "Why do so many poets settle for so little? I don't understand why they're not greedy for what's inside them. When I read the poems that matter to me, it stuns me how much the presence of the heart – in all its forms – is endlessly available there."

And certainly, both men see the poet's calling in similar terms. Graves would certainly endorse wholeheartedly the first poem "In Dispraise of Poetry" in Gilbert's first book.

*"When the King of Siam disliked a courtier,
He gave him a beautiful white elephant.
The miracle beast deserved such ritual
That to care for him properly meant ruin.
Yet to care for him improperly was worse.
It appears the gift could not be refused."*

Graves begins his *White Goddess* with: "Since the age of fifteen poetry has been my ruling passion and I have never intentionally undertaken any task or formed any relationship that seemed inconsistent with poetic principles; which has sometimes won me the reputation of an eccentric."

Gilbert has done likewise. One might compare this to an interview in which Gilbert explained: "When I was 14, I made a list of everything that I wanted out of life, and I put 'becoming famous' on it. Then I did become famous at a fairly young age, and I realized that it's an empty thing. Fame can be addictive, and some writers feel they must publish in order to remain famous. I don't do that.... I just want to make enough money so I can afford my life."

Philosophically, the real dispute Gilbert has with Graves' romantic ideals is in Gilbert's belief that: "Like the greatest poetry, true romantic love is transcendental, but not mystical."

Gilbert does not embrace Graves' mysticism, nor use ritualistic poetic traditions. In the poem, "Measuring the Tyger" Gilbert fiercely expresses a hatred of this approach to literature and life.

*"Irony, neatness and rhyme pretending to be poetry.
I want to go back to that time after Michiko's death
when I cried every day among the trees. To the real.
To the magnitude of pain, of being that much alive."*

But then this too is a kind of celebration of the Goddess, as Graves would probably suggest by quoting Keats when he was writing under the shadow of death about his Muse, Fanny Brawne: "Everything that reminds me of her goes through me like a spear."

The publication of Gilbert's book made me think of another parallel with the life of Robert Graves. I recently read the forward to Graves' *Selected Poems* in which the poet realizes his judgement was waning and turned over the selection of his work to a trusted editor.

It made me remember the Irish poet John Montague telling me how he brought Robert Graves to Ireland in the sixties for a grand public reading, and on the way to the event in the limo realized that Graves mind was not what it once was and easily wandered.

Luckily, Montague told me, Graves performed satisfactorily on the stage and read each of the poems placed on the rostrum before him, although some in the audience were a little perplexed as he read aloud each of the page numbers before, after and in the midst of each of the poems.

That both these fine poets' minds should be lost in this terrible mental fog seems particularly cruel. It seems Gilbert deals with just this kind of fate in his poem "The Lost Hotels of Paris" which begins:

*"The Lord gives everything and charges
by taking it back. What a bargain.
Like being young for a while...."*

Still we must give thanks for small blessing. Just as Graves was able to give memorable readings despite his condition, so Gilbert had managed to do so until just a few years ago.

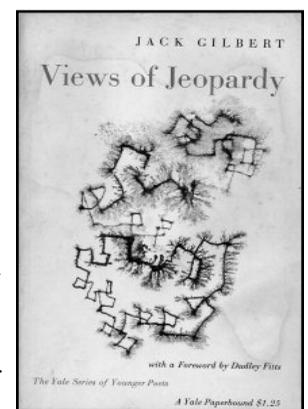
Take this account of a Gilbert reading published by [artandliterature.wordpress](http://artandliterature.wordpress.com) on the internet:

"I attended a poetry reading at the Folger Theatre in D.C. – one that was sponsored by the Poetry Society of America and featured Gilbert, Maxine Kumin, Gary Snyder and Irving Feldman. As anyone knows who has seen Gilbert read recently, he seems frail at the podium, he sometimes struggles with reading his own work, he'll stop mid-poem and start over from the beginning to try to keep his way. And yet, throughout it all, he's completely mesmerizing. A hush falls over the audience, as a group not just respectful but almost reverent, careful not to miss a word. After the reading at the Folger, four lines were set up, one for each author, and while the three other poets – masters of the form – chatted with a few fans, the line for Gilbert's signing stretched long throughout the crowd. The copies of his latest collection at that time, Refusing Heaven, got snatched up quickly, and I missed the opportunity to buy a copy of the book by this poet whom I've never read or even heard of but who'd quickly left me in awe."

And so we come again to what both poets would agree is the curse and blessing of poetry. At the end of "The Lost Hotels of Paris", Gilbert accepts the extent and the limits of this strange gift.

*"Ginsberg came to my house one afternoon
and said he was giving up poetry
because it told lies, that language distorts.
I agreed, but asked what we have
that gets it right even that much.
We look up at the stars and they are
not there. We see the memory
of when they were, once upon a time.
And that too is more than enough."*

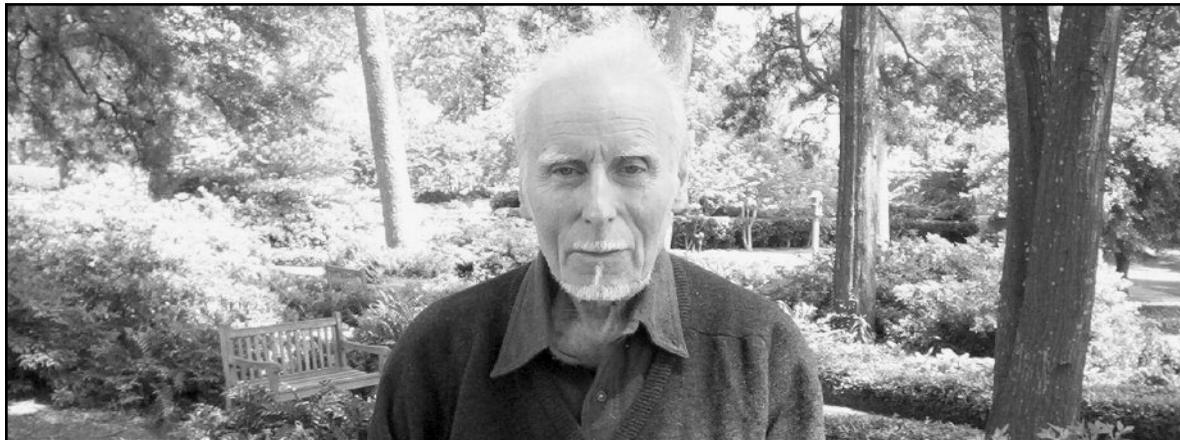
David Day has published over 40 books of poetry, ecology, history, fantasy, mythology and fiction. Born in 1947 in Victoria, BC, he now lives in Toronto, Ontario.



Jack Gilbert's *Views of Jeopardy*, published in the Yale Series of Younger Poets, 1962

JACK'S CHAIR, DON'S CAT AND THE ART OF NOT WRITING POETRY

for Jack Gilbert — a poem by David Day



Jack Gilbert

Talking to Jack about that remarkable poet
And enormous fat man,
Theodore Roethke.
How one day, so frustrated with his students
He stepped out of his classroom window.
He stood teetering on a precarious ledge
Five stories above the pavement.
Clinging like a beetle to the brickwork,
He edged his huge body
All the way around the outside of the building.
Then sweating and trembling,
Climbed back into the room.
'There,' he gasped with an unsteady voice.
'At least that will give you dumb bastards
Something to write about!'

What does it take to make a poem?

Jack is unimpressed. 'That's pure anecdote.
I don't want anecdotes or stories.
I want a poem from nothing.

'I want a poem,' says Jack,
Looking around for something.
'I want a poem from that chair'.

The lonely chair stands blankly
In the middle of the stone floor
With a white wall behind it.

It's sturdy and handmade with a woven reed seat.
It looks like it might have belonged
To Van Gogh or even Gauguin
But I don't feel the turmoil
Or sense the dervish brush strokes
Of madmen slapping paint on canvas.
It's just a bloody chair
And this is Greece, not France or Tahiti.

Besides, what I want to do
Is take you outside into the sunlight.

I want to tell you about the miracle
Of the fire on the mountain.
And the mad priests mounted on motorbikes
Holding aloft icons and sacred relics.

But Jack doesn't want any of that.
He wants this chair.
I want to talk about the woman
The islanders call the 'Daughter of the Wind'
Or the story of the blind snake
And the poison hand.

But no, instead, we've got this goddamn chair
In the middle of this white room.
And we've got these two guys
Sitting here, drinking ouzo
Discussing what poetry is not.

'But it's just a goddamn chair in the middle of a room
With the Greek sun shining through the open doorway?'
I think I am shouting.
'The poems, the anecdotes, the stories
Are all outside! Out in the world.'

But already, I can see
This is not true.

In a moment of our mutual distraction
We haven't noticed the entrance of an anecdote
In the form of Paniottis, the Greek landlord.

He has just removed the chair.

So here we are: two philosophers
Discussing art and life
Staring at a blank white-washed wall.

Yet, about poetry: I've always liked
What our mutual friend Don says
When someone hands him a poem
That's not a poem.

Actually, to tell the truth,
Don doesn't say anything. He just reads it attentively.
Then, there are several moments of embarrassed silence
Before someone figures out how to change the subject.
However, much later, he will explain
That it is like someone handing you a dead cat.

I mean, I can see it's a cat,' Don says.
'It's got all the right parts.
And they've been assembled properly,
But the cat is dead.

'A poem is a living cat
This thing is a dead cat.
I don't know how to fix it.
It's just a dead cat or a not-poem.
What else can you say?'

So what am I doing on this page?
Search me. This obviously isn't a cat, or a chair.
And I'm not even trying to write a poem.
I'm just scribbling this down in short lines
To irritate Jack and Don.
Also, I love to piss off librarians
Who are always looking for a category.

Just call it non-poetry
Which is NOT poetry
In the same way that non-fiction
Is essentially NOT fiction

The problem is: I never really set out
To write a poem. Not ever

You see, I used to be a lumberjack.
Then I started writing things down.
I was trying to understand something
Then it became something else.
I wrote down some more.
And time just marched on.

As I get older, I understand less and less.
The good part is: I don't seem to care any more.

Soon, I will be like this page
Before I started to deface it,
Or like the wall
Behind Jack's chair.

Empty and totally blank.
But shining white.
Pure. Almost perfect.

Paros, Greece 1980/1990

LONNIE JOHNSON

Jim Christy

Toronto, mid-'Sixties:

The young white man and the old black man, much more than fifty years separating them, sitting together on a bench in a park that was at the intersection of Avenue Road and MacPherson Street. The old man talking, the young man listening avidly, not recognizing most of the names he heard, not having the background or a grounding for the stories but knowing somehow that what he was hearing was unique.

Bruce Gorman who lived on Dupont Street in 1966 was attending architecture school and working part-time. The other man lived in a rooming house on MacPherson; he was seventy-two years old and a musician. If you're one of those who believe it was the devil who taught the legendary Robert Johnson to play guitar down in Mississippi somewhere out along highway 61, well, then, you have to accept that young Bruce Gorman was sitting there, like he did most afternoons, not with an old black man, but an entity that had merely assumed the form of an old black, he was passing time with The Devil himself.

Lonnie Johnson who was born in New Orleans in 1894, and first played Europe as a song and dance man in 1917, landed in Toronto in 1965, and decided to stay. Not that he was unfamiliar with the city or with Canada. He had been criss-crossing the country for fifty years, in the early days booked on the TBOA and RKO theatre circuits. His first Toronto gig of 1965 was less, as they say, than auspicious. He was booked into a place called the New Gate of Cleve, and there were four people in the audience. One of them was the jazz writer for the *Globe and Mail*, Patrick Scott, who sat and listened in awe. He came back the next night, and was even more impressed. "Lonnie Johnson," he told his *Globe* readers "is not only the greatest singer and musician in jazz, he is the greatest singer or musician of any colour or gender on any instrument in any style of popular music anywhere in the world today."

Johnson moved on to other venues in the city and his audience increased. Guitar player and singer David Rea caught one of those early gigs on Yorkville Avenue, only vaguely aware of who he had come to see. "First time I heard him I had to go outside and cry. I couldn't believe it. We were in the presence of greatness."

In those first days, Johnson's audience, wherever he played—Steele's Tavern, George's Kibbitzteria, the Penny Farthing, a half-dozen other venues—consisted of musicians and of people out on the town who couldn't care less who was up on stage. Johnson would dream aloud to a reporter, sounding like he was repeating a line from one of his songs:

"Gonna get me a place of my own, someday
Won't no waiters serve no drinks when I play."

As one musician says, "Toronto didn't know what it had."

What it had was a man who was probably the most important all-around figure in the history of the blues.

Johnson had played on New Orleans street corners before the year 1900. He began as a violin player but before the age of ten, he was also accomplished on piano, guitar, banjo, mandolin and drums. He could play most other instruments, too and did play them professionally. Lonnie Johnson had eleven brothers and sisters, and the whole family worked weddings and banquets all over New Orleans. But it was as a dancer and fill-in musician with a Negro revue that he made that first trip to Europe.

When he got back to New Orleans two years later, he was devastated to discover that his mother and father, and all but one of his siblings had died during the Spanish Flu epidemic.

"In the middle Sixties when I knew him," Bruce Gorman says, "Lonnie still talked about that. It still made him sad."

Johnson bought his first guitar that year and took to the road. "I felt so alone," he told British writer Paul Oliver, "I just got to ramblin'."

He played wherever he could earn some money: rent parties, mostly, more street

corners, as Robert Johnson would do fifteen years later, and the occasional club date, mainly as an accompanist. He traveled up and down the West Coast in 1920, and there are stories that he played the Patricia Café in Vancouver which was managed from 1919 to 1922 by a former pimp who claimed to have invented jazz, none other than Jelly Roll Morton.

In Texas, Johnson played rags, in Detroit he played the blues, on Mississippi River excursion boats with the Charlie Creath's Jazz-O- Maniacs band he played whatever the audience wanted to hear. Lonnie Johnson, by then, 1925, was a veteran professional musician. On his first record date the same year, with Creath, he played violin.

In 1921, Big Bill Broonzy saw Johnson in a club playing the blues on a mandolin, "He could play anything you could make music on and he was good on all of them."

He entered a contest sponsored by Okeh Records, and won. The prize was a recording contract. He was soon so popular that the company issued a Lonnie Johnson record every six weeks for the entire eleven-year length of the contract. He also worked as an accompanist on Okeh recordings that featured artists as different as Texas Alexander and Victoria Spivey.

Hearing these recordings, hearing Johnson in person, Brownie McGhee said, "I had never thought that kind of music could be made with voice and guitar.... His musical works may be and should be the first book of the blues bible."

Most important, musically, were the records he made in the late-'Twenties with Louis Armstrong, Eddie Lang and Duke Ellington. He played in those configurations generally conceded to be Armstrong's best, the Hot Fives and Hot Sevens. It's Lonnie Johnson trading solos with Armstrong on the now classic recordings of "I'm Not Rough," "Savoy Blues," "Mahogany Hall Blues Stomp" and "Hotter Than That."

"He and Louis inspired each other," critic Sam Charters wrote. "Johnson's reputation as a jazz guitarist was secure."

Soon he was regarded by just about everyone as the greatest jazz guitarist, an opinion underscored by the historic duets with Eddie Lang, on which Lonnie Johnson played the first twelve-string guitar that most people, musicians included, had ever heard. Of Johnson's solo on one of these tracks, "It's Easy When You Know How," guitarist Leo Kotke has said, "I don't know anyone who has figured that one out yet. Lonnie was a freak."

Although Johnson continued to record for Okeh, he was by the early 'Thirties, no longer a full-time musician. There was little work but Lonnie Johnson, who could play anything, and had done so—"He brought the blues to jazz, and jazz to blues" maintains the encyclopedia, "Big Book of the Blues"—was a victim of his own versatility as much as of the Great Depression. "What is he?" Club owners wanted to know, "A jazz act, a crooner or a blues player?"

Lonnie Johnson went back to scuffling, traveling from town to town playing wherever he was able. In 1930, he was living in the basement of a friend's house in Byhalia, Mississippi. The man had a Seven-year old son named Sam and Lonnie gave the boy music lessons. The kid, Sam Meyers, grew up to be a singer, harmonica player and drummer who in the 'Fifties would play in back of Elmore James and record for Ace and Fury. Sam passed along all he learned from Lonnie Johnson to his younger brother Louis. In the fifties the brothers, along with Junior Wells, formed a trio called, first, the Three Deuces, later the Three Aces.

Meanwhile, in Robinsonville, Mississippi, Willie Brown and his pal, the great Son House, were playing Saturday Night dances at Funk's Corner Store, a sort of general store which also served as beer hall and meeting place, such operation were known in black communities as Buffet Flats. A local kid named Robert Johnson used to hang around, listening and staring at the musicians' fingers as they danced along the frets. He wanted to play, too but was just not talented enough.



Lonnie Johnson 1947-48

"We used to let him play the harmonica. He was okay on that," Son House would tell the story. "But he wanted to play the guitar. When we went out for a break, he'd pick up one of the guitars and start banging on it. People would come out and complain to us. A dog wouldn't want to hear it!"

"Go away and learn to play," Son House told him.

He did, too. The jive version, of course, has Robert making that Faustian bargain with the you-know-who. Besides corny, it is also condescending, rooted in the notion that no poor black man could possibly play that well unless he was some idiot savant, or something mystical was going on. The same people regard "primitive" or "intuitive" artists, the same way. They said it about Henri Rousseau.

What Robert Johnson did do was get on that road, looking for the Way, and sometime somewhere someone told him that Lonnie Johnson, whom Robert had always claimed to be related to, was living in Byhalia, Mississippi. "He was always talking about Lonnie Johnson. Lonnie-this and Lonnie-that," recalled his road buddy, fellow singer and guitarist Johnny Shines. "I guess everybody has to idolize somebody."

When he finally located the Myers household, it was: Move over little Sam.

Some of the last decent gigs that Lonnie Johnson made before turning to manual labour were in Montreal in 1935. I've traced him to the Silver Slipper Club and the Monte Carlo Grill in the famous St. Antoine neighbourhood.

But soon Lonnie was in Peoria, Illinois working in a coal mine, later in a steelyard and for a time he made railroad ties. He also made gigs on weekends and continued to record for Okeh, even though few people had money to buy records. Johnson had been married in the middle 'Twenties to Mary Williams, a talented amateur blues singer whom he encouraged to build a professional career. Lonnie started Mary out by featuring her on his own Okeh records. Soon they were singing duets and eventually doing songs about their marriage, the good times and the bad. When they divorced in 1937, the recorded references continued. Lonnie and Mary Johnson became sort of the George Jones and Tammy Wynette of their day. Once they separated Mary put out a side called "Rattlesnake Blues" with a couple of lines that in the best blues tradition would appear in variation in many another song to come, ("That's all right, daddy, that's all right for you/ Some day you'll want your Mary and she'll be far from you"). Lonnie came back with "Why Women Go Wrong", "Trust your Husband" and in a moment of lamentation: "She's My Mary".

Economic conditions had gotten better by 1937, and Johnson's career revived. He went to Chicago and worked steadily for several years. He was signed by Decca records and his first time out, on "Hard Times", introduced more lines that would become immortal:

*People ravin' 'bout hard times
Don't know why they should
If people was like me they didn't
Have no money when times was good*

His solo work in back of clarinetist Jimmie Noone on "Keystone Blues" is considered the basis of what would become known as the "Chicago sound" and as leader, Lonnie recorded one of his own songs, "The Chicago Blues."

After five years based in Chicago, he hit the road again to promote his new records. He 1945, Johnson played Vancouver. In 1947, he based himself in Cincinnati after signing with King records. After a short time, he was at the top of the R&R charts with a million selling record.

I first heard the song as an Elvis Presley cover. Presley has been much aligned for "ripping off black artists" which I think is a charge based more on class and generation than on anything resembling reality. Singers do other people's material, always have always will, and Presley was a Negrophile so it follows he'd do black music. But he was workingclass and stayed that way, and he was born in the 'Thirties. Ten years after he hit, the Rolling Stones emerged singing black music. In fact, what most white listeners of a certain age know about the blues is the Rolling Stones interpretation of the blues. They were Muddy Waters idolaters. And bless them for it. Many others followed. Eric Clapton idolized Albert King (whose guitar hero was Lonnie Johnson.)



Lonnie Johnson

But they weren't "ripping off black music." Oh, no, by then the media were in different hands, hence the new breed were *paying homage*.

Unlike Presley's covers, the new generation of pop stars, oriented to a middle-class white audience, produced lesser, paler, versions of blues and r and b standards. As Muddy Waters, quoted by Elijah Wald, said in *Escaping the Delta*, "They got all these white kids playing blues. They play rings around you. But they can't vocal like the black man."

Even more revealing in that comment of Mr. Morganfield's is that he referred to the white players as kids. The Rolling Stones, Clapton, everybody in the Paul Butterfield Band (the most authentic of the lot) were in their late-Twenties in the late-Sixties. It's inconceivable anyone of any colour referring to Lonnie Johnson or Muddy Waters as "kids" when they were the same age, much less Howlin' Wolf or Son House.

I know it's heretical but usually Presley's covers were, if not better, at least as accomplished as the ones he copied. And he was of the idiom, as was the first great white blues singer Jimmie Rodgers and, later, Hank Williams. One where Presley falls way short, however, is Lonnie Johnson's big hit: "Tomorrow Night."

Accompanying himself on electric guitar, nothing flashy, "playing the song" as musicians say, Johnson sings in a hauntingly beautiful style, the bittersweet voice of experience that dares, still, to hold out a little bit of hope for romance despite being painfully aware that it's never worked out right before.

*Your lips are so tender
My heart is beating fast
You're willing to surrender
But tell me darling, will it last?
Tomorrow night
Will we be together when the moon is bright?*

Johnson had a few more hits on King Records, including "Confused" and "Pleasing You," on the strength of which he toured Europe for a year. Back home, he found interest in his work had dwindled and his records were hardly selling. Still he worked steadily for a few more years or until rock and roll hit. By 1957, there was no work at all. Johnson quit the music business and took a job as a janitor at the Ben Franklin Hotel in Philadelphia. He lived with a woman named Susie Smith and they had a daughter they named Brenda. Lonnie, sixty-three years old by then, was thrilled and he wrote a song for her, "Brenda, My Darling" but had no place to sing it.

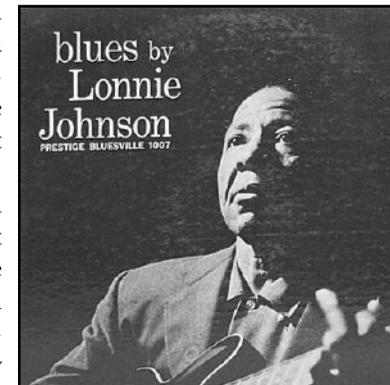
In 1962, he was discovered by jazz and blues fan Chris Albertson, pushing a broom at the Ben Franklin Hotel on Broad Street. The folk music craze was on by then and Albertson launched Johnson on the folk festival and coffeehouse circuit. This was not a "Tomorrow Night Crowd" or a "She's Making Whoppee in Hell Tonight" crowd. These white college kids wanted their Negroes in overalls and big old boots, strumming battered guitars and singing about women leaving them while they were out picking cotton. And it hurt so much they had to go out and get drunk. When they got back to the plantation the boss man done fired them.

There were blues men who fit that image and just as many accomplished and sophisticated musicians, most notably Josh White, who were willing to adopt to that mold. It wasn't that Johnson wouldn't adopt, he couldn't.

So for a couple of years he toured as an anomaly. Almost a sideshow freak, an old black man in a suit who could play guitar equal to any white man, shout lowdown blues or croon as sweet as any band singer.

Lonnie Johnson was about to quit the music business a final time but he was saved by Canada. He was called up to Toronto and met at Union Station by bassist Jim McHarg and sax and flute player, Jim Galloway. They both were so intimidated that neither could do more than mumble greetings. "Finally," Galloway recalls, "Lonnie broke the ice. He said: 'So, what's the chick situation in Toronto?'"

There may only have been four people in the audience that first night at the New Gate of Cleve but it was all packed houses by the middle of his run. Johnson soon had fans who would show up anywhere in Toronto that he played. He also had young admirers who followed him down the street. "Literally," Bruce Gorman remembers. "You'd see this old black man walking down Avenue Road to Yorkville and there'd be three or four or more white guys by his side and trailing behind him. I mean people like Lenny Breau and David Clayton-Thomas."



Blues by Lonnie Johnson

"He always took time to sit down with us young musicians and show us how the music should be played." David Clayton-Thomas says. "He was a soft-spoken, gentle man."

Chris Whiteley who with his friends had a jug band that would become The Original Sloth Band, first heard Johnson at a private party. "He played solo at a lot of private parties that were put on by people like our parents so we got to watch and listen up close. Then he'd talk with us. ... He gave practical advice too. He told me to raise the action on my guitar. I did, and I prefer a high action to this day...."

I was a teenager at the time. He was very nice and encouraging and I've never forgotten it."

"Those were heady days in Toronto," Gorman says. "And right in the middle of it was Lonnie Johnson. I'd see him walking up and down Avenue Road. I'd chat with him in the park. I had a dog and he liked my dog. But most of all I remember him playing, those fingers flying up and down the neck in a blur. And his fingers, they were so long they were like capos."

Johnson's playing and singing has been cited as a major, if not the major, influence on dozens of musicians, from Houston Stackhouse to Albert King, and including the likes of T-Bone Walker, probably the leading electric guitar player in blues history. I've collected quotes from B. B. King going back to the fifties where he heralds Lonnie Johnson as the major influence on his style. The latest one I've found is from a 2004 radio interview in Hawaii.

DJ: Who was the biggest influence on your playing back then? (the beginning of his career)

B. B. King: Same as now. Lonnie – not Robert – Johnson.

David Clayton-Thomas was hooked by Johnson's "strong, traditional jazz roots...his chord structures and melodic sense was much more sophisticated than the blues players I'd heard."

What did he look like? How did he act? What was his manner. Galloway says that Lonnie was about five-foot ten inches tall and always well dressed. Bruce Gorman says he was six feet tall, and "was a snappy dresser. He stood out in any crowd."

Whitely says, "He had a very dignified air and always wore a suit. He smoked his cigarettes in a cigarette holder."

Jim Galloways never remembers seeing Lonnie Johnson when he didn't have a woman or two on his arm.

Journalist Marci McDonald who interviewed him in the late Sixties says that "Lonnie was still in the game, if you know what I mean."

He was kind and friendly but occasionally given to fits of despondency.

"I remember him one time being real low. He loved it in Canada and didn't want to go back to the States. He wanted to bring his wife and daughter up but there was some problem. Some other person making trouble."

In 1966, Lonnie had put up some money to invest in club called Home of the Blues, on Yorkville Avenue. The deal went sour and he lost \$7,000. The deal after the collapse Lonnie went to Ottawa for a three-week nightclub gig, and got such a poor reception—the crowd expected Louis Armstrong imitations—that he almost admitted himself to a hospital.

Then there were the women. Wives he never talked about. "When you got money and a woman," he told Marci McDonald, "the woman's got both hands and their feet, too in your pockets. When they take them out, there's nothing left."

But there was another time, when Johnson left Toronto to play Port Arthur, of all places, that he brought the house down every night and came back happy and with Port Arthur woman on his arm.

Lonnie Johnson in Toronto was enjoying what was probably the happiest time of his life and career. Only the period of the late- Twenties when he was touring off his Okeh recordings could have rivaled the Toronto years. But he was mellower in Canada. He worked steadily, had money, respect, no racial hassles and plenty of female companionship. He had fun. He was much in demand at private parties and small conventions. He wowed the Bakers' at their annual get-together in 1967 when he sang, "I'm Your Jellyroll Baker."

Every now and again, Lonnie took the train down to spend a couple of days in Philadelphia with his young daughter, Brenda who was living with her mother Susie Small. He recorded an album for Sackville Records with Jim McHarg's Metro Stompers. Buddy Guy remembers meeting Lonnie on stage in Toronto in 1968. "I just fell out! I was shocked to see him. I couldn't turn his hand loose. He had to shake it free."

Then on the afternoon of March 14 in 1969, he was walking back to his



Blues & Ballads, with Elmer Snowden

MacPherson Avenue roominghouse and was just at Webster Avenue when a car driven by 25-year old David Hoskins was rear-ended by another car, jumped the curb and ran Lonnie Johnson down. He suffered a broken hip and severe damage to his kidneys. He was in the hospital for months.

Several weeks after the accident, a benefit was held for Lonnie Johnson at Massey Hall, and the entertainers included the likes of Salome Bey, Jodie Drake, pianist Charles Thompson, John Lee Hooker and Ian and Sylvia.

The night before this affair to raise money for a man once called the greatest living guitar player, there was a show at Maple Leaf Gardens by the man currently called the greatest living guitar player: Jimi Hendrix. Inevitably, one is tempted to ask the question, 'Who was better?' Personally, I believe that there is nothing Jimi Hendrix did that Lonnie Johnson couldn't do or hadn't done decades before. Don't think so? Well take the advice of American writer Nick Tosches, listen to Jimi Hendrix on "Hey Joe" and then play Lonnie Johnson's "Got the Blues for Murder Only."

Lonnie's last public performance is usually reported to have been at a blues show in February 1970. But three months later, the month before he died, he sat in with the Jim Galloway quartet at the Savarin Tavern. "He sang 'My Mother's Eyes'" Galloway remembers. "And there were plenty of wet eyes in the place, mine included."

Lonnie Johnson suffered a stroke and died on June 6, 1970. There was a memorial service at Our Lady of Lourdes on Sherbourne Street.

Little Brenda, seven years old, had been brought up to Toronto by her mother and uncle. "We got in the night before. We went shopping and they bought me a pink dress. Then I couldn't believe all the people that

showed up, and the motorcade. After the service we went back to the hotel and there was the service on television. And I saw myself in my pink dress."

And Salome Bey sang "Brenda" and "Tomorrow Night."

At the time of his death, Johnson's was the longest recording career of anyone who had ever played on record.

Lonnie Johnson was the first male blues star and was considered the finest guitar player in blues and jazz.

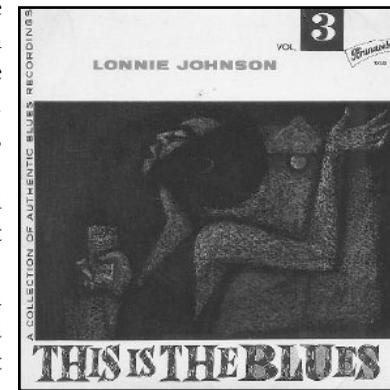
No one wrote a wider range of songs. Johnson penned raw down home blues, hokum, sophisticated uptown blues, ballads of love and loss, dozens of songs about death and the devil, songs rooted in politics of the day, even songs about floods. Words and music to one thousand -three hundred songs.

He was the first important studio sideman and the first bluesman to record on an electric guitar.

His duets with Eddie Lang in 1928 and 1929 mark the first important interracial partnership in jazz.

He has to be the most important figure in the history of the blues. New Orleans, St. Louis, Dallas, Chicago, Cincinnati and Philadelphia all have celebrated his tenure and claim him as their own. Toronto has more right than any of them, but barely knows Lonnie Johnson existed. It certainly hasn't sung his praises.

Jim Christy is a poet, novelist, essayist, world traveller and raconteur. He has published numerous essays, novels, collections of poetry and has released several Compact Discs of his poetry set to music.



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IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD: SAMUEL R. DELANY ON WRITING AS A CREATIVE ACT

Carol Cooper

“[Delany] said that science fiction wasn’t special because of its gadgets and its landscapes ... instead it was special because of its language, and the assumptions and techniques readers used to interpret that language, and the way writers’ knowledge of those assumptions and techniques affected the stories they wrote.”

—Matthew Cheney, paraphrased from “Ethical Aesthetics: An Introduction to *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw*.”

Out of 13 works of non-fiction published to date by Samuel R. Delany, more than half devote themselves to essays, letters, and/or transcribed interviews about the process of writing (and reading!) itself. Throughout, Delany supports his observations using sprightly anecdote or allegory; sometimes with salient references to the novels of Toni Morrison, Robert Heinlein, and Gustave Flaubert, or the critical theories of Susan Sontag, George Orwell, and Jacques Derrida. I cite this tiny sampling of Delany’s textual reference points, out of a much wider spectrum of equally relevant examples, just to assure newcomers to Delany’s ideas that they can trust the breadth and evenhandedness of his research.

Having steeped himself in all the usual literary and paraliterary canons, including poetry, which he reads but does not write, Delany goes back and repeatedly compares their subjective and objective effects before measuring his conclusions against those of other literary critics. He constantly searches for quality among diverse categories of fiction and non-fiction, from pornography to graphic novels to obscure small-press monographs with the advantage of having written memorable examples of each. With 26 published novels plus several landmark works of autobiography under his belt, Delany is no mere ivory tower observer of man’s literary enterprise. Widely acknowledged as both a gifted wordsmith and a particularly astute, self-aware reader, Delany is perhaps uniquely qualified to explain how any given text works, and why or whether it works as effectively as possible.

The two books reviewed here include the first and the latest anthologized attempts by Delany, currently a tenured professor at Temple University in Philadelphia, to codify and promote his personal aesthetic. Revised and republished this summer by Wesleyan Press, *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw* (1977) now makes a perfect companion-volume to *On Writing* (2005). Together they provide enough dialectical and autobiographical evidence to render their author’s arguments as clear and persuasive to the lay reader as to the degree-laden academic. Oh sure, readers may have to negotiate a few text-bombs of linguistic jargon, but by and large Delany’s wry, energetic rhetoric explains the quantum mechanics of great, even paradigm-changing writing in simple, powerful terms.

Born in New York’s Harlem to a middle-class black family in 1942, Delany was an award-winning science fiction novelist by the mid-1960s. He produced long and short-form prose which elegantly deconstructed consensus reality long before semiotic agendas were routinely on the menu for most genre writers and their critics. The extant SF community of progressive writers and editors embraced him, and his invited presence among the elite peerage of the 1966 Milford Writers Workshop alone might have secured his reputation.

It is significant that his 1966 Nebula award-winning novel, *Babel-17* featured a non-white female “xenolinguist”/cryptographer as its protagonist and functioned almost like a thematic sequel to his similarly language-obsessed novella *The Ballad of Beta 2*. This was one year before Jacques Derrida would publish three philosophical essays which “laid the foundations of deconstruction”, much to the benefit of Delany’s later writing.

However, it must be remembered that Delany’s prep-school education and omnivorous reading habits fueled only part of his prodigious cultural production

through the ’60s, ’70s and ’80s. In Fred Barney Taylor’s 2007 documentary “The Polymath, or The Life and Opinions of Samuel R. Delany, Gentleman” Delany vividly recollects “the sexual generosity” of New York City in providing the spontaneous, semi-public recreational sex he needed to drain stress and tedium out of the 8 to 10 hour days of writing/rewriting required to complete his first five or six novels. A self-identified gay man since adolescence (who would nonetheless go on at 19 to marry his high-school sweetheart and later produce one child) Delany frequently encoded aspects of his polymorphous sex life in his fiction. He deployed this information in his writing more and more deliberately through the mid- to late 1970s, seeing no social benefit to excluding this subject matter from the realms of art or public discourse.

Released not long after the surprise crossover success of Delany’s controversial urban fantasy *Dhalgren*, *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw: Notes on the Language of Science Fiction* was a selection of provocative essays first published for collegiate consumption by David Hartwell’s Dragon Press. Obsessed with science fiction’s semantic potential (especially in the hands of authors like Roger Zelazny, Joanna Russ, and Thomas Disch), to cast bright, transforming light on the most occluded, self-sabotaging aspects of the human condition, *Jaw* became the first such collection—as Matthew Cheney points out in his introduction to this new edition—to bring “linguistic, structuralist, and post-structuralist concepts to bear on the material.” Because of the pioneering originality of his approach, anyone

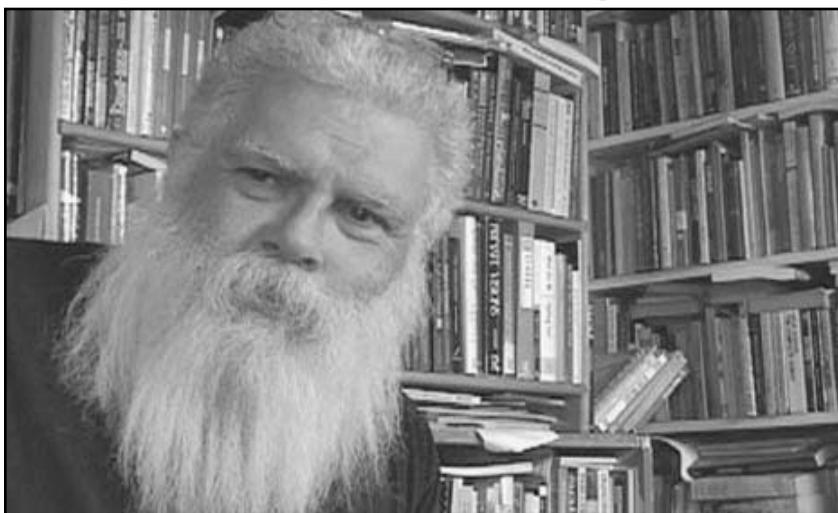
now hoping to be taken seriously as a critic of any form of speculative or fantastic literature must somehow respond to Delany’s ideas.

Several essays have been dropped from, added to, or re-sequenced in the 2009 edition depending on whether they’d been republished elsewhere in intervening years. Notable additions to what originally were 14 pieces written between 1966 to 76 are the 2003 essay “Midcentury: An Essay in Contextualization”—a sprawling autobiographical reminiscence which offers historical reference points for mid-20th century thinking about gender, race, and the pace of social change—and Delany’s feisty, exasperated “Letter to the Symposium on ‘Women in Science Fiction’” that was first included in a Symposium-dedicated issue of *Khatru* in 1975. The content of the “Letter”

informs Delany’s meditative dissection of Ursula LeGuin’s *The Dispossessed*, as well as two far more favorable critiques of stories by Joanna Russ and Tom Disch. Indeed, much of the fun of reading *Jaw* and *On Writing* back-to-back lies in noticing how unflinchingly Delany brings the same analytical standards to the work of established writers as to the uneven efforts of his fledgling creative writing students.

Delany’s formidable memory and raw intelligence is on full display in “On Writing.” Whether remembering how he taught nuanced observational skills to his first class of Clarion workshopers, or confessing to interviewer Steve Erickson that wanting to “perfect” the basic structure of his favorite Alfred Bester novel in 1965 made him write the epic space opera *Nova*, Delany is inspirational. Aspiring writers seeking to know what powerful freedoms they might exercise through masterful control of plot, characterization and language will find the answers here. Delany shrewdly suffuses his Neveryon quartet with anarchic sexual motifs and stylized irony. He unselfconsciously writes Sadean gay pornography as seething political commentary on the AIDS crisis. He applies insights culled from Gertrude Stein, Lacan and Plato to fictionalized interrogations of modern myths about civilized social behavior, thereby making readers perceive reality in new ways. The 13-part appendix which closes the book condenses all his most helpful advice into a pithy, accessible index of shortcuts that impatient students and teachers alike will love. Even Delany’s more complex solutions to narrative dilemmas compel implementation because his recognition and framing of each problem is so mathematically precise.

(continued on page 13)



Samuel R. Delany in Fred Barney Taylor’s film *Polymath, or the Life and Opinions of Samuel R. Delany, Gentleman*

ON THE ROAD IN THE MIDDLE KINGDOM

Trevor Carolan

For students of China's old wisdom paths, Bill Porter's *Road To Heaven: Encounters with Chinese Hermits* (1993) was a revelation. I've claimed elsewhere that it's one of the formative texts of our whole new millennial appreciation of Asia's contribution to the global collective imagination.

15 years on, *Zen Baggage: a pilgrimage to China* shows that this 21st century Asian travel-hound has lost none of his zest for the Buddha dharma, *Tao*, or munching pumpkin cookies on the sly. Follow your bliss! It features Porter's same humanist travelogue style, punctuated with vivid descriptions of China's resuscitated Zen temples, sharp insight in Buddhist history, key extracts from important Sutras, and excerpts of poetry tinged with the sacred.

With its new prosperity, and with government reaffirmation since 1979 of the right to religious belief and practice, Buddhism is reawakening in China. Porter's self-appointed role is to journey widely in investigating what forms this revival is taking. Ex-army, a grad school dropout, and with Buddhist monastic experience of his own, Porter has bumped around East Asia for nearly 40 years. He knows the ropes in China and his language skills are sophisticated. When he announces that he's making a pilgrimage "to places associated with the beginning of Zen in China, specifically its first six patriarchs...the men who put Zen on the map", it's a journey I want to know more about.

Porter takes us through the arrival of Zen's early teachers in China, remarking as he goes on temple architecture, daily life regimes within the Zen training halls, and about such related incidentals as the art of making huge temple bells. When wearing his Red Pine hat, Porter is probably our finest contemporary translator of classical Chinese poetry, so we can expect his paying respects to the graves and environs associated with great Tang and Sung master poets like Chia Tao and Bai Xuyi, to whom Allen Ginsberg was devoted. The most moving memorial visit however, is to his own old teacher, Shou-yeh at Wutaishan, or Vulture Peak.

"The mountain missed him," Porter says. "So did I."

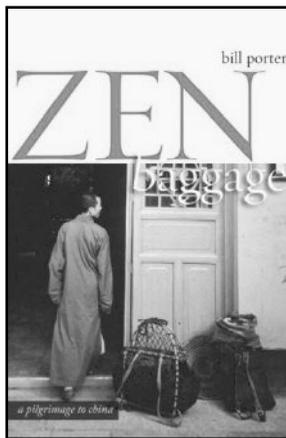
On buses, trains, in taxis, and on hikes around mountain temple hillsides, Porter takes us deep into the origins of various Zen *sanghas* and practice traditions—there are indeed varieties of Zen existence in China, although sitting meditation is usually at the heart of things. Situating Zen within its familiar historical context, he explains, more importantly, its place, value and living nature within contemporary China and this is what's most appreciated. Somehow or other, he even leads us inside one of the country's notoriously fragile coal-mines: We're not in baroque Jan Morris travel territory here anymore, Toto.

Porter's real skill is to deliver rough-guide insider commentary, warts and all. He notes that in Chinese history someone always has to take the blame. Monks and hermits, Taoist or Buddhist, are an easy target. Stories of the victims who suffered in the aftermath of Tiananmen massacre's and of more recent Falun Gung persecution filter through. It's an old tale in China. Early Zen masters, it seems, were often on the run.

Plenty of travel reporters know how to spin a tale. Not many offer us an educational syllabus through their work as Porter does. Writing with a measured hand, he takes time to turn things around in his mind. He rolls with the knocks of the road, and there's a droll humour that works—we're talking Buddhism here. It's not Seinfeld.

But Porter is North American, and a Pacific Northwest boy to boot. Drifting and weary in dullsville Hofei, he lands a swank hotel room going cheap. Bathed, fed, and reclining in a terry-robe with a glass of port in hand, he watches the moon cross half the sky. Surely a moment for meditation on compassionate poetry? Porter does the obvious thing—with a sigh he reaches for his last Snickers bar. A sure sign of honest reporting as any veteran road-warrior will confirm.

Zen Baggage reads like a series of letters from a canny old pal in the ancient world. I couldn't get enough—no other Western writer packs the dharmic travel scrunch and punch like Porter—like something between Gary Snyder and the peerless Martha Gellhorn. This guy know what the journey is all about and his account in



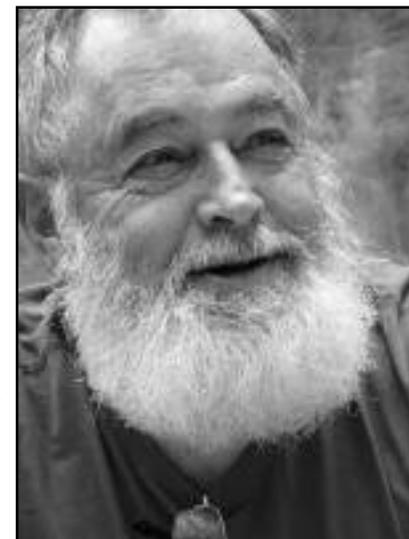
Zen Baggage: a pilgrimage to China
Bill Porter
Counterpoint, 2009
260 p. U.S. \$26.

a chapter titled "No East or West" of how, in Chinese, "the truest of friends is a *chih-yin-chih-yu*, 'a friend who knows your tune'", is worth the price of the book.

You'll likely come away after reading this rich, fat account with that idea that in Chinese Zen, personal liberation seems to have something to do with communal practice, community service, and simple living. *Not bad, Grasshopper!* You'll also learn more about Chinese food, especially vegetarian. After one simple meal of cabbage, mustard greens, and a variety of wild mushrooms, Porter notes how the latter "seemed to confirm my suspicion that mushrooms were the food of the gods, who had inadvertently left some spores behind when they moved on to a more peaceful planet."

We can thank heaven Buddhism wasn't entirely wrecked under the Great Helmsman—although to give the old pirate his due, he and his colossally confused Red Guard acolytes made a pretty good job of things during the civil war also known as the Cultural Revolution. Nowadays things are more reassuring, if still a little uneasy. Zen survives in archetypal Chinese fashion—with ambiguity, rigor, discipline, fuzzy where necessary in co-existing with government bureaucracy, which as Porter shows has begun to get the larger picture, especially where visitor dollar potential (read tourism) is involved. Speaking of which, *Zen Baggage* is book you'll absolutely want to take on your visit to the Middle Kingdom.

Trevor Carolan is the International Editor for the PRRB.

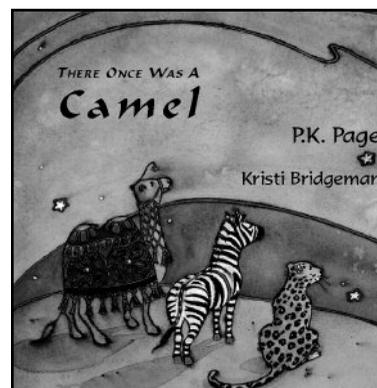


Bill Porter

DELANY (continued from page 12)

Marketed today as essential "how-to" guides for aspiring writers, both books give equal weight to mainstream and genre fiction, since Delany rejects class distinctions between "high" and "low" culture. He simply warns—through practical examples and cautionary anecdotes—against structural sloppiness and lack of inspiration in whatever one chooses to write. More than once he stresses the difference between "good writing" and "talented writing," explaining that good (meaning technically correct) writing minus talent (meaning energetic, inspired ideas) is responsible for most bad fiction. Yet he insists that both talent and technical skill are required to create truly memorable fiction, thus helping us understand exactly how far Delany raises his pedagogical bar above the basic competencies encouraged by most MFA programs.

Carol Cooper is a freelance culture critic at the Village Voice. She is the author of *Pop Culture Considered as an Uphill Bicycle Race*. She lives in New York City.



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TOKYO TRILOGY

Hillel Wright

Every once in a while, from among the many fine and not so fine slim volumes of verse that emerge from the nutrient-rich ooze of the small, academic and independent press, a masterpiece arises. All risks acknowledged, I would venture to pin this label on *The Darkened Temple* by San Franciscan Mari L'Esperance.

In short, this collection hinges on the poet's abandonment – if that's what it was – by her Japanese mother as a young girl, and her subsequent obsession with finding, if not her mother, then some sort of closure to this traumatic event. L'Esperance slowly lets the light shine on her darkened days, opening the doors to her memories just a crack in some poems, and then flings them wide open and lets anguish escape in others.

The first poem, “fog: memory” stands boldly on page 1, encased in white space, as a preface:

*I thought it had left me, but
it had only receded for a time –*

*Along the shore beads of moisture
cling to the snarled kelp*

like mementos, little souls –

The theme is picked up immediately on page 5, with “The Bush warbler Laments to the Woodcutter”, the opening poem of Part One:

*Memory of our transgressions is a stone. It lies
on the seabed of our deepest forgetting”*

*...You will say that a grand house once stood
in a forest clearing. Then, nothing but birdcalls.*

*...If I could make it so, I would be the one left alone
in the meadow, rubbing my eyes and wondering.*

...Whatever you abandon, returns in your dreams.

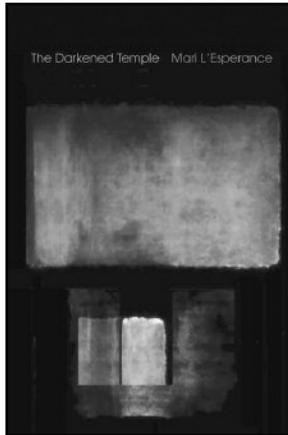
Choosing to inhabit both mother and daughter, the poet brings a sense of true poetic justice to the intellectual and emotional debate which forms the narrative of the poetry that follows. Even more remarkable is the poet's introduction of a supporting cast of emotional doppelgangers – a shipwrecked drowning expatriate writer on her way home with her husband and child; a woman waking up from the initial blackout of a stroke; a boy obsessively building a model airplane in his sanctuary in a dysfunctional home.

Part Two begins with a poem called “The Last Time I saw her”:

*From the car I watched
as my mother ran
toward the train
that would take her back
to the only life she knew
how to live.*

*...she would go back
because the idea of sanctuary
was as remote to her
as the constellations.*

In this section, the poet focuses her energy in her search, in her memories, her imagination and her dreams: *And all of her life, the refrain: I am the dark house and the dark house is me.*



The Darkened Temple
Mari L'Esperance
University of Nebraska
Press, 2008, 82pp,
\$16.95 (US)

When all else leads nowhere, the searcher attempts to forget:

*Crows drift above the darkened temple,
their ragged cries and the falling off after –*

It is the falling off that I want to hold on to,

*Yet the notes smear and fade, so I reach
For something that might choose to stay.*

*The missing are restless. They wander
Between two worlds and belong to neither.*

*...What I mean to say is: she was of this world
and then she was not.*

Part Two ends with “White Hydrangeas as a Way Back to the Self”, a long poem set off in short stanzas across ten pages, the text of the poetry deferring to white space for the reader's eye:

*To enter the story
means
going back to the beginning.*

*To enter the story
feels
like drowning*

*and drowning is the only way
to get there –*

Part Three offers a denouement of reflection, tinged with resignation, tempered with hope:

*When they called to tell me that my mother
had disappeared, I did not want to think
of what may have happened to her. Now
they come flooding over me, the possibilities*

*...The rain keeps falling the way it has to.
The begonias make the exact shape
They were meant to make. Such possibility.*

The poet, Mari L'Esperance, has the extremely rare gift of knowing how and how much to restrain her obviously powerful feelings and pain, to graft them, like a skilled horticulturist, onto other branches of humanity, art and nature, to make metaphors out of articulate snatches of verse. Her poems embody the spirit of Wordsworth's dictum of “emotion recollected in tranquility”. This ability allows the poet to transmute pain into art, suffering into beauty, the touch of a spiritual magician pulling the readers along with her out of “the darkened temple” and into the light in the courtyard of choice.

* * *

In the publisher's continuing quest to keep dada alive and effective, Ahadada Books has recently released this quirky, engaging collection of ten short stories by the iconoclastic Dr. Tom Bradley. Turning, as most readers of literature are apparently wont to do, to the author bio, we find this:

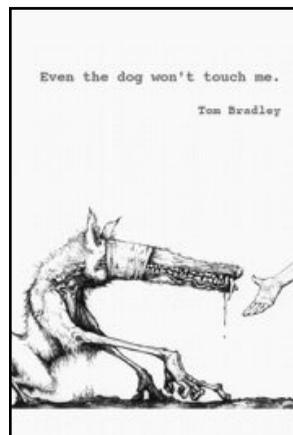
“When Tom Bradley was a little boy he was given a gazetteer for Christmas. As little boys will, he looked up all the places in the world that start with the F-word. There were two, Fukien in China and Fukuoka in Japan. Little did he suspect that he would one day be exiled to both.”



Mari L'Esperance

Bradley's characters, seemingly inspired by Thomas Pynchon's "whole sick crew", tend to be less than respectable, yet imbued with a ferocious sense of the absurd, which is essential for survival and sanity – or at least what passes for sanity – in environments akin to madhouses.

Pre-Tiananmen Square China is the most convenient ecology for many of the stories, although the opening tale, "Undecorated Dad" begins in America during World War II.:



Even the dog won't touch me
Tom Bradley
Ahadada Books, Tokyo
& Toronto, 2009, 121pp.

"He considered going over to kill Hitler or Hirohito or somebody, but Uncle Sam had no boots or uniforms anywhere near his size. So they put him in Military Intelligence and sent him to the Utah hinterlands to baby-sit Italian and German POWs."

Sam Edwine, Salt Lake City spawn of "Big Brad" is the one character who appears and re-appears in stories along the way. A disreputable college professor "Known all over the campus as 'the Botticelli of Bullshit', he dabbles in writing literature, or at least perpetrating hoaxes in the world of "communications corporations" based in Los Angeles.

Sam's scams, however, never seem to pay out the big bucks and poor Sam finds himself on the faculty of a third-rate Chinese university, presumably located in Fukien. Even here he remains the con-man. One morning while "moonlighting" as a Christian minister and on his way to baptize a baby, Sam's Flying Pigeon bicycle threatens to fail him in his aim to navigate past the infamous English Corner without being physically commandeered by "self-studiers". Sam decides to scam a "handicapped person" out of his hand-cranked tricycle in order to deceive and deflect the mob of would-be English students.

Something of his life in the classroom is alluded to in a later story, "Sam Edwine Says Hi to a Bum in Foo-Chow":

The bum rolled his head to one side and spat a plump yellow lunger on Sam's hand. The glistening globule nestled and quivered warmly in the web between Sam's thumb and forefinger. It was more of a response than he had gotten in years of classroom teaching.

Dr. Bradley is a Class-A tongue-in-cheek satirist and some of his sharpest barbs are those that zoom in on the pompous and pretentious world of modern – or post-modern – literature. In "The Stylist" a drunken Sam Edwine wrangles a meeting with some Hollywood big-wigs to pitch a novel which "he hadn't exactly written" yet. "Or maybe it was a screenplay". Sam's philosophy:

A whore is good on her back...and a used car salesman is good on his feet. I, on the other hand, am good on my ass.

Further on, in "At the Creative Writing Workshop", Bradley hilariously sends up the PEN Club, the National Book Award and the Writer-in-Residence, described as the "famous teacher, this significant Manhattanite of Letters." In this vicious satire, the first-person narrator accompanies his nephew, "a sort of freshman at a large public university in far-Western America" to the workshop featured in the story's title:

His classmates...are the future Creative Writing Industrialists of America, and they're working on fictional dissertations and metaphysical theses, sans footnotes. These people are right on the verge of finding literary agents, for Christ's sake....

Sounds like the kind of place Sam Edwine – or Crad Kilodney – would feel at home in.

Agents, of course, get the Dr. Edwine treatment in the final story "Closet Fiction", when the smutty professor finally hits the jackpot:

"Golan & Globus people are talking seven figures."

"Oh, you mean they don't count the two figures behind the decimal point? I always wondered about that."

Sam's manuscript, of course, is the work of a recently deceased colleague, but his own



Tom Bradley in 2007

decadence is eventually trumped by the agency's:

"I wasn't going to tell you this....You were chosen literally at random. You're the communication industry's equivalent of a sweepstakes winner. The only prerequisite was that nobody...should be able to accuse us of cronyism or star-carrying this time, as they did after our previous efforts with Harvard graduates and rock musicians. For you, Dearie, are as obscure as obscure can be...a Dr. Nobody from the –"

"I believe it's called the Intermountain Wastes," twanged one of the consultants....

Author Tom Bradley also finds space in this concise compendium to write scathing satires on emerging capitalism in Communist China in "At the Beautician's" and post-war Japan in "Procedures for an American Military Wife Stationed in Hiroshima During Times of Increased Terrorist Activity". Ahadada editor Jesse Glass (Tokyo) and publisher Daniel Sendekki (Toronto) have certainly raised the black flag of anarchy – or perhaps irony – in presenting this collection.

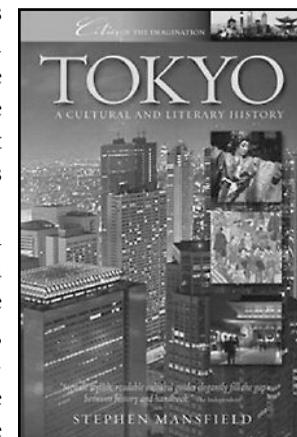
* * *

Tokyo: A Cultural and Literary History, one of Signal's "Cities of the Imagination" series, gives Stephen Mansfield, one of Tokyo's premier English language photo-journalists, a chance to present his art on a large canvas using a broad palette. And, as those who might already know his work, Mansfield succeeds admirably, as expected.

Tokyo is the 34th city looked at in the series, which already includes, for example, Kyoto, Buenos Aires and Bangkok. The book combines the travel guide and the popular history with a focus on the art, including drama, visual art, literature and architecture of the city's different eras, from a quick glimpse at archeological evidence from the Jumon Era (8000 BC) to the present day. The bulk of the book, however, is devoted to the Edo Era, that 365 year reign of the Shoguns of the Tokugawa Clan.

There are also illustrations, mostly photos, some archival, many by Mansfield himself, although neither the Table of contents nor the Index lists the sources, nor are they identified in the text, which must certainly be considered a weak point. Nevertheless, the thirty-odd pictures and maps contribute greatly to the text while remaining unobtrusive and never threaten to turn a literary work into a coffee-table book or mere travel guide.

After a short eight-page record of Tokyo's pre-historic past, we arrive at the fortress of the Tokugawa Clan in 1590, thirteen years prior to the decisive Battle of Sekigahara, which secured military control over all Japan for the new family of



Tokyo: A Cultural and Literary History
Stephen Mansfield
Signal Books, Ltd.
Oxford, 2009, 268pp.

(continued on page 17)

WRITING THE “LIFE” IN WRITING

Jordan Zinovich

To me, the most interesting volumes of “Selected” verse are those that survey the imaginative fields where poets dream; the wells they draw from. Whenever a poet, or an intuitive and appreciative editor under the guidance of the poet, employs their choice of poems to contemplate both the writing life and the “life” in writing, that selection becomes a collection I can return to.

Michael Rothenberg’s *Choose* is one of those memorable collections. Rothenberg has known success as a poet, editor, songwriter, and publisher. With work gleaned from the past twenty years of a very productive career, this could easily have become a massive, unwieldy amalgam. Instead, the slim volume accents the intuitive dexterity he displayed when editing major collections by Philip Whalen, Joanne Kyger, David Meltzer, and Ed Dorn. It opens a gate to the grounds of his imagination.

Two intriguing formal strategies permeate his selections. The first emerged from his work developing journals as source material. I must admit, on first reading, to have set aside *The Paris Journals* (Fish Drum Inc., 2000), finding the lists of its early poems tedious. (I don’t enjoy the lists in some highly-regarded Beat poems either, and just as readily set them aside.) But I returned to *The Paris Journals* with interest and then appreciation after reading “XLVIII. The Eiffel Tower” and “L. Gustave Moreau” in *Choose*.

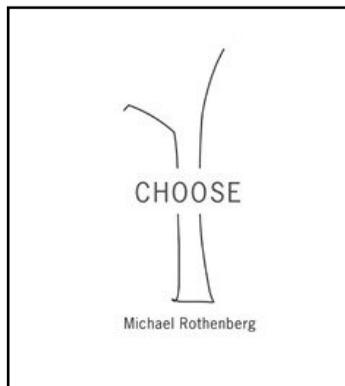
“XLVIII. The Eiffel Tower” is a pop-cult wonder, packed with appropriately-historical, subtly-affective allusions and meteorological insight.

*I never want to forget . . .
My chest pounding out of breath I never want to forget
. . .
Taste of my heart at the back of my mouth
Paris spread out in a banquet
Scorpion fish in saffron
. . .
And again. Now in the rain
I never want to forget calling my mother in Miami from a payphone
. . .
Telling her I love her from the top of the Eiffel Tower
I never want to forget how night fell on my feet
As I found the pace of my feet
Falling on wet stairs
Going down
How the rain fell!*

“Gustave Moreau,” which follows immediately, feels a bit like Baudelaire. Both poems prove that there’s more to Rothenberg’s strategic “journalizing” than I’d previously acknowledged.

His other strategic attitude only surfaced when I tried to analyze the idiosyncratic couplets, triplets, and fractured stanzas scattered throughout many of his other poems: they worked, but I couldn’t explain how. When I queried, Rothenberg called them “projective” elements, relating them to Charles Olson’s “theory of projective verse.” But he stressed that his usage wasn’t formally precise. “After years of practice I’ve managed to develop a kind of accidental precision,” he said. “I use them to open space in my breathing and on the page.”

In his seminal essay “Projective Verse” (1950), Olson called for a poetic practice grounded in the activity of writing, with a meter based on breathing, “the breathing of the man who writes as well as of his listenings.” This implies a creative modality that persistently retunes a poet to the processes of composition: it stresses a flexible response to both inner and outer stimuli and addresses the challenge of keeping a poem alive. Olson wrote: “If [a poet] is contained within his nature as he is participant in the larger force, he will be able to listen, and his hearing through himself will give him secret objects share.” For Olson, George Quasha has said (see *Projective Verse*



Choose: Selected Poems
Michael Rothenberg
Big Bridge Press, 2009
US\$15

at *Fifty*, www.flashpointmag.com): “in projective verse, the field is *alive*: it has a mind of its own which is constantly asserting itself? at times against the mind of the poet.”

Rothenberg’s most successful couplets and idiosyncratic stanza structures convey the secret projected intensity of his “listenings.” While Olson went on to seek a kind of instrumental “objectism” that would arm poets to reject humanism’s tendency to privilege the human subject and reduce the nature surrounding us to mere resource, Rothenberg accepts the ironical fact that he can’t negate his subjectivity. He embraces the internal and external life that touches and confounds him.



Michael Rothenberg in Dublin

*So what about the Dusky Seaside Sparrows?
Extinct in the middle of June,
nineteen hundred and eighty-seven.
It’s a Disney World
of space shuttles and evolution.
 (“Elegy for the Dusky Seaside Sparrow”)*

Olson might have believed that it’s theoretically liberating to write for a kind of universal reader, but Rothenberg writes to the relationships that lend foundation to his world. He acknowledges that his relationships help orient him in life.

*It’s got nothing to do with us
We’re only dust. It has to do with stopping the sun. Half-baked on a beach
before the prom. Photographs of who we once were.
What do you think of me now?
It has nothing to do with us
 (“It Has Nothing To Do With Us”)*

Choose arrived in my mailbox as a gift, unsolicited but very much appreciated. Initially I wasn’t asked to review it, so for the pure pleasure of the unexpected I started from back to front, as I sometimes do, and stopped in delight at the poem titled “The Barn.”

*The right way
to approach
the broad side
of a barn
is with one eye
closed
and both hands
in your pockets
then start
whistling
to let it know
you’re coming*

This, I thought, is how he approaches a poem. It’s a statement of intent.

Choose is a brave selection wherein Michael Rothenberg exposes the raw nerve of his most private self. Its bravery is founded on confidence and humor. Its imaginative fields survey the depths of his life. Each of the poems he selected is a well.

Jordan Zinovich is a senior editor with the Autonomedia Collective, one of North America’s most notable underground publishing houses.

TOKYO (continued from page 15)

shoguns. The remaining nine chapters follow the growth of the city throughout the Edo Era, the Meiji Restoration of the Emperor, the brief Taisho Democracy, and the long Showa Era, including its segue into the current Heisei Era, which began in 1989 after the death of Emperor Hirohito.

The Edo Era was best represented culturally by the advent of kabuki theater and the immensely popular, often erotic and/or satiric *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints of Hokusai, Utamaro and others. Author Mansfield excels in his descriptions of the lives of Edo's famous artists as being intricately involved in the life of Edo (now Tokyo) itself, or at least in certain sections of it. He gives the reader a good indication of how the city influenced the works of the artists and how the city was in turn affected by works. Utamaro, for example, who "spent a good deal of his life in the pleasure quarters" is portrayed by Mansfield as fully inhabiting the life of the city:

Utamaro's portraits of women in the pleasure quarters, his use of colour, form and style in serialized works like A Collection of Reigning Beauties are matchless. A typical Utamaro beauty, languid and willowy, is sensual but attainable. Unlike Harunobu's prints of beautiful eroticized women in faintly unreal settings, Utamaro's subjects have a plausible sensuality, suggested by intimate, even slovenly touches such as disheveled clothing, exposed breasts or hair in casual disarray....Utamaro's The Twelve Hours of the Green Houses, a series of twelve prints depicting in fluid lines a day in the life of a Yoshiwara courtesan, are unsurpassed in their elegance and veracity. The series was published to great acclaim in 1794.

Hokusai, famous for his *Thirty-six Views of Mt. Fuji* was according to Mansfield...

sharp-tongued and cantankerous...by nature a showman whose creative energy drove him to some unusual exhibitions of his skills. These 'performances' brought a breath of fresh air to the city. On one occasion, using a barrel and a broom as inkpot and brush, he astonished on-lookers by painting a colossal portrait of the Indian saint Daruma in the precincts of Gokoku-ji temple.

The shogun Tokugawa Ienari then summoned Hokusai to Edo Castle. Hokusai proceeded to invent what our century calls 'performance art'.

"Turning up dressed in his usual rags...proceeding to unroll a long sheet of paper, he painted two blue parallel lines representing water along its surface. He then opened a box and out stepped a rooster. Swiftly painting its feet red, he placed the bird on the paper where it strode up and down, its feet leaving imprints resembling scarlet autumn leaves. Bowing respectfully to Ienari and his astonished retainers, the artist declared, 'I have created a landscape for your Gracious Excellency. It is called Red Maples along Tatsuta River.

If Edo-era Tokyo was characterized culturally by paintings, wood-block prints and theater, literature became the dominant theme in the Showa Era. As his guide through Tokyo's literary landscape of the 20th Century, as well as through the city's labyrinth of alleys, bridges and crossroads, Mansfield chooses Nagai Kafu, a writer often dwarfed by such 20th Century giants as Soseki, Akutagawa, Tanizaki, Kawabata and Mishima, but perhaps the most authentic Edo-ko or true Tokyoite of them all. Through Nagai's eyes and following his footsteps, Mansfield is able to trace the rise, fall and rebirth of the city in the tumult of the recently concluded century.

Like Borges in Buenos Aires, Nagai is attracted to the rose-tinted corners of Tokyo at sunset, but after the war has literally left the city he loved in cinders, Nagai "...continued peregrinations through the twice-razed, increasingly modernizing neighborhoods to the east of Tokyo...contenting himself with graveyards, mouldering tombs and carved deities..."

And like the best of literary travel writers before him – Paul Theroux's *Patagonian Express* and Donald Richie's *The Inland Sea* spring to mind – Stephen Mansfield has successfully given us access to Tokyo's history and geography as an organic continuum, which we may carry with us on our own personal peregrinations.

Hillel Wright is a frequent PRRB contributor from Japan. A special CD edition of his 1985 interview with Allen Ginsberg, including transcripts and photographs, is forthcoming from Printed Matter (Tokyo).

PHILIP K. DICK (continued from page 4)

that seems impossible to implant or reproduce. The connection between the two always has this cause and effect relationship, one which never seems to run in the opposite direction even in the most extreme states of intoxication. (There are moments when Ford's instincts show themselves, and appear to be something Replicants do not have, or have only weekly or woodenly.)

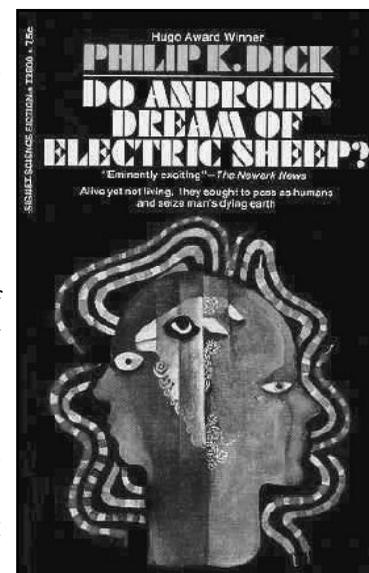
Another thing about true conscious states as opposed to non-conscious ones is the feature of *durability* and continuity. A dream, almost by definition, comes to an eventual state of evaporation. The *qualia* of an imagined event seems to peter out, to run down. It cannot run the endurance lap we require of almost all of our experiences in life. We might say, again with Robert Nozick, that the "real" thing is the thing that stays constant through innumerable disruptions, that remains steady through a wave of "Lorenz transformations." Consciousness is invariant through all the variations that make up its perceptions and creations.

So the real thing, the creating thing, has the overall character of invariance that lasts through each of its extrusions. It also has the ability to link each one of its creations to the previous one, not in terms of theme, but certainly in terms of origin. Fireworks, however more beautiful than the ground they rise up from and illuminate, still have to be fired by someone. We never have the slightest notion that the ground rises up out of the pyrotechnics. And this is not just a matter of faith or repetition. It is the most common and reliable feature of experience: it simply happens that way and we have a well-grounded assuredness that it will continue to happen that way.

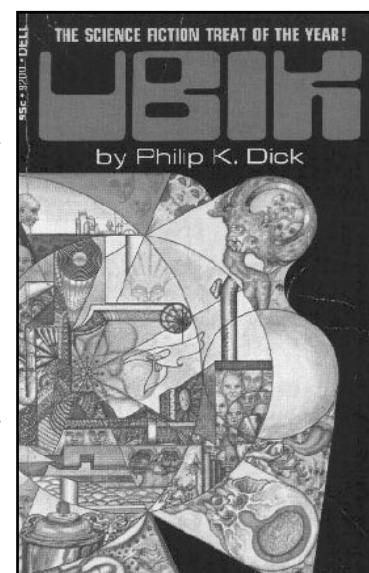
The ultimate advantage of grounding ourselves in the "real" real thing, the creating thing, is the concept of freedom it brings to us. If consciousness is a creating instrument, one over which we (usually) have control, then we really are free agents with all the responsibility that entails. The mind's products are often erratic, amorphous. Our mental creations run in all directions and seem in danger of taking on their own life. But the creative force itself keeps hold of it and reels it back. The ability to go after our creations, to reign them in and control them, assures us that we have far greater power over our destinies than almost anything else in the world, not just non-conscious objects but non-*self*-conscious sentients like our brother animals. Whatever vats are hooked to one another and whatever drugs ingested, we can always reverse course with a true effort of will. Consciousness is the borderguard against the self's enslavement. If the creating agent can never itself be created, then it can never be constrained.

Consciousness does not need to struggle to free itself, but its objects can seem maddeningly fleeting. Everything it attaches itself to can be ephemera. Pan again to Ford and Young in the cockpit of their hovercraft. Ford is not sure how long he'll have the Replicant, as they all have pre-designated, programmed extinction dates. He looks into her eyes, knowing she'd be a lot, perhaps nearly everything, to lose. He shakes away the thought and accelerates.

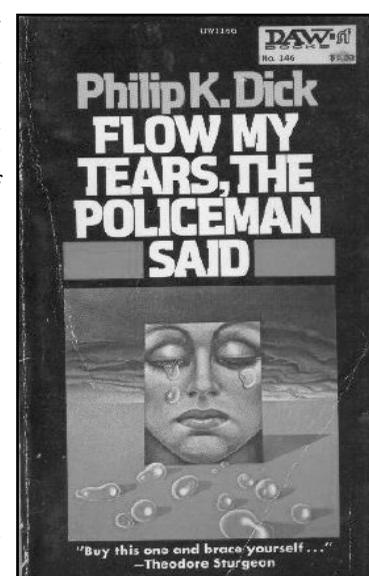
Richard Wirick is the author of the novel One Hundred Siberian Postcards (Telegram Books). He has been published in Paris Review and The Nation. He practices law in Los Angeles.



Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? published 1968



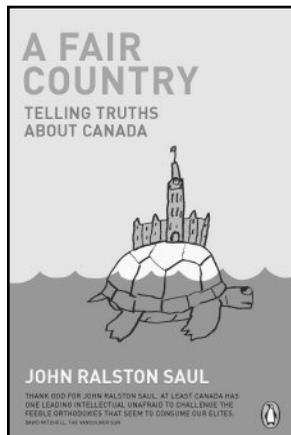
Ubik, published 1969



Flow My Tears, The Policeman Said published 1974

TELLING IT LIKE IT IS: ON JOHN RALSTON SAUL

Gwen Point



A Fair Country: telling the truth about Canada
John Ralston Saul
Viking, 340 p. 2008

A *Fair Country: telling truths about Canada* is a book that from a First Nation educator's perspective is welcomed, for its messages affirm what many First Nation leaders have expressed to governments of the day for generations. Indeed, First Nation leaders have continued to hold the governments of the day accountable to the "truth(s)" from the earliest cross-cultural encounters through to present-day treaty negotiations.

One hears the expression about starting to read a book and not being able to put it down: This is that kind of book. From the introduction to the last chapter, Ralston Saul captures the reader's attention as only the "truth" can do. Accordingly, as one who has heard from elders about the many struggles, and who has witnessed generations of colonialism, in this review I'll share with you from a First Nation educator's perspective. We can start by addressing the notions of "truth", colonialism, and other key phrases such as "aboriginal inspiration around a concept of peace, fairness and good govern-

ment." Additionally, we can comment on Ralston Saul's understanding of First Nations' traditions such as the meaning of the Circle, marriage and leadership.

Ralston Saul has woven the "truths about Canada" in a manner that leaves no doubt in one's mind about who is responsible for the plight of First Nations struggles today. There have been a number of books written about First Nations and Aboriginal Peoples that share the history and dismal reality for First Nations People. Saul reports on this dismal history; more importantly however, he includes a more recent history that includes success stories amongst First Nations in education, business and leadership.

Very important here is the notion that the "colonial mentality" still exists today to the detriment of First Nations and Canada as a whole. For this reason, *A Fair Country* is a book should be read by all Canadians and both the private and public education systems.

As a First Nation educator teaching in variety of settings from K-12 to post-secondary, the words I often hear after sharing the dismal history of First Nations—from the laws imposed that banned the potlatch, to the residential school era to the Sixties scoop—are "I didn't know." Some folks are embarrassed to be Canadian and not understand how this could happen in Canada. Some want to know why Canadians still do not know what happened to "Indians". Ralston Saul discusses this history, explains the why's, and suggests that the elite in Canada has had a stake in not acknowledging the plight of First Nations.

I attended a presentation by Ralston Saul on his book and it was encouraging that his book was well received by the First Nations in attendance. It was also very special to see a local First Nation elder, a well respected First Nation leader, and a young local First Nation sing Hip Hop that included her traditional language. Given the recent apology by Prime Minister Stephen Harper to First Nations for the residential school era, and as a First Nations raised in an era where racism was commonplace—when you couldn't secure a place to rent or a job, or weren't served in a restaurant because you were an Indian; when you knew too well what hatred and fear look and feel like—it was somewhat hopeful to be in the audience knowing that the response to Ralston Saul's book will help to create a better understanding about the plight of First Nations and our issues.

Saul uses the terms First Nations and aboriginal proficiently, in a way that informs the reader of his understanding of these terms. As an educator, some of the questions that are asked routinely by well-meaning and not so well-meaning people are, 'what is the difference between an aboriginal or First Nation? What about an Indian, a native?' The well-meaning person usually wants to know in order to avoid offending anyone, while the not so well-meaning person usually does not want to hear the answer. By way of appreciation, the term "First Nation" was created by our leaders and elders opposed to having terms imposed upon us, and because First Nations were the original people.

By contrast the term Indian came from the first explorers and settlers. In many First Nation communities, leaders share how Columbus was looking for a shorter



John Ralston Saul

route to India and landed on Canada's east coast where the first people he encountered were covered in red ochre, that is still being used today. Thus was coined the term "red Indian". (Nowadays, many First Nations joke that they are glad he wasn't looking for Turkey.) Oddly, the term "Indian" is still the legal term used by government today. The term "native" was used after Indian became unpopular with First Nations. The term "aboriginal" is a more inclusive term used to address First Nations, Metis and Inuit. Given this understanding of the different terms used to address First Nations, and that First Nation people carry the traditions and are the First Peoples of North America, Ralston Saul perhaps could have used the term 'First Nations' in his opening remarks, suggesting "We are a People of 'First Nations' Inspiration", rather than 'aboriginal.'

The notion of truth from a First Nation perspective is simple. However, to explain it in any deeper context, whether traditional, social, or political as Saul does, could be another book. Perhaps the notion of "truth" might be too simple. Similarly, "words" and the "notion" of spoken words is important to understand from a First Nation perspective. Ralston Saul discusses how First Nations have an active oral tradition and this can be difficult to appreciate unless one is raised in a traditional "oral" society. First Nations have an oral tradition, yet talking and being verbal was generally minimal. My grandmother would ask "how are you going to think about what you seen if this", pointing to my mouth, "if this is going all the time?" Or "how are you going to think about what you hear if this is going all the time?" She would also ask her grandchildren to check with their mind and heart before saying anything, and would explain that the reason why our mouth is between our heart and our mind is to remind us to check with both before speaking.

My grandfather would also caution us to be careful when we talk and not to say hurtful words. Hurtful words spoken to someone are worse than hitting someone, for a bruise heals but words stay with a person and they can become an illness. First Nations understand how important words are. More importantly, we understand that we must be responsible for what we say and responsible for what we do. There is very little trust amongst First Nations for the government of the day as history depicts how the words of the governments have not been truthful. Many First Nations still today live in third world conditions next to urban communities that display wealth which many First Nation neighbours will never experience.

Ralston Saul does not go into depth with First Nation traditions but perhaps like any good book his approach will encourage readers to learn more. He describes the notion of marrying-up and the notion of the Circle. Many of the early traders married First Nation women so they could secure trade and passage through the First Nation territories. First Nations understood this form of union as some marriages would be arranged amongst First Nations for the same reasons, to access resources and create an alliance with other nations. While most of the early traders left their First Nation wives, Ralston Saul notes the successful marriages between Molly Brandt, Six Nations Ontario, and William Johnson, an Alberta Metis leader whose parents were married in the mid-1800's; and between British Columbia Governor, James

Douglas who married a local First Nation woman. These examples are important and welcomed, for there is a shift underway and more pride in being aboriginal. He also describes the many contemporary successful First Nations attending universities and the many First Nation leaders who have made a difference in their communities like Jack Anawak, “one of the founders of Nunavut.”

Being ashamed for being an Indian growing up and not understanding why was common amongst many First Nations. It was also uncommon to see an Indian work in a business. One incident where a First Nations woman worked at a checkout stand at a local grocery store was a welcome surprise and I felt proud until her look told us without words, “don’t you dare acknowledge me as an Indian”. I didn’t acknowledge her. I also knew how she felt. Today it is very different: I will have young and older people approach me and tell me with pride that they have aboriginal ancestry.

As an educator, people will ask me what the answer is to helping First Nations. It took me years to understand there is no one answer; rather, it will take change on all levels across the agencies and it will take books like Ralston Saul’s to shift Canadians to accept the responsibility to make change based on the truth.

Ralston Saul has addressed the notion of the Circle in his last chapter called “A Circle of Fairness”. He describes the First Nation notion of the Circle as “we should all be eating from a common bowl.” The circle to many First Nation people means what you send out will come back to you. If you send out hatred and anger that is what will come back to you; if you send out kindness and love, that is what will come back to you. This chapter sums up Canada’s reality and attitude towards those living



Gwen Point was honoured at the Aboriginal Tourism Association Awards in 2007.

in Canada. Ralston Saul shares how fairness is what most Canadians want; however, he claims that in the history of Canada “the colonial mindset is always easy to identify...because it attacks fairness and inclusion as soft and romantic notions.”

First Nation people in Canada live with the truth and are disadvantaged as a result of this old colonial mindset that still exists. As Ralston Saul also argues, “I can’t think of a more romantic notion than to believe that a stable society can be built on the celebration of disadvantage.” Canada’s circle will not be complete until it includes all people, so one hopes that this book will help to change the colonial mindset in Canada.

Ralston Saul’s deeper argument illustrates how Canadians have been influenced by “aboriginal” people. This notion alone brings so much to mind: only a generation ago, working in the public education sector as an aboriginal support teacher I was told by aboriginal parents to stay away from their children. Many obvious aboriginal students would avoid me and give me the look that said please do not talk to me. I understood their feelings simply because I learned in school that it was not a good thing to be an Indian and I grew up ashamed and confused until I studied the history of the colonial mindset that was imposed on First Nations people. It was this that stripped them of their dignity, displacing them from their own peoples and traditions.

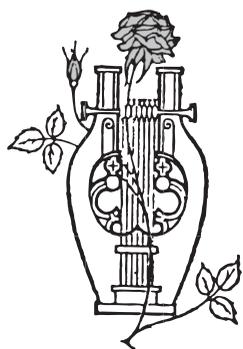
My concern as an educator is how many Canadians know this history. More importantly, how many of those with decision making powers know this history? I appreciate the recognition in *A Fair Country* that aboriginal people have influenced what is known as Canada today from our early contact with the first explorers and settlers through to the government system. This acknowledgement and information will help to inform Canada’s elite and those in decision making positions to make better, more informed decisions.

I would like to end this review in my traditional Halqemeylem First Nation language by saying to Ralston Saul, “Kwas Hoy, tset tsel ey tey Yoyes”: “Thank you, for your very good work”. It is not always easy to share or speak the truth and it is not always welcomed. It is not what is said but how it is said. Ralston Saul takes the truth(s) about Canada and shares them in way that will promote “growth” for those willing to work towards a Canada for all Canadians.

Gwen Point is Stó:lo First Nation and teaches at the University of the Fraser Valley.

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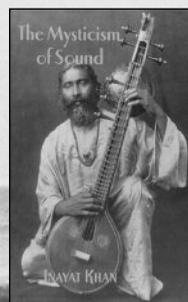
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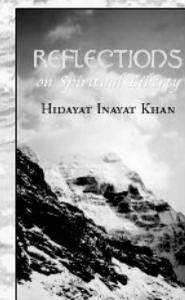
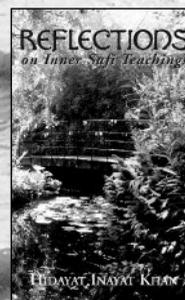
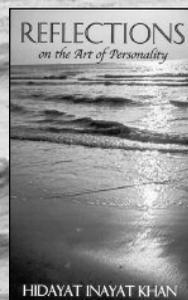
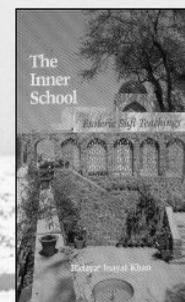
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EVOLVING ORGANIC (continued from page 5)

whose laughter matches the laughter of dogs,
whose understandings manifest designs
fairer than the spider's most intricate web,

still turns without surprise, with mere regret
to the scheduled breaking open of breasts whose milk
runs over the entrails of still-alive babies,
transformation of witnessing eyes to pulp-fragments,
implosion of skinned penises into carcass-gulleys.

We are the humans, men who can make;
whose language imagines mercy,
lovingkindness; we have believed one another
mirrored forms of a God we felt as good –

who do these acts, who convince ourselves
it is necessary; these acts are done
to our own flesh; burned human flesh
is smelling in Vietnam as I write.

Yes, this is the knowledge that jostles for space
in our bodies along with all we
go on knowing of joy, of love;

our nerve filaments twitch with its presence
day and night,
nothing we say has not the husky phlegm of it in the saying,
nothing we do has the quickness, the sureness,
the deep intelligence living at peace would have. (735)

Robert Duncan: "Uprising: Passages 25"

Now Johnson would go up to join the great simulacra of men,
Hitler and Stalin, to work his fame
with planes roaring out from Guam over Asia,
all America become a sea of toiling men
stirred at his will, which would be a bloated thing,
drawing from the underbelly of the nation
such blood and dreams as swell the idiot psyche
out of its courses into an elemental thing
until his name stinks with burning meat and heaped honors

And men wake to see that they are used like things
spent in a great potlatch, this Texas barbecue
of Asia, Africa and all the Americas,
And the professional military behind him, thinking
to use him as they thought to use Hitler
without losing control of their business of war,

But the mania, the ravening eagle of America
as Lawrence saw him "bird of men that are masters,
lifting the rabbit blood of the myriads up into . . ."
into something terrible, gone beyond bounds, or
As Blake saw America in figures of fire and blood raging,
. . . in what image? the ominous roar in the air,
the omnipotent wings, the all-American boy in the cockpit
loosing his flow of napalm, below in the jungles
"any life or sign of life" his target, drawing now
not with crayons in his secret room
the burning of homes and the torture of mothers and fathers and
children,
their hair a-flame, screaming in agony, but
in the line of duty, for the might and enduring fame
of Johnson, for the victory of American will over its
victims,
releasing his store of destruction over the enemy,
in terror and hatred of all communal things, of communion
of communism •



Robert Duncan in 1947

has raised from the private rooms of small-town bosses and businessmen,
from the council chambers of the gangs that run the great cities,
swollen with the votes of millions,
from the fearful hearts of good people in the suburbs turning the
savory meat over the charcoal burners and heaping their barbecue
plates with more than they can eat,
from the closed meeting-rooms of regents of universities and
sessions of profiteers

back of the scene; the atomic stockpile; the vials of synthesized
diseases eager biologists have developed over half a century dreaming
of the bodies of mothers and fathers and children and hated rivals
swollen with new plagues, measles grown enormous, influenzas
perfected, and the gasses of despair, confusion of the senses, mania,
inducing terror of the universe, coma, existential wounds, that
chemists we have met at cocktail parties, passed daily and with a
happy "Good Day" on the way to classes or work, have worked to
make war too terrible for men to wage

raised this secret entity of America's hatred of Europe, of Africa, of Asia,
the deep hatred for the old world that had driven generations of
America out of itself,
and for the alien world, the new world about him, that might have
been Paradise
but was before his eyes already cleared back in a holocaust of burning
Indians, trees and grasslands,
reduced to his real estate, his projects of exploitation and profitable
wastes,

this specter that in the beginning Adams and Jefferson feared and knew
would corrupt the very body of the nation
and all our sense of common humanity,
this black bile of old evils risen anew,
takes over the vanity of Johnson;
and the very glint of Satan's eyes from the pit of the hell of
America's unacknowledged, unrepented crimes that I saw in
Goldwater's eyes
now shines from the eyes of the President
in the swollen head of the nation. (738)

As we read Duncan, in this poem (getting past his sometimes archaic spelling) and in the introduction to *Bending The Bow*, the collection in which we find this poem, do we not get empathy for one of the most devastating things to happen in a war? "A boy raised in Iowa has only this nightmare...in which his soul must dare tender awakening or close hard as an oak-gall within him" (Duncan i). Is it not this act which makes all war possible? Is this not the root cause of war? Is not the field swirling out

from Duncan a balance of the horrors committed in the name of Duncan and his fellow citizens *along with* the realization of (and compassion for) people who in making this war are simply unaware and doing their work, their patriotic duty? One's ethics determines their fate, and Duncan knew that the Vietnam War was: "to defend a form our very defense corrupts" (Duncan i).

As for Levertov's poem, in the interview that for her was the final straw in her friendship with Duncan, James Mersmann writes:

Duncan's appraisal is actually even more stringent than this. He says: 'There's another field of feeling that frequently comes up when she means to write a protest feeling, and that is her own sadism, and masochism, and so the war becomes like, becomes not a gloating but almost as fierce an expression as the fantasies of Dickey. She'll be writing about the war and suddenly – in one of the earlier poems that's most shocking – you get a flayed penis, and ... when she reads it you get the effect and tone of disgusted sensuality...' (749)

The Dickey mentioned in this passage is the poet James Dickey whose poetry about his own World War Two experiences are referenced in Duncan's poem "Uprising: Passages 25." The interview with Mersmann was conducted in 1969 and published in 1974 and failure to apologize for what Levertov perceived as a personal "attack" (the characterization of which is reinforced by the editors of *Letters*) was the reason Levertov cited in her decision to dissolve the friendship. Yet it was in a 1966 letter that Duncan brought up his concern about this poem and this (as he saw it) sadism, when he wrote: "The words in their lines are the clotted mass of some operation...having what root in you I wonder? Striving to find place in a story beyond the immediate" (530). Levertov responds within five days of the date of Duncan's letter and, thinking through the act of letter-writing says that this identification with violence may be related to: "...my own violent temper, which in the last few years seems to have been converted into other energies, & second, my anxieties, my 'imagination of disaster' which so often presents the most horrid possibilities to me in graphic terms...I'm not sure where such questions lead. But I have the feeling it is well to ask them" (532-3).

Duncan elaborated further in November 1971: "I don't think I am arrogant or coercive to demand a fullness of what a spider-web is if there is a spider-web in a poem, for I believe (and so do you) that *images in poems like images in dreams are not incidental or mere devices of speech, chance references, but go deep into our experience.* And who in this world has not watched with fascination the activities murderous and cannibalistic of a spider in its web? What child does not know the spider's invitation to the fly?" (695, emphasis added) Duncan was seeing this through a Freudian lens and we don't have the benefit of being able to psychoanalyze Levertov. What we do see in this exchange is Duncan recognizing this as a clue to what was going on in Levertov's psyche. He was concerned about this and as a friend brought it to her attention. She had been interested in his perspective for some thirteen years at that point, considering him on some level (at least for a time) a mentor. It was only a few weeks after the July 1966 letter that he expressed his dissatisfaction with "workshop" poetry, exemplified, he felt, by Hayden Carruth, among others, because it was missing "the recognition of the process of language as a spiritual process" (543). By late fall of that year, Duncan was more direct in his expression of what he saw happening to Levertov: "...Denny, the last poem brings with it an agonizing sense of how the monstrosity of this nation's War is taking over your life..." and also warned that in addition to bearing constant testimony to the destruction the U.S. government was responsible for, to also "now, more than ever, to keep alive the immediacy of the ideal and the eternal" (563). Duncan was reacting to her poem "Advent 1966" in which Levertov writes:

*There is a cataract filming-over
my inner eyes. Or else a monstrous insect
has entered my head, and looks out
from my sockets with multiple vision...* (561)



Denise Levertov in 1967

Duncan wrote the following month "And we pray that compassion will grow in our hearts where outrage now burns" (565).

By 1970, Levertov was still following the path of opposing the war in her poetry and in anti-war activism. Her husband was arrested in such activity and she was trying to prevent herself from becoming "exhausted and despondent" (645). The charge we get from anger, like any other harmful stimulant, can be powerful and hazardous to one's health and well-being if continued over a long period of time. It was this that Duncan was concerned about, as well as how the poem in Levertov's hand was changing from the organic gesture of allowing the poem's content to be discovered in the process, to something approximating what Duncan called Free Verse. Remember, it was Levertov's corollary to the Robert Creeley line in "Projective Verse" FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT where Levertov rightly substituted the word REVELATION for extension. It is in Free Verse, Duncan pointed out, that "...the poem does not find or make, but *expresses*" ... and that "Free Verse just doesn't believe in the struggle of rendering in which not only the soul but the world must enter into the conception of the poem..." (408, emphasis added). The organic poet has as her cosmology an organismic paradigm, which we see that Olson found in Whitehead, which we see in Duncan's perceptions of and concerns about the direction of Levertov's life and verse and with which he saw her urge for wholeness and self-understanding beginning to slip away. In one of Duncan's most important statements on this matter, he writes in late 1971:

What I find myself getting at is that your verse form has become habituated to commenting and personalizing just where the poem itself begins to open out beyond the personal into your imagination of a "you," a "world" or a history beyond your idea of yourself or your personal history...You remember that you are committed to 'opposition to the whole system of insane greed, or racism and imperialism' – a political stance: but we are the more aware that it comes to forestall any imagination of what that system is, any creation of such a system of greed, racism and imperialism is like. The poet's role is not to oppose evil, but to imagine it: what if Shakespeare had opposed Iago, or Dostoyevsky opposed Raskalnikov – the vital thing is that they created Iago and Raskalnikov. And we begin to see betrayal and murder and theft in a new light. (669, first emphasis mine)

But by then the rift was too wide and the friendship, for what it was, over. It took publication of Duncan's comments in the Mersmann interview to finally end it, and Duncan regretted his actions, suggesting "it was more contentious than truly critical" (707) but for Levertov there was a "statute of limitation" on quarrels beyond which time a friendship would cease to be (713).

Duncan never did articulate it, but seems to understand Carl Jung's notion that "what you resist, persists." In other words, the thought-field energy which goes out in opposition to something, only serves to strengthen that field. This seems apparent as Levertov's imagery above would suggest.

It seems to me that some of Duncan's best thinking was done in these letters and he realized on some level that Levertov's intellectual foil was helping him create his best poetry and statements on poetics. Duncan's outline of the differences between the conventional poet, the free verse poet and the organic poet exist as the best delineation of these three basic strains in postmodern North American poetry and more importantly the cosmology underlying them. History will be the ultimate arbiter of the strength of the field these poems emanate. Yet the warning he wrote of in a 1961 letter remains as the best clue for anyone seeking to use poetry as a wisdom teacher, as a feedback system in our effort to become more conscious human beings: "I see it now, the quest for wholeness (the whole self and the whole world lie in the same event – we find ourselves only as we find the world)." (300) And as the United States heeds neither the warnings of Duncan, or the anti-Vietnam war activism and poetry of Levertov, finding itself now engaged in a war at least as pernicious and unnecessary as the one the Vietnamese call The American War, we are well-served to look at the words of poet Abu al-Ala al Ma'arri, writing in Baghdad 1,000 years ago "Don't let your life be governed by what disturbs you." Or as Duncan himself said in "Passages 26: The Soldiers" that "The first Evil is that which has power over you" (Duncan 115).

Footnote

——— Original Message ———

From: Paul Nelson

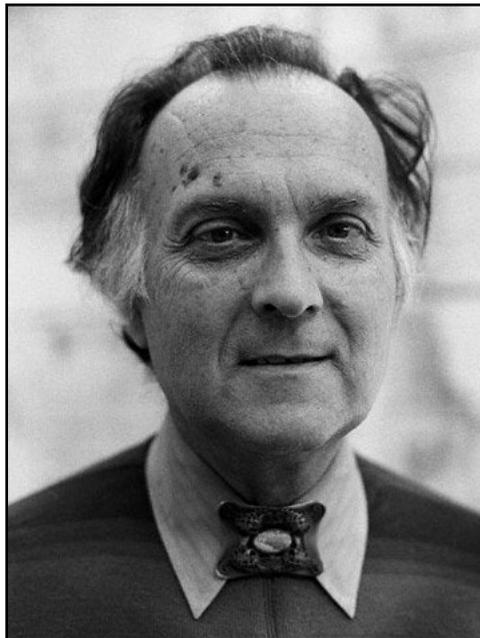
To: JUDITH COHEN

Sent: Monday, November 27, 2006 11:27 AM

Subject: Re: Notes

Judith,

As for the Duncan/Levertov, I don't read that Duncan's *is a more conscious anti-war poem* as you state I do here. Instead, I am suggesting Duncan believes the poem should be a revelation, not a statement. This is the core of the organic. I say that Duncan is upset Levertov has abandoned this approach and sees how her anger at the war is taking over her consciousness. She is no longer discovering perceptions about the war and the making of it, she is stating how bad it is. The turn in the poem (ironically stated with the word *turns*) misses the essential point Duncan makes in his poem that these people barbecuing meat in the suburbs, that the scientists we've met at cocktail parties, all have parts of themselves that they have closed off, as he points out in the introduction to *Bending The Bow* how the soul of a boy raised in Iowa *must dare tender awakening or close hard as an oak gall within him*. Duncan uses the imagery of other people who have closed off a part of themselves and sees Levertov DOING THE SAME THING and this saddens him. Duncan sees how good men are corrupted as they choose to close their souls when loosing the flow of napalm, and he sees the same closing in Levertov. Does this limit her? Yes. Is this a bad thing? Well, it depends on what your intent as a writer is. The organic allows one to become fully individuated, but Free Verse will likely connect with a larger audience, most of whom are not consciously working on their own individuation.



Robert Duncan

I have always been able to sense this difference and perhaps I have not been able to fully articulate this. But this Duncan/Levertov argument is a critical difference and many people who read Levertov suggest this break had a devastating effect on her verse. One reviewer suggests after 1970 her work reverted to *polite scolding*. Now there are people who relate to the anger, who resonate with it and Levertov has plenty of fans, especially here in the Pacific Northwest where she spent her last years. What I am suggesting is that she moved away from a purely organic approach. Again, not my preference. I think it does limit the energy available to the poem. Does that make it bad? Worse than Duncan? No, just not my preference, writing from the stance of a person interested in the soul-building properties of this practice and not necessarily the potential audience for books. My preference. I think Duncan's as well, and that on some level Duncan suggests there was some degree of splitting off part of her person-

ality (shadow) which she couldn't bear to examine.

People who are fully individuated understand that they have in themselves the capacity for violence, for all sorts of vile things. (I could tell you a story of recent events that made it very clear to me, my own capacity for violence.) When an individual understands this, and it is reflected in their work (and how can it NOT be when the organic approach is used, as it is totally transparent?) this makes the work a more complete gesture, to me more satisfying.

Now there are those who have split themselves off, have neglected the hard work of soul-building and have not come to the realization that they are capable of such horrific acts. Would they resonate with a more simple WAR IS BAD poem than one which has an underlying tone of I AM CAPABLE OF THIS?? Yes, I have seen it. I have seen at the Slam how victim poems score well with the audience, but they don't reach a deeper level with me, as I prefer not to be victimized.

These are very subtle points and I agree the introduction must be such that a College Freshman can begin to get the difference between what is Organic (and the stance toward reality that supports this worldview) and what is not. I am not good at dumbing things down, as I have spent too much time trying to find and perfect the language and the subtle distinctions that are sometimes difficult to communicate. Your assistance in this matter is greatly appreciated.

2.

(organismic (holistic (exploratory

Or to elaborate on Charles Olson's Projective Verse with special emphasis on "that stance toward reality which brings such verse into being" (Olson 239) and synthesize what Robert Duncan said in 1963 in two separate letters to Denise Levertov (who herself had some interesting thoughts along this line and no doubt whose field prompted Duncan):

the conventional poet = *universe and life are chaotic; the natural is formless (chaotic); the poet (the civilized or moral man) is given an order to keep against chaos. Every freedom is a breakdown of form. Freedom = (a) disorder or (b) sin.*

free verse = *the universe and man are free only in nature which has (And we are reminded of been lost in civilized forms. The poet must express his WCW's notion that no feelings without the trammel of forms. The poem does verse is actually free, that not find or make but expresses...Free verse just doesn't each takes on its own believe in the struggle of rendering in which not only patterns & tendencies.) the soul but the world must enter into the conception of the poem. Ginsberg's "Howl" is one of Duncan's examples of free verse.*

the organic poet = *the universe and man are members of a form. Freedom lies in the apprehension of this underlying form, towards which invention and free thought in sciences alike work. All experi-*

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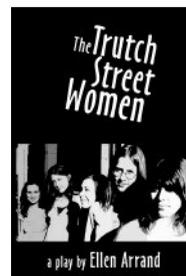
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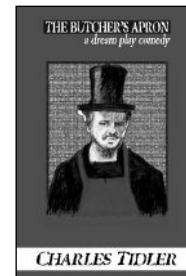
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ISBN 978-1-894800-88-4
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published 2006 120 pages



ence is formal – We feel things in so far as we awake to the form. The form of the poem is the feeling (and where form fails, feeling fails.) (Duncan/Levertov 405, 407-8)

Duncan makes a distinction between these groupings and “linguistic” form which is, among other things, an acknowledgement of the intelligence of the language itself. One writing in the Open (organic) mode quickly begins to understand this. There is, in the act of Organic Poetry composition, a state of consciousness which the practitioner begins to recognize, cultivate, refine and apply in a system that may employ wordmusic (assonances, alliterations, etc.) repetition, or other methods to further the poem in the non-linear manner Olson suggested when letting the poem rip (“Speech where it is least careless and least logical”) (241). This process emerges from a: “constellation of experiences ... (which) demands, or wakes in him this demand, the poem. The beginning of the fulfillment of this demand is to contemplate, to meditate; words which connote a state in which the heat of feeling warms the intellect” (Levertov 68).

Most notably in North America, Jazz musicians had long ago sussed out the power of creating in the moment. There is something remarkable in the moment, the only time in which (unfocused on outcomes) self-change can be realized. It is attention to the moment which refined, leads to the best of such verse. Form, then, as Levertov noted, is a “revelation of content” and in attention to this revelation as it is revealed, we are rewarded with the organic poem (Levertov 73).

The stronger the fields of energy which enabled it, combined with the depth and skill at attending to the moment and translating it through speech (as transcribed), the greater the energy of the resulting poem. And isn’t free verse, or conventional verse (as described by Duncan above) a matter of cleaning up the areas in which one’s attention to, or trust in, the moment had waned? The poem loses energy if revision becomes a lack of courage in sticking to the non-linear track suggested by the fields of resonance. It also suffers when it is a lack of sensitivity in the *tuning* process, as Gary Snyder has called it, which accompanies the process of typing out the organic poem, or when it is spoken upon the completion of composition (Snyder 130).

The inability to stay on track in the moment, or the lack of trust in the impulses arising in the moment, will likely be stronger in the individual lower on the pyramid suggested by Abraham Maslow in which needs for safety, love/belonging and esteem have not yet been satisfied and have prevented self-actualization. We see this in the content of so many free verse poems when the need for acceptance, reinforcement, publishing credits or other such motivators dominate. Still, what I suggest here is a continuum in which the poet works. When it is perfect, the poem comes out without need for any revision. It is totally organic in that respect. When the attention has waned, and that same voice heard in composition recognizes it as so, a fine-tuning may be necessary. This means it is a little less organic in that continuum to which I refer. I am suggesting with Organic Poetry anything more than a fine-tuning constitutes a failing as described above or a lack of time for the impulse to be properly incubated so as to be transformed into a high-energy construct. The poem should then be discarded until the content can come out in the moment more clearly, or re-made into a different poem, as Ted Berrigan was said to do with his work, *The Sonnets*.

Organismic vs. Mechanistic

Despite the good Doctor’s suggestion that the poem is a “machine made of words” (256), an organic poem is more like a ghost in the machine. Olson suggested in “Projective Verse” that such verse suggested a stance toward reality that was counter to the modernism of his day. The stance Olson hinted at is known as a whole-systems (organismic) perspective which is not so much in opposition to the Newtonian/Cartesian paradigm, but goes beyond its limits, the limits suggested by mind being separate from body, person being separate from environment and so on. Reality is more than inert atoms, but atoms as an aspect of patterns of relationship, events in a process of becoming. To go beyond the need for control and domination, we enact Partnership and its inherent interconnectedness. Beyond the merely rational, we get to the mythic. The organic poet understands and nurtures the mythic and

the sacred nature of all reality which grows in its sacredness as the poet’s trust in her process deepens. The content DOES change as the Organic Poetry practitioner quickly learns in verification of what Olson suggested. One reaches deeper levels of awareness, new teachers appear (including children, nature and other unconventional sources), and stronger fields of energy become available. Rather than seek to oppose evil, the organic poet can imagine it, see the capability for evil in herself, and move to compassion while creating a field of resonance that makes such evils less likely to succeed or even be attempted. Here I am thinking of the mindfulness of Gandhi and the field he radiated that ended British colonial rule of India, or that of Thich Nhat Hanh whose meeting with Robert McNamara led to the end of the Secretary’s participation in the American war against Vietnam.

The Organic Poetry practitioner initiates a process (or a process in which said practitioner is initiated) in which a homeostasis of consciousness begins to happen. Homeostasis is the property of open systems, organisms, to regulate their internal environment to maintain or create stability. Enacted by the Organic Poetry practitioner, the poem is written, a deeper state of consciousness is enabled, a new level of seeing (or being) is achieved, new teachers (sources) appear, new experiences are had (or reactions to old experiences begin to change) and trust in one’s process leads to such qualities as optimism, willingness, acceptance, understanding, reverence and – ideally – serenity. I am suggesting here the Organic Poetry praxis is a kind of witnessing consciousness or mindfulness. Tibetan Bon Christopher Hansard suggests that “Mindfulness is one of the qualities you are migrating towards throughout your life, whether you are conscious of this or not. It is the development of compassion and serenity” (203).

The praxis of Organic Poetry speeds up this homeostatic process in one’s self (this quest for balance), creates a field of resonance that those who are open may recognize and resonate with, and is the process by which the most powerful of the continent’s poetry (Whitman, Williams, Olson, McClure, early Levertov, Hernandez Cruz, Waldman, Bowering, Blaser, Rothenberg, Kyger, Wanda Coleman and others) was written.

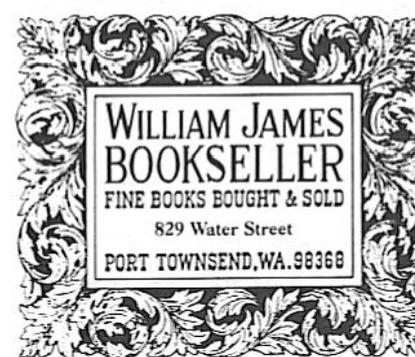
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Paul Nelson is a poet, teacher and broadcaster and founder of the non-profit Global Voices Radio. A professional broadcaster, he has interviewed hundreds of authors, poets, activists and whole-system theorists for a syndicated public affairs radio program.



Denise Levertov



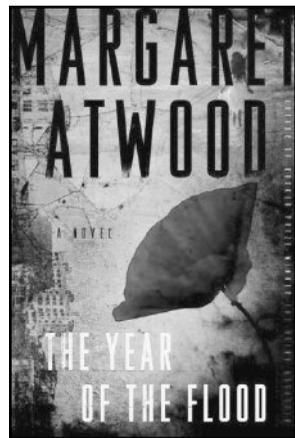
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THE YEAR OF THE FLOOD

Linda Rogers



The Year of the Flood
Margaret Atwood
McClelland & Stewart
2009, 386 pages
\$32.99 Cdn.

It has become apparent that the song-lines of bees are being skewed. What we don't know or disregard about the flight patterns of singing insects, dolphins and the angels who guard us is the substance of Margaret Atwood's polemical novel, *The Year of the Flood*. How did human beings blessed with apparent "superior intellect" get so far off course, taking so many species down with them?

In her recent poems, essays and fiction, she flourishes like a doomed garden signaling its willingness to procreate. This is a desperate flowering, one that cracks the apparently impervious façade and reveals the heart within. In "Heart," a poem from her recent poetry collection, *The Door*, she writes:

*Some people sell their blood. You sell your heart.
It was either that or the soul.
The hard part is getting the dam thing out.
A kind of twisting motion, like shucking an oyster,
Your spine a wrist
And then, hup! It's in your mouth.*

This Biblical novel in the great tradition of Adele Wiseman's *The Sacrifice* and the canon of Morley Callaghan, is prophecy, proverb and Psalm rolled into one big Rinpoche sandwich, "Make me one with everything." Did the writers of the Gospel bear such a burden when they were faced with the question, "Did world begin or end with the Crucifixion?" Do we still believe in miracles?

We could call Atwood the angel of redemption if she would let us get away with that. Her own intellectual rigour precludes that possibility. Redemption is too easy, a "pawnshop" concept, and so we are left with the buzzing of lesser angels, mosquitoes taking meaty nips out of the conventional morality and chewing it up to make "special" paper, the kind that might get past the tree police. "... paper was sinful because it was made from the flesh of trees."

With *Payback*, her recent Massey lectures, and the new novel, *The Year of the Flood*, a record of the Waterless Flood, a plague that is the nemesis of so-called "civilization," she offers a multi-layered, multi-textured justification for the end of the human species, which has defaced the gold standard of God's first holy law, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

Payback, a random philosophical examination of the history of indebtedness, the moral, phenomenal and legal basis of human society with its dialectic politics and delicate equilibriums of goods and services, is a blueprint for the novel. As everything changes and is the same, it turns out there is no compass to make us one with everything. "I deal in futures. My best offer is Maybe."

I remember considering possible book titles with Carol Shields before her untimely death a few years ago. "If, Maybe, Or," she mused. Are life and fiction all about conjunctions?" Carol called her novel *Unless*. Atwood has given us her *Maybe*. The bottom line is the same. The future is uncertain, but gifted with free will, we do have a say in it, just like Robert Johnson standing at the crossroads with the guitar that would or would not make him famous, Eve with her rosy apple, or Faust with the charming Devil. Maybe.

Long Ago and far away I called Margaret Atwood an "Ice Queen" (no wings) because, in the words of another poet, I thought her heart was "armoured in a plate of stone." How could a writer with such an arsenal of gifts not offer her readers a more comfortable pew to rest their bolsters on? She owed us hope, didn't she? In the explanation offered up in *Cat's Eye*, we witnessed the germ state of cynicism, even a systemic misanthropy and we understood. She got that we are a "get" species when many of us had our heads in the sand, or worse, where the sun don't shine.

"For what is a man profited," Jesus asks in the Gospel according to St. Matthew, "if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?" The cynical view is that we have nothing left to lose. The twenty-one grams we release at death may be just gas. Methane.

In a canon covering almost fifty years and as many books of fiction, poetry and non-fiction, the writer who does, as it turns out, so love the world and its creatures,



Margaret Atwood

especially the ones with music knit into their beings, has laid the Pollyannas to waste. The Dian Fosse of print, Atwood is an oracle; would that even more of us had listened.

Now in *The Year of the Flood*, with its resonant title, the novelist releases the doves from her holy sepulcher with holy *trompe l'oeil*, visions of possibility that may be miracles or simply tricks. Our gilded monuments may be tumbling into Ozymanduis' gritty grave, but is there faint hope in the values that have less to do with intelligence than grace, the intangible qualities that transcend our material existence?

Like all good satirists, most of them wounded optimists, Atwood has an acute sensitivity to the grossology of empirical existence. We are creators of garbage, a filthy and disgusting species. Interspersed with giddy glimpses of supernatural light, she spins relentless description of the many ways in which we have laid waste to the garden, polluting the land and the sea and the innocent creatures who share the earth with us.

However, despite inevitable betrayals in the imbalanced equation of give and get, she does find grace, even in the garbage dump of human existence. In real time, not Bollywood time, children who have no experience of the currency that forms the basis of our faulty hierarchies may rise out of the slums of Mumbai and re-plant the garden, or the garden may go on without us.

Woven in the various narratives of *The Year of the Flood* is the story of bees, a threatened species. Atwood's post-apocalyptic bees are singers and pollinators; just like the ones we are missing. Their buzzing and birdsongs are contrapuntal to the hypnotic cant of God's Gardeners, the new religionists whose hymns appear at intervals in the narrative told by two women, Toby and Ren, who may or may not survive the Apocalypse. "The Gardeners loved their instructive rhymes."

*Oh Garden, oh my Garden,
I'll mourn forever more*

*Until the gardeners arise,
And you to life restore.*

No one has warned the Gardeners about *hubris*. They too are doomed, in spite or because of their self-righteous behaviours undermined by hypocrisy. The Gardeners will not save the bees with their prideful janitoring. The bees will clean out their own hive when it is infected, or they will fail.

When the queen bee is healthy, the hive is healthy. It is the queen equivalents, white witches conversant with spells, who mitigate the damage done by mortals bartering with the ephemeral commodities, money and power. The Gardener women, our narrators Toby and Ren, and their accomplices, Pilar and Amanda, remember the recipes even as the forest goes quiet.

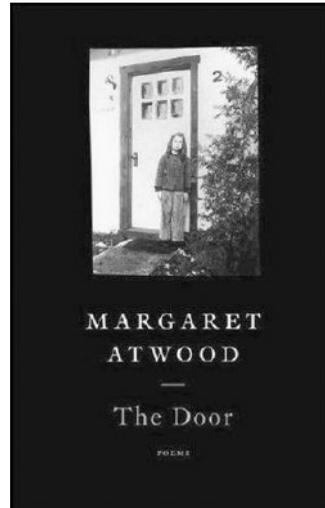
“When the small creatures hush their singing,” said Adam One, “it’s because they are afraid. You must listen for the sound of their fear.”

Since the sound of fear is silence, and fear is the large elephant in her garden of unmentionable experience, Atwood has filled the book with singing. In the beginning and at the end, there is music, “faint and far away but moving closer.” That is her only real affirmation. You can’t kill music.

The Romans covered their ears so as not to hear the shrill cries of the prophet Calpurnia warning her husband not to go to the Forum on the ides of March. We all know what happened to Caesar. Atwood mitigates her doomsday homilies with humour, and millions listen. *The Year of the Flood* could be described as an apocalyptic comic book, complete with cleverly manipulative rhymes (hymns) and catchy nouns like “bimplants” for bosoms that are vessels for the estrous equivalent of hemlock.

“A spoonful of sugar makes the medicine go down, in the most delightful way.”

The Gardeners, shrubby meadow muffins and latter day hippies, are the only religion to survive the Waterless Flood, a contagion that purges the earth of human interference in its natural destiny. “Adam One sighed. “We should not expect too much from faith,” he said. “Human understanding is fallible, and we see through a



Margaret Atwood's *The Door*

glass, darkly. Any religion is a shadow of God. But the shadows of God are not God.”

The Gardeners are the last desperate Aristotelians, chanting their fresh litany of Saints: Saint Dian Fosse, Saint Euell Gibbons, Saint Terry Fox et al. It is all human invention, Toby thought, “for every, Yes... there is also, a No.” There is some comfort in the naming, as Al Purdy discovered in his last days. Atwood pays tribute to the poet with whom she had an uncomfortable affinity. “Say the Names,” she repeats as Purdy did in his powerful poem.

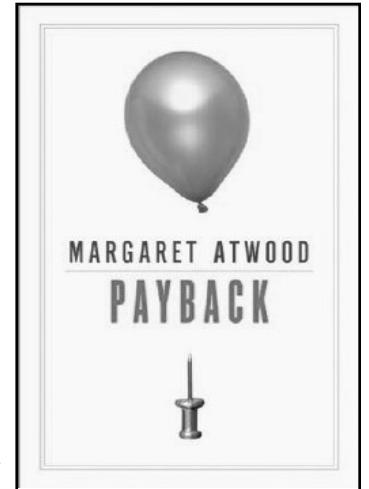
*say the names
as if they were your soul
lost among the mountains
a soul you mislaid
and found again rejoicing*

In the days before Armageddon, when global warming was just settling in, Atwood sent flowers to the dying Poet of the Land. While everything else in his hospital room wilted and crumpled in the heat: bouquets from lesser scribblers, gifts of fruit and poems, the poet himself, The Oracle’s flowers remained fresh and vibrant. That is the underpainting of *The Year of the Flood*, which is *Genesis* and *Revelations* plowed into one uneasy garden, a wasteland spread like compost, “God’s great dance of proteins,” around seedlings that *will* thrive because they are the progeny of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. “I am the resurrection and the life” sing the libidinous honey-drunk bees whose payback for all their industrious hive building and pollinating is the conditional survival of flowers.

Flowers require compost, just as humans require protein. “We would not be human if we did not prefer to be the devourers rather than the devoured, but either is a blessing. Should your life be required of you, rest assured that it is required by life.”

As the speed with which humans are consuming one another accelerates (where are the singing frogs?) we are warned about larger predators. Ruin and beauty is one dog (humanity) chasing its tail. Nothing stops death, not the Gardener’s natural foods

(continued on page 28)



Margaret Atwood's *Payback*

**Leanne Boschman: Prince Rupert
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ROCKSALT: AN ANTHOLOGY OF CONTEMPORARY BC POETRY

Paul Falardeau

Finally, after the lack of a new, comprehensive anthology of B.C. poets for over three decades, British Columbia's current generation has been seen and recorded in *Rocksalt*. Edited by Mona Fertig and Harold Rhenisch, this beautiful volume contains fresh and unpublished work from 108 BC poets.

Some of the notables include Peter Trower, who at 78, still has spunk, and his "Ghosts of the Baseball Days" elicits haunting memories of his youth as age creeps in. Bill Bissett is in his usual form with "going thru th arktik". Names like Joanne Arnott, Marilyn Bowering, Judith Copithorne, Mona Fertig, Al Rempel, Marya Fiamengo, Maxine Gadd, Kuldip Gill, Betsy Warland, the PRRB's own Trevor Carolan, and Vancouver poet laureate George McWhirter march joyously in front of the reader's eye. This is a parade of best of the bests for some; for newer readers it will be a doorway into discovering much of the best poetry B.C. has to offer.

There are younger souls here too. Colin Fulton, at twenty-one represents the future of the province's writers and his contribution is a wonderful poem simply titled "Vancouver" which conjures up Ezra Pound with lines like:

"Our cab is full of erratic heartbeat morse and I only accelerate past each downtown corner watching yield, stop, merge signs pass by."

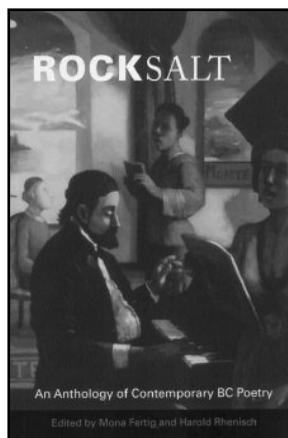
The book looks fantastic too, a beautiful cover and gorgeous pages suit the words they carry; each poet receives an introduction from the editors and presents a statement themselves. An alphabetical table of contents makes searching out poets a snap.

In the introduction Harold Rhenisch notes that in the process of collecting poems for this publication it was evident that all over BC, people are writing poems, though the styles may differ and, interestingly, what they are written on may differ as well: "on their kitchen tables, on scraps of paper, on old typewriters, on clunky old computers and new laptops" Rhenisch notes and most importantly, these people, the poets of BC who hail from Nelson to Vancouver, from the Queens Charlottes/Haida Gwaii to Kamloops and everywhere in between, are writing poetry as part of their everyday lives.

That is exactly what is captured here, the soul and essence of British Columbia, as only poets can see it. The poets of *our* generation. I say our generation, but what does that mean? The authors in this volume range from old men to young women. More appropriately, one could say that these are the poets of our time. *Rocksalt* samples the new and the old, the avant gardé (check out Daniela Elza's triptych) and the classic, free verse, free form poetry, its all there to check out for anyone now or in the future who wishes to know what BC poets were doing in the early years of this century, this urgent millenium. Future readers will also find out a lot about life at this time, what we hoped and dreamed and did with our lives every day.

In her introduction Mona Fertig writes of poetry, "It connects us to what is past and what is coming. Archetypal. Unspoken. Old as dreams." This is what *Rocksalt* achieves, it is our past, our present and most certainly our future.

Paul Falardeau studies English and Biology at UFV. A programmer and DJ for CIVL radio, he is Arts and Life editor for The Cascade in Abbotsford and lives in Aldergrove.



Rocksalt: An Anthology of Contemporary BC Poetry
Ed. Mona Fertig and Harold Rhenisch
Mother Tongue Publishing, 2008. 273 pp., \$24.95



Harold Rhenisch
photo by Gabor Gasztonyi

UNNECESSARY TALKING THE MONTESANO STORIES

Trevor Carolan

Generally better known as a Pacific Northwest poet, translator of Chinese, and dharma bum, Mike O'Connor began showing something of his native Yankee roots in his 2004 collection *When The Tiger Weeps*. With these well-carpentered stories drawn from American culture's memory lane, he now taps into the love affair this nation's readers have had for a long time with Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer.

Set in Montesano, pop. 2,431, the county seat of Gray's Harbour, Washington, and redolent of small-town west coast life in the 1950s and early '60s, O'Connor's tales here are reported with the honest ring of a boyhood vernacular so real it's uncanny. If you were lucky enough to have grown up around these parts in those hallowed Cold War days, you'll recognize every incident—from schoolroom inquisitions, to after-school tackle games, to descriptions of the local jailhouse alcoholics, and of the ever-present caution needed in "looking out for enemies"—in this case, Billy White's Catholic Gang.

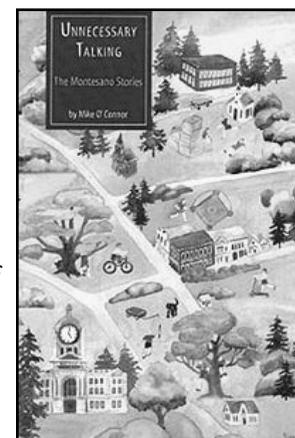
Somewhere in O'Connor's tales of youthful adventure, the rootsiness of Mark Twain's social reformer voice creeps in organically too, and we can be forgiven for noticing an echo in young Mike O'Connor of that simple language Ray Carver, another Northwest son, loved as well. Playing football after school in "The Metaphysical Courthouse", O'Connor and his friends receive some real wisdom from an old bum who warns them what life can be like "when trouble comes looking for you":

This is speculation, but I'm trying to get at something and to avoid saying not everything was perfect in Montesano, which of course was true I sensed in some social way...Because most of the time things were close enough to perfect in Montesano and I didn't want to jinx that...Maybe Montesano was moving along fine, but I started to suspect that something in the world at large wasn't.

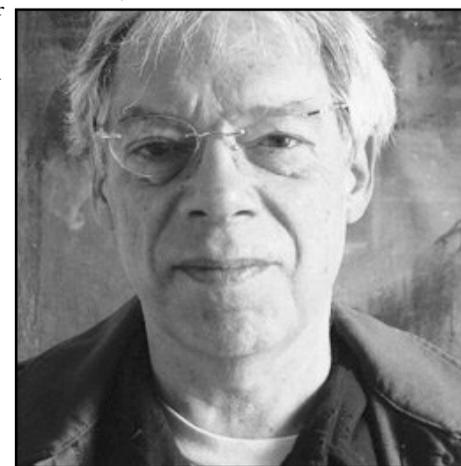
O'Connor's boyhood details about the building of secret forts and the elaborate etiquette regarding theatrical death rituals while playing guns are lovingly conveyed. Was life ever truly this simple and honest? These stories are as good a reflection as you'll find of those fading childhood days that somehow have begun to look better with each season.

"I must have been growing up in some unconscious, effortless way, just like my sister...", his youthful protagonist explains. On reading these stories from a humbler time in American life, one suspects that's indeed the case, and can be forgiven even for suspecting them as meditations on aging or community ecology—a natural preserve for any aficionado of Chinese poetry and the dharma.

Trevor Carolan is the international editor of PRRB.



Unnecessary Talking: The Montesano Stories
Mike O'Connor
Pleasure Boat
176 p. U.S. \$16.



Mike O'Connor

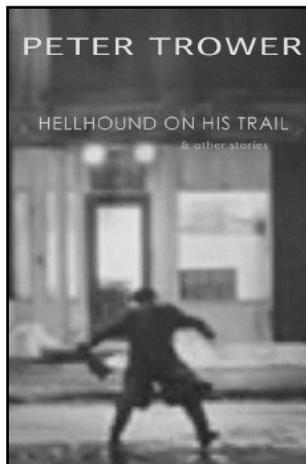
GUTENBERG BLUES

Richard Olafson

At the Summit of the Americas in Trinidad, Venezuela's President, Hugo Chavez, in a historic meeting with newly elected President Obama, gave him a copy of Eduardo Galeano's *Open Veins of Latin America*. One can only speculate what kind of book he might have given George Bush? Or Stephen Harper? Of course, Yann Martel sent several books off to Stephen Harper in the hope that he might be inspired by literature, but they were likely used by his staff as paper weights. What a waste of postage! (With the cancellation of the Canada's book rate some years ago, the expense for such a project is quite large – the cost of postage being more than the cost of the book in some cases.) However, Hugo Chavez was no stranger to literature, nor to the passing on of a good book to friends, a tradition among the cultivated. In 2005, to celebrate the 400th birthday of Cervantes, he gave away over a million copies of *Don Quixote* to his countrymen, as well as 70,000 copies in English for distribution in the Caribbean and 5000 in French to Haitians. The following year he did the same with *Les Miserables*. Was Chavez a modern Don Quixote, chasing after windmills, or perhaps oil derricks resembling the feudal castles of the International Monetary Fund Bank? Of course not! The wisdom of Hugo Chavez puts most western leaders to shame and illustrates that there is one leader who possesses a deep commitment to culture. When asked, by a journalist, whether all million copies would be read, he replied that what really mattered was that Cervantes was in a million households that could otherwise not afford books, and that it would be there for future generations to enjoy. Chavez understood the permanence of culture as an investment for future generations yielding infinite wealth that even the reserves of Venezuelan oil could not provide.

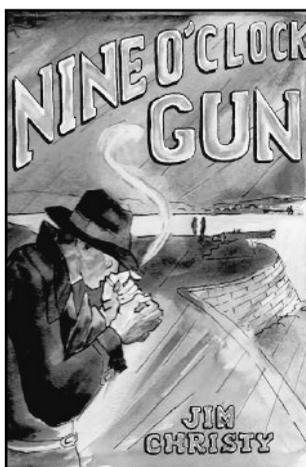
The idea that a book might have some intrinsic value other than an immediate economic gratification seems rather novel to most modern politicians, and most governments in the first world would balk at the expense of offering literature freely. What the actions of Chavez acknowledged is that there is a world where books matter, where culture, literature and education are as important as food, and more important than the world of commerce. A great book nourishes the soul as food feeds the body. Free books for the hungry is as radical an idea as those of the San Francisco Diggers in the hippie era who handed out free food on the streets of Haight-Ashbury. As the leader of an embattled country, under constant pressure in 2005 from the Bush administration, Chavez understood the value of literacy, and that the key to economic development lies in culture and education. While we in the West have the luxury of debating intellectual property and copyright matters, the third world is starving for simple access to information and literacy.

In Canada, one aspect of our national cultural policy is the Canada Council for the Arts Publishing Program. This program was established to insure that Canadian authors and literary titles would be able to be published, even if the market for these books was slim. In an industry dominated by multi-national bestsellers, a national cultural voice requires support. The US recognizes this through the National Endowment for the Arts publishing program, which supports only non-profit literary publishing. Literary work, such as the publication of poetry has a limited audience and may take a very long time to return a profit – yet as the most intense use of language for communication, its value is



Peter Trower's
Hellhound on His Trail

A relatively small amount of cultural funding has allowed Ekstasis to publish over three hundred outstanding titles, employing artists, designers, and printers, launching or furthering the careers of hundreds of Canadian writers, expanding the audience for poetry and literary fiction, giving voice to emerging poets and writers, building bridges between the languages and cultures that make up our country (through a Quebecois translation series), bringing world literature and literary currents into our cultural dialogue and reflecting diverse visions of Canadian life to readers of all ages.



Jim Christy's
Nine O'Clock Gun

clear. A culture without poets is not a culture.

Over the past four years a handful of Canada's most literary of presses have seen their Canada Council funding reduced or cut entirely, as has been the case of Ekstasis Editions this past year. A subtle shift in emphasis from aesthetic to commercial values seems to have taken place in the past few years with publishers rewarded for publishing less poetry. Indeed the sums on the balance sheets appear to have eclipsed the aesthetic value of work between the spines. It is naturally the role of Council administrators to be vigilant on behalf of the tax-payer, and we regret any statements suggesting Council staff had any part in these decisions.

Those who work in Ottawa do have a responsibility to the the public and are accountable to taxpayers. However, in the case of a press like Ekstasis Editions, a modest investment of cultural funding clearly generates a significant return. A relatively small amount of cultural funding has allowed Ekstasis to publish over three hundred outstanding titles, employing artists, designers, and printers, launching or furthering the careers of hundreds of Canadian writers, expanding the audience for poetry and literary fiction, giving voice to emerging poets and writers, building bridges between the languages and cultures that make up our

country (through a Quebecois translation series), bringing world literature and literary currents into our cultural dialogue and reflecting diverse visions of Canadian life to readers of all ages. In addition, Ekstasis promotional endeavours include the publication of the *Pacific Rim Review of Books*, a global literary journal to fill the need for greater review opportunity for Canadian books in an international context, as well as the Pacific Festival of the Book, a Victoria, BC festival devoted to books and authors. It is evident that a press such as Ekstasis indeed offers good value to the taxpayer, paying dividends far in excess of a modest annual investment. What is essential is a re-examination of priorities. The fact that we are able to do so much is evidence of the sound management of our company.

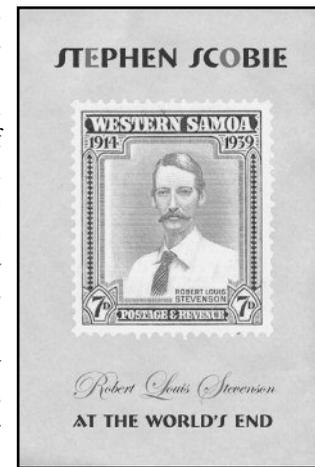
The appointment of Arash Mohtashami-Maali as the new head of the Writing and Publishing program is a step in the right direction. A published poet and literary publisher himself, it is to be hoped that under his leadership a renewed interest in true literary and cultural values may be promoted. Mr. Mohtashami-Maali has been compared to Naim Kattan by Roy McSkimming, but although that has yet to be proven, his appointment may signal a return to the period when the Canada Council for the Arts was on the right track, the age of Kattan or Roch Carrier, both writers who understand the special needs of the literary community. Arash Mohtashami-Maali is a poet after all, with a poet's insight of what is needed in the long term, but gifted with the practical sense of how to get the job done. We need more artists and poets working at the Canada Council for the Arts, so that it can serve the needs of poets and artists. I do believe that Arash Moutashami-Maali has the necessary optimism and vision to carry the Canada Council for the Arts into a new paradigm of literary responsibility.

We are told that we live in a new era with new economic realities and new priorities. But culture is intrinsically valuable and needs no justification either commercially or economically or spiritually. For publishing to be supported at all by funders, it should be considered an end in itself and valued for its aesthetic

(continued on page 40)



Lesley Choyce's
The Disciple of Ice



Stephen Scobie's
RLS: At the World's End

WHAT IS CANADIAN LITERATURE?

Mike Doyle

A piece by Ken McGoogan in a recent *Globe and Mail* (August 8), is the latest contribution to an old chestnut, the 'What is Canadian Literature?' debate. I wonder how many other 'literatures' have people hovering on the sidelines wondering 'What' they are? One thing, notice that the very phrase 'Canadian literature' has an academic whiff about it. What we are talking about is Canadian writing. By now, starting a list with, say, Margaret Atwood, Marie Clair Blais, Anne Hebert and Alice Munro, we can add the names of several score more topflight Canadian writers and these constitute what the academics call a 'canon' of Canadian literature. (It becomes 'literature' at this level of discourse!)

In debating his own rather nervous, perhaps redundant, question, McGoogan raises a further one: 'When does an immigrant writer become a Canadian writer?' Implicit in this is the correct notion that an individual may become a Canadian citizen and yet not necessarily become a Canadian writer. McGoogan suggests that a book whose content is Canadian might be considered Canadian and might qualify it as an item of Canadian literature. Maybe, but that is a stretch and still does not make its author a Canadian writer.

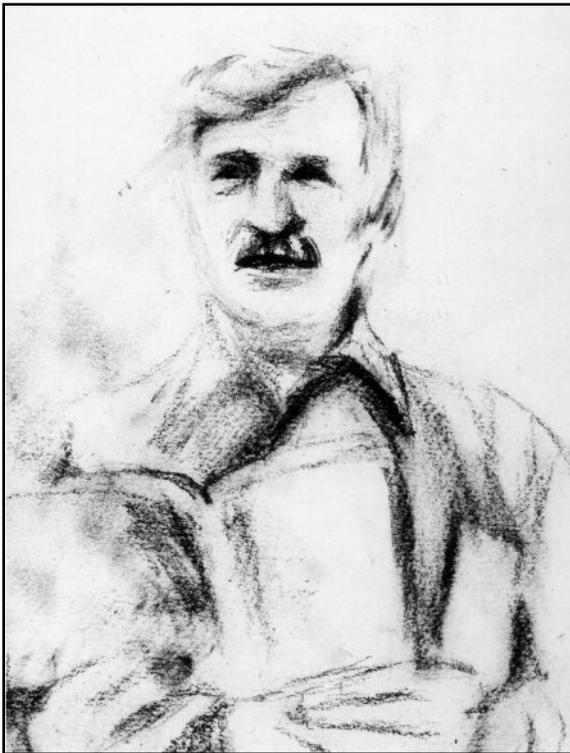
The crucial sentence in McGoogan's piece reads: 'If a novel is written by someone who came of age in this country, and so was psychologically shaped by this place, his or her creations can only be Canadian.' That 'only' is vaguely problematic, but McGoogan has the main point. If your writing must belong somewhere then it belongs to the place where you were psychologically shaped. This does not entirely settle the question, as I discovered first hand. Born in England, I grew up there, left Europe very early in my twenties, psychologically shaped to that point by Irish ethnicity and the Irish mindset of the people around me. My destination was New Zealand where I began to realise my true vocation. My original shaping was English in circumstance, Irish by extended family ethos, thus partly European, even though back then there was no European Union.

I have lived in Canada over forty years, delighted to call Canada my home and that (certainly by McGoogan's criterion) my children are Canadian. McGoogan begins to confuse the issue with lists of immigrants some of whom are acceptably Canadian because they live here and 'produce some of its [i.e., Canadian literature's] most exciting work'. A case by case examination of the work and 'psycho-logical shaping' of some of the writers he mentions would really cloud the issue. Some important writers, Dionne Brand comes to mind, are bi-nationals, for a start.

I've spoken before of Pico Iyer's perspective (mentioned by McGoogan), the one in which shaken loose you become a citizen of the world, and I see Iyer's position but don't really agree with it. As a writer, I write from what is within me and realise that I came to Canada when I was already psychologically shaped (albeit in two stages). I am glad to be a Canadian, glad to be in Canada, and glad to be a writer, but have never aspired to being a Canadian writer as such. In terms of this nationalist way of categorizing things, I am a displaced person. In terms of my own perspective, I am here (in the world, in that part of it known as Canada) and now.

There are writers who come to a new country and set about making it their own (Frederick Philip Grove may be an example), but more common would be a James Joyce, who lived in several European countries whereas Ireland, his country of origin, always remained his focus. A more recent example would be Milan Kundera, who has lived in Paris for decades, but writes of his birth country Czechoslovakia. Then there is Joseph Conrad, who wrote in English, Anglicized his name, is undoubtedly part of English literature though he did not necessarily write about England, and was unmistakably Polish.

Canadian literature, in the first instance, is good writing published by people whose lives were shaped by Canada from an early age, say 14 at the latest (on this criterion I would call Michael Ondaatje Canadian even though some of his preoccupation stems from an ethnic background in Sri Lanka, in which sense he, too, is bi-national.) I am not trying to solve the question, 'What is Canadian literature?', simply adding a thought or two to the debate, though I think one response to the ques-



Mike Doyle

tion is: 'Who wants to know?'

The Polish-Indian-Jewish writer Ruth Praver Jhabvala once (1979) lectured on 'Disinheritance', describing herself as a 'writer without any ground of being out of which to write' (see *Guardian Review*, 19 March 2005). Born in Germany in 1927, (though in old age she looks Indian), her father a Polish Jew victimised by the Nazis, she escaped to England in 1939; after the war she married an Indian and lived in India for ten years. For over forty years she worked on movie productions with James Ivory and Ismael Merchant. They all lived in Manhattan, but the Jhabvalas wintered in Delhi. Ruth Jhabvala sees herself as a refugee and, as such, says 'you don't give your whole allegiance to a place'. Her status almost diminishes her to 'nothing', makes her feel a 'chameleon' or 'cuckoo', but she says, "I like it that way". In her own view, Jhabvala writes in the mode of the country where she is living. In the movie *Shakespeare Wallah* (1965), an 'end of the raj' movie, she combined her love of English literature with her knowledge of India. So, as a writer, it's possible to be without a national pigeonhole.

I have enjoyed for the most part the Merchant-Ivory productions I have seen, also the novels of Jhabvala I've read, and generally compare her condition with my own, that of the 'rootless intellectual' or 'displaced person', no less true in my case than in hers, though I feel I have roots in

Ireland, some in New Zealand, and - a wry but unavoidable admission - some in England, and having spent half my life in Canada, some here, too. For me, the most significant of her remarks is that, 'you don't give your whole allegiance to a place', though I believe that, if you settle in a place after a certain age, 'don't' means 'can't', at least as a writer. As an individual, it's a different matter.

As for deciding whether individual works are Canadian, that is not a matter of principle but of judgment made on a case by case basis. It would be a ramshackle way of establishing the 'canon' of a national 'literature'!

Mike Doyle is a poet, critic, biographer and editor. He is the author of Paper Trombones: notes on poetics, a journal of his life as a poet in Canada.

ATWOOD (continued from page 25)

or the life-enhancing aesthetic procedures in the Helthwyzer Compound, where Ren's inappropriately named bio-mother Lucerne, a *Strega Nonna* to her milkless core, claws at immortality.

The female characters, although they inhabit a higher chakra than the men, are not completely out of the range of Atwood's ruthless paintball pen. Mean girls that pop up like weeds in the Atwood oeuvre raise their slender necks in *The Year of the Flood*, but this time, whew, they are absolved by the doctrine of sisterhood. All for one and one for all, Ren and Toby put down tender roots in the post-apocalyptic garden that is their new reality. After Predator Day, Toby puts aside the notion of survival to risk all for Ren. She is the future, if there is one.

"Ren is a precious gift that has been given to Toby so that Toby might demonstrate unselfishness and sharing and those higher qualities the Gardeners had been so eager to bring out in her."

There is no guarantee that the sacred sisterhood, Atwood's Greek chorus, will survive the aftermath of the Waterless Flood but she does point us to the fornicators who will serve in the pink trenches protected by bodysuits and possibly save the species for an undeserved Second Chance.

"Adam One said we should always look on the positive side, and the positive side was that we were still alive."

No one, not even Margaret Atwood, can guarantee the outcome, but because there is music and a garden that mutates around out terrible mistakes, the possibility exists. Maybe.

Linda Rogers' is Victoria's Poet Laureate and the author of Muscle Memory, a new collection of pre-apocalyptic poems.

REVOLUTIONS

Mary Ann Moore

From the first poem in Joan Shillington's debut collection, readers are offered a careful and perceptive look at the family life and court influences of Tsar Nicholas II and his wife, Alexandra. The poems are beautifully rendered from the first "Family Portrait 1914" to the final portraits: "The Execution", "The Funeral Procession" and "Nicholas Speaks from the Grave". I know many have taken a great interest in the lives, assassination, and martyrdom of Nicholas and Alexandra and will already know much about them. I am one who does not so besides this enlightening poem-history, I needed to do a bit of research.

Some of that research appeared in the local press in May 2009. An article revealed that 60 "secret" letters of Olga Alexandrovna Romanov, the youngest sister of Czar Nicholas II, were discovered and are to be sold at a London auction. The letters, written in English so as to avoid the "Russian authorities" were written from 1916-1920.

It was in 1916 that Olga last visited her brother Nicky. In 1918, Nicholas and the other members of the royal family were executed by Bolshevik rebels. The Grand Duchess and her second husband Nikolai Koulikovsky escaped Russia and settled in Denmark. In 1948, Olga moved to Canada to a farm near Campbellville, Ontario, west of Toronto, with her husband and two adult sons. Later the family moved to a small house in Cooksville, now part of Mississauga, Ontario, where she pursued her passion for painting. Olga died in 1960 in a Gerrard Street apartment in Toronto. She's buried in a North York cemetery with the inscription: "The Last Grand Duchess of Russia".

Revolutions is a provocative title as the poems includes descriptions of "small revolutions [that] stir within his body" and "Earth's revolutions [that] rise in the dawn". And, of course, there is the revolution of 1917 during which Nicholas and his family were imprisoned.

The forms the poems take are refreshing. Lines cascade as vodka does. Sometimes there are parallel lists to create a back and forth rhythm of religious holidays.

Many of the poems are written in the first person so that Alexandra writes of Nicholas asking her to marry him as well as the "delicate tracery of a Fabergé". Alexis, the only son of the couple, (they also had four daughters) writes of sitting on his father's shoulders and Nicholas himself speaks from the grave following the assassination of he and his family along with their doctor and some family servants.

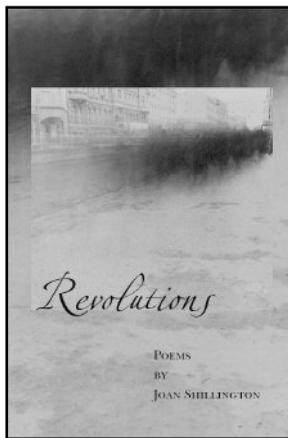
The poems are spare and yet reveal so much. They're rich with colour including lilac that "deepens to paschal grief", china "kilned blue", a mauve boudoir, azure lakes and garnet that "changes color with the light".

The closing line of a poem has the most impact and when Shillington ends a poem with a single line, standing on its own, the result is startling and bold.

Shillington acknowledges the work of other poets as inspiration as she "believes that there is always a debt to be paid in the words that have come before us, the poems, stories that we have read, the teachers and fellow poets who we have learned from. Associations of words, phrases and form in another's work often inspires my poems and I have attempted to name a few."

As for her subject, Shillington was inspired by reading *Nicholas and Alexandra* by Robert K. Massie and a writing course she took. Following the course for which she had to complete two portfolios of 20 poems each, she continued to read and write about the last court of Russia.

I asked Shillington about the anti-Semitic pogroms that occurred during Nicholas' reign. In an email exchange, she told me: "There were a lot of organized



Revolutions
Joan Shillington
Leaf Press
2008, 77 pages
\$16.95



Joan Shillington

attacks on Jewish people all through the reign of Nicholas II and his father Alexander III and probably as far back as you can go in Russian history and the history of Europe. Remember, in that period of time, just before and during World War I, there was not much of a middle class. There was the ruling class and the peasants in Russia and the peasants led a miserable life of poverty and hunger with no chance of getting ahead. Alexander III did not groom Nicholas to be an effective ruler. He was a play-boy, a rake and did not understand the people of his country. When dissatisfaction increased and uprisings increased, there were more and more attacks against the Jewish people and 'troublemakers'. Nicholas was an autocrat, believed he had direct orders from God and he did not share his power with anyone. Everyone answered to Nicholas so of course, all pogroms came from him as the ultimate authority."

From the amount of reading and research Shillington did, it's quite miraculous this story of Nicholas and Alexandra could be told with such detail in so few words. That's what poems do; they distil language and story into a pungent perfume.

Mary Ann Moore's recent chapbook of poems is called *The Names of Things* available from www.maryannmoore.ca.

DEAD MAN

Jeff Olafson

"Do you remember," said the fireman,
As he welcomed the Dead Man to hell.
"When you were in the boat? And then later
That night, you were lying looking up at
The ceiling, and the water in your head
Was not dissimilar from the landscape.
And you think to yourself why is it that
The landscape is moving, yet the boat is
Still." Cursed from birth, poor Bill Blake headed to
Machine to meet his grave. A prostitute, Thel,
Gave him a paper rose and a place to
Sleep that night, but that rose was sick. He was
Just an accountant from Cleveland, but now
He faces his tomb: the forlorn Mirror
Of Water. He awakened to a man
Clawing at his skin with a knife, one who
Offers guidance: He Who Speaks Loud, Saying
Nothing. "You are a dead man..." said He, or
Rather "Nobody." As he ingested
The Peyote, "Nobody" saw all good
And evil, and what Blake was now: Death. He
Fled. "Have you read my poetry?" Blake would
Ask to those who would hunt and kill him like
A fawn. The Wilderness hides all sorts of
Philistines to those who search; a vision
Is what he seeks now. Yet within the wild
He finds that Nothing, and Nobody once
Again comfort him. He is taken to
Those who will make his vessel that will take
Him beyond the Mirror of Water; he
Embarks upon the waning dawn, and as
He closes his eyes, he sees Nothing, and
All the light is drained from his world.

Jeff Olafson recently graduated from high school. He lives in Victoria.

ARROWS & THE ENGLISH STORIES

Linda Rogers

We are a narcissistic civilization and historical novels do not cut it in the current literary zeitgeist. Been there, done that is a typical attitude. The problem is the popular culture doesn't always tune in to the same old same old of repetitive human behaviour.

Luisa Maria Celis reminds us in her novel based on the chronicles of Jose de Oviedo y Banos that little has changed since the Conquistadors rode their fine horses into Venezuela on the false premise that they were there to save souls. The name Oviedo de Banos to a bad Spanish speaker like me sounds like "open the toilet." Metaphorically, it is an apt reaction. Colonialism is always a toilet, where the refuse of corrupt societies is flushed into serial Promised Lands.

"Purify my heart," the gospel song goes, "let me be as gold and silver." That might have been the anthem of missionaries who accompanied the conquerors, as they rationalized their not so pure intention to capture souls on the blood-soaked golden road to Caracas.

In *Arrows*, the gentle priest Salvador accompanies an expedition to Venezuela, where the Spanish intend to establish its capitol city and plunder its wealth in the names of God and King. Celis makes it clear that there are no illusions in this journey of one tormented soul. The Conquistadors are brutes and the good priest is pulled apart on the rack of divided loyalties.

This is an old story and a new one. There are war chaplains serving today who know as they minister to the sick and broken that conquest is conquest no matter how persuasive the propaganda of the perpetrators' false definitions of freedom. Once the enemy is perceived as the embodiment of evil there are no limits to judgment, no controls on inhuman behaviour.



Luisa Maria Celis

There is no doubt in this reader's mind that Luisa Maria Celis intends us to understand that the Conquistadors are no less culpable than the multinationals with their attendant CIA's and CSIS's who colonize South America and other parts of the world to take its resources and leave behind wounded indigenous peoples who have been separated from their dignity and their heritage.

In her political narrative and in her carefully researched storytelling, which weaves the priest's two conflicts, the parallel arcs of his disillusionment with his mother country and his religion, "After months of living with the Indians, I was relegating the Church to a dark corner of my mind," Celis makes the personal political and the political personal. This is the first of three perspectives on the Conquest, which will no doubt continue to drive the point home within the construct of compelling personal journeys.

I often wonder when the cut off for "historical" begins or ends. Is it yesterday, fifty years ago or a hundred? It seems as though yesterday is now history. When human behaviour remains unchanged, it hardly seems relevant.

The English Stories, Cynthia Flood's collection of short stories from Biblioasis, who bravely put forth the non-lucrative genre many publishers fear unless they have Alice Munro on the bottom line, is initially unremarkable. In the accompanying notes, Flood is compared to Munro, providing scary expectations. This reviewer wor-



Arrows
Luisa Maria Celis
Libros Libertad, 2009,
paper, 220 pages

ried the collection might be heavy going: Canadian girl goes to English public school in the Fifties, taking a Muskoka basket made of sweetgrass and porcupine quills and filled with amulets to protect her from homesickness and exclusion. Should this book have been categorized as juvenile lit?

Watch out for those quills. They come hard and fast once we are lulled.

Amanda, the only child of academics who plan to spend a year in England researching the romantic poets, one of those girls of annoying candor who barely bother to raise their hands to answer every question in class, is a moving target with the wrong accent.

She is quickly identified by that most perceptive of social groups, adolescent females, especially upper middle-class English adolescent females, who learn in their nurseries that success or failure depends on an exquisite understanding of social etiquette, the right words, the right clothes, the right addresses and schools.

The sharp-toothed bitches with received accents circle Amanda like sharks. So much is made of her menstrual blood and theirs, it is clear there will be a killing. Flood allows her readers to swim into the inevitable face-off with cruelty that are the mark of such institutions and the inevitable happens, over and over, as we penetrate the veneer of post-colonial society rife with bigotry and snobbery.

Fortunately, Amanda is an intelligent girl, the greater sum of her parents' inadequate parts, and she manages to transcend her terrible adolescence marked by unkindness, loneliness, the plague of polio and girls who are shopworn, even by inference.

The English Stories are told by a variety of narrators, revealing different facets of



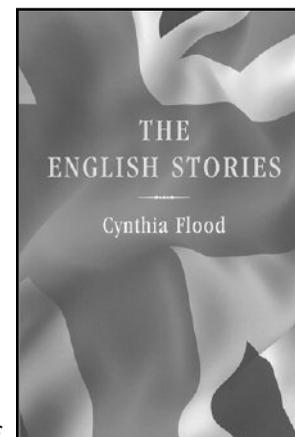
Cynthia Flood

Amanda's life as an alien. In her own words, she is righteously misunderstood. To her teachers, she is too clever. To the girls in the lucky sperm club, she is common; and to the fellow guests in the small hotel where her parents have taken rooms for, as it turns out, two long years, she is an ill-mannered brat.

We know better. Amanda assumes the courage of the wise as she progresses through a series of epiphanies that reveal the hypocrisy of post-war England. She is our witness, no matter who is speaking. Just like the priest Salvador in *Arrow*, we know she will act on her better impulses. Amanda can do this because she is unfettered by the mores that infect her schoolmates.

What matters even more than Amanda is the context in which she finds herself. Flood has drawn a portrait of a confused time, when a powerful empire on which the sun never set limps into evening. The girls who go to school with Amanda should be the last generation to endure misogyny and to perpetuate racism. Will girls like Amanda continue to speak out? Will they, having spent their seasons in hell, make a difference? We are counting on that.

Linda Rogers new collection of poetry is called *Muscle Memory*.



The English Stories
Cynthia Flood
Biblioasis, 2009, paper,
217 pages

OBITUARY OF LIGHT: THE SANGAN RIVER MEDITATIONS

Robert Priest

“I thought I knew where I was going/when I set out/but now I’m not so sure” writes Susan Musgrave in the final lines of a poem from her latest collection: *Obituary of Light, The Sangan River Meditations*. In many ways this hints at the essence of the book if not of her whole career as a poet. Which is not to say that Musgrave has lost her way. In fact in this volume, for my taste, she has found her way---to uncertainty. But it is a fruitful uncertainty that gives the poems a most becoming sense of openness and mystery. “I’ve kept the same question/to myself for a thousand years/ When life stops does death stop too?” “Is it the flags that flutter now or the wind?” There are many such questions posed throughout the poems and even when there are answers they remain wreathed in their attendant mysteries like the “duck’s cry” which “doesn’t echo/ and no one knows why.” All of this is appropriate to the book’s themes of life and death, emptying and replenishing. As such it is not a book that knows anything for sure, but a book that asks everything. The voice is straightforward, honest and without irony. There’s not a static moment anywhere. The poems flow with the almost invisible artistry of a master poet at peak power caught in the talons of something much bigger than herself able only to sing as she is transported. They have the freshness and ease of urgent meditations and like meditation they come from the observer’s stance, unmarred by the futile thrashings of resistance or judgment. Whatever troubles or losses befall her Musgrave’s mood is one of eloquent but sad acceptance. “If you ask me/ again what I want it is to make/ peace with the part of me that insists I exist.” What a relief then, to read poems which are



Obituary of Light: the Sangan River Meditations
Susan Musgrave
Leaf Press, 2009 paper,
64 pages, \$18.95

not always straining forward toward their next self-justifying flash of technique for technique’s sake. Sure there is plenty of skill here but only insofar as it supports the delicate questioning underlay. And the miracle is Musgrave makes it look so easy – as though these riches just fell into her lap from the troubles of the world. “how effortlessly / rain drips from the eaves”.

Dedicated to the memory of Paul Bower, a logger and friend who is battling and then dying of cancer the poetry finds its imagery in the richness of the natural surround, the island of Haida G’waii where Musgrave lives. This landscape of mist, rock and sea is evoked intensely but deftly throughout the slim volume serving at once to describe the physical limitations of her environment and magnify her themes. “Even the river stealing past/ in the darkest night becomes another way / for grace to slip through.”

Musgrave’s antecedents are also clear. She has been reading Rumi and I suspect, the great sixth century Chinese poets Li Po and Tu Fu. These influences are acknowledged in poem ix in the section entitled Spring:

“Perhaps this is all I have left to do
To bow to the plum blossoms in all those ancient love poems
Loosely translated from the Chinese”

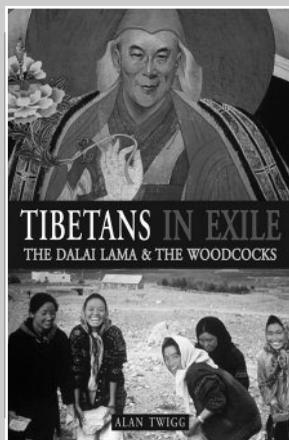
(continued on page 35)



Susan Musgrave with Ted Hughes in 1993, photo by David Anderson

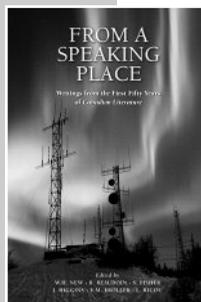
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Alan Twigg



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THE COAST MOUNTAINS TRILOGY

Ron Dart

Dick Culbert is a mountaineering legend and pioneer on the West Coast. Bruce Fairley in his *Canadian Mountaineering Anthology: Stories from 100 years on the Edge* (1994) suggests that 1960-1975 is 'The Culbert Era in the Coast Mountains'. *Pushing the Limits: The Story of Canadian Mountaineering* (2000), by Chic Scott, concurs with Fairley in unpacking the significance of 'Culbert's Decade' in visual detail.

Culbert's *A Climber's Guide to the Coastal Ranges of British Columbia* (Alpine Club of Canada, 1965), was the first book to describe, in meticulous detail, the various peaks and routes worthy of ascent in the Coast Mountains. Less known, however, is Dick Culbert the poet. *The Coast Mountain Trilogy: Mountain Poems, 1957-1971* threads together some of his most challenging, evocative and insightful poetry from the years that the mountains were his hearth, home and cathedral.

This collection is divided into three sections: 1) The Coast Mountain Trilogy, 2) Early Poems and 3) Late Poems. The first is just that: 3 poems ("Land of Lichen", "Land of Ice" and "Land of Lakes"). The second is the largest section and tells many evocative and compelling tales with images and metaphors that hold one's attention and imagination well after the read. 'Late Poems' is the shortest section in the book, and while it concludes the book with "Beni", an account of a Himalayan trek, there is a sense here that Culbert is bidding adieu to the mountains as a sharp, physical challenge.

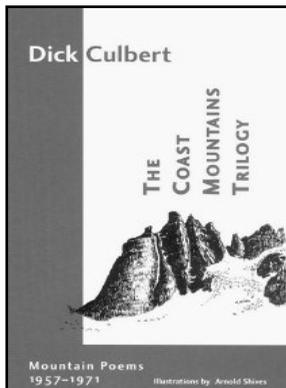
Glenn Woodsworth provides a fine introduction, placing the poems in both a chronological and thematic context. He also makes more than clear where Culbert's poetry fits into the larger genre of mountaineering poetry within Canadian alpine tradition. Robert Service, Earle Birney and E.J. Pratt are held high as models and Culbert drew from them all in style and content. Arnold Shives, a trekking companion of Culbert and Woodsworth from the early 1960s onward, adds to the work's appeal with his unique black/white sketches—some rare—of the Coastal Mountains.



Barrel Sides spires, Howson Range, 1962, by Arnold Shives, pencil & India ink

This volume should be welcomed at a variety of levels. Culbert's poetry is celebrated, West Coast mountaineering history is recounted and recalled, mountaineering literature is revived, and Culbert, Woodsworth and Shives team up again to celebrate a vivid era of mountaineering culture from our coastal mountains. It's a book for re-reading many times and is an essential addition to the archives of our Coastal Mountain lore and legend.

Ron Dart wrote on Noam Chomsky for the inaugural edition of PRRB. He teaches at UFV.



The Coast Mountains Trilogy: Mountain Poems, 1957-1971
Dick Culbert
Illustrations by Arnold Shives
Tricouni Press, 2009

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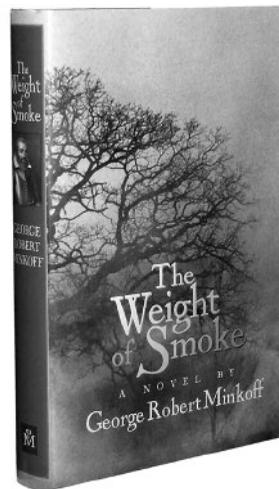
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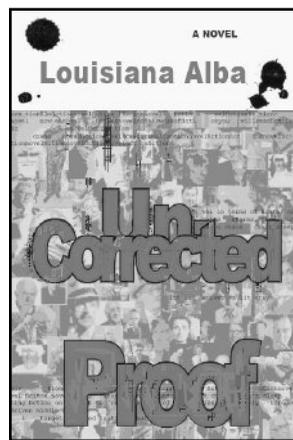
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PUBLISH OR DIE!

Paul Duran



Uncorrected Proof
Louisiana Alba
Elephant Ears Press
2008, 312 pages
UK£ 7.99

Who is Louisiana Alba and what does she (or he) have against the publishing industry? It's a rhetorical question since most authors inevitably have some gripe against the media giants they are forced to rely upon to shepherd their creative works to the masses. Yet usually, besides the odd drunken cocktail party diatribe or expletive-laden rant to one's spouse, authors won't, or can't afford to, bite the hand that feeds them. Alba on the other hand has decided to go straight for their throats, going public with the writer's eternal screech – *the bastards have (add your own word here – ruined, stolen, fucked up, etc.) my book!* – then framed it within a literary conceit so audacious and capricious, that to stumble just a little bit is to fall off the mountain completely.

It's a high wire act that literally co-opts the style of dozens of literary untouchables and pop culture icons from James Joyce to Jimi Hendrix, Anthony Burgess to Andy Warhol, Earnest Hemingway to Quentin Tarantino (there are over a hundred authors and artists listed in the book's acknowledgements starting with ABBA!). Alba

(an obvious *nom de plume*) uses each successive voice in her vast arsenal to tell the story of Archie Lee, the plagiarized author who schemes to get his novel back from the people who stole it – the celebrity novelist Martyrn Varginas, his greedy publisher Menny Lowes, and his man-eater of an editor, Ellen Spartan.

Using *The Iliad* as a starting reference point (in a deliberate cracked mirror image to Joyce's use of *The Odyssey* in *Ulysses*), the novel playfully winks at Homer not so much for his epic poem's style as for its archetypal tale of love, abduction and revenge. The characters all are sly doppelgangers for their Greek counterparts; Archie Lee for Achilles; Ellen Spartan for Helen; Menny Lowes for Menelaus and so on. But the book does not rely solely on post-modern mimicry or clever homage to keep our interest. It more than holds it's own as a thoroughly enjoyable pulp story about stolen manuscripts and deferred vengeance in the volatile, cutthroat world of publishing. Making publishing a life and death enterprise involving kidnapping, murder and the CIA is a nice conceit that no doubt will give even the crustiest of publishing execs a knowing chuckle.

The novel starts with Archie out to expose his literary theft at the Crocker Prize banquet (read Booker Prize). He gets cold feet when he comes face to face with his nemesis Varginas and Varginas' attractive editor Ellen. She unexpectedly offers Archie a position at her new imprint when he stammers out that he's "expert with espionage thrillers." From there the story follows Archie's desperate scheme to wreak revenge from inside the publishing mecca using his newfound influence to try to get his original novel into print under the name of an opportunistic young hustler he has hired for the part. Nothing goes according to plan as the novel ricochets from London to Barcelona to the South of France to New York and back; from pulp crime to spy



Louisiana Alba

thriller, memoir to meta-fiction, screenplay to redacted text.

It may sound like a daunting task for the narrative to constantly shape-shift from one disparate source to another but the effect is breathtakingly kaleidoscopic and in most cases wholly appropriate (even the few typos in the book seem correct given the title). In truth it would probably take a tenured literature professor with a vast music and DVD collection to decode all the stylistic shifts in *Uncorrected Proof* but that's not really the point. Given all the literary byplay and conceptual ambition, the story is still amazingly accessible, so when you are able to pick up on a particular author or style, it just adds to its kicky pleasure.

In the end *Uncorrected Proof* is also a cautionary tale about ego and ambition run amok in a world where ego and ambition are the only character traits that seem to really matter. With no clear winners or losers it could almost be read as a twisted metaphor for our own troubled times, with the publishing industry standing in for Wall Street and the banks, where the "best and brightest" have had their way for too long and have grown fat on the bones of those crushed under their Gucci loafers and stiletto heels. Perhaps I'm reading too much into Alba's remarkably varied prose, but the seeds of a revolution are there, if not on the economic front, then maybe just in the publishing house.

Paul Duran is a writer and director whose films include Flesh Suitcase and The Dogwalker. He lives in Los Angeles.



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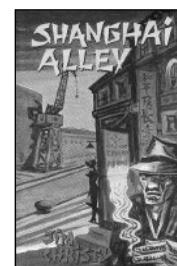
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SHINING A LIGHT ON WORLDS IN TRANSITION

Joseph Blake

Like most North Americans, I couldn't name a dozen writers from the countries included in *Another Kind of Paradise*. For that reason alone, editor Trevor Carolan's latest anthology of short stories from the new Asia-Pacific is a rich, surprise-filled, literary gift. These stories and their well-crafted translations provide insightful, searing images of everyday life from worlds I've yet to visit. I'm grateful for such glimpses into lives so different and yet so much the same as my own.

Exotic and common, deeply traditional and changing fast, the worlds depicted in these 21 stories from Japan, Vietnam, Taiwan, China, Korea, Hong Kong, Philippines, Singapore, Cambodia, Laos and Bangladesh are jewel-like, ripe for contemplation.

The vast Asia-Pacific region that Carolan's book reflects and its myriad neighborhoods of religion and culture share a history of village storytelling. These finely-spun tales are woven from that tradition. Buddhist, Taoist and Confucian thought resonate below the surface of modern lives also touched by Islam, globalization, migration, and the media. Psychologically complex and probing, deeply spiritual and compassionate, the book's eclectic cast of characters stay with you long after you close the book.

Many of the stories and most of my favourites in the anthology are written by women. Seiko Tanabe, an award-winning Japanese master of many writing forms, offers "The Innocent", a soul-wrenching, ash-dry portrait of a single, urban female office-worker's relationships with men and girl friends. Alcohol, sex, marriage and friendship illuminate the protagonist's path through rigid social convention to self-awareness. By the story's final lines, the title character, Sachiko, emerges like a moth from a swaddled, silken cocoon of emotional numbness only to fly into the nearest flame.

"She would probably accept Kitazono's proposal," Tanabe writes, describing her character's near-blind acceptance of a passionless marriage and the fleeting nature of passion, adding, "But she thought, she would have to be somewhat less innocent, and more realistic." Sachiko tries to remember an boyfriend's number, "but it suddenly escape[s] her."



Seiko Tanabe

Vietnamese writer Pham Thi Hoai's "Nine Down Makes Ten" describes a life that is even more inhumanely bound by flawed sexual relationships and freedom unleashed from tradition. The nine men representing different facets of Vietnam's workers' paradise are portrayed with a sadly bitter and mocking tone limed with a dash of weary self-deprecation. You can feel the air sucked out of the narrator's world from the opening description.

"The first man in my unhappy life was slender and gentle with an honest face," the story begins. "His was an honesty easy to find at any time, especially and without interruption in a sheltered environment."

Her next man is frivolous and merry, the third brings misery. Next comes an elderly hero, then an idealist, another maybe a genius, a Don Juan, an obsessive lover, a man of pragmatic action. Each man is picked apart and reassembled before our eyes with lightning-like flashes of poetic image. It's a literary magic trick that smokes like a slow fuse from the story's first arid sentence. By the last paragraph it explodes weakly like a piece of damp fire-

works, leaving the reader to contemplate the story's title as if it were a Zen koan.

Feminist awakening, youthful coming of age, the lure of consumerism, romance, criminality, caste divisions, political metaphor, surrealism, descriptions of indigenous cultures, and what Carolan calls "raw otherness" are the subjects of these narratives, the waters of economic and social change that characters navigate. Sometimes the stories seem exotic, other-worldly. Some are so strange, that they take your breath away. Others feel like looking long into the mirror.

With its skin-peeling, soul revealing descriptions of men and women in rural and urban states and states of social transformation, *Another Kind of Paradise* lives up to Carolan's introductory description of the book as "human stories we can give a damn about." These stories, with their lives so finely-etched in societal robes and roles that we feel we know them, help shine a light on worlds in transition, on worlds we share. It's an important book.

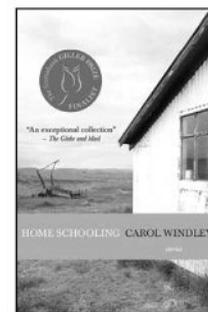
Joseph Blake writes on international travel for many journals and is jazz columnist for PRRB.



Another Kind of Paradise: Short Stories from the New Asia-Pacific

Trevor Carolan, Ed.
Cheng & Tsui, 246 p.

WHAT IS IT ABOUT WEST COAST WOMEN AND FICTION?



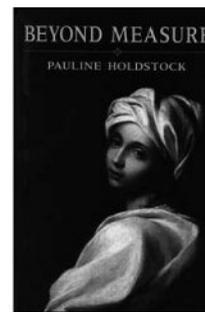
Praise for Giller Prize Finalist Carol Windley

"Home Schooling ... is as delicate as it is intelligent ... nothing short of an exceptional collection of beautiful words and resonant insights. — Carla Lucchetta, *The Globe & Mail*



Praise for Linda Rogers

"Rogers' work is both sensuous and intelligent, and it's impossible to read her without a creeping sense of terror and joy." — Susan Musgrave



Praise for Giller Prize Finalist Pauline Holdstock

"This well-executed novel can sit comfortably on any bookshelf alongside works by writers like A.S. Byatt and Jane Urquhart." — *The Globe & Mail*

**Sure. The world needs more Canada. But
Canada needs more B.C. writers.**



From Cormorant Books. Where Imagination Takes Flight.

TOGETHER UNDER ONE ROOF

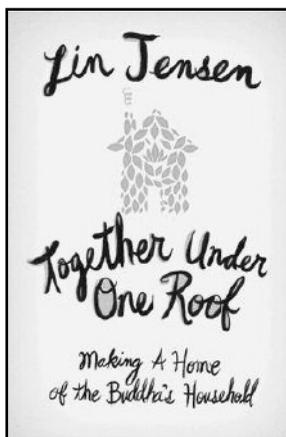
Patrick Carolan

In Lin Jensen's *Together Under One Roof: Making a Home of the Buddha's Household* readers see a long time teacher of Zen Buddhism speaking in riddles about ancient Zen masters speaking in riddles. The founder of the Chico Zen Sangha, Jensen presents us with a book that offer us a series of short two or three page Dharma talks—*teishos*—analyzing various *koans* posited by masters and pupils of Zen study alike. By relating them to examples taken from subjects including world politics, hiking, environmentalism, and cooking an evening meal to name a few, he elegantly gives these ancient puzzles clarity and relevance to our everyday lives. This is all done with the goal of showing us the beauty of the ordinary and our own ultimate oneness with the world around us, a place alive with the Buddha.

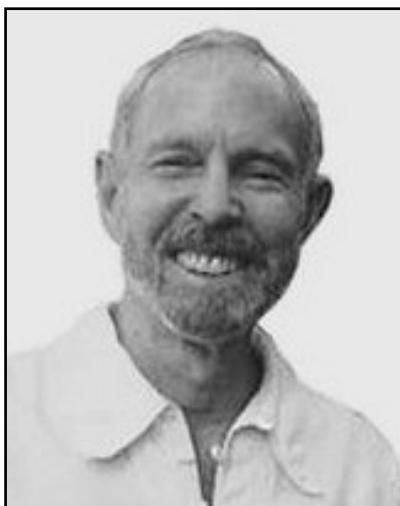
One such *koan* examined is “to play an iron flute with no holes.” Given such a challenge there are two possible options, the first being to shrink away from the impossibility of the task and “retreat within the limits of the conceivable.” But the second option is to dive in and revel in the boundless freedom of an undefined instrument yet to have form imposed on it. Simply “play it anyway.” In doing this, what is revealed is the power and creativity of ordinary mind. Jensen also explores the story of Elder Ting, a monk who after asking Zen Master Lin-chi, “What is the great meaning of Buddhist teaching”, is literally struck dumb by an earnest slap across his face. Nowadays we might ask, what is the real meaning of this Zen story, an authentic case of what Jack Kerouac would call “Zen lunacy”? Well, as Jensen explains this curious tale, on the brink of what Elder Ting assumes will be a complete answer to his quandary, a moment of even deeper clarity is brought on by this completely unanticipated destruction of all his expectations—of his desiring mind. Anyone with an entry-level experience of Zen teaching is likely to have heard this hoary tale in one manifestation or another; what Jensen does is relate this classic Zen parable to his own experience. Following a hike, a new friend tells the author that when they'd first met on their trip, he'd thought Jensen was a “real pain in the ass.” Like Elder Ting, the author is flabbergasted: in his own mind he had thought the outing was a great success. Haven't we all experienced this feeling at one time or another? Jensen's point seems to be that in the uncertainty brought on by the shattering of our perceived realities (i.e. I am a good student, I am a good lover, I can hold my liquor, etc.), there is a beauty, because with our own personal drama destroyed we can free ourselves from the illusions we inadvertently create for ourselves.

These kinds of situations largely shape this book. Collectively, they form a compendium of lessons gathered by a teacher who has himself learned that the Buddha's real household is found in the stuff of everyday life. Small prayers of contrition the author offers when overwhelmed by the burden of failures in day-to-day living provide examples of how, even in a secular age, we can still find solace in the simplicity of everyday sacraments. And there is a poetic sensibility to many of Jensen's accounts and tales of birding and hiking the Sierras evidence his grounding in the natural world, another source of hope for a teacher intent on sharing his contemporary take on the Buddha's ageless insight.

Interestingly, at times these *teishos* bear a striking similarity to Catholic teachings, both in their sermon-like form, and in their call to practice universal compassion: to recognize the sacred in all things. This view likely has roots in his time spent as Buddhist chaplain at High Desert State Prison in California, where amongst those society has swept aside, he works to preserve some of the “loving mercy” we abandon by locking them away. Indeed, Jensen bows reverently to the equality of the whole pic-



Together Under One Roof: Making a Home of the Buddha's Household
Lin Jensen
Wisdom Publications
268 pp. \$16.95, pbk.



Lin Jensen

ture of daily experience—the pots and pan, beets, beans, and pity of it. As he relates, this is the Buddha's real household, and “the Buddha's household happens to be wherever I am at the moment.” He concludes that asking how his Zen practice is going is tantamount to asking how his entire life is going; “there is no valid distinction between the two.”

Readers may question whether there is a central thread to these accounts. Rather than flowing from one another, each lesson is more a fragment of knowledge within the larger collage of this teacher's cumulative wisdom. More useful than earthshaking, it's the kind of book you'll appreciate having handy when a friend asks, “What's the real meaning of the Buddha teaching?”

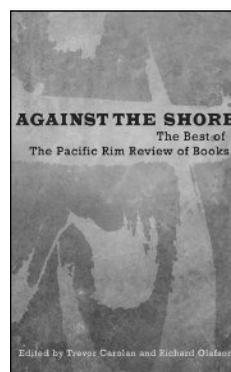
Patrick Carolan is a graduate student in Cognitive Psychology at Simon Fraser University, Vancouver.

MUSGRAVE (continued from page 31)

I suspect that Musgrave actually has lots more to do in both poetry and prose but this volume is a definite turning point. It gives us a new deeper Musgrave, a friendlier more mystic sea-witch if you like, neither a tart nor a mugger but simply this: a true poet capable of addressing the great themes and sufferings of human kind in a way that is readable and re-readable. Of course the old Musgrave is not that far away. But listen to how artfully her presence is resurrected:

“As long as I am alive there will be a snow of mist on the mirror.” In truth her gaze mostly falls far beyond the mirror to illumine instead ‘the broken heart of this world.’ She does this with compassion, wonder and wisdom.

A fabulist in the tradition of Cortazar and Borges, a composer of lush love poems, and a widely quoted aphorist, Robert Priest has also written fifteen books of poetry and prose.



ISBN 978-1-897430-34-7
Literary Criticism /
Essays
186 Pages
\$22.95
5 x 8

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Against the Shore: The Best of the PRRB

edited by Trevor Carolan
& Richard Olafson

From its inception in 2005, *The Pacific Rim Review of Books* has cast a close, constructive eye on contemporary literature. With this anthology, the *PRRB* now confirms its place in contemporary Canadian arts & letters. Addressing a broad horizon of topics and issues in engaged East-West culture, serious poetry, international relations, history, and ecological inquiry, contributors include such distinguished writers as Gary Snyder, Josef Skvorecky, Red Pine, Rex Weyler, Andrew Schelling, and Michael Platzer, as well as many of the veteran and talented young West Coast writers whose work *The Pacific Rim Review of Books* has consistently championed.

Trevor Carolan has published 13 books of poetry, fiction, translation, memoir, and anthologies. Active in Pacific Coast watershed issues, aboriginal land claims, and Asia-Pacific human rights campaigns, he now teaches English at University of the Fraser Valley in Abbotsford, B.C.

Richard Olafson is an editor, poet, book designer and publisher. He has published a number of books and chapbooks, and lives in Victoria with his family. He is publisher of *The Pacific Rim Review of Books*.

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THE CULT OF QUICK REPAIR

Linda Rogers

Everyone is somebody's child. That is where Dede Gaston's collection of short stories and Gale Zoe Garnett's novel, two compelling records of arrested infancy, begin and end. These books should be required reading for right to lifers who need to understand that pain is not the matrix for responsible society, that dysfunctional families undermine functional community.

The leaven of these sorrowful lives is humour, the bastard child of oppression and unhappiness. Sadly, laughter is not salvation, but it can be a quick fix.

Dede Crane is a writer who feels the world through the body of a dancer. This is the nemesis of ruin and beauty, the place where one exalts and the other exists as the only exit. In grace, there is always pain. That is the lesson of which the lyrical dancer, *en pointe* on bleeding toes, has an exquisite awareness.

The Cult of Quick Repair is a collection of stories told by narrators who have shed their skins. Like those transparencies in books of anatomy, her characters experience life changing moments in the raw. None are without fault or blemish. An expendable employee tries to fuck his way out of failure and fails twice. An anguished daughter ignores her mother's last request and enables her drug addicted brother when death visits. An ambivalent mother carelessly fails to foresee a car accident in which her children are injured.

Crane makes it clear there are many ways to die, some of them by living. Sex and death exist side by side in these stories, and neither is romanticized. The stories are a composite of ruthless observation, some of it funny and some gut-wrenching, the cramps that come from too much information.

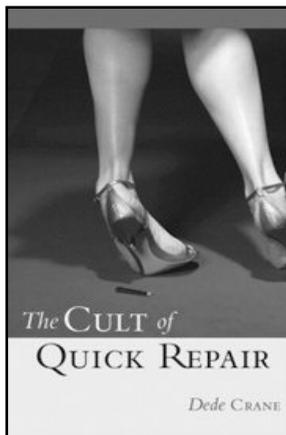
Like all great satirists and good Buddhists, Crane knows that laughter is the sound barrier that is broken in the flight between illusion and reality. This collection resonates with mirth, most of it at the expense of characters reduced to what they are and not what they want to be. The adulterous husband is a just "a balding shit" and not the hero who has let down the humourless bitch who regularly shares his bed in a tryst with an ambitious bimbo who gets desperate at an office party. There are no bells ringing and Crane makes it obvious the earth hardly ever moves for people stuck in their own revisionist histories.

In Crane's world, sex and drugs don't quite cut it. There is nothing new about torn cloth and no quick repair. Tears are fixed with love and compassion, with patience, careful weaving of flesh and community, the usual remedies. There is no way around it, not even laughter, which is a reflexive response to grief, the crack that lets in the light.

For Crane, life's tragedies are rarely large cosmic events, but the small ways in which we let one another down. These often come as surprises to the ordinary people who populate her literary landscape. A wife is as surprised as her husband when he kisses his teammate on national television. A woman who has been surprised by lust in the workplace on her birthday is also surprised by her cuckolded husband. The withholding girlfriend of a controller is surprised into experiencing a stubbornly resistant first orgasm. These little twists, like good jokes or poetic inversions, are the stuff of comedy.

Sometimes the comedian who is masterminding these shape-shifting moments gets in our line of vision and we become aware that our experience of the story or character is being manipulated by the hyper-observant storyteller. There is the window and the veil, and the veil is divided into frames that occasionally distract the suspension of disbelief.

Fortunately, it is mostly window when Crane opens the curtains on her entertaining homilies about the human condition. Crane "writes what she knows." Her expe-



The Cult of Quick Repair
Dede Crane
Coteau Books, 2008
paper, 208 pages
\$18.95



Dede Crane

riences as a dancer, daughter, wife and mother infuse these pages with intense realism. She is sure of this terrain. It is rocky, but there is that human compulsion to connect which gets us over, across and above, wherever we must go with that driving need.

Driving need is the bass line in so many sad songs about family betrayal. There is none worse than the all too common theme that drives stories of bereavement. Grief and greed are the ugly G words that describe too many mortuary tales.

Gale Zoe Garnett has taken on this familiar narrative in *Savage Adoration*, her Sicilian homily about dying badly.

According to the narrator, Ellissa, "Pappino," the narcissistic Johnny Major ne Giovanni Maggiore, adored the daughter he dragged through his gambling dens and the upscale boudoirs of the serial gold diggers he bedded and bred, but not enough to make his humiliating demise in Montreal an easy matter for her, her semi-siblings and the various shady rests for his brainless voyageur

Scumbag Johnny has been terminated with prejudice and Ellissa, the favourite child, can't believe the slippery lawyer who is bonking her last stepmother when he tells her there is no will. Johnny always took care of the bottom line no matter how sloppy his meandering.

This too familiar scenario is the under-painting for an absurd comic picaresque that takes Ellissa, the mourning veterinarian, from Montreal to London and finally Sicily, where family problems are resolved in practical/diabolical ways. The real will must be unearthed and retribution delivered to the wicked stepmother (a blowsy double-Dutch actress) and the ugly (one anorexic, one obese) twin stepsisters who are evil in epic proportions.

There are two levels operating in *Savage Adoration*. One is a comic contrivance. We ride to vengeance with the righteous child, who believes she truly does deserve the blessing of her repulsive but adored ("women love outlaws like babies love stray dogs") sperm donor, laughing all the way. The top story is black humour, right down to the defenestration of the ugly stepsister with its linear graphics standing between the reader and the shady reality of Giovanni.

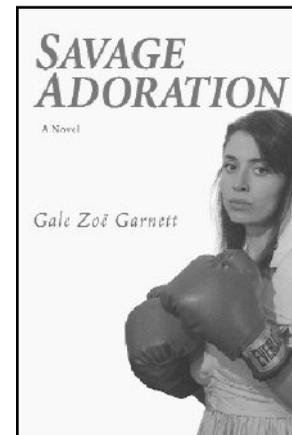
We know that Ellissa is a real person with a real life, but her theatrical observations sometimes suspend belief. Comedy is much harder than tragedy to write. The timing has to be perfect and the mechanics invisible when tears and laughter are in such a delicate balance, something both Crane and Garnett manage some but not all of the time.

Ellissa's psychological journey is the narrative we are compelled to follow. The saviour of small animals is a child woman arrested by the overweening ego of a man who spent his entire life digging holes for others to fall into. For Ellissa, her gay brother and the fat and thin twin step-sisters, there is no end to need and no remedy for neglect. The void has made them all dependent on a father who had nothing to give but the ephemeral pleasure of his company.

The real story of *Savage Adoration* is that when children are denied the good parenting that is their human right, they are damaged in ways they rarely outgrow. Ellissa's love for her father is no more natural than the unrequited longing of her half siblings. They are incomplete, and savagely hungry. That is no joke.

There is no quick repair for the damage done by bad parents. Material blessings don't cut it. However, in this story, there is redemption and Garnett ends her cautionary novel wisely, but I won't spoil it by telling.

Linda Rogers' lyrics are on *Ruin and Beauty*, the new recording of songs by the band *Light, Sweet Crude*.



Savage Adoration
Gale Zoe Garnett
Exile Editions, 2009
paper, 218 pages
\$22.95



Gale Zoe Garnett

FOR THE SAKE OF ONE BLOODY FEATURE FILM

Javad Rahbar

Publication of a novel or any other kind of literary work by Iranian filmmakers is not a new phenomenon. Since the early days of Iranian cinema, directors, following the trend set by the masters of contemporary story writing in Iran, found literature as a rich medium for conveying their ideas through words. A great number of Iranian filmmakers who nowadays are considered as the forerunners of “Iranian New Wave Cinema” in the 1960s and ’70s were writers as well, most famously Ebrahim Golestan, Bahram Bayzaie and Nasser Taghvaei. From the same group, Masoud Kimiai started writing novels in the ’90s. And in 2009, another prominent icon of the same group, Dariush Mehrjui, published his first novel, *For the Sake of One Bloody Feature Film*.

Two years ago, Mehrjui was preparing himself for the public screening of his latest movie, *The Santoori*. But the pre-scheduled screening of the film was cancelled at the very last moment by the authorities of the Ministry of Culture on a number of pretexts. *The Santoori* is the story of the Iranian young generation trying hard to survive in a breath-taking atmosphere filled with drugs, discrimination and betrayal.

The Iranian film master has now returned with another shocking work in a new medium. Translator of a number of plays by western playwrights, Mehrjui published his first novel, *For the Sake of One Bloody Feature Film*, in May 2009. The book was released at the ten-day Tehran International Book Fair and in the shortest period of time possible reached its second edition. Most of those who bought the book belonged to the young generation of the country since they have found their hero in the guise of a 70-year-old filmmaker whose movies are praised and loved by the audiences and critics alike.

Born on December 8, 1939 in Tehran, Iran, Dariush Mehrjui left his hometown for the United States in 1959. Upon graduating from UCLA in philosophy and filmmaking, he returned home in 1964 and started his movie career. Named as an epoch-making filmmaker of Iranian cinema, Mehrjui is hailed in Iran as the man who internationalized the Iranian cinema with his second movie, *Gaav (The Cow)*, 1969). He also made *The Cycle* (1973) which won him the *Fédération Internationale de la Presse Cinématographique Prize* at the Berlin Film Festival in 1978. In 1990, he wrote and directed *Hamoun*, which has turned to a cult film in Iran. Then he made four consecutive female-character films: *Sara* (1993), *Pari* (1995), *Leila* (1996) and *Baano* (1991, released in 1998 in Iran).

In general, most of Mehrjui’s movies are adaptations of Persian literary pieces or are loosely based on literary masterpieces of world literature. Dariush Mehrjui knows literature well and conveys it accurately to the screen. He just recently proved that he is at ease with the process vice versa.

For the Sake of One Bloody Feature Film is the story of sophisticated problems that the Iranian young generation is facing nowadays while most of them date back to decades ago.

The novel is narrated by Salim Mostofi, a young director at the early of his twenties. He has made a few short films which have brought him some national and international awards. However, he has been boycotted by the officials for more than two years due to *inappropriate* themes discussed in his movies.

Sick and tired of everything, Salim decides to put an end to his daily miseries and tragedies. He plans for a feature film to prove his talent to the officials in charge.

The young director has a hard way to go since his life is falling apart from every angle possible. For example, the period of legal temporary marriage with his colleague, Salma Tajadod has expired a long time ago and he is in doubt over extending it. Angered and confused by the intimate relationship between Salma and his long-time friend and colleague, Hamid Mirmirani, Salim falls into a state of hallucinations



For the Sake of One Bloody Feature Film.

Dariush Mehrjui
Ghatreh (Drop) publication, 2009. 248 pages in Persian.

and day-dreaming until Salma helps him find a producer for his feature script. The producing company is run by the daughter of the owner, Parisa, who quickly becomes interested in Salim. Salim and Parisa become inseparable as Salma and Hamid starts shooting together.

Then the catastrophe of making the feature film kicks off. Salma finds there is something going on between Salim and Parisa. Salma runs with Hamid to shooting locations in northern Iran. After a quarrel with Parisa, Salim leaves Tehran for northern cities of Iran to find Salma and win her love back. But the more he searches for his love, the less he finds. After a few days, he finally finds the real truth behind recent strange behavior of Salma. Mansour Davari, a young relative of Salma and a close friend of Salim, tells him that Salma is going to get engaged to an Iranian student who lives in the US and he is intended to take Salma with himself there.

Everything stops here for Salim. He pays a visit to Salma’s house, just to see her with her fiancée. Being speechless in front of Salma, Salim accepts the harsh reality, departs on a long-term journey across Iran. Returning to Tehran, he finds Mansour Davari has died in an accident.

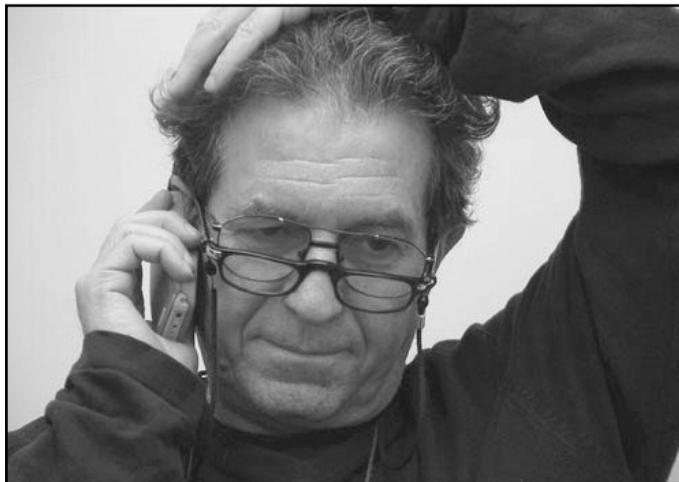
The last time he has a chance to see Salma is at Mansour’s funeral procession. Filled with outrageous jealousy toward the man standing next to Salma, Salim wonders about the sudden death of a young friend who had lots of unfulfilled ambitions, including winning an Academy Award for the movie he always wanted to make in the US.

The novel ends with a big *why*, calling for a logical justification for the untimely death of Mansour Davari as the symbol of the Iranian young generation.

For the Sake of One Bloody Feature Film is divided into 66 parts with different lengths. Two of them, for example, are only two lines. One is this short passage which depicts helplessness of Salim when encountered with the fact that perhaps he is losing his love, Salma.

(26) “Do you still belong to me? Do you still want me?... Haven’t got tired of me? You won’t leave me. I only depend on you. You are my everything.”

In other more detailed parts of the book, Salim/the narrator addresses the reader as though he/she is reading through his diary. Sentences are short and simple and



Dariush Mehrjui

most parts of the book are dominated by colloquial language. The non-stop interior monologues of Salim provide Mehrjui with golden opportunities to reveal all the hidden aspects of Salim’s character, as a typical case of the Iranian youngsters who prefer to stay in their country and work, just as Mehrjui himself did during the last decades.

Salim Mostofi is a typical Mehrjui character. He resembles unique features of Dariush Mehrjui’s great and unforgettable male characters, among them Hamid Hamoun (played by Khosro Shakibai) in *Hamoun* (1990) and Ali Bolourchi (played by Bahram Radan) in *The Santoori* (2007). These are characters who are struggling with their ideological and philosophical conflicts which directly affect their personal lives. All feels betrayed by their beloveds and are keen on finding a way out of their catastrophic situation.

They lack a stable mental state and seemingly all their relentless efforts are fruitless.

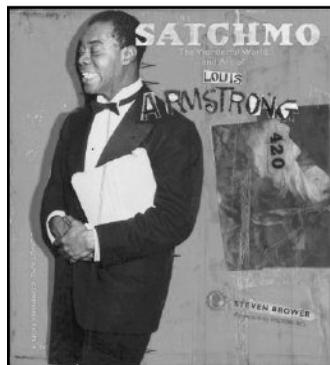
Besides the internal problems mentioned, Salim should face bureaucracy and censorship in his career and an uncertain future awaits him. Like Mehrjui’s movies, the eye-catching point of the novel is his detailed study of the younger generation of Iran while he is in fact narrating the problems he has tackled with during the last years.

Bahram Radan, who played the role of Ali Bolourchi in *The Santoori*, once said that in order to find the real characteristics of the young and broken character, he mostly tried to copy the exact behaviors of the film’s director, Dariush Mehrjui. Perhaps that’s why Mehrjui narrates the tragedies of the Iranian younger generation in his first novel so exact and highly impressive.

Javad Rahbar, 29, works as a freelance journalist in Iran. He holds an MA in English Literature and teaches English and Translation at university. He lives in Tehran.

SATCHMO, MOTHER INDIA & ALL THE WILD HORSES

Joseph Blake



Satchmo: The Wonderful World and Art of Louis Armstrong Steven Brower
Abrams 256 pp. \$39 Cdn.

Visual art and music are beautifully married in each of these recently published books.

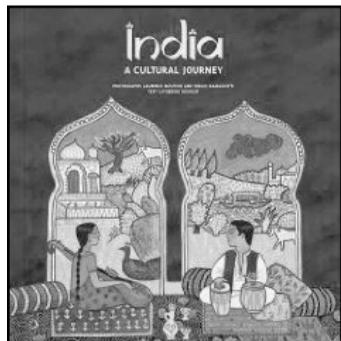
One part biography, one part art book, *Satchmo: The Wonderful World and Art of Louis Armstrong* is a revelation. It's a jazz primer and a very intimate portrait of the great Armstrong. *Satchmo* reveals the musician's heightened visual sensibility and complicated, sly, half-hidden personal stance through the reproduction of dozens of his original collages, photographs and letters from the Louis Armstrong House Museum, Queens College, New York.

Steven Brower describes the volume of Armstrong's visual artistry as "over 200 scrapbooks and 650 tapes...more often than not adorned with energetic collages. Most utilize photographs he collected over the course of his lifetime, some utilize greeting cards and telegraphs of good cheer that he received from presidents and royalty, and others are more artistic flights of fancy. Others still are risqué, employing lingerie ads and revealing photography."

Brower wonders if Armstrong's collages grew out of his native African-American "need to adorn", as Zora Neale Huston has called it. Armstrong writes, "My hobby is to pick-out different things during whatever I read and piece them together and make a little story of my own."

Using dozens of Armstrong's artful collages made for his collection of reel to reel tape boxes, diary-like writing in his own grade five-educated hand, album art, photographs, Hilton Als' poetic forward and the author's own collage-inspired biography and book design, a complex artistic genius is revealed. If you already love Louis, this discovery of his visual art will make you love him more. If you don't love Armstrong's music, thumb through these pages while listening to recordings of his Hot Five. He's the king!

* * *



India: A Cultural Journey
Putumayo World Music & Crafts,
270 pages, \$29.95 US

Putumayo Records is a world music powerhouse with dozens of critically acclaimed recordings from every angle and corner of the musical world. The collection grew out of mix tapes label founder Dan Storper once made for his New York clothing store's ambiance.

With *India: A Cultural Journey*, Putumayo has published a gorgeous literary twin to the label's current CD hit of the same name. It combines the photography of Laurence Mouton and Sergio Ramazzotti with a text by Catherine Bourzat to produce a visual journey to match the recording's survey of contemporary Indian music. The one billion and counting population's myriad cultural permutations and common humanity are reflected in the 333 vivid, moving images and poetic text.

Oscar-winning *Slumdog Millionaire* studio wizard and Bollywood superstar, A.R. Rahman is featured on one track as are modern takes on traditional forms like Ghazal and various devotional songs. The book captures an even wider range of cultural diversity in orgiastic shades of pink and saffron yellow, green tea landscapes and brown rivers of humanity. The mountains, beaches, bazaars and temples of India jump from these pages.

* * *

"It was a long hard voyage to America in 1493," Canadian folk hero Ian Tyson sings in the opening verse of his song *La Primera*. In the recently published collaboration *La Primera: The Story of Wild Mustangs* Tyson's lyrics share pages with B.C.-based equine artist Adeline Halverson's paintings. It's a moving tribute to the origins, history and



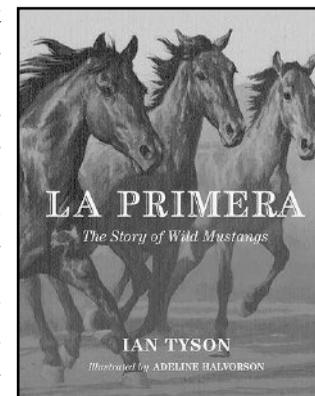
Louis Armstrong

enduring life of America's wild mustangs. It's a book that will be loved by children, parents, Tyson fans, and horse lovers of all ages.

Tyson's lyrics tell the story of Spanish horses introduction to America with explorers like Columbus and Cortez. Describing the Comanche as "holy terrors when they climbed upon our backs" Tyson sings "when the grass was green they would raid for a thousand miles."

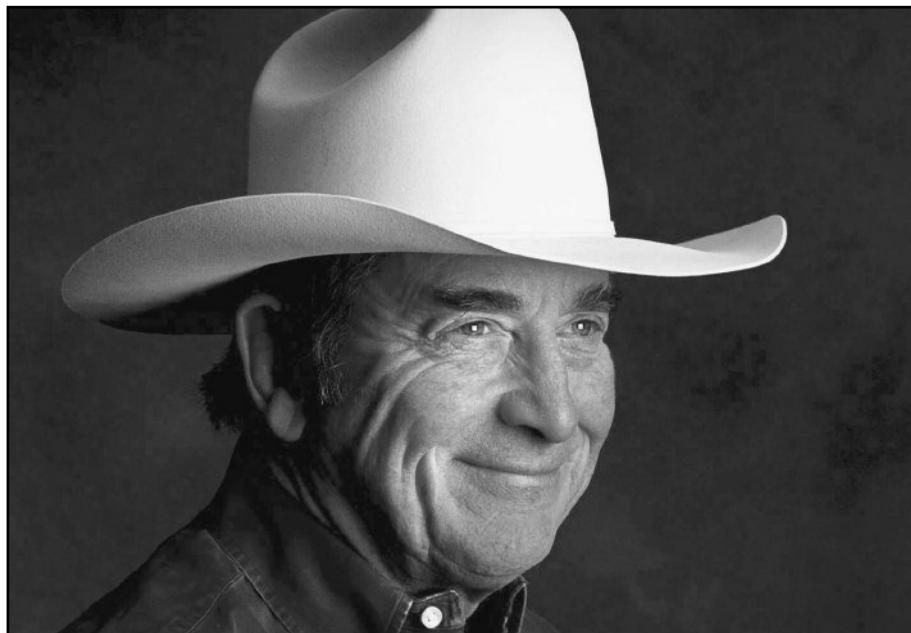
Continuing his historical narrative in song, the old cutting horse rider sings "but the Texans had revolvers when they returned from the war/ Buffalo had gone away, the Comanche moon was waning."

Tyson's last verse finds the horses following long-horn cattle up Mister Goodnight's trail "all the way to the far Saskatchewan" before bringing the story up to date in the final chorus. High in Montana's rugged Pryor Mountains a small herd of wild mustangs roam freely under strict protection. Blood samples trace their origins back to the original Spanish mustangs, a word devolved from the Spanish word *mesteño*, meaning stray animal. As Tyson sings in the last chorus of his song, "He became an outlaw-his blood was watered some-but the flame still burns into the new millennium."



La Primera: The Story of Wild Mustangs
Ian Tyson, with paintings
by Adeline Halverson
Tundra Books, 32 p.
\$22.99 Cdn.

Joseph Blake writes on music and travel from Victoria, B.C.



Ian Tyson

LAUGHTER AND LIGHTNING

Linda Rogers

The word “picnic” comes from the Italian and means something like “little bits.” In the introduction to *Tantric Picnic*, a collection of impressionistic memoirs, Hans Plomp, an anarchist from a pragmatic culture, refers to the Mexican poet Octavio Paz, who said the cultural differences between Eastern and Western culture are manifested in culinary custom.

Paz was correct. At the crux of Western Civilisation, we have Seders and Holy Communion, sacramental meals. Offerings of food, sacrificial offerings of livestock and, in the case of the Biblical Isaac, son of Abraham, our own children, are central to cultural and religious ritual.

In the global village, we are experiencing the blending of ritual feedings, which is a good and bad thing. We have blurred the picnic boundaries and shared the feast, but we have also lost the opportunity for self-definition. Since we are what we eat, the result has been social and economic confusion.

Gardens, from the Paradise of Genesis through Islam’s walled gardens with water reflecting godhead and the labyrinths of the European Renaissance to the over-fertilised enclosed suburban yards, provide the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

India, with its seductive orchards and floral fragrances and its dustbowls of poverty and despair, is a sprawling garden, a perfect context for the questor who would, in the wake of his generation’s discovery of the mystical religious practices of Asia, seek to understand his own social context.

Plomp has every pore open to the sensate attraction of a country as phenomenally diverse as India. An archetypal Sixties person, born at the end of the war that saw his Dutch antecedents eating rats and tulip bulbs in order to survive the deprivations of Nazi occupation, he is a sensualist and a rebel, one who could stand, as he did recently, in front of the altar in an Anglican church and read a poem about “eating” a woman, albeit using the metaphor of a domestic pet.

He may or may not have been aware that, although an apparent desecration, this was his Eucharist.

Meeting with fools, divine and otherwise, in India, is a path to Plomp’s own spiritual anarchism. His journey, like those of many of his generation is informed with wisdom and humour, the essential ingredients of Eastern religious practice, the spice and flavour missing from Christian-Judaic and later Islamic teaching.

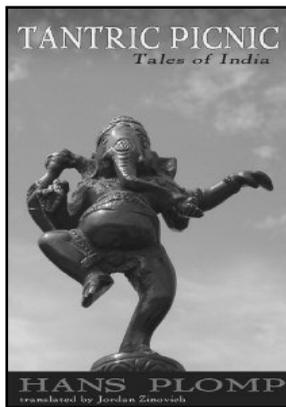
Everyone knows sneezing is erotic. In Bali, they say “soul come back” to an extreme histamine response. There is wisdom and humour in that. When we blow our minds, we open the door to enlightenment. Laughter is like sneezing. It changes our way of seeing and being. This is what the Yogis and rinpoches know, and what the dour Netherlanders are missing.

The good news is the dykes hold the back the water that destroys. The bad news is the dykes hold back the water that renews.

Plomp, a member of the Provo Revolution of the Sixties, which brought, among other things, community bicycles to Holland, is open to the reinvention of India, which seems to be all paradox, but in the end, makes sense.

His stories, like the parables of most indigenous cultures, are windows on a landscape where time is only the shutter speed of a camera that attempts to capture one moment before it transforms into something else. The sounds we are left with are the holy cacophony of bazaars, running water where the living bathe and the dead are washed away, and laughter, always laughter.

Some things need to be understood and others simply accepted. This is the premise of Plomp’s journey to the heart of light and songwriter Amy Foster’s magical



Tantric Picnic
Hans Plomp, translated
by Jordan Zinovich
Ekstasis Editions, 2009
paper, 129 p.



Hans Plomp

novel *When Autumn Leaves*.

I was curious about Foster’s first novel because, as a writer who crosses genres, it is interesting to analyse the engineering integrity of the bridges between songwriting, poetry and fiction with their different structural demands.

Foster is clearly a storyteller, her narratives speaking to a broad audience. The novel, like her songs, is immediately accessible. However the under painting is more complex in the story of a Jaenist community at the western end of the new world, where Canada and the orient converge in a vast mysterious ocean.

“Into the woods” is more than a phrase in Avening, British Columbia, a Brigadoon populated by compliant New Age women/men and well-integrated men/women with sensible haircuts, who understand the shamanistic power of transformation. Their forest is a door to another world, where healing is a sacred art.

Here is where *Wiccan* meets *Mosksha*, where western and eastern cultures blend practices in the enchanted British Columbia rainforests, and First Nations still practice the spirit religion of their ancestors. It is surprising that Foster has not integrated an indigenous shaman in her cast of characters, but perhaps that would have muddled the quest which is central to her vision.

The Autumn of her title is more than a pun. The main character is a four hundred-year-old healer who needs to re-invent herself and reinvigorate her coastal community. It is time to pick a successor from a list that has been presented to her by an already liberated soul, the visitor who brings bad and good news. The Indian Jains of Plomp’s quest are the Jaenist candidates from which Autumn must pick a new alchemist who will free the empirically trapped souls in her community.

In her storytelling, Foster reveals the felicitous selection of phrase that is essential to songwriting. Her observations of the phenomenal world are the objective correlatives that link the normal to the paranormal, the physical to the metaphysical. She knows her amulets, which objects are sacred and worthy of remark and will engage her readers, the hooks in songwriting terms, who could be juveniles open to the possibilities of magic as well as adults engaged by the lighter side of the dark arts.

Foster’s most difficult task is leading the muggles (or, in Jaenist terms *samsain*) of her fictitious community to a satisfactory conclusion. As she introduces the candidates on Autumn’s list, we are offered the opportunity to evaluate their gifts and proximity to the *dharma*, truths that, if not self evident, deserve to be revealed.

As these divine souls walk more or less softly on the earth that leads to the holy door, we are left to choose. These choices are made by the characters in this apparently transparent examination of magic in ordinary lives and by the reader.

Before the ultimate candidate declares herself, we have already made the satisfying decision that she is the right one. If we have been manipulated by the writer, we don’t care. *When Autumn Leaves* has been an engaging read, albeit saturated in the seriousness of New Age alchemy. North of 49, the colder sensibility kicks in. In the novel, light, a rarer commodity the farther we get from the equator, replaces humour as the catalyst for transformation. It hardly matters whether lightning or laughter strikes our minds and hearts, so long as they are opened to the instruction of a greater power.

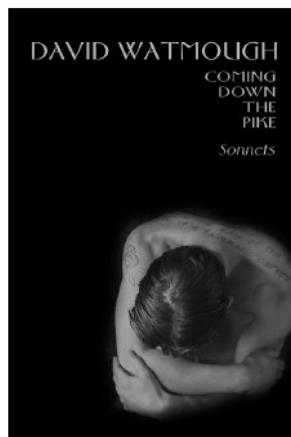
Poet, lyricist and novelist Linda Rogers is Victoria’s Poet Laureate. Her new album, *Ruin and Beauty*, with *Sweet Light Crude*, is available at cdbaby.com.



When Autumn Leaves
Amy Foster
The Overlook Press
paper, 287 p.



Amy Foster



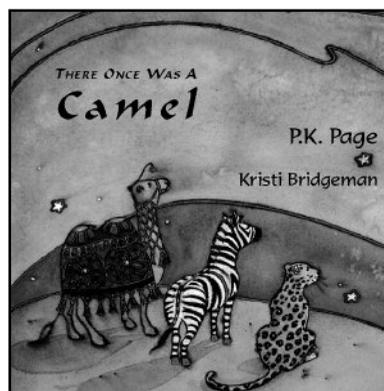
Walter Hildebrandt's *Finding Louis O'Soup*; David Watmough's *Coming Down the Pike*; Charles Tidler's *Straw Things: Selected Poetry & Song*

purpose. The very foundation and rationale for cultural funding is threatened when aesthetic values are sacrificed on the altar of commerce.

The bottom line criteria is used to justify any number of undesirable actions. The "bottom line" argument was used by Harper in his refusal to ratify Kyoto, and the problem with the "bottom line" argument is it is more costly in the long term. It really is a problem that begins in the schools with childhood education. The "other" culture would not have such beliefs if they were taught appreciation of knowledge in grade school. The "bottom line" argument is also used similarly to control the importance of culture. It is without question that the arts are essential to a healthy civilization.

It is naturally the role of Council administrators to be vigilant on behalf of the tax-payer, and we regret any statements suggesting Council staff had any part in these decisions.

In the new reality, politicians and administrators perceive their duty as gatekeepers of culture, protecting us from unmanicured lawns, from unmanageable underbrush, from the weeds of culture, from the untrimmed forests of art. Just as the BC government, in collusion with the forestry companies manage forests by clear-cutting tracks of land, the corporatization of the arts is a form of management of culture. Cultural work is a growth industry in Canada, and yet while many of the old industries are dying, arts policy appears to be to "clear-cut" poetry and the more literary productions, trim back the foliage as it were, in favour of the "curb appeal" of commerce. Let it not be forgotten that as resource-based industries decay, along with ever-dwindling resources, the cultural industries are the ones that demonstrate vitality and growth. There is no "clear cut" solution except clear vision.



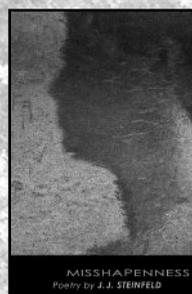
PK Page's *There Once Was a Camel*

However, it is the infinite possibilities and the infinite resources of art that leads to increasing optimism, as each generation renews itself endlessly. The arts are constantly evolving, out of the abundant reserves of inspiration, recharged by the vitality of art itself in a process that is beyond "economic" realities or balance sheets or government policy. Culture is the only human resource whose products can be considered enduring and eternally renewable; it is the very stuff of civilization and we will never run out of it. That is a well of the imagination that cannot be capped.

Richard Olafson is a poet and publisher of Icelandic descent. He is the publisher of both Ekstasis Editions and The Pacific Rim Review of Books.

Note: The book covers displayed in this article are from titles published by Ekstasis in 2008, which a recent Canada Council jury claimed failed to meet the minimum standard of excellence required for funding.

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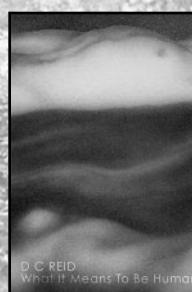
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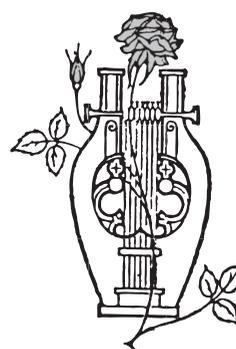
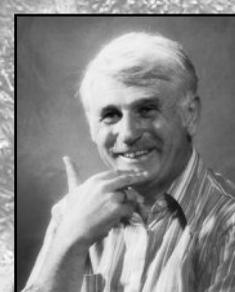
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BOYS' DAY

Cody Poulton

Stir crazy again at the Kyoto house, cooped up too long and longing for a horizon farther than the wall of the next house, half on a whim decide to head out for Ômine over Golden Week. The weather has been perfect, if a little hotter than usual for this time of year; the forecast has promised more sun for the weekend.

But I wonder if the gods of Ômine—Zaô Gongen, Fudô Myôô and all those other fierce Tantric deities—aren't having it out for me for abandoning my wife, what with our daughter also going away to spend the weekend in Tokyo with her lover. Mitsuko professes not to be bothered, she has already made plans to amuse herself babysitting our grandson on the third of May, but now that I've taken off and am once again alone, this pleasure trip of mine has left me with something of a bad taste in the mouth.

Yesterday my wife was on the phone to the in-laws, attempting to explain my heading off on my own over the long holiday weekend. "It's his work," she says. "He's got this research project on Kumano and Yoshino. Besides, he likes to hike. Hardly a day passes when he isn't traipsing off somewhere for a walk. He gets fidgety if he doesn't. Not that this project is going to bring in any money. These scholars aren't in it for the money, I take it. They do it for posterity or something like that. Good for the reputation I guess. Oh, there's a raise if they publish a book out of it."

Well, that about sizes it up, I thought. But what she failed to mention is that element of pure escapism—not because it hasn't crossed her mind, I'm sure it has, but because it was none of the in-laws' business.

"I bet you're happy," she laughed as I was packing my hiking gear. I said happiness has got nothing to do with it. Truth be told, I am a misery artist: even when I snatch a chance to have some pleasure, some side of me ensures I spoil the fun for myself. So I can't really blame the gods, only myself and an instinct for self-denial that itself is a backhanded form of self-indulgence.

As if to reproach me, the clouds rolled in by the afternoon as the Kintetsu express headed south through the paddy fields of the Yamato Plain. All the pretty girls had left the train at the larger stops—Saidaiji, Kôriyama, Yagi—so that by Kashiwara Shrine where I boarded the line to Yoshino there were only old folks and schoolchildren. From there the train stopped at every little town, each station name a snapshot of Japanese history or legend—Okadera, Asuka, Tsubosakayama, Kusurimizu, Kuzu, and so on—as we burrowed deeper into the mountains. At each stop the conductor took leisurely pauses to stretch or practise his golf swing before closing the doors and starting up again. The name of one town, Muda, written with the characters for "six fields" (??) but homophonous with the word for "pointless" (??), was beginning to seem like an apt description of this escapade; it certainly encapsulated all the tedium of rural life. No wonder the young women want to leave such places and many of the men, too, though family obligations tend to hold the boys back more.

By the time we reached the end of the line at Yoshino there were only a couple of us who stepped off the train. Around the station was a collection of little restaurants and souvenir shops, a bus stop, and a cable car up the steep hill to the town of Yoshino proper, which sits on a long, steep hogs-back that rises further into the mountains behind. Yoshino, like Gaul, is divided into three parts: the Lower Thousand (Shita no Senbon), the Middle Thousand (Naka no Senbon) and the Upper Thousand (Oku no Senbon). All these thousands refer to its cherry blossoms, for which the place has been famed since ancient times. It was the site of the summer palace of Empress Jitô whom the eighth-century court poet Hitomaro eulogized in the Manyôshû. En no Gyôja, an ascetic who lived in the ninth century, used the mountains there for his religious austerities. En founded a temple there, Kinpusenji and, a day's hike away, another hermitage further up at Ômine (Big Peak). It was

there I was headed. The plan was to spend the night in Yoshino, then rise at dawn for the trek to Ômine. If I kept up a steady pace, I should be there by nightfall the next day. The cherries are said to be the avatar of En's guardian deity, Zaô, and if I was lucky I'd be spending much of the following day hiking on paths of petals under a pink shade of late blossoms at the higher elevations.

Spurning the bus and the cable car, I shouldered my pack and started the trip on foot up the steep slope to town. The blossoms here were pretty much over, the cherries in leaf with a pink carpet to walk on, the air alive with birdsong, notably that of the *uguisu*, the Japanese nightingale, actually a bush warbler, dull to look at but with a thrilling melody which the Japanese say summons up the name of one its most sacred texts, the Lotus Sutra: *hô ... hôkekyo*. (A more cynical neighbour jokes that it's only humans who imagine that. What the birds are really saying is *Ahô ka, omae?* [Are you some kind of fool?].) Behind me on the trail was another hiker with a large backpack. Somehow he overtook me, taking a shortcut on the way up, where I encountered him again. I asked him where he was going. Kumano, he said, along the Okugakemichi, the trail taken by those who follow in En's footsteps, ascetics called *yam-abushi* (roughly meaning "those who throw themselves upon the mountains"). He'd see how far he'd get that day, camp out somewhere in the Upper Thousand perhaps.

I've been to Yoshino several times in the past, but had forgotten how much of a backwater it was. Walking through what passes here for town, lots of little restaurants, inns and souvenir shops, but it seems the locals have to travel farther afield for their own supplies. Certainly no grocery or convenience stores to pick up some snacks for the trek tomorrow. In fact, after climbing a good twenty minutes to my temple lodging, had to double back to Aoki-san's sake shop, where a modest selection of beer snacks—peanuts, dried squid, chocolate bars and so on—were on sale on dusty shelves. By then it had started to rain.

"Breakfast's at six," said the monk when I checked in at my temple lodging.

"Fine. I'll eat breakfast then head straight out. I plan to hike to Ômine tomorrow."

"In that case, better we pack your breakfast. You'll need a good twelve hours and if you ate here you wouldn't get there before nightfall."

The diffident promise of an *obentô* in lieu of a proper breakfast, the difficulty of finding decent snacks for the road, and the threat of more rain to come, were all making this jaunt less appealing. Not only that, but my walking up and down town in search of peanuts, squid and chocolate had exacerbated a bad knee. Contemplating the possibility of twisting my leg badly on a slippery slope far from any help made me lose heart.

"I'll have breakfast in instead. I've dropped the idea of hiking in directly from here," I tell the monk. "I'll take the bus to Dorogawa and climb to Ômine from there."

"In that case, breakfast's at seven-thirty. You might not catch your connection for the 9:15 bus."

"Didn't you just say breakfast was at six?"

"I'll see if the kitchen can prepare something for you by seven."

The people who ran this place were a shifty lot. The monk himself seemed to be a minor factotum. An older couple with a worldly odour about them were in charge. It was practically empty, but no sooner had I settled into the Samantabhadra Room than there was a commotion next door, the stamping of feet, tossing of luggage and futons, the incessant chatter of my neighbours, all this with nothing more between us than a flimsy *fusuma*. I came for some peace and quiet, I say to myself (is that what I came for?), and after putting up with this ruckus for more than half an hour with no sign of it abating, I stomped upstairs to demand another room from the *okamisan*.



The view from Mount Ômine

“Well, I’ll have to charge you more for that,” she said slyly.

“What do you mean? The place is practically empty and you’ve got me cheek to jowl with the only other lodgers!”

“Let’s see. There’s the couple in the Acala Room, then you, then next to you on the other side in Maitreya is the gentleman from Nagoya. And there’s another couple down the hall from that. I’m sure I don’t know where to put you,” she said, mocking me. “I suppose I could put you in Ksitigarbha, if you don’t mind having no view.”

“View? The only view I’ve got in the room you have me in now is a wall.”

I just know she was lying about all these guests, because I saw the register. Okay, the guy from Nagoya was real and so certainly are Mr. and Mrs. Acala, but where are the others?

The woman’s husband, a wall-eyed character in a piratical bandanna, escorted me to my new quarters. His crafty wife was true to her word: the *Jizô no ma* (Ksitigarbha Room) had no view, no windows even. It felt like a cell, but at least it was quieter.

The dinner was vile, a hamburger of mystery meat and soggy spaghetti in a tasteless tomato sauce—only the fried tofu and bamboo shoots were palatable—and my dinner companion had never been abroad and couldn’t get over the fact he was dining with a foreigner. I shouldn’t feel this way, but is everyone from Nagoya such a bore? I could have saved some time, money and small grief by avoiding Yoshino in the first place and going to Dorogawa directly. I took the opportunity to spend the rest of my dull evening venting vitriol into my diary and poaching my sore knee in hot water.

A haiku on the tea pouch in my room, courtesy of the Itôen Tea Company, a prize winner from a middle school girl:

*Mejiro naku
sofu madogiwa ni
nagaku tatsu*

A white-eye sings
my grandfather lingers
long at the window

I wonder if this pouch had been expressly selected by my innkeeper. There were no windows to this room for me to linger, but there were a couple of shoji letting in light from the corridor, creating a kind of false dawn because the corridors were kept lit at night. I was across from the toilet and the staircase, hardly out of the way of traffic. I had been worried about sleeping in, but no fear of that. Lights out at ten, wakened regularly by the snores of more next-door neighbours (my piratical friend and his money-grubbing wife, no doubt), who also had a knack for knocking things over. Their alarm rang at 5:30, woke up their pet bird, who kept chiming in when the alarm rang, but failed to rouse Mr. And Mrs. Bandanna until two more encores by the clock and bird. On the way to the toilet, peeked outside: a grey light and overcast skies. If my knee didn’t hurt and I had a full belly, I could leave right now and be at Ômine by dinnertime. But best give the leg a rest.

An indifferent breakfast with Nagoya. When I went to make tea I discovered that the teabag had been used already. It was wet before I added the hot water and tasted like *niban-dashi*, the second draught. I mention this to Long John Silver, who denies my accusation, even going so far as to retrieve the original tea pouch from the kitchen, as if that proved anything. I should actually have asked to see it: perhaps there was another poetic gem penned by a schoolgirl. Meanwhile, Nagoya was scarfing his rice, topped with *natto*, those slimy fermented beans, waving his chopsticks furiously as if swatting flies, to disentangle the skeins of slime that trailed from the beans, the chopsticks, his masticating mouth. This performance was all the while punctuated by the screams of a large bird.

“Don’t tell me they keep peacocks here,” I say to Nagoya.

“Peacocks, you say? Don’t rightly know what they sound like.”

“They sound like that.” Sure enough, as I left shortly thereafter without so much as a fare-thee-well, I encounter the culprit in a large cage by the front door. What sort of people keeps peacocks as pets?

On the way back down to the station, an old granny sweeping fallen cherry blossoms off the road. She eyes me suspiciously when I bid her good morning. I’m already feeling defeated in this dreary little town in the off season where travelers like me are

themselves a bit like the cherry petals that fill the gutters from the last trees to blossom. I feel like I’ve strayed into a place the day after a parade.

Got off the train at Shimoichi, where a party of other hikers and one *yamabushi* were already waiting for the 9:15 bus to Dorogawa. Immediately accosted by the local cop, who asked me where I was headed. Apparently there had already been that week three people lost or injured in the mountains. “Make sure you leave a message with someone where you’re going, even if it’s a note dashed off in pencil for the bus driver,” he advised me. “Take care of yourself.”

The hikers and the *yamabushi* are all headed like me to Ômine, for the *yamabiraki*, or “mountain opening,” marking the official commencement of the ritual season with its various austerities, including for some the rigorous Okugake to Kumano, a trek that takes almost a week. Talking to the gang at the bus stop, however, nobody plans to have themselves suspended by the ankles over a cliff (the most celebrated rite of all), not even the *yamabushi*. I assume from how he looks and is dressed that he has done it all already. They’re going to Ômine just for the night, to participate in a specific ritual called the *toake*, where the *hondô* (main hall) is opened after being shut up over the long, snowbound winter on the mountain. One hiker is carrying a huge camera and tripod with which he hopes to capture the event. He and the others are dressed in typical Japanese mountaineers’ gear, sturdy boots and leggings, warm flannel long-sleeves shirts and vests with webbing and lots of pockets, hats and small towels wrapped around the neck to mop up the sweat of climbing. I’m beginning to think that perhaps I’m too lightly dressed, that I’d been fooled by the hot, thirty degree Celsius weather we’d been having in Kyoto up until the day I left.



Entrance of the route to Mount Ômine

Standing off on his own in the parking lot was the *yamabushi*, but he smiled and nodded whenever I happened to glance his way. His hair was cropped short and stubbly, he wore a white cotton robe, pale yellow *hakama* trousers and white soft soled, split toed boots similar to the ones construction workers wear here. On his arms were white gauntlets that covered the forearms and back of the hands but left the fingers and palms free and open for gripping rocks. Around his neck was slung a string of rosary beads and a conch for blowing, around his waist a pouch, and on his back a modern, capacious rucksack. (All the *yamabushi* I encountered were similarly attired, no one using the old fashioned wooden framed backpacks anymore. Efficiency trumps tradition every time, and the Japanese are a practical people.) I immediately liked his face: forthright, honest, cheerful, neither wary of nor obsequious to a foreigner like me. He saluted me with his hands in prayer when I approached to say hello. We had made no more than small talk before the bus arrived and so found ourselves lined up together and, once having boarded the little bus, sitting side by side. By this time so many passengers had appeared for the bus to Dorogawa that they had to call in a second one. During the hour-long trip, the *yamabushi* showed me photos he had taken with his digital camera on previous trips to Ômine. He went every year, sometimes more than once, hiking in the mountains there, staying in the hermitages at Senjôgatake, where we were headed today, or in mountain huts, or sometimes camping out, alone or in groups. Along the way, the clock seemed to turn back to an earlier time in the year. First in the hills we could see the purple swags of wild wisteria in bloom; deeper into the mountains, these were replaced by cherries just now blossoming, and the new green of budding trees gave way to russet colours on the slopes where the deciduous trees were still bare. The bus passed through Tengawa (Heaven River) before arriving in Dorogawa, where, despite its name (Muddy River), a pristine stream ran through a town that was famous for its thermal waters.

Much as I liked the *yamabushi* I didn’t want to force myself on him as a traveling companion. Besides, I hadn’t yet had my morning coffee and I didn’t imagine he’d have need of one as much as me. We parted ways at the bus stop, saying “see you at the top” or some such, and I ducked into a little coffee shop further up the main street running parallel to the river. Inside were a woman at the counter and three men from Osaka, on their way home from a fishing trip, a crew that dwarfed the tiny furniture and stank up the air with their cigarettes. Finding the tables and chairs too Lilliputian for myself as well, I wedged myself into a seat at the counter. As a little garbage truck passed by playing Akatombo (“red dragonfly”), one of the customers, a fat and jolly

sort, wondered aloud what tune the school bus played if the garbage truck was playing such a famous children's song. He told the mama-san he and his buddies regularly made themselves a nuisance in these parts, catching sweetfish and camping where they weren't supposed to. Lest I repeat my debacle with snacks in Yoshino, I asked the lady where I might be able to purchase some rice balls for the trek up the mountain. She said there was a restaurant at the trailhead, but if it was rice balls I wanted, she could call somebody to make them for me. It wouldn't take long. As I sat waiting, sipping my coffee, it began to rain outside, windy gusts of heavy rain spraying the street. I saw my *yamabushi* trod up the street unprotected but seemingly not bothered by a bit of wet. Armed with my rice balls and donning my parka I headed off. It was too windy to unfurl my flimsy folding umbrella.

On the other side of town, just where the village was beginning to peter out into a motley collection of sheds and Chinese noodle shops, I noticed the pension where I had made reservations for the night after the night at the temple on the mountain. My plan was to hike over to another ridge, to a peak called Inamuragatake, where the pension managed a mountain hut I could stay in. Already in Yoshino I was beginning to have my doubts about the weather and the strength of my legs, and both the policeman in Shimoichi and the *yamabushi* had told me that the path from Senjōgatake to Inamuragatake was a treacherous one, a thin trail that fell off sharply on one side for several hundred meters into the valley below. Lose one's balance and it'd be hard to stop an unwanted descent. I thought it best to stop by and mention my misgivings at least and so I rang the pension's buzzer. A woman's voice came on the intercom. "Wait, I'll be right down." She was a small-boned, nervous bird of a woman but she was most kind and solicitous, and seeing the way I was dressed told me I'd catch my death of cold if I didn't have heavier and more waterproof clothing for the mountain. "Come in and have a cup of tea while I see what I can find you," she said. She returned with a couple of portable rain shells and pants.

"See if any of these fit."

I tried one on. It fit in a pinch.

"Better than nothing," she said. "You'd be soaked through in this rain dressed as you are." She kindly lent me the rain gear despite the fact that I'd as much as cancelled my reservation at her hut.

Along the way I filled up on spring water. Some seven, eight years ago I'd come to Dorogawa with my wife. We'd stayed then in an old *ryokan* that catered to pilgrims, and the owner had driven us around, showing us the sights. At that time, the road and the spring looked as they'd been for decades, but now a brand new, straight stretch of blacktop ran up the valley and the spring had been diverted to a large parking lot where a little coffee shop boasted of its pure water, which motorists had come to fill up in large plastic jugs. Beyond that, another couple of kilometers or so was the trailhead. Then, we had ventured no further than the pillared gate with its forbidding inscription ????, *nyonin kekkai*—no women allowed beyond this point. Ōmine was out of bounds to the female sex, one of the only mountains left in Japan where they couldn't go. As a consolation prize, there were other mountains nearby they could climb, and there was even a local shrine where on a smaller scale where they too could play at *gyō* (austere practice): it was a mini-golf version of the eighteen-hole course that the real Ōmine was, and the effect was more than a little condescending. The plan had been for Mitsuko and me to wander back from the trailhead to the inn, a leisurely hour or so walk in pleasant spring weather. We were wandering before this gate inspecting some of the imposing steles erected by guilds of pilgrims from days past when Mitsuko bolted at the sight of a huge black snake slithering among the stones. That was enough for her to flag down the hotelier before he'd had a chance to drive away. I wonder if it wasn't the *yama no kami*—the mountain deity—making his point, that women weren't wanted there.

At the trailhead today was a restaurant that hadn't been there when we encountered that snake. I stopped for a bowl of miso soup to eat with my rice balls. By that time I needed something to warm me because, despite the borrowed parka and plastic pants, the rain had seeped into my clothing and left me wet and cold. The counter was festooned with brightly illustrated banners, mostly advertising what they had

on the menu. From left to right the banners read "World Heritage Site," "Women Not Allowed," "Oden" (a kind of stew) and "*Ōkini* (thanks, in Kansai dialect), an odd juxtaposition which, I took it, the proprietors had thought not amiss. I opened my pack lunch. In an artfully folded bamboo leaf were three *mebarizushi*, rice balls wrapped in brilliant green edible leaves, with relishes of walnuts and bonito flakes, dried salty kelp, and *chirimen zanshō*, little fish preserved in soy sauce, sugar and mountain pepper. It was both beautiful and delicious.

Most of the pilgrims were traveling in groups, many of them having arrived in large coaches that disgorged their passengers in the car park at the restaurant. On their backpacks were little bells that when I first heard them on Mt. Kōya, I'd taken as meant to ward off bears. Here past the gates, the conventional "good mornings" or "good days" gave way to the greetings *omairi*, or *yō omairi*, "have a good pilgrimage." The usage was rather like the Austrian "*Grüss Gott*" and the trumpeting of the conches also had an Alphorn ring to it. The woods here are dark but not ancient, unlike the

primeval forests of places like Mt. Kōya, for example. Here the cedars are younger and grow straight as arrows; it is a managed forest. Japanese mountains may not be high but they are generally very steep, and from here for the next couple of hours it is a slog to the top. Along the way are three teahouses providing some rest, shelter and refreshment. They are sheds, really, made out of wood frame and corrugated metal. The first is Ipponmatsu Chaya (Lone Pine Teahouse); it is roughly halfway from Dorogawa town to the top. Along the way are various little shrines, effigies of Jizō, Fudō, En no Gyōja in his wizard's cowl. At one point is a marker to two youths who were lost in the mountains, or lost to the mountain—the word *sōnan* doesn't tell me what exactly happened and there is nothing else there to tell their story. Further on, a spring called *tasuke mizu*, "helpful water." Since I still have some left from the spring down below, I continue on without filling my canteen.



The main gate of the Ōminesanji Temple

Eventually, as I reach higher elevations, the sky is visible, the view opens up, but it is colder and the wind is strong, blowing rain. My poncho and waterproof pants are no help at all and I'm soaked to the skin. Two kilometers from Lone Pine Tea House is the next shelter, Dōtsuji Chaya, at the intersection of the trails from Yoshino and Dorogawa to the top. Inside are about twenty or thirty other pilgrims, clouds of steam rising from their wet and sweaty bodies. It's there I run into my *yamabushi* friend again. As he was earlier this morning, he is dressed only in the thin cotton layer of his pilgrim's clothes, but somewhere along the way he had donned a few other accessories: a deer pelt slung from his waste, a *hachimaki* bandanna and a little pillbox hat called a *tokin* that was strapped to his forehead rather like the phylacteries that some Orthodox Jews wear at prayer. The only thing missing to complete the *yamabushi*'s panoply are the pompons, which, after all, do seem like a frivolous frill. He is soaked to the skin. "Don't you have a rain shell?" I asked.

"I do, but I figured, get wet from the outside in or sweat and get wet from the inside out, it all adds up to the same thing. So I didn't bother," he said, smiling. "Where are you staying?"

"Tōnan'in," I said, mentioning the name of one of the hermitages (*shukubō*) that provides lodging on the mountain.

He said he was staying at another one of the hermitages. I asked him if he'd mind if I took a photo of him. We took each other's photos. "See you up top, then," he said, and we parted company again.

A little farther was another teahouse, Darasuke Chaya, and then from there it was another steep grade. It was already quite cold, with a raw, wet wind blowing. I stepped through patches of still unmelted snow on the north side of the mountain. Certainly I wasn't properly dressed for this, but the legs held out fine. At one point one has to scale a cliff clinging onto chains, but then the trail started to level off a little. I passed through a gate marking the entrance to the precincts of the temple complex; it was little more than a scattered collection of hermitages dotted among the rocks and trees. I went first to the one I was staying at, to put down my pack and have a cup of tea. I then headed out again for the short climb up to the *hondō*. Although an imposing building, it was very simply constructed, a long rectangle of weathered timber with a heavy tiled roof. Its doors were still shut tight; they would be opened in the ceremony that night. There I ran into another *yamabushi*—we'd crossed paths sever-

al times on the way up, like the tortoise and the hare, I occasionally overtaking him, then him me on my rest stops at the intervening teahouses. He was an old guy, looked like a scarecrow made of sticks and rags, but his progress was inexorable. Unlike the younger one, he'd taken the precaution of throwing on a transparent rain shell over top his white robes. He broke out in smiles every time he saw me. Here at the top he complimented me on my climbing prowess. I returned the compliment, as he was all but expecting me to do.

"*Ojisan oikutsu?*" How old are you, gramps? He proudly proclaimed he was seventy-six and had made the climb up every year for more than forty.

To the side they had prepared the *goma* bonfire they would ignite in the hours before dawn. Just to the south, the mountain dropped off sharply toward the chain of peaks leading toward Kumano. It was still raining and misty, however, and one could see very little. To the west, there was a short climb to the peak where it opened on a small open plain of wildflowers (too early yet for any to bloom) and *sasa* bamboo grass. I wandered around there in the cold mist for some while, inspecting sundry rocks and monuments, ominous as grave-

stones, then returned to the *shukubô*. There I got out of my wet clothes, put on the heavy wool *tanzen* kimono provided by the priests and warmed myself up with several cups of *bancha* before my turn came to soak myself in the little bath they had. Here on the mountain no soap is allowed, so one can only rinse off the sweat and soak. The water could be hotter. In the hermitage there is no stove and the bath and the bed are the only warm spots available. Still cold, I laid out a couple *senbei futon*, "cracker mattresses" they call them they are so thin, one on top of the other; over that I put three blankets and a heavy duvet of cotton ticking, then I buried myself under the covers. I was hungry too, so while waiting for the dinner bell I snacked on the chocolates and squid-flavoured peanuts I'd bought in Yoshino. I had dozed off when I heard a lusty ringing of gongs and sutra chanting from below. The service over, a monk called us to supper.

The dining hall below was a large room with long refectory tables and benches; at the end was an altar in a raised anteroom heavily decorated with Buddhist images. The kitchen and *shukubô* office was off to the side. I noticed, besides the large hearth in the kitchen, an oil stove and a TV set. At least the monks who work here don't completely go without creature comforts, I thought. Supper, an assortment of mountain vegetables like ferns and mushrooms, dried and reconstituted things like *kiriboshi daikon* and *Kôya-dôfu*, was waiting on vermilion lacquered trays on the tables. One of the attendants brought me a form to fill in to register myself as guest for the night: name, address, date of birth.

"What does that make you, now? Fifty-three?" he asked. "Best years of your life, the fifties. Were for me at least. Then, as one heads into the sixties, the body starts to tell you it's packing it in. It won't let you abuse it like it used to. Eat or drink too much and you feel it, don't get enough rest and your body lets you know it. Is this your first time up the mountain?"

"Yes."

"You're a *shingyaku*, then." A novice. The term meant literally "new guest."

"I've got you neighbours with a professor from Kyoto. He's a regular. Thought the two of you would have a lot in common. He ought to be down anytime now. Still in the bath. You all right with tea, or would you like something a little stronger?"

I ordered some sake, thinking it might warm me up some more. Food on the mountain is vegetarian, but apparently there are no religious injunctions here against alcohol. A group of pilgrims were seated in a huddle in front of the altar, having not moved since the evening service that finished a few minutes before. A large bottle of sake was being passed around. The conversation over there was getting rambunctious.

"Meeting," said the attendant. Later, when our side of the room was beginning to fill up, he brought another honking great bottle of sake, passing out free drinks to the pilgrims. He left the bottle on the table for us to help ourselves. I looked at the label: it was a special brew for the mountain, called Gyôja Masamune (Hermit's True Faith). I had to laugh—the name was a riff on a popular brand called Kiku Masamune. I thought to myself, These guys know how to have a good time. What with all the trumpeting of conches, drinking and male bonding going on, my week-

end felt something like a cross between a fishing trip and a hockey game, mixed up with a little esoteric Buddhism. Shugendô, the *yamabushi*'s cult, seemed half religion, half sport.

The professor from Kyoto joined our table. It turned out we were also sharing our room. I tried to engage him in conversation, but it was like getting blood from a stone. The man was shy, or he had a complex about foreigners. About all I learned was that he'd been a mathematician but had now retired. I'd volunteer information about myself—my wife's from Kyoto, we live there when we can, I'm spending the month there, etc.—but he seemed singularly incurious about me and more than willing to turn the shreds of our small talk to the gentleman beside him as an opener about something else. He spent the better part of the evening studiously ignoring me. No matter—the cold and the exertion had made me ravenous. My vegetarian dishes were somewhat meager, but there was all the miso soup and rice I could eat, not to mention the tea and sake, and I filled my belly. It was no later than seven when I staggered upstairs and fell asleep under the burrow I'd made for myself.

You'd think a temple would be a restful place, but it's not, what with all the snores and sneezes, gongs and conches sounding off at all hours. Sometime around one a.m. I'm awakened by the shy mathematician. What breath he saved over dinner table conversation he expended when he slept, because he was a noisy roommate with all his snoring. Presently, the trumpeting of conches signaled that something was afoot. I reluctantly crawled out of bed and gingerly padded downstairs to find a collection of wet hikers flaked out on the dining room benches. The man I met in Yoshino was not among them, and I wondered what had become of him. The attendants were still up and more and more *yamabushi* were getting dressed, wringing out their soggy deerskin pelts and blowing their conches for the hell of it, or so it seemed. "Is the ceremony starting?" I asked.

"Not for a while," the attendant replied.

The main structure of the Ôminesanji Temple



"Why don't you get dressed?"

I'll tell you why, I thought. All my clothes, even the change of clean, dry ones I'd brought and thought were safe in my rucksack under its waterproof shell, are soaking wet on hangers, dripping on the veranda upstairs. It's freezing outside, there are patches of snow on the ground everywhere, and I've got no idea if, when I do get dressed, I'll just stand around for the next few hours shivering, waiting for something to happen. Nobody's told me what the hell's going on.

I returned to bed, but the mathematician's snores kept me awake and I debated what to do. More stamping in the corridor and trumpeting of conches. I finally dressed up in a motley assortment: a still wet T-shirt and fleece top, the pension lady's "waterproof" trousers, and the woolen *tanzen* over it all. By this point, there were stars poking through the shreds of clouds that clung like smoke to the mountaintop, but there was real smoke too, the smell of cooking fires and bonfires, the smell of a campsite. The rain had mercifully lifted, but it was still terribly cold, especially now without the cloud cover. Dressed as it were half in hiking garb, half pajamas, I followed a party of pilgrims with their flashlights up the flight of stone steps leading from Tônan'in to the *hondô*. Someone told me we'd just missed one of the more spectacular events, where "human horses" bear *yamabushi* like portable shrines into the *hondô* to cries of *wasshoi!* We made it nonetheless for the climax: the *toake* rite. The *hondô*'s doors had been flung open and pilgrims were crowding into the cramped space inside. It was dark inside except for a few candle-lit lanterns bearing the names of pilgrims' guilds: Iwakumi, Kyôbashi, Kômyô. Within the *hondô* itself was an inner sanctuary, or series of such enclosed within a network of wooden lattices. The pilgrims milled about and on a signal began lustily chanting the Heart Sutra, followed by En no Gyôja's mantra. With each cycle of sutra and mantra, a select number were admitted through a small door into the inner sanctuary and so I, with all the rest, slowly flowed toward the trapdoor in the latticework. At one point, one of the more enthusiastic chanters lost his place in the sutra and started to recite the wrong section, whereupon his neighbour in the crowd laughingly complained that he was getting us all mixed up. "Sorry! I guess I got carried away," said the miscreant. There was to the whole night a combination of levity and solemnity that made the ritual somehow all the more authentic. The crowd pressed from behind and there was a perilous bottleneck at the steps leading up to the trapdoor whenever the door opened to admit some

more. “*Oshitara akimahen de! Kega suru kara* (Don’t push! Somebody’s gonna get hurt!),” cried a man with an Osaka accent, a remark which inspired much laughter.

I was standing on the top rung of the staircase, holding on to a roof beam for balance, when the sliding door snapped shut in my face. I turned around to look at this milling scrimmage of men and saw my *yamabushi* friend waving at me, only a few bodies behind. I raised my hand to signal him back and he shot me a one-handed prayer-salute. He was beaming happily. “We meet again!” Another round of sutra and mantra over, the door opened and the crowd pressed in. “Watch your head!” I ducked, was squeezed through and shot out the other side. Our cohort (my *yamabushi* included) filed to the left before a row of fierce wooden deities. Another recitation of the Heart Sutra and En’s mantra and we moved further to the left, making room for another bunch through the trapdoor. We made a right turn, moving clockwise, to another row of Tantric deities; another right turn took us into a long corridor at the back of the sanctuary. There, we were requested to sit before an effigy of En and another round of sutra and mantra, which was accompanied by the vigorous jangling of *shakujō* (a brass rattle that all the *yamabushi* carried), beating out a rhythm. My friend explained to me that En’s image was opened only once a year, on this night. The recital over, our group filed around the other side and through another trapdoor into another cagelike sanctuary with more images of En and company, his demon servants Zenki and Goki, the deities Fudō, Zaō and others I don’t know. Once again we sat and recited sutra and mantra to the wild beating of *shakujō*. Inside this womblike space, in the candlelight, the faces of the craggy *yamabushi* around me seemed galvanized, their eyes wild with inspiration. I thought to myself what perfect theatre this ritual was, mysterious and thrilling. It reminded me of accounts I’ve read of the secret winter dances of the Coast Salish, with their singing and shaking of deer hoof rattles.

This was the last recitation, and we were led out another trapdoor into the cold outside. We’d entered the *hondō* from one end and left it at the other, just to the side where the *goma* bonfire was now burning. It wasn’t a grand pyre like some of those the esoteric sects like Shingon and Tendai burn, but it provided welcome warmth and light. My *yamabushi* friend explained that the *goma* was a vestige of the sacrificial pyres on which Brahmins in India would burn offerings to their gods. In Shugendō and the other esoteric sects in Japan, the fire itself was the sacrifice, its sparks rising like prayers to heaven. The *yamabushi* and other pilgrims huddled around the fire, some snatching at the smoke to apply to their head or other parts of their body that ailed them, while sparks from the fire flew up and scattered among them, sometimes settling on their clothes. The white robes of my friend were riddled with holes, the small conflagrations of sparks from fires from previous years, he said. I joked that I’d noticed all the holes earlier in the day and wondered if perhaps they weren’t simply moth-eaten.

The *toake* ceremony was over just as dawn began to illuminate the eastern sky. The rain had come down hard till right around the time I got up and since then it had gradually cleared. Then, at dawn, it seemed to have clouded over again, but it was not the thick fog of yesterday. Above, there were banks of clouds, and below, in the valleys, more clouds flowed like smoke, like rivers: *unkai*, a cloud-sea, they call it. Just a few meters from the bonfire, the mountain falls sharply off to the south, and now we could see the range of peaks over which the *yamabushi* travel on their pilgrimage to Kumano. At Sanjōgatake, the elevation is some seventeen hundred meters. From here it rises and falls to Daifugendake (Samantabhadra Peak; 1780 m.), Gyōjagaeridake (peak where the hermit turned back; 1546 m.) and Misen (Mt. Manifold, 1895 m.) to the highest peak in the region, Hakkyōgatake (Eight Sutra Peak, 1915 m.). More peaks along the spine of the Kii peninsula follow like vertebrae, mountains with names like Buddha Nature (Busshōgatake), Peacock (Kujaku), Sakyamuni (Shaka), Tengu (a wood spirit) and Nirvana (Nehan). The escarpment slopes down to the last major peak, Mt. Tamaki (1076 m.), before the main shrine (*hōgu*) of Kumano. All these peaks are considered holy and together comprise vast natural mandalas, illustrations of the Diamond and the Womb Worlds. To traverse these mountains therefore is to tread on a cosmic map, with one foot on earth, the other in the spiritual realm. One literally walks above the clouds. Here at Sanjōgatake as the sun was beginning to



A hospice on Mount Ōmine

light up the mountains and sky to the south, two *yamabushi* stood on a platform overlooking this magnificent scene and blew their conch shells. Their calls were returned by other conches in the valleys below.

I headed back to the *shukubō* for breakfast, but paused first to take in the view there to the north and east. It was just as spectacular, range on range of wooded mountains. The hogs-back of Yoshino rose like a chain of islands from a sea of clouds boiling in the valleys. Another *yamabushi* there was gazing out at the scene and taking photos. “Quite the view, eh? Where are you from?” he asked, the inevitable question.

“Canada.”

“Well, I guess you’ve got lots of places like this where you come from. Like the Rockies.”

I told him I lived on the West Coast, quite a way from the Rockies, actually, but that where I lived, Vancouver Island, the mountains didn’t look all that different from here.

“No temples, though, I guess. You people are Christian, right? So, what do you have on the mountaintops, maybe a church with a nice steeple, or something?”

“Generally, nothing at all.”

“So you don’t worship mountains.”

“I suppose we do in our own way. There are lots of hikers and campers, people who love the wilderness, but we don’t give our love of nature a particular form, or call it a religion.”

He told me he was a monk at Kinpusenji in Yoshino and would be returning there this morning, a faster walk than the trip up because it was mostly downhill, maybe only eight hours instead of the twelve or more it would take up to Ōmine. The first five or six hours, he said, were a beautiful hike, the last not so interesting. To save time yesterday on the way up, he’d driven part way from Yoshino, parked his car and hiked in over the prettiest stretch. I was beginning to

think I should return by way of Yoshino. The other *yamabushi* I kept running into also said he too was going to spend the day hiking back to Yoshino. When we parted he said “*mata goen ga attara, oai shimashō* (if karma so inclines, let’s meet again),” and gave me the prayer-salute. But I’d made plans to stop off on the way back in Dorogawa and return the raingear the lady at the pension had so kindly lent me

I went in for breakfast. The shy mathematician came down. He’d slept right through and missed the predawn ritual. Then I packed my still wet things, shouldered my bag, and headed back up to the top to once again gaze out over the mountains to the south. By this point, around 6:30 a.m., the cloud cover had cleared and the sky was a pristine blue. The views were astounding. Walking over the field of bamboo grass I’d wandered over the afternoon before, I could see now, to the west, other sacred mountains, like Katsuragi and Kongō, and beyond in the dim haze the fringes of Osaka. Way below, in the crook of a long gorge I’d climbed the day before, was Dorogawa. I also found there the route I would have taken to Inamuragatake, where I’d originally planned to spend the following night. As the policeman and the *yamabushi* had warned me, the path looked treacherous, a thin ribbon on the steep mountainside, still muddy from last night’s rain. One false step and it would be a long slide to the bottom. Further along was a series of cliffs where I met a group of other pilgrims. At least one looked like a seasoned ascetic in his white robes, but the others looked like city boys on an excursion. A fat youth, his neck so plump that his earlobes stuck out horizontally from his head, was carrying a stuffed teddy bear in his rucksack. It takes all kinds, I thought, and Japan is a place that indulges eccentricity. I spent the first hour or so wandering from peak to peak over terrain that the day before had been obscured by clouds and rain but now revealed spectacular views. I saw the place where the *yamabushi* hang pilgrims by the ankles, Nishi no Nozoki (Western Peak [not peak]) in a terrifying religious twist on bungee jumping. “Do you love your parents? Your wife? Have you been unfaithful?” the victim is asked, and any hesitation or unsatisfactory reply results in a slide of the rope further over the precipice. I gingerly peeked over the edge: it was a straight drop down, hundreds of meters. In the past, stories say, some pilgrims plummeted to their death and still some of the austerities the *yamabushi* practised seemed death defying.

For a good hour or two on the way down the views were gorgeous. More rocks

(continued on page 46)

Yolande Villemaire



Yolande Villemaire est née au Québec et remporte en 1980 le Prix des Jeunes écrivains du Journal de Montréal pour son roman *La vie en prose*, qu'on qualifiera d'oeuvre féministe et postmoderne. Poète et romancière, elle publie une dizaine de recueils de poésie dont la rétrospective *D'ambre et d'ombre* en 2000 et dix romans, dont *La déferlante d'Amsterdam* en 2003 et *India, India* à XYZ en 2007. Elle a vécu à New York, à Paris et à Amsterdam, mais aussi en Inde. Sa poésie est traduite en anglais, en espagnol, en italien, en roumain, en néerlandais, en catalan et en islandais. Elle vit à Montréal. Son recueil *Céleste tristesse* a été réédité en 2006 aux Écrits des Forges en coédition avec Le Temps des Cerises en France.



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BOYS' DAY (continued from page 45)

and chains to scale on some of the promontories, each one marked with more statues of Fudô, En no Gyôja, stones bearing mantras and dharanis. But mostly there were wooden staircases on the way down. The sun was up and the earth and air were getting warmer. I stripped down to my T-shirt, happy to let the sun dry out my clothes and warm my body. By this point I was encountering more pilgrims on their way up than those going down with me.

"So why did you want to come to a rotten country like Japan?" an older man asked me jokingly when he heard where I was from. "Our politics stink, we throw our garbage everywhere, and what could be uglier than our cities? Surely Canada's more beautiful than anything we've got."

"What can I say? My wife's from Kyoto," I reply.

"Ah, a *Kyô-onna* (lady from the capital)," he said. "I see you have good taste."

"Good taste be damned. She's all piss and vinegar."

"Well, you know what they say about those Kyoto ladies. Strong-willed."

I rather like the Japanese custom of running themselves down. Our country's the pits, my wife's stupid, the kids are no good: all this modesty, which is hardly sincere, nonetheless provides an opening for the other party to disabuse them of their string of bad luck and tell them, no, You have a beautiful country, your wife's both beautiful and intelligent too, and all your kids are wonderful. The reverse to this is an experience I once had, when indeed I seemed cursed with bad luck, of receiving one of those Christmas messages from an old friend rattling off all the terrific things that had happened to him and his family that year, his success in business, the scholarships and tennis trophies the kids received, etc., etc. All this made me feel doubly miserable, and I wrote back a wicked parody, an over-the-top account of my own wretched year, inventing ludicrous achievements that rubbed in the fact that I was still much worse off than my friend. I should have known better. This lark proved the kiss of death to that relationship. In short, I prefer the Japanese way: somebody else's misery, especially when you just know it's not true, makes you feel all's right with the world.

Down from the mountain, I walked back to Dorogawa along the river with its pristine water. People were swimming and fishing in it. Here again it felt like spring. The air was warm and there were still cherries in bloom. I knew that back in town it would feel more like summer. At the pension I returned the raingear I'd borrowed, apologizing profusely for having ripped a hole in the crotch clambering over some rocks on the top. I told the lady I felt ashamed to return them in that state and she, equally insistently, told me there was no need to worry. I resolved to send them a nice present from Kyoto when I returned. On the way back to the bus stop I dropped in to say hello to the hotelier and his wife at the inn Mitsuko and I had stayed at some years back. They invited me in for a bath and I spent a while chatting with them over tea in the front room, my feet dangling over into the street. Later I had lunch at the restaurant that had made those delicious rice balls for me the day before: a beautiful assortment of local fish and vegetables, including sweetfish caught from the river that flowed just outside the window. The meal was so good I lost all track of time and missed the 12:45 bus back to Shimoichi. I killed the two and a half hours till the next bus soaking again in the public baths there. It had an open-air tub and a spot in the sun where you could stretch out naked as the day you were born. In the coffee shop next door was a group of old guys who'd stayed at the same *shukubô* the night before. They'd polished off a big meal and their table was cluttered with empty beer bottles. Another holiday with the boys almost over, they'd bought some fiddleheads from the lady there to take back for their wives to prepare for dinner.

The train back to Kyoto gradually filled with more passengers as we got closer to town. In the little villages we passed, houses with sons had put up carp streamers that were blowing proudly in the breeze. May fifth was Boy's Day, now officially called Children's Day, but still really a day to celebrate the male offspring. (The girls have their own day, March third.)

Back home, I was remarking to my wife how impressed I'd been with the health of all the old pilgrims on the mountain. Such strong legs and stout hearts these guys have! It's so nice to see so many of them spending their time hiking in the mountains.

"Is it any wonder?" my wife said, folding laundry. "After they retire those old farts haven't got anything better to do with themselves."

Cody Poulton is the Chair of the Department of Pacific & Asian Studies at the University of Victoria.

THROUGH THE CRACKS

Paul Falardeau

It starts like any other album. A chord on an acoustic guitar struck with a downward moving hand. But there is so much unlike other albums, and other music that follows, that this small similarity can be allowed. Russell Wallace is Salish. He writes songs that take a harsh, gritty look at modern day Canada, through the eyes of the often downtrodden indigenous people.

Nowhere is this clearer than in "Trampled" where Wallace sings "Oh Canada/ You trampled across/Our home and native land" in a send up of the national anthem not unlike the ragged shout-outs on Neil Young's *Living With War*.

"The lyrics of these songs are reflective of what is happening in Vancouver from the perspective of a Salish person" says Wallace on UBC's creative writing website, "The title of this album refers to cracks in our society. Cracks are indications that something is old and damaged. Aboriginal people have fallen through many cracks in Canadian society."

"Dreams on Fire" really exemplifies this idea, telling vignettes of people who weren't lucky enough to make it past the city's pitfalls. "They found her body next to the tracks/a mother's life between sidewalk cracks," sings Wallace about one ill-fated victim.

Vancouver shows up from multiple viewpoints. We see the occupants of the Blue Eagle diner and their gossip, Powell Street lights shine over a young mothers smile, there's seedy but necessary Oppenheimer Park, and the album closes with a look at the fall of Hastings Street, from its glory days of The Smiling Buddha and the Lux to its current dangerous alleys.

Some of the album's most interesting moments come in the two traditional Salish tunes, "Grandmother Song" and "Owl Mountain". Wallace explains that "[people in the gold rushes] spent a lot of time in Salish territories and they...would have heard the Grandmother Song echoing through the mountains and would have heard Owl Mountain sung by the elders as they traveled through the towns." The songs are traditional, but arranged in a contemporary fashion, which makes them instantly bridge new and old worlds.



Russell Wallace

"Owl Mountain" has a cool new jazz vibe, showing mature instrumental talent, also reflected in "Blue Eagle" which has a slick bassline and a terrific riff from a class, Miles Davis-style muted trumpet.

The real highlight of the album, instrumentally, lyrically and vocally comes on the excellent "Down by the River". Wallace sounds like a young Gordon Downie, the lyrics are cutting and starkly beautiful. The whole package is tied up with a fiery electric slide guitar, played aptly by Steve Dawson.

Great music like the tunes on *Through the Cracks* is new and exciting, blending two worlds together in a modern light, showing us what we could lose, through the cracks.

A regular contributor to PRRB, Paul Falardeau studies English and Biology at UFV. Arts and Life editor for The Cascade newspaper, he's also a DJ and programmer for CIVL radio. He lives in Aldergrove, BC.

Through the Cracks
Russell Wallace
Mount Currie, BC
Red Planet Records
2007, 41:01 minutes running
time

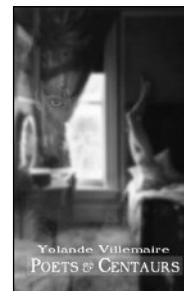
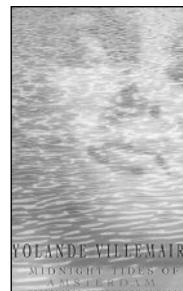
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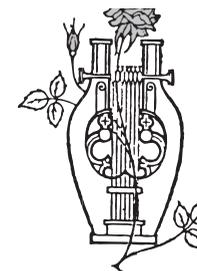
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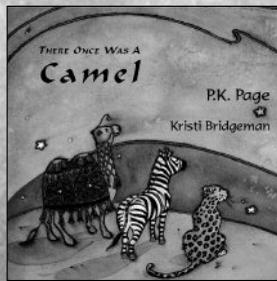
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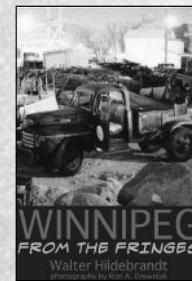


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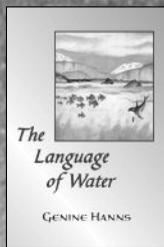


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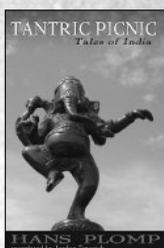
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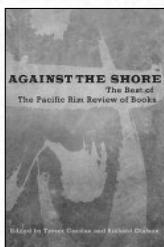
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