

Beattie, Ann - *Mrs. Nixon: A Novelist Imagines a Life*

In its September 19, 2011 issue, *The New Yorker* published Beattie's story, "Starlight." At the time I wrote in my blog: "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."

After reading *Mrs. Nixon*, I don't feel quite the same way. Perhaps the book gives a wider range to Beattie's motivation for writing about Pat (Thelma) Ryan Nixon. In the chapter entitled "My Meeting with Mrs. Nixon," Beattie speaks of having met Mrs. Nixon and daughter Tricia at a D.C. department store while she and her mother were also shopping. Ann and Mrs. Nixon tried on the same pair of shoes at one point. "Every salesperson in the area was pretending not to notice the Nixons. Mrs. Nixon sat with her coat folded on a chair next to her and shopping bags on top of it. Her daughter sat on the other side, with her coat on the chair next to her. The coats and packages were blockades, in case anyone wanted to plop down and visit. My mother was not even sneaking looks; she feigned interest in a mannequin being dressed in the lingerie department" (135).

I sense that Beattie's entire interest in Mrs. Nixon was spawned from that one *observation*. Though they chatted, I can't think one could say she actually met, was actually presented to the First Lady of the United States; it was more of a chance encounter, I should think. At any rate Beattie writes of Pat Nixon with a great sense of speculative interest. She never interviewed the woman; she only takes factual information from sources the rest of us could have read.

What might make this book interesting (to writers especially) is that Beattie uses it as a springboard for teaching creative writing. She cites poet Louise Gluck's words: "Critical assault of a finished work is painful in that it affirms present self-contempt. What it cannot do, either for good or ill, is wholly fuse, for the poet, the work and the self . . . the ostensibly exposed self, the author, is, by the time of publication, out of range, out of existence, in fact" (262).

So glad to hear someone else affirm what I've felt upon finishing a story or novel.

In "The Writer's Feet Beneath the Curtain," Beattie discusses the art of writing dialogue. "Predictable dialogue condescends to the reader and makes us yearn for what we hear between the lines; paradoxically, bad dialogue sharpens our sense of what really might be said, what *is* being said under the surface and off the page, at first indistinct but building to a crescendo so that finally we're happier sinking under the surface instead of floating at the top, stranded with characters who bore us" (152).

Mm. Right words in the wrong book? I wonder if this volume isn't the fulfillment

of a contractual agreement: so many books delivered to the publisher in so many years. And this is what Beattie—the woman who has had forty-nine stories published in the *New Yorker* since 1974—comes up with? Mm.

Beattie ends with this nugget (and she may be so right): “You’ll be a different you if your words are ever published, and there will be less and less possibility of ever connecting with them in the same way. You erase yourself every time you write” (266).

Browne, Renni & Dave King - *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers: How to Edit Yourself into Print*

I didn’t believe I would like this book, but the authors offered reminders to me on a number of issues: I should read my work aloud because clunky prose readily presents itself by doing so, plus I can hear repeated words, wrong or bad word choices, especially in dialogue. I should elide all “ly” adverbs from speech attributions (he said warily) and most adverbs and adjectives. The goal is to select strong nouns and verbs and let them do most of the talking. Hard work.

The authors provide a great checklist before sending out a ms. One’s book may still need an editor, but at least my ms. will be cleaner, more professional. The real editor will have less to do and since many editors today no longer edit, one will be ahead of the game.

Cheever, John - *The Wapshot Chronicle*

I used to sneer at the Library of America covers when I saw them at the bookstores: black with the author’s photograph featured across the cover, a signature font used to depict the author’s name. But having read Cheever’s *Wapshot* novels for the second time in three years, I find the editions to be enlightening, well-edited, and a bargain. For \$31.50 you get all five of Cheever’s novels: \$6.30 apiece, three-and-a-half cents a page. Each LOA edition offers so much more: fine editing, in this case by Bruce Bailey, noted Cheever scholar and author of *Cheever: A Life* (see my reading journal for 2009); a chronology of Cheever’s life; and notes that gloss Cheever’s allusions to past events, historical and literary.

Cheever uses a very sly but clever point-of-view in which readers believe they are witnessing a third-person narrative until they see the word “we” and it shifts to first-person plural for a sentence or two: “Looking back at the village *we* might put *ourselves* into the shoes of a native son (with a wife and family in Cleveland) coming home for some purpose—a legacy or a set of Hawthorne or a football sweater—and swinging through the streets in good weather what would it matter that the blacksmith shop was now an art school?” (16). Funny that Cheever should mention Hawthorne—because he is another author who employs this method (in *The Scarlet Letter*), as if the speaker is the author peeking out from his sheaves to draw us in, or is it an unnamed resident of St. Botolphs luring readers into this long, long tale that will cover two tomes before it is finished? Readers feel as if

they are in cahoots with Cheever, peering over a valley to see what the story is all about. And it's quite effective.

The thirty-seven chapters seem, at times, to fit together incidentally. The novel is largely linear though *some* chapters seem out of order. Cheever might write about one character—Honora, the spinster cousin, for example—and then not mention her until many chapters later. She appears throughout both novels, the child of a long lineage of Wapshots, but by the end (of *The Wapshot Scandal*) an eccentric dowager who's time to die has arrived. Cheever seems to have a feel for the whole of humanity, never judging his characters—almost as if he himself has at one time or another been inside the skin each one of them. Male. Female. Old. Young. Smart. Thick. Heterosexual. Homo. Sexually active. Not. Drunk. Sober.

Cheever, John - *The Wapshot Scandal*

This novel seems to be more developed in many ways than the *Chronicle*, Cousin Honora particularly. Seems that for years, both as sort of a Libertarian and as one who doesn't care, she fails to pay her federal income taxes. In Chapter XVII she solves the problem by withdrawing all her money from the bank and fleeing to Italy. The chapter is a pleasant stand-alone narrative that makes a great short story, one of Cheever's greatest gifts. On board she befriends a young man who turns out to be a stowaway. When she catches him stealing her money, she tries to talk him out of it. When that action fails, she strikes him on the head with a lamp and drags him into the corridor. She leaves to find help, but when she returns the man's body has disappeared. She's positive she's killed him, but later as she debarks the ship, she spots him with another of the ship's matrons. The chapter begins and ends with Honora blowing the ship's circuit breakers by plugging in her antiquated curling iron. Is Cousin Honora too much for the world, blowing circuits wherever she goes, forging her way as does an icebreaker in the north Atlantic? Seems so, and such a quality makes her a delicious character (she might even be a distant relative of Strout's Olive Kitteridge discussed below).

As the *Chronicle* was otherwise about Leander Wapshot and his wife Sarah, the *Scandal* is largely about their sons, Moses and Coverly, and Moses's wife Melissa and Coverly's wife Betsey. The novel seems to limn the Wapshots as typical New Englanders (mostly British or Scottish stock): aloof, fiercely independent, and as eccentric as they come. Yet the Wapshots are softies, too, never really hurting or maiming one another or their fellow citizens. Cheever can't seem to kill off his characters unless they die of natural causes, as Cousin Honora does near the close of the novel, returning to the United States—knowing she, as the daughter of missionaries, has lived quite a fulfilling life. The novel ends with the reappearance of the first-person narrator, and I can't for the life of me figure out who is speaking. Cheever? An anonymous Botolphsian? God? Someone tell me, please.

Danza, Tony - *I'd Like to Apologize to Every Teacher I Ever Had*

I didn't want to like this book. What could Danza learn from one short year in the

classroom, when I'd spent nearly thirty there? I first became aware of his book when the author, actor and star of *Taxi*, appeared for a reading on C-SPAN's Book-TV. He seemed a little cocky even as he spoke of how difficult the job of teaching English to tenth graders had been—and then as he continued, I learned his entire *raison d'être* was bound up in producing a reality show for the A&E Network. Oh. Danza didn't even read from his book but spoke extemporaneously of his nine-month stint (the producers later pulled the plug and Danza taught the second semester without cameras in the room). Maybe that was the trick, his willingness to remain in the classroom, that made me buy it—again on Kindle. What did I have to lose?

Well, I was pleasantly surprised with Mr. Danza's experiences. He may have worked harder than I did my first year of teaching back when I was but twenty-six. With a certain position of power and privilege, Danza seizes the opportunity to let the public know—what the rest of us who did it for a career can't necessarily—how stupendously difficult it is to be a good teacher.

I want to record some nuggets he uncovers.

This one is from a retired teacher at Tony's school, Philadelphia's Northeast High: "Seating chart. Make one up, use pencil. Do not rearrange chairs unless you are able to put them back neatly before the bell rings every day" (35).

How right this sage is. I, Mr. J., made up a new seating chart every six-weeks period, breaking up cliques that had been formed in the junior highs feeding into my school. It allowed me to learn pupils' names, all one hundred forty-four of them, rather quickly, as well. And you must always put the chairs back in the rows where you had them. Why? So that the next class can perceive that you're just as ready for them as you were the last.

"Others are kinder. They offer advice and tell me what they believe it takes to be a good teacher. 'You have to be prepared to play many roles,' says an older woman who's been teaching for decades. 'You have to be a mother, father, sister, brother, social worker, counselor, friend, and anything else they need.' They tell me some heart-wrenching stories about kids who've come to school hungry, or late because gunfire outside their bedroom kept them up all night, or who don't talk in class because of abuse *inside* their bedroom. They tell me about teachers almost adopting their students to keep them from falling into the abyss of foster care or homelessness. 'Adoption fantasy,' one man says, 'comes with the territory'" (48).

I never knew that's what that was called: all the years in which I could have taken home any number of kids if so allowed and if I'd had the resources to do so—the one(s) who captured my heart for no good reason at all.

"It's beginning to dawn on me just how much work teachers are besieged with *outside* the classroom. This, I think, is another thing that politicians and the media rarely mention" (49).

Aha. Forty hours working in the building. Another twenty at home grading essays until your eyes bleed. No one knows.

“Another paradox of education in America. They want the experienced teachers to retire and make room for new teachers they can pay less. Talk about your penny-wise” (73).

Mr. J adds another dimension to this paradox. Just when teachers are gaining all the wisdom, all the knowledge a lifetime can give them, when they could do the most good, like doctors or lawyers who’ve reached their stride—they finally have not the energy to continue. All the cogs and wheels of the public school machinery (it’s never really the students that tire you) have finally worn this fine individual to a pulp, and when the Big They offer you the lead parachute, you take it. (Gold, are you kidding?)

I could go on and on, but suffice it to say that Mr. Danza really gives his all to the job at Northeast High. He cries at the drop of a hat (both in and out of class). He tries new methods when others fail. He learns from his mistakes (and he makes, like most of us, a lot of them). He organizes field trips for his Philly kids to see a show on Broadway. He organizes a teacher talent show that energizes the faculty. He’s one of those sparks that every teaching staff needs, and then suddenly the year is ended. He is both devastated and relieved. Yes, when you reach that point in the year, you are both. You can’t wait for the summer to arrive. At the same time, you’ve spent 183 days watching your pupils grow and change, something you’ve had no small part in, and you don’t want it to be over—particularly if it’s been a great year.

Mr. Danza is asked over and over again if he’s going to come back next year. And each time he says, “I don’t know.” What a luxury. *I don’t know.*

Denby, David - *Great Books*

Over four hundred and fifty pages, this one took me a long time to read, but it was worth it. Denby, former *New York Times* critic and now *New Yorker* film critic, writes of his reading experiences when he audits a couple of literature classes he had taken at Columbia University in the early sixties. I read this book rather belatedly, as it was published in 1996, but it’s never too late to learn of someone’s love affair with literature. There are so many things I could talk about: the number of masterpieces that he and his colleagues read; the brilliance with which Denby writes of his feelings, his insights, his criticisms of the authors, the teachers, his fellow students (then and later).

Denby states here what I believe is the thesis of his book.

“Great literature, obviously, could not rescue anyone from so grievous a foreshortening of perspective. It was naïve and false on my part to think that the students would be rescued by Western classics. I knew perfectly well that great

books work on our souls only over time, as they are mixed with experience and transformed by memory and desire and many other books, great and small. At some time later, the perception of a ‘choice between freedom and sex’ would dissolve into absurdity. But for a while, the idea worked its mischief” (402).

His great experiment of attending classes as a forty-eight-year-old man that he had taken as an eighteen-year-old youth ends in the determination that personal growth is found partly through a lifetime of reading. We don’t just put these writers on the shelves after finishing school. We reread them again and again, these great books, and our lives are instructed by them, are informed by their eminence. From the Greeks to Virginia Woolf, to the Bible, we are taught and retaught the great lessons of human existence. Can we learn them and relearn them well enough to continue the species?

Egan, Jennifer - *A Visit from the Goon Squad*

This book was recommended to me by Carol Dawson, the woman from whom I took an “Editing Your Novel” workshop in the summer, when I asked her to name a contemporary novel that was nonlinear in structure.

I fell for Egan’s structure of this book. It’s almost like a story collection in which one character is both a major and a minor character, but in different chapters. The narrative is all out of order, much the way our minds work, and it’s up to the reader to put the narrative together. It’s not easy, but it’s fun. She has one chapter—Chapter Twelve, Great Rock and Roll Pauses—that’s written in the form of a flow chart. The novel, about the punk rock world of the eighties, seems genuine to those of us who know little about it. Kudos to Egan for earning all the awards of the year.

French, Alice - *Happy Birthday: Adjusting to Life’s Changes as Birthdays Keep on Coming*

Alice French is a friend who used to live in Lubbock, Texas. For years she worked as an on-air personality for KCBD-11, the NBC affiliate in town. She later developed the student-run cable TV station for the Lubbock Independent School District, as well as her own media firm. Her late husband, Rich Weaver, was head of the theatre department at Texas Tech University for many years. For the first three years of their retirement, they toured the U.S. in an RV, and Alice has many interesting tales to tell about their experiences. She now lives in Holiday Island, Arkansas—and has a beautiful view of the famed hills from her living room window.

Alice wrote her book, *Happy Birthday*, primarily for women over sixty. She did so as an outgrowth of several related activities. First, she solicited women in her study to answer various questions she posed by way of her blog. Second, she put together a number of groups from these women and asked them to meet her in home for further discussion. Utilizing these two rich sources of information, as well as her own life history, Alice offers alternatives to women over sixty, who

may feel that their lives are at a dead end. Faced with the reality that she and her friends could live another twenty or thirty years, Alice wishes to touch a broader community of women: women who may have had children who now are busy with their own lives and may not have much time for Grandma; women like Alice who had full and satisfying careers but now find themselves widowed and alone; women who are still healthy and strong and itching to learn new things, itching to be a part of a vibrant world.

French hates it when a young salesperson asks if she “knows how to work the Internet.” *Please, I once ran a cable station! I own every piece of smart ware I can get.* Alice and members of her group offer much good information, and the cheerful tone she maintains throughout is always tempered with a healthy dose of no-nonsense reality. When I was young, the elderly person I most admired was the one who kept on learning, kept making her life interesting. I’m thinking, in particular, of a woman named Naomi Hilburn, who, after her children were grown, returned to university at age fifty-five to become a visual artist. She moved from Lubbock, Texas to Taos, New Mexico. There she worked her last twenty plus years as an artist, making friends with, among others, the renowned abstract expressionist, Agnes Martin. I now place Alice French in this same category—a person creating for herself a new life from the ashes of her old one. And doing so with joy.

Gurba, Myriam - *Dahlia Season: Stories and a Novella*

When I investigated the possibility of sending my story collection to Manic D Press, their policy stated that they wouldn’t even consider your manuscript unless you “read one of our books and consider whether your submission is appropriate for our company. In your cover letter, please tell us which book you have read and what you thought about it. Be specific.” Since I included a “correction” sheet of all the typos I found in this book with my own submission, I’ll probably never hear from the editors, but I couldn’t help myself. I had to be honest.

Okay. Since it looked like Manic D is a LGBT press (though they don’t seem to state so anywhere), I selected this book because it is a collection of short stories. Sort of. Gurba includes four plus the novella—all totaling one hundred ninety pages. The pieces are engaging enough. They’re all written from the first-person POV of a young lesbian (not the same lesbian, though it seems like it). The stories seem like throat-clearing for the novella, which may contain the most substance. In “Dahlia Season,” a young woman finally figures out that she (might) have Tourette’s Syndrome. (One is never sure. Is it just a device for the character to gain attention and learn what people think of her?)

I admire Gurba’s courage for writing from a sexually active point of view. Sex ought to be considered a sixth sense, something a character experiences as fully as seeing and smelling, yet, particularly in literary fiction, it is often shunned by editors and publishers. Gurba gives honest but not cheap details, particularly in the narrator’s scene with Gabriella in “White Girls.” The narrator’s sexuality is tied to other kinds of sensuality; it’s not written to be titillating (no pun intended).

The novella, of course, works rather like a coda, which has introduced all of Gurba's images and themes: young misunderstood lesbians and how they cope with life.

Leavitt, David - *While England Sleeps*

Well, I did read the unexpurgated edition of the novel, having paid a princely sum for it at McMurtry's store in Archer City, Texas (having closed its doors forever at the end of 2012). From what I can determine, the fuss was over the fact that Leavitt had created a character that was too much like Spender, a "poet" instead of the "essayist" found in the revised edition (and a half a million details, I suppose). I still find the novel a little on the juvenile side (see my reading journal, 1997). The narrator portrays nearly every sexual experience he has in great detail—something I've been calling for in novels for a long time—but in places it almost seems gratuitous. Is that my age speaking? Sour pubic grapes, wishing I could do it as cleanly and as erotically?

Leeming, David - *Stephen Spender: A Life In Modernism*

I'd read about so many of Spender's contemporaries and their work—Isherwood, Auden, Wescott, the Sackville-Wests—and felt that I must now explore his life. By way of this biographer, Spender would seem to have been a quiet but self-proclaimed bisexual. In his young life, he was as active and promiscuous as his contemporaries, but later on after he married and had children, he (apparently) kept this part of his life under wraps. In the eighties writer David Leavitt used what Spender considered to be private information about him in Leavitt's novel, *While England Sleeps*, and Spender sued to get the novel amended. In response Leavitt rewrote parts of the book. I'd give anything to have a copy of the first edition (the remainders were all pulped by the publisher, so only a few were sold in the U.S.)¹. The biography, on the whole, seems cramped somehow. Leeming pursues a certain line of thinking and then stops. And yet, what he has written, appears to be well researched, accurate. He likes his subject without either being too fawning or too critical.

Some favorite passages:

"The people who most meant 'poet' to him were the great modernists of the generation before him. Spender, Auden, and their friends had since their first Oxford days been excited by the 'inclusion within new forms, of material which seemed ugly, anti-poetic, and inhuman.' Eliot in *The Waste Land* and Joyce in *Ulysses* revealed the 'modern life could be material for art.' Spender particularly admired the 'hard clear imagery,' the 'boldness of experimentation,' and the 'search for means of expressing complicated states of consciousness and acute sensibility' that he found in James, Joyce, Eliot, Woolf, Hemingway, the Sitwells, Pound, and his friend Herbert Read" (68).

¹ I later bought an original unpulped version of *While England Sleeps* and report

“[E.M.] Forster advised his younger friend on the revision of *The Temple* and shared with him his own unpublished homosexual novel, *Maurice*, which he revealed was ‘wish fulfillment’ rather than ‘autobiography.’ In spite of his keeping his private life ‘closeted,’ Forster was a better role model and adviser in connection with sexual matters than Spender’s other older-generation author confidants, Virginia Woolf and T.S. Eliot, who were both somewhat embarrassed by the open Hyndman relationship. During the troubles that would face Spender and especially Hyndman in the years to follow, Forster remained a faithful and supportive friend to both men” (83).

“Spender’s return to London at the end of the summer [1935] coincided with the publication of his collection of short stories, *The Burning Cactus*. Besides ‘The Burning Cactus,’ ‘The Dead Island,’ and ‘Two Deaths,’ the book included two autobiographical stories. ‘The Cousins’ is essentially a parable about a young Spender-like aesthete who chooses socialism and art over the life of his superficial bourgeois relatives, one of whom is a boy based on his cousin John Schuster, with whom he had been in love as an adolescent. ‘By the Lake,’ the rewriting of the early story Spender had shown to Auden and Isherwood at Oxford, is based on his sojourn in Switzerland before going up to the university. The hero of the story, who falls in love with a younger English companion, is a thinly veiled portrait of the young Spender. *The Burning Cactus* is marked by the psycho-erotic concerns of D.H. Lawrence’s work and by the mixture of poetry and prose that Virginia Woolf had suggested to Spender as an appropriate modern approach to fiction. The work is a modernist collection, which embodies something of the ‘destructive element’ discussed by Spender in his book of that name. The reader confronts in all of these stories lives that can best be understood against the background of a wasteland world of looming catastrophe. Spender dedicated *The Burning Cactus* to Tony Hyndman and W.H. Auden” (98).

“At Christmastime Christopher Isherwood came to London, and he and Stephen went bookshopping. But Christmas had become a chore: ‘This part of winter becomes every year more like a dark tunnel one enters about 15 December’” (185).

“Highlights of the visit were dinner with George Kennan, a Robert Frost reading, and lunch with J. Robert Oppenheimer. Oppenheimer, whom Spender had thought of primarily as one of the inventors of the atomic bomb, was surprisingly cultivated and interesting. He showed Spender his painting, especially a van Gogh he prized. He criticized the recent English-French-Israeli action in Suez, unlike Kennan, who had approved of it. Spender ‘had the impression that Oppenheimer examined whatever was said to him, and condemned what was superficial’” (199-200).

“Reading, he felt, was the ‘passive, receptive side of civilization without which the active and creative would be meaningless.’ It was the ‘immortal spirit of the dead realized within the bodies of the living.’ Reading, like writing, painting, and composing, was ‘sacramental’” (245).

Burning Cactus in TTU Library: PR6037
P47
B9
1971 (1936 in the Southwest Collection L.)

Maddow, Rachel - *Drift*

I made a number of notes (as well as using Kindle's handy yellow highlighter), but I fear they would interest only me, so I challenge you to consider the following passage from Maddow's book. "Not since the peace-time years between World War I and World War II,' according to a 2011 Pew Research Center study, 'has a smaller share of Americans served in the armed forces.' Half of the American public says it has not been even marginally affected by ten years of constant war" (202).

And yet I offer . . . haven't more than half of us been . . . *affected*? Haven't more than half of us known at least one family *affected* by the war, at least known of a soldier (even a friend of a friend) killed or disabled by the war? Haven't more than half of us known at least one person whose business has folded during this decade in which the war-induced deficit (along with other controllable factors) has crushed the economy?

In addition to demonstrating how the country has drifted to a new kind of warfare—distant, unaffecting of civilian life, almost unreal because it's kept out of the public eye—Maddow brings it to our attention how little U.S. citizens have at stake, apparently. Because our last two wars have been fought without a draft, without civilian sacrifice (except for, needless to say, the friends and relatives of over 4,500 men and women), without the approval of the civilian population who is paying and will continue to pay for these wars—we are a population that has drifted into war and will be less and less likely to drift out of it. My grandfather, my father, my uncles, my cousin all fought in various wars with mixed results. What will be the ultimate result of our decade of war? More strife or a well-earned peace?

My only criticism concerns Rachel Maddow's prose. Her writing is both elegant and pedestrian, at turns. It is elegant when she is making a point, employing "drift" as a fine extended metaphor throughout the book, articulating herself with a vocabulary that reflects her education. On the other hand, her prose sometimes reads as if she has dictated one of her evening presentations complete with single-word fragments, not to mention the word "busted." Okay, it's fine to opt for "busted" in informal usage or a context pertaining to police work (*The detective busted him on the spot.*), but in a book in which Maddow has gone to great lengths to be accurate and eloquent, might she please avoid using the word "busted?" A "busted fuel line" (230) could easily be transformed to a "broken fuel line," a "damaged fuel line." In another instance, "broke-down busted,

overgrown, spongy stairs,” (243) seems a bit like overkill—particularly in the context of describing the home Maddow and her partner are buying. Surely any editor over the age of forty—one who’s mastered grammar and composition—could catch these instances and elide them. Yea, perhaps I overreact.

McCourt, Frank - *Teacher Man*

I first read this book in 2010, a copy I borrowed from a friend. I was more impressed with it then than upon second reading; this time I read from a signed copy for which I paid one dollar less than the cover price. At the same time, I am perhaps taken with different ideas this reading. Consider the following:

“How I became a teacher at all and remained one is a miracle and I have to give myself full marks for surviving all those years in the classrooms of New York. There should be a medal for people who survive miserable childhoods and become teachers, and I should be first in line for the medal and whatever bars might be appended for ensuing miseries” (1). Amen.

“First day of your teaching you are to stand at your classroom door and let your students know how happy you are to see them. Stand, I say. Any playwright will tell you that when the actor sits down the play sits down. The best move of all is to establish yourself as a presence and to do it outside in the hallway. Outside, I say. That’s your territory and when you’re out there you’ll be seen as a strong teacher, fearless, ready to face the swarm. That’s what a class is, a swarm. And you’re a warrior teacher. It’s something people don’t think about. Your territory is like your aura, it goes with you everywhere, in the hallways, on the stairs and, assuredly, in the classroom” (40). All principals in America should read this passage to their teachers each year, twice maybe.

Obama, Barack - *Dreams from My Father*

I didn’t know what to expect. *A Harvard graduate, the editor of its esteemed Harvard Law Review, Mr. Obama should be a fine writer. He certainly has a great control of rhetorical devices in his orations.* But then I was completely bowled over by this book, and anyone who’s already had the privilege of reading it may understand why I’m so enthusiastic about it.

Mr. Obama’s control of the language is exceedingly good: his understated prose, his ability to delay resolution (novel-like), his exquisite use of figurative language, the emotional tones he strikes when he needs them. Perfection.

More important—always at the service of language—is the message he brings to the reader. Unlike many of us, he searches for answers to why he is the way he is: always asking questions of his mother, his maternal grandparents. Later, while visiting the Obama family in Kenya, asking his numerous relatives the questions that have confounded him his entire life (this is the summer before he is to attend Harvard Law School).

But the memoir is so much more. Considering that he writes the book *before* seeking elected office, one can trace a rather delicate line between his work as a community organizer (so sneered at by his opponents in 2008) and his chair in the oval office. If people should question his motives after four years of fighting for the common person, they should read this book. As a community organizer in the projects of Chicago, Mr. Obama becomes aware of the political machine that controls and diminishes the lives of poor people—anyone who is so consumed with life's ordinary difficulties that they have no idea how to fight the invisible but insidious powers that keep them oppressed. Mr. Obama gives people in the projects power over the machine by enabling them to stand up to city hall when they discover there is asbestos in their apartments. He works with churches, public schools, to help people enable themselves.

Again, the memoir is so much more than even these things. The two years he lives in Indonesia under the tutelage of a stepfather from whom he learns much. The correspondence courses his mother makes him study for, rising at four-thirty in the morning so that he can catch up with what he's lost in Indonesia. His life in Hawaii in which he could so easily become another dropout. His first two years at Occidental College. His last two years, his diploma earned from Columbia University. His grandfather Obama, a very bright man—though without formal education. His father, also very bright, receiving a degree from Harvard. So many places along the way of his youth, Mr. Obama could have been led astray, just another unfortunate lost to the ghetto—but because of loving relatives on both sides of his family, this man finds out what he needs to know so that he can carry on with his life, fulfill what it is that is expected of him. From his father he learns never to turn anyone away, giving money to his relatives (many who do not wish to work) until the elder Obama is broke. If Mr. Obama is concerned about the masses of our country, of the world, it is because he has learned such lessons—from his father.

But the memoir is also a history of inventing a life separate from his history, his father's. During his trip to Kenya, Mr. Obama visits with many of the elders of his family. After he listens to all their stories, near the end of the book—the emotional climax—he elects to be alone in the cemetery where his father is buried in an above-ground grave covered with tile:

“I dropped to the ground and swept my hand across the smooth yellow tile. Oh, Father, I cried. There was no shame in your confusion. Just as there was no shame in your father's before you. No shame in the fear, or in the fear of his father before him. There was only shame in the silence fear had produced. It was the silence that betrayed us. If it weren't for that silence, your grandfather might have told your father that he could never escape himself, or re-create himself alone. Your father might have taught those same lessons to you. And you, the son, might have taught your father that this new world that was beckoning all of you involved more than just railroads and indoor toilets and irrigation ditches and gramophones, lifeless instruments that could be absorbed into the old ways. You might have told him that these instruments carried with them a dangerous power, that they demanded a different way of seeing the world. That this power could be

absorbed only alongside a faith born out of hardship, a faith that wasn't new, that wasn't black or white or Christian or Muslim but that pulsed in the heart of the first African village and the first Kansas homestead—a faith in other people” (429).

The Republicans underestimated Mr. Obama's powers of persuasion in 2008 and again this year—after all that this man has accomplished—and there still exists doubt about what this man is capable of! Last year Mr. Obama closed a 60 Minutes interview with the words, spoken with no great effort, “I'm a pretty persistent son-of-a-gun.”

Those who continue to challenge him have no freaking idea. They may win the battle, but I have no doubt as to who will win the war.

O'Brien, Edna - *Saints and Sinners: Stories*

I love O'Brien's stories, and I know I shall return to them again and again because they do not unfold easily, necessarily, the first time. In “Shovel Kings,” a first-person narrator recalls another character (Rafferty) who then tells the story—rather by way of being interviewed by the narrator. Interesting approach, and I'm not sure why it is so effective. If Rafferty tells the story himself, alone, then perhaps there is inherent some sort of weakness in it. If the narrator alone tells about Rafferty without his input . . . then again the story is weak for it. I must remember this approach to see if it might work. It is rich; it is effective.

In “Black Flower,” I like how O'Brien develops the character in such a manner that is so facile—but isn't really. The black flower is a subtle metaphor for the man, but also the malaise existing between the two factions. “The petals were soft, velvety black, with tiny green eyes, pinpoints, and there was something both beautiful and sinister about it” (76).

“Old Wounds” is the story I like best in this collection. Love it, in fact. The lazy back-and-forthness through time, I suppose. The wounds, the healing of the wounds, the wounds again. Fight, make up. Like many families. Wounds. Heal.

Reid, Jan - *Let the People In: the Life and Times of Ann Richards*

I pre-ordered this book from the University of Texas Press, so I literally got it hot off the . . . following its release. I thought I knew pretty much everything there was to know about late governor of Texas, Ann Richards. Not true. I didn't realize she had four grown children, not just Cecile Richards, the current national president of Planned Parenthood. I didn't know that she had become quite bored and discouraged as a mother and homemaker and entered politics in order to challenge her mind. I didn't realize Ann had lived her last years in Manhattan. I didn't know that, following her divorce, she had had a long-term relationship with a male writer.

The biography by Jan Reid, a writer-at-large for *Texas Monthly* with many other

journalistic credits, as well as several books, is in many ways a memoir. Reid and his wife, “Darchy,” (Ann’s pronunciation of Dorothy) were close to Ann, and many parts of the book shift to first person after having established a certain objectivity in the third person. A little jarring at times, the point of view also offers a more personal view of Ann than a straight bio would have. As one can imagine, I found a number nuggets I found irresistible and share them here:

“[Ann] had a green rubber stamp that read ‘Bullshit.’ She used it often in her correspondence with Zabel. One day, she banged the stamp on a copy of a letter from a small-town district attorney who had written to a representative in support of a House bill that increased the fines in Texas for prostitution convictions: ‘The fine is still a maximum of two hundred dollars. It’s a simple matter of arithmetic to see that a prostitute only has to have eight customers in order to pay a two hundred dollar fine. She can generally do this or more in one night.’ Beside her ‘Bullshit’ stamp Ann wrote: ‘The insidious effects of inflation are felt in all segments of society. Eight tricks a night is damned hard work’” (79).

Richards’s son, Clark, said of his mother after she stopped drinking: “She was a champion and everybody looked up to her. I saw her that way, too. But part of me wanted to say I was upset about the way things went when I was a kid. That part of me didn’t have a chance to express itself. Any time I went to a group, I couldn’t say, ‘Godamighty, when I was young and Mom was drunk, she was *mean*.’

‘Nobody wanted to hear that story. Part of me had a need to say to somebody, ‘You know, that hurt.’ So this guy [his therapist in Japan] provided me with an opportunity eight thousand miles away, and I could say when I was young, Mom would sometimes have these rage attacks, and boy, they scared the hell out of me.’” (119).

Paul Burka, a Texas Monthly political writer, said of Ann after her gubernatorial win in 1988: “‘She has turned an office from one that’s supposed to be weak—the Texas governor has no direct control over state agencies and doesn’t even get to appoint a majority to their boards for at least two years—into one with muscle Ann Richards is a politician, in the true sense of the word—someone skilled in using the political process. She is the first governor since the fifties to push her agenda by testifying at legislative hearings’” (285).

“Engraved on the other side of Ann’s tombstone is a graceful line that I couldn’t hear when the helicopter was circling the Capitol that day of her inauguration, all those years ago: ‘Today we have a vision of a Texas where opportunity knows no race, no gender, no color—a glimpse of what can happen in government if we simply open the doors and let people in’” (426).

Ann Richards’s remarkable story is heightened by recalling the context in which it happened. You’d think now, not the nineties, would be when Ann might have attempted to open the doors of the Lone Star State’s government (if still alive), but because of the Republicans’ choke hold on the legislature and the state’s gerrymandered congressional districts that send representation to Washington,

Ann Richards couldn't get elected today any easier than the day she lost in 1994. Whether you were fond of her or not, you might like to learn more about one of the most colorful figures in Texas political history.

Richards, Donald W. - *Call Me Elmer*

Set in 1930s, this novel begins when a family on its way to the West accidentally leaves their eighteen-year-old son behind during a rest break. He did wander away from the car, and the reader might wonder why a family would leave a member behind and not return to the scene. The young man, Mathew Russell, continues to walk and finds a job working for Middleton Farms somewhere in the Southwest (the author never tells the state that Mathew came from nor the one where he winds up). He makes quite an impression on the owners of the farms, not to mention their granddaughter, Kathy, and works his way up in the organization. He is not afraid to speak his mind and actually helps the Middleton organization make some significant changes in its operations. Mr. Middleton, because he lost a son named Elmer, renames Mathew, and Mathew eventually adopts Elmer as his middle name. Taking the name is more significant than that because Mathew represents his old life, and Elmer represents his new life with the Middletons; using both makes his life a sort of amalgamation.

World War II interrupts Mathew Elmer's relationship with Kathy and the Middletons. He plays a significant part in the war effort, recruited precisely because of his agricultural background. At war's end he does return to Middleton Farms, and he and Kathy practically marry on the spot in 1945. While in England Mathew runs into a man whom he identifies as his brother. The man, however, denies any knowledge of having ever known Mathew. This event is a big disappointment to the reader. Perhaps a few well-placed flashbacks about his former life would have prepared the reader for that emotional slap in the face. And perhaps Mathew, unafraid of conflict, might have confronted his brother as to why the family never returned for him. Even if that question is never answered, it would make the reader feel that Mathew had some connection with his past, that he had tried to make amends with his former family. Other than that issue, the novel is enjoyable, and the excellent prose contributes a great deal to that experience.

Spark, Muriel - *Curriculum Vitae: A Volume of Autobiography*

Spark has many fine nuggets in this volume. As author of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, she introduces the reader to the teacher in her life, the woman who inspires the character. I love how she admires this teacher for being so different from the others in her school, how Miss Kay speaks brashly of her own life, her own feelings and thoughts. This may be one way that Spark is inspired to become a writer. Spark continues by describing a number of eccentric teachers in her schooling, all of whom she admires or she wouldn't write about them.

At nineteen Spark moves to Zimbabwe to marry a rather unstable man. She says it is in Africa that she learns to cope with life. She has a child, and when she

realizes she can no longer stay with her husband, she abandons him, leaving her son with some friends. At the end of WWII, she makes her way back to the UK and later sends for her son, who then is raised apparently by her parents. She must be one of the first women of her generation to live the life that Virginia Woolf envisioned for herself (having a room of one's own). Spark never really speaks much of her son, mostly of her writing life:

“I was aware of a definite ‘something beyond myself.’ This sensation especially took hold of me when I was writing; I was convinced that sometimes I had access to knowledge that I couldn’t possibly have gained through normal channels—knowledge of things I hadn’t heard of, seen, been taught” (110).

I, too, had similar experiences when I wrote my novel; I just kept reaching into this great grab-bag of ideas and I had no idea where they were coming from or whether they really made any sense to anyone but me. After struggling with one short story after another, it felt so great to have these “channels” Sparks alludes to.

“It was on this occasion that Masefield spoke those words that I was to remember later: ‘All experience is good for an artist’” (196). Amen.

“I felt, too, that the novel as an art form was essentially a variation of a poem. I was convinced that any good novel, or indeed any composition which called for a constructional sense, was essentially an extension of poetry” (205).

For further reading:

Muriel Spark’s short stories:

“The Gentile Jewesses”
“The Curtain Blown by the Breeze”
“The Seraph and the Zambesi”
“The Go-Away Bird”
“The House of the Famous Poet”

Sparks’s novels (though not a complete list)

The Girls of Slender Means

Memento Mori (all characters are elderly people)

Loitering with Intent (Refer to my Reading Journal 2007 to see my take on this book)

Her friend, Sefton Delmer, *Black Boomerang* (Secker & Warburg 1962)

Strout, Elizabeth - *Olive Kitteridge*

This is one of the most delightful books of fiction I’ve read this year, and Olive Kitteridge is one of the most interesting characters I’ve come across in contemporary fiction. Olive is a retired school teacher living in Maine with her

retired pharmacist husband. Her only son, a podiatrist, marries a woman who swoops him off to live in California, a place Olive has no desire to visit. When Christopher's wife dumps him, he chooses to stay in California rather than return to Maine, a fact that rankles Olive. But Olive rankles easily. She tells her husband to go to hell, condemns to hell the people in the little town where she lives, former students, her own son, when he says he's moving to New York with his second wife and her two children (with Christopher's on the way). In a climactic moment, Olive travels down to NYC to stay in Christopher and Ann's brownstone, and when things don't go well, she abruptly decides to leave. Christopher, who has been in therapy, calmly informs Olive how she's hurt him through the years; his calmness is what infuriates her most, not that he has pointed out her gravest faults. Olive is left alone when her husband dies after a long stay in the nursing home. A big fat Republican man moves to town (Olive herself is fat, although she is a Democrat, who rants freely against George W. Bush and his regime), and one day when she finds the Republican lying on the ground in the park and tends to his medical attention, Olive starts to see him, first at dinner and then on a regular basis. Subtly, or otherwise the reader couldn't take it, wouldn't believe it, Olive begins to see how harshly she's judged others in her seventy plus years. The reader doesn't find out whether she's been changed or not, but you hope. You really hope she's been altered. Such a smart person deserves a better life.

Stutz, Phil and Barry Michels - *The Tools: Transform Your Problems into Courage, Confidence, and Creativity*

I found this book helpful, as it dovetails well with my latest therapy experience. And after I memorized the procedures (tools), I believe they work. One I find particularly helpful is the Reversal of Desire. If there is a task you dread doing or social event you dread attending, you repeat the following mantra. "Bring it on! I love pain. Pain sets me free." (There are also some mental pictures you must employ, like imagining that a "cloud" is spitting you out when you think, *Pain sets me free.*) But the authors are correct. You can't stop using the tools, or you lose them. I continue to read and re-read the book. I wrote out reminders for myself to keep them in my head when cues to use them arise in my day.

Weiner, Eric - *The Geography of Bliss*

[This book was a Christmas gift from my niece.]

I began reading this during my 2011 Christmas trip to Las Vegas, and it helped me put the trip into perspective. Weiner is/was an NPR correspondent, and sets out to answer the question What makes people happy? He chooses ten countries to visit and analyze: The Netherlands, Switzerland, Bhutan, Qatar, Iceland, Moldova, Thailand, Great Britain, India, and America. Each country has its own set of circumstances that make it more or less happy or more or less not. People of Iceland, ironically enough, with all that darkness, seem to be among the happiest, as are the people of Bhutan. And the unhappiest seemed to be Moldova, a U.S.S.R. satellite that has sort of fallen out of orbit, having no real affiliation, a

dreary place by Weiner's reporting. The Thai are perhaps the most spiritual and the Netherlands the most secular. India seems to be second place as the happiest and Great Britain second from the bottom. Though Qatar is the wealthiest, those people by and large seem to be in the middle somewhere.

Bertrand Russell: "A certain amount of boredom is . . . essential to a happy life" (41). "A generation that cannot endure boredom will be a generation of little men, of men unduly divorced from the slow process of nature, of men in whom every vital impulse slowly withers as though they were cut flowers in a vase" (41).

A hand-painted sign in Bhutan:

When the last tree is cut,
When the last river is emptied,
When the last fish is caught,
Only then will Man realize that he can not eat money

TOTAL: 21 titles

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 2012.]

Etgar Keret, "Creative Writing," *New Yorker*, January 2, 2012.

Aviad's wife Maya takes a creative writing course following a miscarriage and writes three stories. ¶ Aviad takes a creative writing course and writes about a fish that becomes a man. Each of Maya's three stories seems to be symbolic of the couple's relationship: in one narrative people can only see the people they really love. In another story a woman gives birth to a cat the husband suspects isn't his. Aviad thinks that is funny, but the story turns "sad" when the cat and the husband don't get along. The cat says, in meow, "Daddy." Keret compresses a great deal into 1,600 words: three shorter narratives plus the tension between Aviad and Maya. *Do you love me? Should we even have children? It's a good thing the baby didn't live.*

John Lanchester, "Expectations," *New Yorker*, January 9, 2012.

A rich, though overextended British banker does not receive the huge Christmas bonus he'd been expecting and will now find himself under a crush of debt. ¶ His wife chooses this time to leave him for a few days (and perhaps forever). This story is reminiscent of John Cheever's exposés of urban life in the 1950s USA, and Lanchester similarly lampoons a youngish couple who've become mired in the trappings of an upper-class life: nannies, expensive homes, cars, clothing, "spoilt" children. It is also reminiscent of films made in the thirties with men and women dressed in silk robes and clamping cigarette holders between their gritted teeth. Wickedly funny, the story is a parable for our times. Be careful what you wish for and all that rot. A man who wears "bespoke" suits can't be all good.

Saïd Sayrafiezadeh, "A Brief Encounter with the Enemy," *New Yorker*, January 16, 2012.

A young American is part of a contemporary war—somewhere unknown, quite "generic"—and does virtually nothing for twelve months, putting in his time until his stint is over. ¶ You don't eat, don't sleep, don't think, don't shit. You just act—doing what you've been trained to do. This soldier makes it through almost an entire year of boring tedium and on his last day . . . he sees the enemy and shoots him. Or is it the enemy, a man in his fifties, and his dog? Or is it a goat? Oh, no, it's a boy who also winds up in a pool of blood. The next day the soldier returns home as planned.

Roberto Bolaño, "Labyrinth," *New Yorker*, January 23, 2012.

Eight people in a photograph, and the author tells a short story about them—separately and connected. ¶ The narrative seems as if it's suspended—told in the present tense and quite fluidly—like a slide under a microscope. Eight people pictured in Paris in 1977. Some are married, some not. Some fuck each others' wives as the photo is "unfrozen" by the author. It is an interesting exercise—and that's what it could feel like to the reader. The author takes an old photo (he knows no one in it), and he dreams up a narrative that seems plausible. Maybe such an approach is cultural. Bolaño feels free to pursue such a structure, and North

Americans do not. And yet a strangely likeable story emerges—so alive and erotic—in spite of its frozen, photographic nature. One of the deceased authors in 2012’s collection, thus edging out a living writer. Perhaps there was no better contemporary story to take its place.

T. Coraghessan Boyle, “Lost Gigantes,” *New Yorker*, February 6, 2012.

In a South American country, a giant man agrees (for payment) to breed with many women, but then later seeks to escape . . . and does. ¶ Boyle seems to crank out one of these after another, one novel after another—but the quality is becoming uneven. This story is very intriguing at first. Giants! A foreign country that wants to breed them as well as small people—for entirely different purposes. The giant escapes from the breeding compound twice but only succeeds a third time when the building fails. Very *deus ex machina*. The ending is a little facile, too—the nameless giant digging his way out of the rubble to live with his love, Rosa, with whom he is now to have a child of his own and not the state’s. Symptomatic of Boyle’s fading powers? Hope not. ¶ One should read his novel *The Inner Circle*, his portrayal of Kinsey, author of the infamous sex study.

Michael Chabon, “Citizen Conn,” *New Yorker*, February 13 and 20, 2012.

An old man seeks to right a wrong with Feather, a former professional partner and friend, and obtain forgiveness—but never succeeds. ¶ One of the longer *New Yorker* stories, reminiscent of an Alice Munro saga. Luxurious. Unfolding every crinkled corner of these two men’s lives. And the reader is not disappointed. Although Artie Conn never receives forgiveness for his sin (he had made a deal that signed away their rights to comic book characters they had created together—without Feather’s knowledge), Artie does finally realize how valuable their friendship had been to Feather and how Artie’s error, his betrayal, could never be forgiven. Chabon is author of *Wonder Boys*.

Thomas McGuane, “A Prairie Girl,” *New Yorker*, February 27, 2012.

Mary, forced out of prostitution, marries a gay man (the only gay principal in 2012’s stories) who later comes to own the family bank. ¶ Except for using the omniscient “trick” of the author/storyteller slipping into first person plural (“our”), the author relates the story in third person. McGuane creates a timeless story. It could be fifty years ago or longer. No cell phones. No TV’s mentioned. More than that, he deals with the issues all American communities deal with: morality of having a prostitute in the community or family; dealing with a gay family member. But most of all, the story is a tribute to the pioneer woman, who did what was necessary to keep her life in order. Trusting a man was not always an option.

Alice Munro, “Haven,” *New Yorker*, March 5, 2012.

A teenage girl in 1970s Canada travels to live with a childless aunt and uncle near Toronto and learns a certain tolerance (the character’s age, in part, limits the sophistication of her knowledge). ¶ Munro is such a master. She begins in the past tense, luring the reader in. Then at a certain point—a position that could almost be a climax but isn’t—she shifts to the present tense. *Why?* one wonders. But it is perfect timing—only the most prescient reader (not this reviewer) will be able to predict what is going to happen at the funeral of the uncle’s sister, from whom he

has been estranged for many years. When he is stopped by the choir entering the main aisle, the Anglican way—an entrapment of his own design—one sees it is a snare in more than one way. A beautiful, subtle, and effective symbol. One must read Munro's *Selected Stories*.

Donald Antrim, “Ever Since,” *New Yorker*, March 12, 2012.

A young man whose girlfriend has rejected him attends a cocktail party for an author associated with his “new” girlfriend’s publishing firm, but he keeps thinking of his old girlfriend. ¶ Ah, heterosexual men. There can never be enough stories about the one that got away—in this case, Rachel—whom the reader never learns much about, nor Sarah, the current one toward whom Jonathan only feels a little warmth, nothing strong enough to marry. At the party they search the huge terrace, for someone with a cigarette. Funny. They keep searching—thinking, for example, that smokers might be gathered at the back stairwell. “Aw, fuck,” Jonathan says, when they find the stairwell empty. Finally, later in the evening, one of Sarah’s colleagues indicates *he* has a cigarette. Ah, success! But then Jonathan pulls a joint out of his pocket—eschewing the cigarette he’s been pursuing all evening Rather like the perfect girl he’s been chasing, ostensibly, for years and years. One hopes that this is Antrim’s idea, anyway, that some heterosexual men haven’t the slightest idea what they want, in smoking products *or* women. Even when they’re placed in front of them! Otherwise, what is the porpoise of this here story?

Rivka Galchen, “Appreciation,” *New Yorker*, March 19, 2012.

A long yet compressed story of a mother and daughter—most likely Jewish, eh?—who play a game of emotional cat and mouse. ¶ You have to love some of the younger writers. Long, long paragraphs apparently not on the same topic. Long words: fungibility (*being of such nature or kind as to be freely exchangeable or replaceable, in whole or in part, for another of like nature or level*), nonfungibility. Long sections on how a manipulating mother controls the life of her unappreciative daughter, who, in particular, doesn’t appreciate her mother’s long periods of manipulation that have lasted way into the daughter’s thirties. You have to love how the author captures this love-hate, cat-mouse relationship that most probably will not change over the next thirty years. The daughter may or may not grieve over the mother who has spent a long period of time controlling her daughter’s life. And it all comes down to money, which, according to the scriptures, is the root of all evil. Another one of Galchen’s stories just appeared in the magazine’s January 7th issue!

Antonya Nelson, “Chapter Two,” *New Yorker*, March 26, 2012.

A woman named Hil attends AA meetings at various locations in Houston and tells stories of her neighbor as if they are Hil’s stories; she often stops off at a bar afterward. ¶ Though Nelson’s narratives are well developed, warm even, one can find them lacking at times. Because of the intricate structure, one wants more, more depth, perhaps. She sets up “complicated” or “complex” relationships, yet they don’t turn out being relevant necessarily. What’s their significance? ¶ But the story *is* cute. The premise that an AA member can end meetings by stopping off at a bar could play tragically, but in this story it turns out to be cute. Or wait, maybe going to AA is just a way for Hil to socialize with other losers and make herself

feel ta home. Hard to say. One should read Nelson's story collection, *Female Trouble*.

Victor Lodato, "P.E.," *New Yorker*, April 2, 2012.

A father arrives in Tucson from New Jersey, and his now obese son puts him up for a couple of weeks. ¶ P.E. = Parallel Energetics = There is another "you." Lodato has the new idiom down pat, but the reader mustn't be fooled. He is a complex storyteller, or a teller of complex stories, and he doesn't dwell on what traditional writers might: the mother who hanged herself when he was seven. He concentrates on the character's own hell: his obesity, the premise of P.E., that there exist several realities within his one life, that they sort of connect like freeways, and that he can join any one he wants at any time—except that he can't, not really. Poor Freddy, a Gen Yer, is just like all the poor slobes of previous centuries who were abused in some way by life—mother's suicide, drugs, obesity—and there is little he can do about it except create his parallel reality and move on like those in previous centuries.

Jonathan Lethem, "The Porn Critic," *New Yorker*, April 9, 2012

Dude works at a porn shop and writes reviews for a "newsletter," and a rich female friend of his convinces two women to come to his apartment. ¶ There exists a real distance here between Kromer and the other characters, between Kromer and the reader. Perhaps that is Lethem's purpose: just as sex for its own sake can separate participants emotionally, a story "about" porn can separate the reader from any vicarious "enjoyment" that a story about sex might bring. Dang.

Colum McCann, "Transatlantic," *New Yorker*, April 16, 2012.

Following World War I, two men cross the Atlantic for the first time in history. ¶ This may be the magazine's most *exciting* story of the year. A moment-by-moment account of this flight, the story is an earth-shattering feat written largely in fragments or short, choppy sentences, much like the sea beneath the men's wings. They experience rain, ice, snow. Batteries that heat their seats fail mid-flight. The men are cold, cold, cold. The plane gets "lost" in a cloud. It falls, falls, falls. They pull out of it. A blue sky is where the clouds should be and vice versa. They right themselves and land in a bog. Little people, growing larger every second, run out to greet them and their beleaguered craft. The last sentence of the story is "Ireland." *Transatlantic* will be published as a novel in June 2013.

Junot Díaz, "Miss Lora," *New Yorker*, April 23, 2012.

A sixteen-year-old brother of a boy who dies of cancer pursues the dead boy's former girl friend. ¶ This is a difficult story because of the amount of Spanish and its crucial nature to understanding the story. Even when you put certain words and phrases in Google Translate, all you get back is gibberish. It is instructive for English-only readers to know how Spanish speakers/readers must feel living in a country that expects them to speak or write English only.

Ian McEwan, "Hand on the Shoulder," *New Yorker*, April 30, 2012.

A woman looks back at an affair she had as a twenty-one-year-old with an older professor, who prepared her to enter the world of espionage. ¶ As always, the

narrative, like most of McEwan's writing, is spellbinding: the infinite amount of detail, the feeling you're really inside this woman's head; his original way with language: **"The quaint hiss and crackle of the blunted needle as it gently rose and fell with the warp of the album sounded like ether, through which the dead were hopelessly calling to us" (61)**. In a way this passage is emblematic of the entire story, as McEwan attempts to bring alive the 1970s in a similar fashion for today's reader. ¶ The end . . . the end is disquieting, abrupt. The last two sentences are flat, completely unnecessary. The story should end two sentences earlier: **"I saw his brake lights come on as he slowed to join the traffic. Then he was gone, and it was over" (65)**. *Finito*. That is the *real* ending, not this: **"Two days later, I attended the interview and was accepted. Tony Canning delivered me to my career, but I never saw him again" (65)**. The reader knows *that*; the two have just had a fight. The reader does not need to be retold in such stark terms. ¶ One should read any novel of McEwan's, particularly *Atonement*.

Louise Erdrich, "Nero," *New Yorker*, May 7, 2012.

A child visits her grandparents and is awed by a dog that, in the same fashion as a man in town, is never quite tamed until he is shot. ¶ Erdrich develops a wonderful parallel between a wild dog and a wild man, both "tamed" by a wild but peaceful man, Uncle Jurgen. Erdrich's prose is so unique yet gives the impression someone might really have thought the words: **"There were always bits of wood or metal jutting out on which Nero could gain purchase" (61)**. Her narratives possess a certain mystical quality, in this case tying the world of humans and the world of the wild into one: **"But it is probably impossible for our two species, interdependent since the dim beginning of our ascendancy on this earth, not to communicate" (61)**. The reviewer's favorite of Erdrich's titles: *The Master Butchers Singing Club*.

Peter Stamm, "Sweet Dreams," *New Yorker*, May 14, 2012.

A young couple live in a small apartment located above a restaurant, and after the woman sees a man staring at her on the bus, she later learns he's a writer basing a story on a young couple *he* had seen on the bus. ¶ Perhaps one of the clearest translations the magazine has ever published—in the sense that there are no cultural puzzles that the reader must ponder. In fact, the narrative seems simple and straightforward. A certain significance arrives at the end when the woman is flipping through the TV stations and recognizes the writer as "the man from the bus." He claims, during the interview, that he hadn't written about the couple that he'd seen; they had only given him an idea. Yes, it turns out he hadn't been watching them at all. His interview would play for a month on an endless loop, **"as imaginary a figure as Lara or Simon" (111)**.

Maile Meloy, "The Proxy Marriage," *New Yorker*, May 21, 2012.

A Montana couple meet in high school, and the boy falls for the girl but not vice versa. ¶ As a favor to her father, they begin to participate in proxy marriages for American soldiers in the Middle East. They attend separate grad schools, the girl marries someone else, and she then divorces him. After one final proxy marriage, they kiss—connect—and then marry each other. Only a young person could have written this story, easily incorporating the use of texting and Skyping naturally—

as if they are a part of daily life. And they are. Meloy covers a great deal of time in her short story, and yet the reader follows her because of the markers she provides. When one finishes the story, one is almost surprised to wind up in such an innocent spot. His red ears. Her lack of awareness that he'd always loved her. After all the proxies, they're now going to experience the real thing. You're just sure of it.

Lorrie Moore, "Referential," *New Yorker*, May 28, 2012.

A woman loses her "deranged son" to an institution as well as the man she's lived with for ten years. ¶ This is not one of Lorrie Moore's wittier stories. It's terribly straightforward and tough. When the older couple visit their deranged son, the woman decides she'd like to bring him home. Pete, not really the son's father, gives no opinion. ¶ Via a cute caller-ID trick, Moore clues the reader that Pete probably has another woman. What one really sees is the ragged alienation of modern life. Children with mental diseases. Women with few resources. Men with no drive or commitment. And not a shred of humor. ¶ If you've never read it, you need to look up Moore's short story (one of the top one hundred of the twentieth century as selected by John Updike) entitled, "You're Ugly, Too." Mean *and* hilarious.

Sam Lipsyte, "The Republic of Empathy," *New Yorker*, June 4 and 11, 2012.

In six parts the story tells of one man's life, as five other characters reveal it. ¶ In "William," the man's wife Peg wants to have a second child. His friend Gregory (a gay ex-cop, hardly qualifying as a principal LGBT character) and he witness a man falling off the next building; he speaks of his friend, an artist who paints for the movies. In "Danny," Gregory's son tells *his* side. In "Leon & Fresko," the reader meets the two men who had been seen fighting on the roof in "William." In "Zach," a hedge fund manager meets Gregory. In "Drone Sister," the sci-fi scene appearing in script form, William is shot down, making him toast, literally. In "Peg," William's widow laments to her German teacher, Arno, who says of William's death, "They don't make mistakes." The structure of this story is clever and easy to follow (a mainstay of a *New Yorker* story). What is really enjoyable are the tones that Lipsyte captures, the current I-care-about-the-world-but-I'm-not-sure-any-of-us-can-do-anything-about-it attitude. Sarcastic. Mellow. Callous. All at different turns in the narrative. All sincere at the time. And all dead-on.

Jennifer Egan, "Black Box," *New Yorker*, June 4 and 11, 2012.

The black box, ostensibly a robot, seems also to be quite human as she takes direction from an unseen power or force. ¶ Egan is clever in the way that she plays with forms on the page. In her novel, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, she writes an entire chapter using flow charts. She divides this story into forty-seven boxes, combining human forces with robotic features, or is it vice versa? It is hard to tell if she's being satiric, but it appears so. There's a certain sensuality she appeals to: **"metallic, like a warm hand clutching pennies" (86)**. At the same time, this human black box (called a "beauty," a woman) has robotic capabilities, a sort of "smart human being" (à la smart phone): **"Pressing your left thumb (if right-handed) against your left middle finger begins recording" (88)**. The black box's eye is also a camera; a flash is detonated by pressing the end of one's

eyebrow. *Never do so in the presence of others.* Yes, Egan is satirizing the technocraticization of our humanity or, wait, is it the humanization of our technocracy? In fifty years you may be better able to tell. Or not. One should read her novel *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (see my Reading Journal for 2012's review).

Junot Díaz, "Monstro," *New Yorker*, June 4 and 11, 2012.

Apocalyptic, post-apocalyptic, or futuristic (or must one choose only one?) tale set in Haiti about a disease that won't quit—in a world where the globe is so warm the seas are dry already (if one reads correctly). ¶ Díaz is a courageous and noble writer who tackles the big ones here: global warming, incest, race, ethnicity, hubris, the emptiness of wealth—while fucking around (excuse me, experimenting) with language. Mixing Spanish (is it?) and English with futuristic *glypts* (like text messages, only faster, probably). All of his characters are vikims (as he spells it). The greatest feat of this story is that it manages to keep the reader at arm's length by way of an emotional distance that is immeasurable in terms of words. Is that the way of all futuristic literature? *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* was a *NY Times* bestseller.

Jonathan Lethem, "My Internet," *New Yorker*, June 4 and 11, 2012.

A human tells of his or her own private Internet. ¶ Odd story. The author takes a thousand words to say essentially the same thing over and over again. It is clever by half. You, as the reader, *do* feel as if you're trapped in (both) Internets, *his* and yours—with him—as if you're inside a bank vault and the air you share is diminishing by the second.

Ben Lerner, "The Golden Vanity," *New Yorker*, June 18, 2012.

A young Manhattanite opts for "twilight" sedation during the extraction of all his wisdom teeth. ¶ This choice seems to be a metaphor for two realities that haunt this man's life. Should he select the local anesthetic or the fuller-bodied sedation, a more golden one that enhances his thinking as a successful author? Lerner may be one of the smartest and most lyrical authors the magazine has chosen to showcase. He creates many a lovely turn of phrase: "**He was suffused with warmth; the universe was benevolent, the lamp positioned to shine into his mouth was the nourishing sun**" (73). ¶ Only someone the reviewer's age could note how easily a young writer assimilates today's electronics into his fiction. Cell-phone screens. Streaming TV episodes on one's laptop. Someone who knows little of the "before," Lerner takes on an intellectual yet lyrical journey through the "road-not-taken" realities mixed with roads that *are* taken: his man experiences both the local and the twilight sedations. One that bars his physical feeling only, the other barring all feeling but creating a beautiful, memorable world . . . if he could only remember it. A lovely and complex story. One of the best of the youngish writers.

Shani Boianjiu, "Means of Suppressing Demonstrations," *New Yorker*, June 25, 2012.

Lea, an Israeli checkpoint soldier, is "confronted" by three young Palestinians (one is thirteen) who want to have their "demonstration" suppressed, so that it will make a splash in the major papers. ¶ This story is a satiric yet serious look at the

Israeli conflict on the West Bank. That three young Palestinians wish to be “suppressed” for purposes of their cause appearing in the newspaper is funny. It illustrates, or seems to, the inanity of the conflict. That with a few negotiations—like whether to suppress a demonstration with shock, tear gas, rubber bullets, or live fire—the conflict could be ended! Thus, a young writer must point out the elephant present, the one that has been gaining weight since 1948. Boianjiu writes with the wisdom of someone much older—like Moses. That everyone else in her country could catch up with her, oh, yes, please catch up.

Paul La Farge, “Another life,” *New Yorker*, July 2, 2012.

A married man attends a birthday party for his father-in-law, leaves early under the guise of feeling bad, returns to his hotel, and, instead of going to bed, eventually hooks up with a pretty barmaid in the bathroom of yet a different bar, after she gets off work. ¶ This is one of those stories in which the dialogue is not set off by quotation marks. You can tell which character is speaking only by his or her idiolect—and you don’t really notice. It also makes the story seem less real, in a sense, as if it’s occurring only in the inside of the reader’s head. Hard to say what’s unusual about this story, if anything—except that this man desires “another life.” ¶ This narrative is more about “alienation” than “freedom.” The husband is so removed from his life, his wife, his family, the fact that they are childless—that when he has his way with the pretty barmaid, he becomes even more alienated. He’s left alone on an icy park bench, probably having a heart episode that may or may not kill him, thinking that his wife who left “to get her shawl,” is probably fucking the “sleazebag” who’d been sitting with him at the bar. Dying all alone on an icy park bench after being inside the vagina of a young, warm barmaid thirty minutes early—that’s alienation.

Tessa Hadley, “An Abduction,” *New Yorker*, July 9 and 16, 2012.

A teenage girl is picked up in her neighborhood by three boys, one of whom Jane later submits to sexually because he’s handsome and desirable. ¶ Hadley—almost as if she were Charles Dickens—shifts the point of view all over the map, making it, more or less, an omniscient point of view. It’s so appealing, gliding from Jane briefly to her father, then the three boys in their cars as they drive her to Nigel’s house (the abduction), back to Jane, to Nigel, to handsome Daniel watching over Jane like a vulture before he takes her sexually, to Fiona, briefly, as she later sees Jane’s discarded swimsuit on *her* bathroom floor, back to Jane upon waking the next morning to see that Daniel and Fiona have spent the night together, to Jane in her late fifties on her shrink’s couch, to Daniel, a lawyer in Zurich, where the omniscient narrator informs the reader Daniel now remembers *nothing* about Jane, how he’d engaged sexually with a fifteen-year-old girl in the 1960s. He now recalls nothing. ¶ American writers are taught by precept and example NOT to shift the point of view (or “head hop,” as some teachers say), or to use a fully omniscient point of view, but here the practice is quite serviceable. The story could have been told no other way. As the Brit Hadley says in an online *New Yorker* interview: “I needed the framing omniscient narrative, which is almost fairy-tale-like, or perhaps like a crime report.” Hear, hear. Hadley lives in Cardiff, Wales. One should read her *Accidents in the Home*.

Junot Díaz, “The Cheater’s Guide to Love,” *New Yorker*, July 23, 2012.

The looonnnggg story of an academic from the Dominican Republic who loses the woman he’s cheated on and never wins back. ¶ Okay, this time the reviewer decided to look up every Spanish word he didn’t know—using either his Spanish-English dictionary or by googling it. Díaz’s Spanish must be Dominican, which may be his point. Go with it. Use the context. Don’t look it up! ¶ This is one of those lengthy stories—it could be developed into a novel—that is also compressed like a poem. ¶ A creative writing professor at Harvard is discriminated against by whites he encounters after he cheats on the love of his life and she dumps him. His back pain (stenosis) is a metaphor for the psychic pain he suffers for being such a shit to his fiancée. He realizes in the end: “. . . **sometimes a start is all we get**” (69). ¶ Díaz’s story is one of three to be published in the magazine this year. One has to wonder why he seems to be so privileged.

Zadie Smith, “Permission to Enter,” *New Yorker*, July 30, 2012.

Two small girls—one black, one white—grow up in London and later attend university together. ¶ Smith’s penchant for breaking this story into sixty-seven parts is sometimes distracting—as if each one is a separate narrative of its own importance. At the same time, each is inextricably linked with the one before it and the one to follow, as well as with all the others. Smith provides a very interesting view of what it must have been like for a bright black girl to grow up in an England that was finally opening its arms to a world it had pillaged but now invited to feast at its ever-shrinking shores. It is an exciting world for anyone who can ford its many streams. Natalie Blake, the little black girl, is one of these fortunate ones. Smith has published at least five stories in *The New Yorker*.

F. Scott Fitzgerald, “Thank You for the Light,” (1936), *New Yorker*, August 6, 2012.

A woman who sells corsets is transferred from Ohio to Kansas City and is looked upon as a leper because she smokes. ¶ A master Fitzgerald is. A thousand words, and he completely snookers the reader into believing she’s in another world. Details, selective details limn this working woman who, in the 1930s, loves to smoke cigarettes. She loves them so much she enters a church late at night to get a light from the votive candles a sexton is just now putting out. He says, “**I guess you came here to pray**” (63). And she does, falls into sort of a trance, and when she comes to, her cigarette has been lit. She kneels and says, “**Thank you for the light**” (63). Light. Light. Light. Is it the sexton (who had left) or You make the call. Youths of all ages should read Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*.

Justin Taylor, “After Ellen,” *New Yorker*, August 13 and 20, 2012.

A young man leaves his girl friend, intends to stay with his sister, but winds up living in the San Francisco area instead. ¶ Yes, another young writer references iPhones and laptops as a matter of course (like a writer used to reference landlines, one’s grandparents’ party line, telegrams). Though Scott is compulsive, often ordering the same item multiple days from the same restaurant menu—he is searching for something different. Different than the non-Jewish girl, Ellen, with whom he’d gone to Schmall College (oh, come on). And he finds her: Olivia, half-black, half-Jewish. He adopts a dog by pulling down a sign from a telephone

pole that says “I FOUND YOUR DOG.” When he brings the dog home, she begins to put on weight. After a trip to the vet, Scott learns the dog is pregnant. She later births nine pups on his and Olivia’s sofa. Scott gives Olivia a key to his apartment. The end.

Alice Munro, “Amundsen,” *New Yorker*, August 27, 2012.

A woman travels to a TB sanitarium to teach and becomes involved with a doctor, who wants to marry her but backs out at the last minute. ¶ You could look at the length of this story (10,000+ words) and groan, but then once you begin to read you are ensnared in Munro’s world of ice and snow, drafty rooms, smelly winter clothing that never really dries out—and you’re there with her. Munro’s plots always seem as if they’ll be rather straightforward, but then you find yourself—along with the protagonist—wondering how you found yourself in such a strange predicament. Her stories are the perfect model for compressing a lifetime into ten or twelve thousand words. She’s a master at making such poetic prose.

T. Coraghessan Boyle, “Birnam Wood,” *New Yorker*, September 3, 2012.

A young couple in the seventies move from a shack to housesit a fine place on a New York lake all winter. ¶ Boyle has the reader the whole time—through the visits to potential apartments, up and down dark roads—until the end when a certain amount of energy has built up, and Keith’s woman Nora decides she’d rather be with a guy from a local bar than Keith. All this narrative energy is suddenly dissipated as Keith leaves the warm house, traverses the frozen lake in a snowstorm to window peep another youngish couple as they lie in *their* bed. Why doesn’t Boyle keep the story in that bedroom with Nora, Keith’s woman, and an interloper from the bar named Steve, who wants to bang her? The reader is hungry for some kind of showdown between Keith and Steve. Oh, by trudging through the wilderness to witness the other couple, Keith comes upon the idealized version of his life, the one he thought he had with Nora. Perhaps, but one still feels Boyle should have stayed in the room and figured out what happened.

Thomas McGuane, “The Casserole,” *New Yorker*, September 10, 2012.

A man and wife cross the Missouri River on a ferry to visit his in-laws only to discover that his wife is leaving him so she can inherit her family’s ranch alone. ¶ A simple story—all the clues are there—but you don’t see that the man’s wife is going to dump him until the mother-in-law hands him the casserole in a lunch box. As the narrator says, **“What kind of idiot puts a casserole in a lunch pail” (94)?** ¶ The couple had decided to remain childless. Does the woman *now* want the ranch? Does she *now* wish to have a child late in life? The story engenders as many questions as it answers, making McGuane a master storyteller.

Leonid Tsypkin, “The Last Few Kilometres,” *New Yorker*, September 17, 2012.

A man in Moscow commutes home on a train while pondering the mistress he has just now left forever. ¶ Written in 1972 when the author was forty-six, this story’s landscape is as arid, bereft as one always imagines Russia to be during the Cold War. And yet there is a trickle of emotion the reader senses as this nameless man sees his mistress for the last time. One witnesses much of the blackness from the

train window but not the scene in which he leaves her. And one doesn't need to see their parting. ¶ The third deceased writer of the year, a translation, no less (see my rant about translations in last year's post).

Mohsin Hamid, "The Third-Born," *New Yorker*, September 24, 2012.

This story is one of the *New Yorker's* most enjoyable of 2012. Hamid lulls the reader into a trance with his consistent drone of using the second person—removing the narrator from the customary stance of first or third person. ¶ It seems, at first, to be an arcless narrative, a rambling story in which a poor, poor family moves from the squalor of the countryside to the slightly reduced squalor of a large (one assumes) Pakistani city. But there is indeed a climax—subtle though it is—when the second-person narrator realizes he will be the one member in his family to break free from their poverty. He doesn't know *when*, but any child that knows twelve times twelve is 144 (and not 134 as his teacher asserts) cannot be destined for misfortune. Forty-year-old author of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*.

Tony Earley, "Jack and the Mad Dog," *New Yorker*, October 1, 2012.

This is a fairy tale of Jack, *that* Jack, and how he meets his comeuppance. ¶ You can forget that a story is like a trip . . . that it *is* a trip. You don't want to take such a trip when you figure out where you're headed, but once you're on the road, you're enchanted. A dog that says, "Ow," when Jack sits on it. A man named Jack who tells a row of corn, "Go shuck yourself." A story of witches, of milkmaids Jack has wronged, and the eternal price he must now pay by way of the mad black dog.

Lara Vapnyar, "Fischer vs. Spassky," *New Yorker*, October 8, 2012.

A Russian woman, a nurse, who has come to the United States, recalls the chess match between Fischer and Spassky in 1972 and how her life turns on Fischer's win. ¶ Everyone should love this story—so straightforward and yet with little bits of symbolism (never quite perfect). Fischer represents the West, freedom. Spassky, the opposite. When Fischer wins, it means their small family will emigrate to the U.S. Within a year, Marina's husband will die; she will raise two children alone in a strange country. Yet, to repeat, such symbolism is not perfect. Fischer, it turns out, is crazy—a mean little bastard—and that is unforgivable in the West. Spassky, the Soviet, is a "decent guy," who stands and applauds Fischer on his concession of the sixth game. No, symbolism is never perfect. Another forty-year-old author. Vapnyar is the author of *Memoirs of a Muse*.

George Saunders, "The Semplica-Girl Diaries," *New Yorker*, October 15, 2012.

In the future, a family man keeps diary (for future readers) of his family's experience of using Semplica Girls to adorn their yard. ¶ Loved this story. So crazy. Family man keeping diary. Some sentences, no verb. Others, no subject. Few articles. **"So young. Looks like should be working at Wendy's" (73).** Some time in future people will landscape lawns with the living poor, yes, poor women from places like Somalia. Couple buys four SG's for their yard, on the occasion of their eldest daughter's BD party (father had won \$10,000 in scratch-off). Younger daughter—altruistic one—releases the four SG's in the night,

causing a row, not to mention a huge financial difficulty. Seems that if SG's not located, will cost man nearly \$9,000 in compensation to SG leasing company. ¶ Biting satire set in near future (or is one already there?)—one that, as per Saunders, causes one to ponder. Or should. One should read the author's *Pastoralia*.

Callan Wink, "Breatharians," *New Yorker*, October 22, 2012.

August, a Montana farm boy, is hired by his father to kill the hundreds of cats that have overtaken their barn. ¶ An admirable story written by a young man of twenty-five—yet with a previous *New Yorker* story under his belt (see January 2011). So many quirky ideas that serve as metaphor. August inside a metal shed when it's raining: **"He thought it was like being a small creature trapped inside a percussion instrument" (63); "tangled intestines of machinery" (63).** Both of these images echo the overbearing presence of the cats. ¶ **"Fingers linger" (67).** Has one ever seen "fingers linger" used together before—such a perfect rhyme of sound and meaning? The way August's mother (living in a house on the same property, separate from him and his father) fashions a poncho out of an old quilt and is probably naked underneath it (and crazy, perhaps dying). But the story's most important task reveals how this boy's world has unraveled in the last year, and, by killing hundreds of cats with antifreeze-laced milk, he begins to make sense of the substance's innate treachery. His beloved birth-dog, Skylar had accidentally licked antifreeze oozing from a container, and the substance that killed something he loved becomes the substance that kills something evil he hates—even if he doesn't know what it is.

Kevin Barry, "Ox Mountain Death Song," *New Yorker*, October 29 and November 5, 2012.

Canavan, a woman masher of twenty-nine, has cancer, and is pursued by Sergeant Brown, who eventually pushes Canavan over a cliff. ¶ Ah, legend, the Irish are loved for it, aren't they? Canavan's sexual prowess, his sexual hunger, his brutality, are legendary. And Sergeant Brown—nearing his retirement age of sixty-five—must bring Canavan down before he leaves. And he does (in the space of 3,000 words). ¶ Barry's use of language is delicious: **". . . and the first thing the Sergeant did was hit him the slap of a phone book across the back of his head" (105).** No one but an Irishman could have written that sentence.

David Gilbert, "Member/Guest," *New Yorker*, November 12, 2012.

One of the reviewer's favorites of the year. Beckett, a fourteen-year-old girl, negotiates the tricky waters of an exclusive Long Island Country Club that didn't exist prior to eighty years ago. ¶ Who doesn't like to understand . . . be let in on . . . the ways of the upper classes? Holden Caulfield sneering at the adult world. Phineas, upper-midler wannabe before he is shaken from that tree and breaks his neck. The entirely closed yet vacuous world ruled by arcane languages that only the elite seem to understand. Beckett has it all figured out, who's the cunt in their little ensemble, until she spots her erstwhile friend's blood in the water and then . . . *Absens haeres no erit*. The reviewer's high school Latin would not unlock this and so he Googled it: "The absent one will not be heir . . ." Though the story is "about" fourteen-year-old Becket, isn't it really about any person, anywhere, who,

if she can get a leg up on someone, will let loose with a good long stream of piss? David Gilbert is difficult to locate using Google—too many of them—but his work is worth the wait.

Maile Meloy, “Demeter,” *New Yorker*, November 19, 2012.

A divorced couple share their only daughter, each having custody for half the year. ¶ Almost contrived as the earthly Demeter *chooses* to share her daughter half the year with her ex-husband. Yet there are some otherworldly moments in the story—particularly Demeter’s “walking on water” scene at the end, transcending age as well as physics—in which she transcends her earthly pain to become, for a short time, a goddess.

Mo Yan, “Bull,” *New Yorker*, November 26, 2012.

Lao Lin insults the narrator’s father by peeing on money his father has earned, but his father tames a bull and also conquers Lao Lin in the process. ¶ What seems like an old-world tale is reformulated into a more modern setting that includes, among other elements, formaldehyde that is pumped into meat to “preserve” it. The translation is one of those in which much beyond the plot does not seem to survive. Could one be missing the subtle metaphors: the bull itself, perhaps, representing the blustery Lao Lin? Or perhaps the story is what it appears to be: a morality tale extolling the virtues of honor regardless of what may happen to the protagonist.

Antonya Nelson, “Literally,” *New Yorker*, December 3, 2012.

Two boys disappear from a Houston home, and father and housekeeper set out to find them. ¶ A very thorough storyteller Nelson is, yet she omits the features that don’t matter—like whether a sixteen-year-old’s missing cell phone is recovered, the one that still has her late mother’s messages on it. Nelson creates the story of a sort of blended family in which the son of their Hispanic housekeeper becomes the “twin” of the household’s son, both eleven—the light-skinned Danny, the darker Isaac. When the boys take it upon themselves to travel an hour by bus across town to fetch Isaac’s toy Sponge Bob without permission, the action triggers a number of problems. The entire story, in a way, is a tribute to the father’s late wife, Danny’s mother, whom you only come to know by way of flashbacks, through which you discover she might have purposely put her car into the path of an eighteen-wheeler. You kind of hate Nelson for waiting until the last two paragraphs to include such pertinent information, but where else could she have possibly placed it? ¶ Because Nelson, too, claims Wichita, Kansas, as her hometown, I always look for myself in her work. In fact, in her story (in *Female Trouble*) “Incognito,” Nelson refers to Happiness Plaza as a meeting place for her teen-age characters. I helped build the real HP in 1968, as a manual laborer earning his next semester’s tuition.

Steven Millhauser, “A Voice in the Night,” *New Yorker*, December 10, 2012.

The author spins three tales, twined together, alternating sections I, II, III: Samuel of the scriptures; a boy of the 1950s; the boy’s old-man persona as a writer in the aughts. ¶ Millhauser skillfully creates the texture of Samuel’s Biblical world, the boy’s 1950s world in suburban Connecticut, including the stone bridges of the

Merritt Parkway, the contemporary insomnia of the old man recalling the sleeplessness of the other two personas. So much is summoned by the author: the boy's atheist-Jewish father, Christmas each year but with no religious images, just lots of presents under the tree, a father-teacher whom the son respects. Brooklyn. Literature is recalled like good-friend stories. Know them well. The last sentence: **"Soon we'll all sleep" (77)**. Samuel, the boy, the author eternally. Millhauser's story from 2011 was on my "Top" list last year. One should read his *Portrait of a Romantic*.

Marisa Silver, "Creatures," *New Yorker*, December 17, 2012.

James's three-year-old son is expelled from nursery school for aggressive behavior, and this event triggers James's memory of accidentally shooting his childhood friend's father. ¶ James's attitude toward his son's aggression is born of his experiences of having killed a man. Even in the end, he isn't sure whether the gun had fired or whether *he* had fired the gun. His attitude toward his son, who wants a gun, who wants to be aggressive, is protective. James can't afford to overreact either way. But he does. He will pull his son out of that school. He will let his son enjoy guns even if he, James, abhors them. The magazine's cover date is three days after the shootings in Newtown, Connecticut.

Thomas Pierce, "Shirley Temple Three," *New Yorker*, December 24 and 31, 2012.

Tommy is host of an Atlanta cable TV show that "clones" prehistoric animals ("Back from Extinction"), and he brings a tiny mammoth to his mother's house to hide (instead of euthanizing it as is the show's "rule"). ¶ Interesting bit of creative fiction here: some sci-fi mixed with a bit of the spiritual, a bit of the comic opera, the macabre . . . and what do you get? You aren't sure. You shouldn't fuck around with mother nature? Some parallel between Mawmaw and Tommy (she'd almost had an abortion because Tommy's father was married to someone else) and Tommy and Shirley Temple Three, the tiny mammoth? A very odd story—the last one of the year. It's hard to feel anything for Tommy, Mawmaw, or the tiny mammoth. And what's that golden light at the end of the story, so bright no one can stand it? The rapture? Mawmaw's trip to heaven? You just aren't sure, and that bothers you, when you can't figure out the ending of a story.