

Boyd, William - *Any Human Heart*

I watched the PBS mini-series of the same title and *had* to tackle the book. A nice read. Boyd divides novel into nine journals spanning his life (1906-198?) plus an introduction and epilogue. The journals are sophisticated, as one would expect for a writer's journals to be—so sophisticated that he refers to his own journals.

Carlson, Richard and Joseph Bailey - *Slowing Down To the Speed Of Life*

I enjoyed this book because it dovetailed with my own therapy and meditation practices. I will want to re-read it at some point, to keep certain points in mind.

1. Mental Health
2. Living in the Moment
3. Process/Analytical mode vs. Free-flowing/Reflective Mode of Thinking
4. Process Mode: ALL VARIABLES ARE KNOWN
5. Free-flow thinking is for dealing with the UNKNOWN (like writing a story or novel)
6. Raise Our Level of Understanding
7. Healthy Thinking is Natural to All of Us (44)

1. Listening
2. Seeing wisdom in Not Knowing
3. Faith in Free-flow Thinking
4. Put problems on the backburner and your mind will often solve them (72).

Simpson, M.S. - *Kabuki In a G String*

Very poorly written, particularly the last one-fourth or so, where Simpson writes very hurriedly to finish the book. He places the novel in Lubbock, Texas (the only reason I read the book), and he gets the dialogue all wrong. Most West Texans don't say ". . . over to Houston . . ." They do say, however, "fixin' to." Simpson didn't have one "fixin' to" in the book. "Y'all" is hardly ever used in the second person singular. And if you do use the term it's usually a hardy "all y'all." Simpson may have lived here for several years while he earned an advanced degree, but he learned very little about the local culture, local lingo.

Trevor, William - *My House In Umbria*

More substance than even the film, which I enjoyed very much. I hope I can write this well into my seventies and eighties, if I write at all.

Williams, Tennessee - *Memoirs*

I must read his story, "The Mattress By the Tomato Patch."

“That goal is just to somehow capture the constantly evanescent quality of existence” (84).

“Also it adheres to the valuable edict of Aristotle that a tragedy must have a unity of time and place and magnitude of theme” (168).

On “structure”:

“I realize how very old-fashioned I am as a dramatist to be so concerned with classic form but this does not embarrass me, since I feel that the absence of form is nearly always, if not always, as dissatisfying to an audience as it is to me. I persist in considering *Cat* my best work of the long plays because of its classic unities of time and place and the kingly magnitude of *Big Daddy*. Yet I seem to contradict myself. I write so often of people with no magnitude, at least on the surface. I write of “little people.” But are there “little people”? I sometimes think there are only little conceptions of people. Whatever is living and feeling with intensity is not little and, examined in depth, it would seem to me that most “little people” are living with that intensity that I can use as a writer.

Was *Blanche* a “little person”? Certainly not. She was a demonic creature, the size of her feeling was too great for her to contain without the escape of madness. And what about *Miss Alma*? Was she a “little person”? Certainly not. Her passion gave stature to the drama as it does to *Lee Hoiby’s opera*” (234-5).

I only read five books this year, a record low for me. But when one considers that I not only finished a novel, I also took three months to set up a Web site. Hopefully, I’ll make up for lost time in 2012. RJ

The New Yorker Readings

[Each year I read every short story in the magazine and post brief profiles at my blog. Since this task is the equivalent of reading perhaps three collections in a year, or 250,000 words, I'm electing to list them below in a special section of my reading for 2011.]

Steven Millhauser, "Getting Closer," *New Yorker*, January 3, 2011.

In somewhat of a prose poem, Millhauser describes a boy's entire approach—in slow motion—to life as he *approaches* the banks of the Housatonic River to jump in and join his sister. At the end there exists a break in which concrete language concerned with the physical surroundings shifts to a well-earned dip into the abstract: the "getting closer" to the river is a metaphor for his own passage through time, the passage of all his loved ones, a closer-ness to death. ". . . ending is everywhere. It's right there in the beginning. Under the shining skin of the world, everything's dead and gone" (61).

Louise Erdrich, "The Years of My Birth," *New Yorker*, January 10, 2011.

A twin girl is rejected by her birth mother on a 1950s Chippewa reservation but is then adopted by a different family. She later has the opportunity to save her twin brother's life by giving him a kidney. There exists so much that Erdrich tells in so little space, the picayune matters that people focus on: assuming a child is *retarded* because she is misshapen at birth; how one mother can reject, another accept; how one twin can always be aware of her doppelgänger but not he of her (not in a positive way). Their lives are a metaphor for the paths we as individuals can take. We can accept or reject. Love or hate. Nourish or starve. Our twin Linda Wishkob chooses to accept, to love even when others reject or hate her. Why? That is the question one is left with at the end of the story. These abrupt literary endings are tough to take at times, but how else could Erdrich conclude this story?

Amos Oz, "The King of Norway," *New Yorker*, January 17, 2011.

Zvi Provisor's only social intercourse is to read and announce bad news to the kibbutz where he lives. He briefly forms a relationship with Luna Blank, but when she literally touches him, he breaks off seeing her. My main complaint with this story is its POV, which is ostensibly in first person (one or two pronouns tell me so), but largely it is related in the third person—establishing what, a grander than usual sort of omniscience, like Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*? Is it worthy of such elevation?

Hisham Mattar, "Naima," *New Yorker*, January 24, 2011.

Elegant prose.

Alice Munro, "Axis," *New Yorker*, January 31, 2011.

This is a simple story in some ways, but like the Frontenac Axis existing beneath the earth, it has a long history that exists largely under the surface, as well. I love Ms. Munro's writing. Her stories are gems, absolutely perfect in every way. Perhaps that is the feature that "bothers" me about them, if that is the right term. She is in such great control that there are contingencies for even the hardest to believe incident—as if saying, "I dare you to find the flaw in this story." Sometimes, it seems, also, that the territory she is covering is too large for a short story. Why am I so hard

on her? I don't know. Such criticism comes from my gut, is all I can say.

Tessa Hadley, "Honor," *New Yorker*, February 7, 2011.

Stella recalls the death of a male cousin, how it unfolds among all her weird relatives.

Mary Gaitskill, "The Other Place," *New Yorker*, February 14 and 21, 2011.

Episodic story of a man who early on becomes aware of how his sexual desire is tied to the wish to murder a young woman. In the end, you're so relieved when, through nearly killing one, the old sexuality of his youth suddenly dissolves away.

Saïd Sayrafiezadeh, "Paranoia," *New Yorker*, February 28, 2011.

Multi-layered story of Dean and his friendship with an illegal alien from Chile, one that only a recent immigrant would know well enough to share in this manner.

David Foster Wallace, "Backbone," *New Yorker*, March 7, 2011.

A boy, in an effort to kiss every square inch of his body, goes too far and injures his back. The story is interesting, and I can see why the late Wallace has so many followers, but there exists an emotional distance that I find disconcerting.

Robert Coover, "Going For a Beer," *New Yorker*, March 14, 2011.

A man goes out for a beer and lives an entire life, and the story ends with said man having his beer in the same game room bar where the story begins. It is difficult for me to feel anything on behalf of the character. Perhaps I don't know enough about him.

Ben Marcus, "Rollingwood," *New Yorker*, March 21, 2011.

Mather is a "stud" with weekend "custody" of his one and a half year-old son, whose mother (with actual custody) disappears for more than a week and then acts as if she's done nothing wrong upon return. Mather is a weenie of a character you despise for not standing up to his ex, for not loving the boy enough, for not having a substantive job that merits a real desk, for working in such a bleak urban setting he doesn't even know (or care) that he has been fired. And yet, you like him, too, because on occasion, you've been a weenie, too. Definitely one of those "refined and tentative" male characters that John Gardner speaks of. Still. Today.

Haruki Murakami, "U.F.O. in Kushihiro," *New Yorker*, March 28, 2011.

A 1995 earthquake causes Komura's wife to divorce him. As a distraction he delivers a package to a remote part of Japan. I don't care for the fact that this story has been previously published in 2001 and that the magazine, following the recent earthquakes in Japan, pulls it out like a precious diamond, once again acting out a more contemporary story/writer, to satisfy some need to be topical.

Ramona Ausubel, "Atria," *New Yorker*, April 4, 2011.

Hazel becomes pregnant by way of a rape (I believe) and imagines the baby is an atria (among other animals). This story is uniquely simple and yet vibrant with complexities. Ausubel takes an all-too-familiar story for young American girls and tells a different tale. Hazel is duly rebellious, but life punishes her for it. As the ba-

by develops inside her, she imagines it to be a variety of animals. Even as she views the actual baby, she ultimately sees it as a baby seal. One believes she's about to drown it with a mop full of soapy water (accidentally), but the baby seal "coughs" and one realizes it now lives. Hazel offers her breast to the baby, and, like the infamous scene from Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, it is a profoundly simple act that needs no explication. Ausubel is a talented young writer who will go far. Or not.

Keith Ridgway, "Goo Book," *New Yorker*, April 11, 2011.

A man who robs people and drives for a hoodlum is cornered by police to spy on their behalf.

Ludmilla Petrushevskya, "A Withered Branch," *New Yorker*, April 18, 2011.

A writer-hitchhiker travels throughout eastern Europe. The emotional climax of the story seems to occur when an entirely different woman loses her whole family to an apartment fire. What seems to me like a rather truncated and underdeveloped story must be a fully nuanced one to the Russian reader.

Thomas McGuane, "The Good Samaritan," *New Yorker*, April 25, 2011.

Szabo injures his shoulder and hires Barney, a temp, to fill in on his "ranch." Barney insinuates himself into Szabo's life and winds up stealing not only an Russell painting worth \$1,000,000, but stealing a loved one from him, as well.

Sam Lypsyte, "Deniers," *New Yorker*, May 2, 2011.

This is a long story, covering many years in which Mandy loses her mother to an affair she has with a man representing a company that wishes to build a service station down the block. Drugs. Ballet. AA. Significant stories, it seems, have significant impetus, in this case the holocaust, a subject that never loses its resonance as it echoes throughout and over the generations like radio waves. It seems to trump, out-trump, all significant stories. I'm serious. Mandy's father's tragedy, his denial of it, in fact, continues the resonance throughout Mandy's life. The more he denies, the louder the message. Mandy can't perhaps feel the heat of the ovens directly, but she does sense their evil effects like ash floating down to rest on her arms. Reading this story with intense interest, I am not disappointed: each section washes back and forth across the life of this family like chapters of a novel. Witty. Dark. Witty *and* dark.

Donald Antrim, "He Knew," *New Yorker*, May 9, 2011.

Stephen and his wife Alice, drugged, amble all around NYC for a few hours. I enjoy the time I spend reading the story but have trouble sensing its significance.

Michael Ondaatje, "The Cat's Table," *New Yorker*, May 16, 2011.

A young boy travels from Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) to London on the Oronsay, a ship with 600 passengers, and encounters a number of people who influence his life. Sensory detail (even if tone is a bit distant) draws the reader in from the very first paragraph. The young boy, at the beginning of the tale, is heavily impressionable, has a crush on an older girl he knows from school, becomes aware of certain treacheries taking place among the adults on board—and emerges a bit smarter by the end of the voyage. Ondaatje is a writer who creates airtight, yet layered, multi-

faceted stories that unfold naturally—as if he just now decided to hold forth. Yet, this story is like a novel in terms of its number of characters and their inevitable interrelatedness. The cat’s table, indeed: a story full of people located far from the influence of those sitting at the captain’s table.

Ron Rash, “The Trusty,” *New Yorker*, May 23, 2011.

A prison trusty meets a young woman and together they plan an escape from rural North Carolina to Ashville, but one of them betrays the trust one places with the other.

Kate Walbert, “M & M World,” *New Yorker*, May 30, 2011.

A *New Yorker* story is subtle, nuanced, almost effortless to write, it would seem, like this one. Walbert weaves seamlessly through time with her two daughters, and ex-husband, to portray the utter isolation that contemporary motherhood can, at times, saddle one with.

Tessa Hadley, “Clever Girl,” *New Yorker*, June 6, 2011.

A girl moves with her mother and stepfather to suburban Bristol, England, and there she discovers her own worth. Trees are a simple metaphor for a complex reality. “. . . how they both existed and did not exist” (67). And yet the metaphor does not scream at you. The story exists away and apart from the metaphor. Lovely, how the physics problem at the end of the story unfolds for the girl, as an accident—the result of spilled coffee. An epiphany occurs. She *knows* she is clever.

George Saunders, “Home,” *New Yorker*, June 13 and 20, 2011.

A young man returns from war and is at odds with his family and society but in unusual ways. A great anti-war story for our time—isn’t it? With Saunders I never know for sure. “Thanks for your service” seems like dark satire, words that are so sincere yet through overuse lose their original earnestness. The repetition of the sentence, litany-like, cheapens its meaning with each utterance—contributes to the darkness, demonstrates how superficial people are concerning those who have been to war. Mikey is one of those who has been away. He has a definite feeling of not being appreciated. Is that because he’s been involved in some kind of Mi Lai atrocity? Saunders withholds more than he releases—always making the reader guess. And yet not. All is out in plain sight. All you have to do is see it. Stupid. (I am referring to myself.)

Jeffrey Eugenides, “Asleep in the Lord,” *New Yorker*, June 13 and 20, 2011.

A young man travels to India to volunteer in Mother Teresa’s hospital, and there he seeks religious meaning. This story will be selected blindly for the *Best American Short Stories* series. I’m sure of it. Tone is everything. Distance. Not as in withdrawal, but distance as in emotional stance. The writer is merely reporting, is not participating in Mitchell’s epiphanies. Religion is a touchy subject to broach in fiction, but Eugenides carries it off—the reader is asking the same questions as Mitchell, and receiving essentially the same answer. We know. We don’t know. We’ve all been in that place where we could aid someone in great pain and walk instead out into the sunshine to catch a boat, plane, taxi to some place far away, where we might pray the Jesus prayer—a considerably easier task.

Lauren Groff, "Above and Below," *New Yorker*, June 13 and 20, 2011.

A young woman is kicked out of graduate school and joins the ranks of the homeless in Florida—a lovely but harsh story. It wanders like the life of someone who is homeless, rambling from a tiny bit of comfort to the next. At first, the reader wonders why the nameless protagonist doesn't just get a job (as she ultimately does, rather by accident). She has an education, after all. But that is also the point the author makes. The woman is so terribly seized by an inertia derived from losing her dreams that having an education seems irrelevant. She becomes paralyzed, cannot change her circumstances. She's seen life from above and below.

Alice Munro, "Gravel," *New Yorker*, June 27, 2011.

Winding back and forth through time, this is a story of a young girl who drowns in a gravel pit, as told by a younger sister who witnesses the event. As always, with Munro, a satisfying read. And perfect; it's perfect.

Julian Barnes, "Homage To Hemingway," *New Yorker*, July 4, 2011.

A writer and professor of creative writing tells three stories of his career, based on the triptych-like structure of Hemingway's "Homage to Switzerland." "He tried to write it all down, simply and honestly, with clean moral lines. But, still, nobody wanted to publish it" (66). Ah, that is the rub.

Ruth Praver Jhabvala, "Aphrodisiac," *New Yorker*, July 11 and 18, 2011.

This is a tale of the long life of a man who returns to India from England (after receiving his education) to live in the large home of his family. I love how Jhabvala is able to span a life-time in 7,000 words. I love how she uses "small" things as metaphor: the stinking heads of animals to represent the stink of an ancient and rotting India. Naima, too, is an agent of that old India, ugly as she is, luring Kishen (not sexually) back to India again and again—literally tearing up his return ticket to England and with it all its treasured civilities. Even to the end, he is under her spell, as they decide who, of the two, will rip up his airline ticket to London. He is paralyzed by a life he both loves and depletes.

Robert Coover, "Matinée," *New Yorker*, July 25, 2011.

This story is a fantasy of a man and a woman who go to the cinema to live out their lives—a tour de force of a sort but one whose virtuosity leaves the reader cold with the machinations of its fanciness-smanciness.

Justin Torres, "Reverting To a Wild State," *New Yorker*, August 1, 2011.

This is the back-story of two lovers (told in sections III, II, I, and 0). I love how Torres numbers the present section with a "III," further back, "II," etc. until one reaches "0". At "0" the reader encounters a flashback of how Sal and Nigel begin. It's the way one *should* think of chronology. Zero *is* the beginning, after all. I love the seemingly disparate parts, yet in the end (or beginning), one sees the white kitten that is to become the fat, deaf cat noted in the beginning (or the end)—a symbol of the couple's tattered, deafened, ten-year relationship. Any number of gay (and straight) couples break up in a few years, but probably far more stay together—like this couple—too frightened or unimaginative to do anything else.

Ben Marcus, "What Have You Done," *New Yorker*, August 8, 2011.

Man travels to Cleveland alone for a family reunion. Love how Marcus hits all the right notes of the reunion without striking the chord too hard.

Yosef Hayim Yerulshami, "Gilgul," *New Yorker*, August 15 and 22, 2011.

A man returns to a seer in Tel Aviv to unravel the mysteries of his life. There seems to exist flaws in pacing, development of the characters.

David Means, "El Morro," *New Yorker*, August 29, 2011.

A man and woman meander through the Southwest United States. I love the dreaminess of this story as it drifts from one narrative to another—creating one cumulative narrative. I love the metaphor of the long-range attack, whether it be the hawk (with his eyes closed) or the friendly missile that kills one of the character's brother in Iraq. A great depth of knowledge and feeling imbues this story—not just the usual sympathy one feels for Native Americans—but depth in the young white woman, the native women rejected in the end. All have a deep dark sad story to reveal.

Haruki Murakami, "Town of Cats," *New Yorker*, September 5, 2011.

A young man visits father in another town, seeking also to find out why his mother leaves when he is a boy.

Yi Mun-Yol, "An Anonymous Island," *New Yorker*, September 12, 2011.

A young woman goes to a village to teach and is confronted by an "imbecile" with whom she eventually has sex. Compared to American writers (who are criticized for it), Murakami seems to *tell* too much, things that the reader can see for herself.

Ann Beattie, "Starlight," *New Yorker*, September 19, 2011.

This story is an imaginative recreation of the Nixons' post-Watergate life. What draws Beattie to these banal people? They seem, in many ways, the least human of all such lionized couples. Each recognizable element of the Nixons' story is like hearing the pings of xylophone keys—even, expected, and dull.

Callan Wink, "Dog Run Moon," *New Yorker*, September 26, 2011.

A young man "liberates" a dog from a painful captivity, and the owner comes after both. This is very mature work for a twenty-four year-old writer. I love the pacing, the structure, how Wink carefully feeds us one bit of the story at a time, a flashback when he needs to tell us something. I love his grasp of the physical world, how the story is deeply rooted in the environment. I love how each word follows the other as if there is no other possible way to relate the narrative. I love how a world that can break into violence at any minute remains calm. I love Wink's metaphors, particularly the one about the frozen river: the secret life beneath its surface. He delivers a quiet, non-violent ending filled with longing. Another young writer that will go far. Or not.

Thomas McGuane, "The House On Sand Creek," *New Yorker*, October 3, 2011.

A man and wife take jobs in an isolated town in the West, and the wife abruptly

leaves for eastern Europe, only to return with a baby whose skin is darker than her husband's. This may be perhaps one of the least original stories of the year (given the multi-cultured nature of contemporary society), but McGuane's characterization is lovely, nevertheless.

David Long, "Oubliette," *New Yorker*, October 10, 2011.

A mother who treats a daughter poorly later dies of Huntington's disease. **"Nathalie would begin the never-ending task of not forgetting her mother" (119).** Hm.

Eugene O'Neill, "Exorcism," *New Yorker*, October 17, 2011.

In this one-act play (that excludes yet another contemporary and LIVING writer), a young man who tries to kill himself is saved, and it changes his view of life. Why does the magazine include such a great man's juvenilia? There is nothing wrong with the play—it is fascinating—but why give valuable space that might be used for a living writer to a 123 year-old ghost, who magnificently wrote plays far more noteworthy than this one?

Caitlin Horrocks, "Sun City," *New Yorker*, October 24, 2011.

A granddaughter travels to Arizona to close out the estate of her grandmother and suspects her grandmother, too, is gay. Well crafted, complex, unfolding like petals of a rose. Second of two gay characters for the year 2011. [Two, two out of 49 stories!]

George Saunders, "Tenth of December," *New Yorker*, October 31, 2011.

A man attempts to commit suicide, but at the same time has the opportunity to save a young boy. This is perhaps the most emotional story by Saunders I've ever read. Yet, of course, he maintains absolute control over said emotion(s). Saunders may be the most mischievous writer I've ever read, as well. He so enjoys playing with the language. And yet it is never obscure, this playfulness. The reader follows him down each and every turn of the story.

Tessa Hadley, "The Stain," *New Yorker*, November 7, 2011.

Marina works as a nurse and housekeeper for an old man, and he becomes overly attached to her. There is too much easily written narrative, not enough dialogue.

Steven Millhauser, "Miracle Polish," *New Yorker*, November 14, 2011.

A man buys a bottle of miracle polish, and when he shines a mirror he sees the contents of the mirror more clearly. At the end, after his marriage has been destroyed by the effects of such honesty, the man awaits the frumpy old man to return and sell him another bottle of miracle polish. But some events are singular, will never be repeated. One senses this is just such an event.

Sam Lypsyte, "The Climber Room," *New Yorker*, November 21, 2011.

Lypsyte is an excellent writer. But the end is jolting—Tovah's diatribe, where she finally unloads (in the presence of all people, Randy Goat) her feminist polemic. It doesn't seem to work.

Alice Munro, "Leaving Maverly," *New Yorker*, November 28, 2011.

Munro makes sly reference to the magazine: "She used to live for her magazines, which were all serious and thought-provoking but with witty cartoons she laughed at. Even the ads for fur and jewels had made her laugh, and he hoped still, that they would revive her" (68).

César Aira, "The Musical Brain," *New Yorker*, December 5, 2011.

When the narrator is a child, his family visits the Musical Brain, but the story is much more complex and convoluted to write about in one sentence. Aira's method of "writing forward" instead of revising (c.f. Wikipedia) may instead be a form of deus ex machina. And laziness, perhaps. Who, of us, after all, likes to revise? What a bore.

Nathan Englander, "What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank," *New Yorker*, December 12, 2011.

The holocaust's fires continue to nibble at the heels of its survivors' descendants. Guilt is handled in new ways: moving to Israel, drinking heavily, smoking your son's dope. The two men whose tattooed numbers are so close together in sequence could care less about the significance. [These two have to have been young children in the early 1940s, because most survivors are now dead from a fairly seasoned old age.]

Margaret Atwood, "Stone Mattress," *New Yorker*, December 19 and 26, 2011.

While on a trip to the Arctic, an older woman recognizes a man who ruined her life in high school, and she sets out to murder him—an act that the reader is only too happy to see her accomplish. As in much of her writing, Atwood's story appeals to a dark place in the psyche and asks the reader to accompany her—and why not? It's only fantasy. All people dream of offing someone who has bitterly wronged them in high school, college, early in their careers before they've hardened to the world's ways. And then with age people soften. But not Verna. Verna carries a grudge to her dying day, and who can blame her? "Bob" takes her virtue, ruins her and plans to take her again as an older woman! So what choice has she but to heave a large rock against his head and put him to bed on a stone mattress (or until he is discovered by someone on the next Arctic field trip)? Yes, to the reader it's satisfying that Verna gets away with it—so far—and if she doesn't get away with it, would she care? In prison, Verna would be satisfied that she has avenged her own honor—to her dying day she would be satisfied beyond measure.