

Ackerley, J. R. *My Father and Myself*. With an introduction by W. H. Auden. New York: New York Review Books, 1969.

Below I profile Ackerley's novel, *We Think the World of You*, should you wish to see my rationale for reading this man in the first place. *My Father and Myself* is a memoir published posthumously. In its pages Ackerley outlines his suspicions about his father's life before marrying his mother.

He begins by examining some photographs that document his father's friendship with a number of other handsome young men back at the turn of the twentieth century. As one who embraces his homosexuality (with hundreds of partners over several decades), Ackerley sets about to see if he can discover if his father wasn't also gay. What makes him suspect? Well, for one, unlike many British men, his father seems not to possess the usual homophobia but rather indicates to Ackerley that he has the freedom to pursue whatever life he wishes. And Ackerley feels compelled to take his father's advice:

"I was now on the sexual map and proud of my place on it. I did not care for the word 'homosexual' or any label, but I stood among the men, not among the women. Girls I despised; vain, silly creatures, how could their smooth soft, bulbous bodies compare in attraction with the muscular beauty of men? Their place was the harem, from which they should never have been released; true love, equal and understanding love, occurred only between men. I saw myself therefore in the tradition of the Classic Greeks, surrounded and supported by all the famous homosexuals of history—one soon sorted them out—and in time I became something of a publicist for the rights of that love that dare not speak its name" (154-5).

His understanding of his condition seems to belong to its largely misogynist period, eh? But he is indeed living his life with a certain guilt-free abandon that was not to be widely duplicated until the 1970s. He also confesses to throwing aside certain individuals in search of his *ignis fatuus*. Yes, always, he's in search of his Ideal Friend, a perfect lover, one he never finds.

The climax of the memoir may occur when Ackerley tells of searching out one of his father's old buddies, one who is now near death. After heckling the elderly man with the question of whether his father may have liked men, he finally shouts at Ackerley, "Oh, lord, you'll be the death of me! I think he did once say he'd had some sport with him [Count de Gallatin]. But me memory's like a saucer with the bottom out" (262).

But Ackerley is still unsure. "May have" simply isn't enough proof for him. The book is complete with an Appendix that dares to speak its name more graphically about Ackerley's sexual difficulties. In all, the memoir is one of those fascinating books one should read: witty, devilish, and yet sad, too. Though Ackerley acts

“freely” for his context, a dangerously homophobic England, he never quite achieves an approximation of happiness. One hopes that gay men never again have to live in such gloom anywhere on this earth. It simply isn’t fair.

Ackerley, J. R. *We Think the World of You*. New York: New York Review Books, 1960.

Several years ago (I’m always behind in my reading and follow-up) in *The New Yorker*, I became acquainted with writer J. R. Ackerley for the first time. From the same generation as my grandparents, as F. Scott Fitzgerald, he was a British man who published only four books in his life. Seems that it took him a long time in between to develop each one. The novel is about Frank, a young man in London, in love with a man named Johnny, Johnny’s wife, Megan, and Evie, Johnny’s German Shepherd pup.

We Think the World of You is built somewhat around the motif of the cliché embodied in the title. No less than seventeen times does Ackerley employ a form of it to demonstrate the offhand way the characters have of treating one another and Evie. And though the reader notices the repetition, it becomes an acceptable motif.

While we were talking about [Johnny, who is in prison], the scullery door was pushed open and a dog came in.

“Hullo, Evie,” said Millie.

I had forgotten all about Johnny’s dog.

“So this is the creature he wanted me to take?”

“Yes, he couldn’t get no one to mind her, so I had to have her in the end. Not that I wanted her, the scamp.”

She was certainly a pretty bitch, a few months old, rather large and long-legged, and lavishly affectionate in the fawning, insinuating way puppies have (22).

Evie continues to insinuate her way into Frank’s life, at least, while everyone else seems to shove her away. She’s destructive, probably because she is not exercised properly.

How she loved running, using her muscles, her strong young limbs! If Tom or the rebuffed boy took her out every day on the lead round these mean streets what use would that be to her? She ought to be bounding a daily ten miles over grass. She ought to be in the country (59).

There is some wrangling between Frank and Johnny’s wife and sister over the care of Evie, though they “think the world of her.” After Johnny is released from prison, Johnny spends some time with Frank and brings Evie with him. He is stunned how much she prefers Frank’s company to his. There is an extremely tender love scene that, oddly enough, transpires with the three of them.

It was now, as the rest of our garments followed, that Evie began to exhibit an increasing perturbation as though whatever was happening before her eyes was having, upon the confidence she had hitherto shown in the distinctness of our identities, a confusing effect. Uttering little quavering cries of doubt and concern, she sat first upon our mingled clothes, gazing at us with wild surmise, then upon our mingled bodies, excitedly licking our faces as though she would solve her perplexing problem either by cementing them together with her saliva or by forcing them apart. She lay with us throughout the afternoon, her fur against our flesh, and we talked of her most of the time (177).

Throughout this trim novel, Frank is put in charge of Evie for short periods of time. Once, he even keeps her past a deadline, thinking that he will just keep her, to save her from the ineptitude of the others in her life. Finally, he promises Johnny he will pay him forty pounds for the dog.

“Did you mean what you said about the forty quid?”

“Of course.”

“Give it to me,” said he roughly.

In this way Evie became my dog.

In some way it seems a painful price; in other ways not. Forty pounds means little to Frank, who has some means. At the same time, it demonstrates how little Johnny thinks of Evie, to let her go for any price, and rather easily at that. After that Evie and Frank live peaceably for many years, yet for such peace, Frank pays a price.

Advancing age has only intensified her jealousy. I have lost all my old friends, they fear her and look at me with pity or contempt. We live entirely alone. Unless with her I can never go away. I can scarcely call my soul my own. Not that I am complaining, oh no; yet sometimes as we sit and my mind wanders back to the past, to my youthful ambitions and the freedom and independence I used to enjoy, I wonder what in the world has happened to me and how it all came about But that leads me into deep waters, too deep for fathoming; it leads me into the darkness of my own mind (209).

Anyone looking for a superficial and positive sort of dog story will be disappointed. *We Think the World of You* is so much more.

Ampuero, Roberto. *The Neruda Case*. Translated by Carolina De Robertis. New York: Riverhead, 2012.

Ampuero’s novel, *The Neruda Case*, is divided into five parts, each one named after a woman whom Pablo Neruda is involved with over his lifetime, either as mistress or spouse. This novel is one of those in which a historic figure, in this case, a distinguished South American poet, is employed as a fictional character (*names*,

characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously).

A kind of *realization* of Neruda's life, the novel takes place against the backdrop of a pre-Pinochet Chile. In the early 1970s, Cuban Cayetano Brulé meets Neruda at a party, and the poet hires Brulé to help him locate a daughter he never really knew, the only child he believes he ever sired. Even though Brulé has never worked before as a detective, he agrees to help Dan Pablo.

In the part titled "Josie," Brulé realizes Neruda has cancer, and the poet first engages him to locate a certain oncologist in Mexico. Brulé's "training" as a sleuth takes place by way of reading certain detective novels that Neruda recommends. Throughout the novel, Brulé compares and contrasts his methods, his capabilities, with the fictional detectives of this one author. In order to make Brulé look like a detective, Neruda dresses him, presenting him with a lilac-colored tie dotted with small green guanacos (llamas): "It had a coarse texture, though a nice feel. On the lilac background, the guanacos leapt joyfully, grazed placidly, or contemplated the horizon" (55). Don Pablo declares the tie is over forty years old. He wore it when he met "some of the greatest European intellectuals" (55). He also wore it when he "went underground" in the 1950s. Essentially, Neruda means for the tie to be a talisman, to bring Brulé luck as he heads out on his mission to find Neruda's daughter. This visual cue appears many times throughout the novel. Is it also a motif representing Don Pablo when he is not present? A reminder of Brulé's mission, his amateur status? One is not quite sure, but it is one of those delightful images that makes the reader feel that he's returned to familiar ground.

Throughout, author Ampuero recaps certain points in order to keep the reader apprised (and interested): "My women never gave me children. Not Josie Bliss, who was a tornado of jealousy, not the Cyclops María Antonieta, who gave birth to a deformed being; nor did Delia del Carril, whose womb was dried up when I met her; nor Matilde, who had several miscarriages. I've had everything in life, Cayetano: friends, lovers, fame, money, prestige, they've even given me the Nobel Prize—but I never had a child. Beatriz is my last hope. It's a hope I buried long ago. I'd give all my poetry in exchange for that daughter" (132-3).

Oh, come on! one has to say. Really? Such a statement makes for good character motivation, but would a renowned poet have said such a thing?

Brulé's trip continues throughout the world, including East Germany's Berlin. One comes to believe that each of the five women in Don Pablo Neruda's life has inspired him to be the poet he becomes; each is an integral part of the work that expresses the human being he is. Without each, or by remaining with only one woman, he would never produce the work that he does. With three chapters to go, Neruda dies, and Brulé is never able to inform the poet the truth about his daughter. As part of the novel's denouement, one sees the lilac tie with green guanacos three more times:

"He wiped his tears with his guanaco tie, and studied the corpse's face again

through the shadows” (361). This seems to be Brulé’s way of connecting with the poet one last time.

The way is not easy, in the time of great political upheaval, but Brulé is able to attend Neruda’s funeral. “He wore his best suit, a white shirt, and the violet tie covered in small green guanacos” (363).

“He bit his lips, still unable to place Ruggiero, who now pressed his index finger against Cayetano’s green-and-purple guanaco tie, and smiled. ¶ ‘A friend of mine pushed you into that truck,’ he said. ‘They took you to Puchuncavi’” (371). This scene brings Brulé full circle to the point where he was at the beginning of the novel.

The Neruda Case is a very finely constructed and enjoyable novel—not only as a sophisticated whodunit, but as a literary novel, as well. And even though I usually dislike reading translations (something is *always* lost), this one is superb. Read it!

Ballard, J. G. *Empire of the Sun*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984, 2007.

The author, born in Shanghai, China, in 1930, explains in the Foreword that this novel is based on his experiences during World War Two, in which he was interned from 1942 to 1945, in his early teens. Indeed, the main character Jim is separated from his parents. The 1987 film by Steven Spielberg makes a big to-do of their separation, but in the book it seems to happen as it might happen to a child. One moment his parents are present, as he is knocked down in a certain melee. The next moment his mother is gone: “Jim’s mother had disappeared, cut off from him by the column of military trucks” (32). Then his father lies down with him, but mysteriously, the next day Jim finds himself alone in a hospital, hoping his parents will come for him soon.

This bright boy must now negotiate the muddy and treacherous waters of wartime virtually on his own. I was inspired by a recent viewing of the film to read the book. I recall many of the movie’s scenes as they unfold on the pages. However, Spielberg takes some liberties, as film directors are wont to do, in order to tell *his* story. The novel is multi-layered, with countless poignant and sad scenes, but Spielberg turns it into a boy’s adventure story. Both are great, but they are not *equally* great works.

In the beginning, the eleven-year-old Jim, intelligent though he is, possesses childish and feckless notions:

“He thought of telling Mr. Maxted that not only had he left the cubs and become and atheist, but he might become a Communist as well. The Communists had an intriguing ability to unsettle everyone, a talent Jim greatly respected” (15).

And like a child he tends to think about things in a rather shallow fashion:

“Jim had little idea of his own future—life in Shanghai was lived wholly within an intense present—but he imagined himself growing up to be like Mr. Maxted” (16).

Early on Jim grasps what death is all about, yet also a certain irony he may not fully understand until later:

“In many ways the skeletons were more live than the peasant farmers who had briefly tenanted their bones. Jim felt his cheeks and jaw, trying to imagine his own skeleton in the sun, lying here in this peaceful field within sight of the deserted aerodrome” (17).

As a child might, Jim feels he is responsible for things that are not really his fault, largely because he lacks the full picture that an adult would see.

The novel, like a children’s story, moves from one episode to the next, one scene to the next. I found it hard to follow at first. But then I realized that perhaps Ballard wishes for the reader to experience this daze that Jim is in, the chaotically episodic nature of his life over a period of several years, as he struggles to stay alive. Even though he periodically wonders where his parents are, even wonders what they look like, his main focus is on staying alive. His body suffers malnutrition. He develops pus-laden gums.

In my Kindle I highlighted the word sun, sunlight, and many synonyms for the word. Ballard seems to be saying two things, perhaps. One, the Japanese empire, whose symbol seems to be that big red sun on its flag, is stretching its domain to include China. The sun also seems to symbolize a brighter day for Jim and the thousands of other refugees of their war. Ballard’s use of it is never heavy-handed; the “sun” just seems to appear as a natural part of this war-torn world.

I’ve read other “war” novels: Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*, Crane’s *Red Badge of Courage*, Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse Five*, Heller’s *Catch-22*, perhaps others I can’t even recall. This novel captures yet a different war, part of the Pacific theatre, but that it is seen through the eyes of a boy, who at times perceives things poorly because he *is* a child, and at the same time grasps what’s happening precisely because his innocence allows him to see the truth. And it often allows him to sidestep the callous or evil actions or adults, even those who profess to be looking out for him. Ballard seems to cast little judgment over this war. It is only where this young man is trapped, alive, yet half dead. Ballard’s last paragraph seems to be a précis of his entire novel:

“Below the bows of the *Arrawa* a child’s coffin moved onto the night stream. Its paper flowers were shaken loose by the wash of a landing craft carrying sailors from the American cruiser. The flowers formed a wavering garland around the coffin as it began its long journey to the estuary of the Yangtze, only to be swept back by the incoming tide among the quays and mud flats, driven once again to the shores of this terrible city” (279).

Though Jim and his parents return to England, others are not so lucky. They, too, are swept back to Shanghai.

Bowden, Charles and Alice Leora Briggs. *Dreamland: the Way Out of Juárez*. Austin: University of Texas, 2010.

I read this book, illustrated by my friend Alice Briggs, in 2010, when it came out, but for some reason, I did not make a note of it in either my blog or my reading journals. Perhaps it is too disturbing. Perhaps I could not fully grasp what Bowden & Briggs have accomplished. Both Bowden and Briggs spent months, if not years, researching their book, exposing themselves to the same dangers that the residents of Juárez do every day. To get the story of the informant who murders a man while U.S. agents listen in and do nothing, to understand the dynamics of this and a thousand other stories, they both make themselves vulnerable to the ragged life on the border, where, because of a few political decisions made in the past, life is a constant battle between those who are selling drugs and those who would steal the contraband and/or the money it generates. It is a bloody war, one that the United States quietly participates in with its insatiable thirst for more and more illicit drugs. It is a war the U.S. ignores as well, for it is a war so deeply entrenched in the two countries' economies, whose balance will be tipped if an "Immigration Policy" is ever brought to light. Bowden provides the illuminating prose, and Briggs the exquisite drawings that expand that which he cannot say with words.

The gist of Bowden's entire narrative might be captured in the following passage:

"One of the early priests after the conquest of Mexico, Fray Durán, knew the old tongue and listened to the old men and wrote down their tales of what their world had been and what it had meant to them. They had been very rich and feared by other nations. They told the priest of the tribute once brought to their emperor: mantles of various designs and colors, gold, feathers, jewelry, cacao, every eighty days a million Indians trudged in bearing tribute and the list was so complete that even lice and fleas were brought and offered. The tribute collectors told the emperor, 'O powerful lord, let not our arrival disturb your powerful heart and peaceful spirit, nor shall we be the cause of some sudden alarm that might provoke an illness for you. You well know that we are your vassals and in your presence we are nothing but rubbish and dirt.' ¶ That was half a millennium ago and yet the rich still get tribute and the people who give them tribute feel as dirt and rubbish. ¶ For years and decades, for almost a century, people have looked at this system and sensed change or noticed hopes of change. And yet they all wait for change" (67).

Bowden is well aware that this journey the Mexican people make is one that started long ago and continues, for all we know, far into the future:

"In the Florentine Codex, a record of the Indians' ways that Cortés crushed with his new empire, it is noted that men who die in war go to the house of the sun and then they become birds or butterflies and dance from flower to flower sucking honey. In the old tongue, flower is *xochitl*, death is *miquiztli*" (80).

The combination of Bowden's stunning and lyrical prose combined with Briggs's dramatic but subtle sgraffito illustrations make a powerful statement of our

problems on the border. No wonder some want to fortify the barriers that already exist there. It is an ugly world, and we certainly don't want it spilling over into ours.

Carr, Cynthia. *Fire in the Belly: the Life and Times of David Wojnarowicz*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2012.

Long book (over 600 pages). Long entry.

David Wojnarowicz (*voyna-ROW-vich*) was born in 1954. His father beat him, and he was sexually abused by older boys. He barely finished high school and did not attend college, yet in the 1980s he became, for a short time, an art sensation in New York. He didn't care about success, often living hand to mouth, and refused to take the next step that would ensure stability. That would have been selling out.

“David's work was full of sex and violence—politics expressed at the level of the body. He painted distress. Soldiers and bombers. Falling buildings and junkies. His images had the tension of some niceness opened up to its ruined heart. In the montages he began to develop, David would expose the Real Deal under the artifacts—wars and rumors of wars, industrial wastelands, mythological beasts, and the evolutionary spectrum from dinosaur to humanity's rough beast” (231).

David was gay but arrived at that place by way of a rather indirect route. He preferred the intimacy of a relationship but often turned to the anonymous sex prevalent in New York City until the AIDS crisis became a problem. In the late eighties, he and his longtime companion were tested and both came up HIV positive.

“David was beginning to consciously connect his family's pathology to a larger worldview. He added an anecdote in the *Eye* about watching a cop kick a dope-sick junkie while arresting him: ‘And I'm feeling rage 'cause in the midst of my bad mood this cop is inadvertently reaching in with his tentacles and probing in icepick fashion some vulnerable area from years ago maybe when my dad took me down in the basement for another routine of dog chain and baseball bat beatings or when he killed my pet rabbit and made me eat it . . . blam . . . blam . . . blam’” (312).

“In the years after David's death, Tom Rauffenbart sprinkled David's ashes in places that had held meaning for him. He took some to the beach in St. John's where they'd had their first sexy romantic vacation. He left ashes at the Great Swamp of New Jersey, at Teotihuacán, and at what was left of the Christopher Street pier. Then in October 1996, he joined in ACT UP's second ‘Ashes Action’ in Washington, D.C. He got up to the fence and threw David onto the White House lawn” (578). It was something David had wanted, when he realized there would be no cure, to have his dead body thrown on the White House lawn.

The death of so many men may be one of the reasons why I continue to write. Not only must I do so in order to stay sane, alive, but I must do it for these people whose lives were cut short by a hateful and unrelenting disease—and a still indifferent culture. I'm surely not as gifted as David Wojnarowicz, but I must not

waste the time given me. I participated in some of the same *risky* behaviors that many of my contemporaries did, and I was fortunate enough to emerge with a different roll of the dice. I must work to honor David and Tom. Would they still be together now? Would David have embraced his success? Would his burgeoning career have matured or fizzled out? Multiply his life times the hundreds or thousands of gifted gay men of that era who died. Their voices continue to shout at us from their discordant chorus. We owe a great debt to Cynthia Carr for allowing us to hear one of these voices loud and clear.

Cobb, Joe and Leigh Anne Taylor. *Our Family Outing*. Tulsa: Total Publishing and Media, 2011.

Sometimes I read a book out of curiosity, not because I think I'll love or even like it. I first became aware of the Cobb/Taylor book through my college alumni magazine. And because I'm not always quick in ordering books I want to read, I just now found time to read one that was published three years ago. But I'm not sorry I bought a copy.

"Man is not the enemy here, but the fellow victim." —Betty Friedan

Ms. Friedan's epigram above calls upon me to think of my own days in seminary, many years ago, a testament to my faith that failed. Coincidentally, seminary, the same one that Joe Cobb, co-author of *Our Family Outing* attends, is the place where I learned that in marrying a woman, I was a gay man who had also attempted to fit in to the societal norms Friedan references. The book is painful reading for one who has already forged his own way through this wilderness, but I admire Cobb and Taylor for publishing their account of their ordeal.

Our stories cross paths in so many ways, though we've never met. I grew up in Wichita. I also attended Southwestern College, the undergraduate school that Joe did, only more than a decade earlier than he. I know some of the people whom he references in the book, ministers of churches in the Kansas West Conference, the one I would have returned to once I finished my M. Th.—if I had finished it.

I have great admiration for Cobb who, although he left the Methodist church in Kansas, did choose to continue serving as a minister in other ways and eventually became ordained through the Metropolitan Community Church, the noted MCC of gay communities across the country. I parted ways with the Church, not only because the Methodist Church in particular would have demanded that I return my credentials, but because I no longer wished to be part of an organization that would de facto reject *me*. Now, part of that stems from a childhood practice of rejecting my father and his actions before he could reject me, a game at which we both excelled. But I ultimately felt I'd rather serve humanity as a public school teacher than through an archaic religious structure that to this day still rejects the legitimacy of the lives of gay men and women.

This criticism betrays my bias, but the authors are more successful when they stay with the concrete, rather than slipping into philosophical or theological realms. For

example, Joe says, after he's left his wife and is experimenting with his behavior in a favored bookstore:

“Leaning against literature, while reading poetry,
I looked down the aisle of science fiction and mystery.
A clerk walked toward me followed by two men.
The third man wore a red bandanna,
brown curls of hair peeking out from beneath.

As he turned the corner between mystery and science fiction, he winked and smiled.

I nearly dropped Emily Dickinson.

I had no words,
only a reality,
a knowing.

This will be a terrible and liberating gift” (79).

At this point, Joe's desires take on a face, a reality. He sees he can literally have some skin in this game he's decided to play. And he continues to maintain a sense of humor:

“I dated a mortician for a month. He was a beautiful man who excelled in make-up for the deceased. At the end of the month, right after we watched a romantic movie, he looked at me and said, “I'm not falling in love with you.” I tried not to take it personally, but I felt like lying down and having him do my make-up” (155).

Throughout the book both Cobb and Taylor share with the reader their growth through therapeutic and spiritual experiences. And the reason they do so is because of the people they love most. Yes, they set aside their hurts, their resentments to make sure that their two children are not injured by their divorce, to make sure that they continue to reach out to their extended family members. This aspect of the book may be the most important, the idea that though everyone has suffered concerning Joe's coming out, they all come through it together. By the end of the memoir, the reader learns that Leigh Anne has found a second husband and a job near her parents in North Carolina. Joe moves to the area to be close to his children, and they work out an amicable visitation program. Joe also meets a new partner, and they have two children, a boy and a girl, through surrogacy—all in pretty short order. Though I began reading this book out of curiosity, I wound up finding a great story of separation and ultimately redemption.

Start Amazon reviews [here](#).

Cunningham, Michael. *By Nightfall*. New York: Farrar, 2010.

I've now read everything Michael Cunningham has ever written, including several readings of *The Hours*, and I'm positive that he's a genius. A rare author it is who can create a world so airtight and yet breath-like, flexible, that it, itself, seems like a

living thing. Rare it is that a contemporary author can compel me to sacrifice an entire morning to finishing a novel as if it were a conversation of the utmost importance.

In *By Nightfall*, a couple in their forties are forging a life for themselves in SoHo. Peter owns his own gallery, and is on the precipice of either making it big or falling into an acceptably mediocre life forever:

“Get Groff (and really, would he blame Groff for going with a bigger gallery?) and he settles, quite possibly for good (he hasn’t ben up and coming for almost a decade now), into a career of determined semidefeat, a champion of the overlooked and the almost-but-not-quite” (228).

His wife Rebecca is an editor. When Rebecca’s brother Ethan (called Mizzy, because he, arriving quite late in the family’s life, is a *mistake*) arrives for a visit, both are rather knocked for a loop. He is one of those charming, good-looking young men who can get almost anything or anybody he wants because he’s always been told that he is *special*. Mizzy is a charming drug addict, so far, a functional addict. But the reader senses that it’s only a matter of time before he must go into rehab *again*, and who’s up for it this time? Certainly not Mizzy.

To give more of the plot would be to ruin the joys of this book. Cunningham is a master of structure, characterization, and storytelling. The chapters, themselves titled, become short stories, yet each chapter leads in a linked manner from one to the other. Cunningham has a way of realizing character by way of reflection. Although he’s a master of dialogue, as well, we often learn more through what seem like the meanderings of the characters’ minds. Their inner and outer expressions combine to form characters that are as real as our friends, our family members. Cunningham creates an overarching structure, in which the characters are one way in the beginning, we watch them metamorphose, and then at the end, we see them broken, like shards of pottery that have been dashed against the floor. With the last sentence of the book, however, we realize Peter and Rebecca are going to put their lives back together. At least they’re going to try.

In an interview Cunningham once said that with each book he tries to challenge himself to something larger than the last time. At first, this seems like a smaller, quieter, novel, compared to his previous tomes, but I don’t think so. With this one he manages to equal, at least, what he has written in the past. Only time will tell if it is *better*.

Doidge, Norman. *The Brain That Changes Itself: Stories of Personal Triumph from the Frontiers of Brain Science*. New York: Penguin, 2007.

I don’t often read “science” books, but I was tempted away from literature by my partner to read this one. Dr. Doidge, through years of research, proves that the human brain is capable of being rewired, even after being damaged, even in old age.

Neuro is for “neuron,” the nerve cells in our brains and nervous systems. *Plastic* is for “changeable, malleable, modifiable.” At first many of the scientists didn’t dare use the word “neuroplasticity” in their publications, and their peers belittled them for promoting a fanciful notion (xix).

What makes the book fascinating is the number of case studies that Doidge brings to the reader’s attention: people with brain injuries, people born with only the right side of their brain, people with extreme emotional problems resulting from childhood trauma.

Doidge contends that with exercise, people can change their brain “maps,” can change their brains. He tells of Arrowsmith, a school that takes these kinds of exercises seriously.

“The brain exercises are life-transforming. One American graduate told me that when he came to the school at thirteen, his math and reading skills were still at a third-grade level. He had been told after neuropsychological testing at Tufts University that he would never improve . . . after three years at Arrowsmith, he was reading and doing math at a tenth-grade level” (41).

The concept of brain plasticity helps to explain or reexamine all sorts of problems or phenomena.

“Language development, for instance, has a critical period that begins in infancy and ends between eight years and puberty. After this critical period closes, a person’s ability to learn a second language without an accent is limited. In fact, second languages learned after the critical period are not processed in the same part of the brain as in the native tongue” (52).

One of the experts that Doidge studies, Michael Merzenich, continues the line of thinking:

“If two languages are learned at the same time, during the critical period, both get a foothold. Brain scans . . . show that in a bilingual child all the sounds of its two languages share a single large map, a library of sounds from both languages” (60).

Merzenich strongly believes that older persons should continue “intensive learning,” that such an activity strengthens our brains.

“Merzenich thinks our neglect of intensive learning as we age leads the systems in the brain that modulate, regulate, and control plasticity to waste away. In response he has developed brain exercises for age-related cognitive decline—the common decline of memory, thinking, and processing speed” (85).

“Such activities as reading the newspaper, practicing a profession of many years, and speaking our own language are mostly the replay of mastered skills, not learning. By the time we hit our seventies, we may not have systematically engaged the systems in the brain that regulate plasticity for fifty years” (87).

Wow! Doidge goes on to say that is why learning a new language in old age is so good for improving the memory generally (87).

To summarize the rest of the book, the author connects brain plasticity with love and personal relationships, imagination, rejuvenation, as well.

I concluded the reading of this book with great optimism. One's brain does not have to wither and die with age. One can and should continue to learn. One may now approach the learning of things that he or she has always wanted to do but was afraid to try with a totally new point of view, a renewed confidence. Doing so will increase the plasticity of the brain and thus strengthen it overall.

When I was young and would sometimes look ahead, with fear and trepidation, about growing old, I often looked to older people for inspiration. The "seniors" I admired the most were the ones who continued to learn, continued to forge new pathways through life. One woman in particular, Naomi, at age fifty-five—after finishing the rearing of her children and serving as caregiver to both her mother and mother-in-law—finished her BFA and moved to Taos, New Mexico. There, she reinvented herself as a visual artist, who counted among her closest colleagues, Agnes Martin, renowned abstract expressionist. Naomi lived well into her eighties, even outlived a daughter who died of cancer, before succumbing to the disease herself. I still think of Naomi as a superb model for all of us. Whenever I am tempted to feel sorry for myself, I think of Naomi. We must continue to learn, continue to forge for ourselves the lives that will most bring us satisfaction. By way of the Internet, by way of local schools and classes, we can learn almost anything we wish. It's the least we can do for ourselves and for those who are to follow us. May they admire us as much as I've admired Naomi.

Related websites:

www.normandoidge.com

www.lumosity.com

Harrison, Jim. *Dalva*. New York: Washington Square, 1988.

I always find it difficult to write about a complex novel. What does one emphasize? Plow through the plot? Structure? Quirkiness of the characters? Does one attack imagery? Metaphor? How all these elements are strung together (does the author even know)? This novel would be a great one for students to analyze.

Dalva is named by her parents after a Portuguese song, "Estrella Dalva," or "Morning Star." It may suit *Dalva* throughout her life for she always seems to be up early enough to witness such thing. Always active, on the move. While still a teenager, *Dalva* falls for a half-Sioux man and makes love with him. When she becomes pregnant, she is sent off to have the baby and put it up for adoption. *Dalva* will never marry again, and she will never have another child. She begins a rather circuitous journey to find out who her son is. She doesn't necessarily wish to meet him or become part of his life; she merely hopes to find out how he's doing.

Interwoven throughout this search is the buried story of her great-great grandfather, by way of his journals, that a young scholar, Michael, examines for his research. But always the narrative is about Dalva and her search for her son. The tragic story of the Sioux serves to inform Dalva of the *wildness*, perhaps, of her half-Sioux lover, the foretelling of what her son might be like, when she finally does meet up with him. And ironically, (thanks to artful writing) the meeting with her son comes near the end of the book. And it is brief. The book has been all about the journey. What happens to those two is now anyone's guess. It could even become another story, for another time. The novel may, in the long run, become known more for its fair and stark retelling of the American West: how the original homeowners were duped out of their land forever.

Moravia, Alberto. *Conjugal Love*. Translated by Angus Davidson. New York: Playboy Paperbacks, 1981.

A married couple spends time in Tuscany, where Silvio has decided to complete a story he must write, though he has never done so before. He insists that, in order to fully concentrate, he must not have sex with her until he is finished. His wife Leda agrees with a certain reserve. Silvio goes on about his work. Each morning a local barber, Antonio, comes to shave Silvio. One day Leda, who has engaged Antonio to cut her hair, complains that the barber has made unwanted advances toward her and that she wants Silvio to fire him. Silvio rejects the idea, ostensibly because no one else can shave him like Antonio, and Silvio doesn't want to shave himself. Leda is not happy with the idea but seems to accept it as long as she does not have to see Antonio again. When Silvio has finished his story, he is displeased, feels it is a failure, not at all what he'd thought it might be. Silvio catches Leda having carnal relations with Antonio, and is stunned. She doesn't, at first, realize that he has seen her, but then later there is a recognition between them: yes, she knows that Silvio knows. And yet, because they love one another, they somehow find a way to stay together. Perhaps it is Silvio's story. The story had been written as a representation of their relationship, and Leda convinces Silvio that he did not yet know enough about them as a couple to portray it adequately. Later, perhaps, he will be able to finish the story, and it will not be mediocre.

Nussbaum, Paul David. *Save Your Brain: 5 Things You Must do to Keep Your Mind Young and Sharp*. New York: McGraw Hill, 2010.

Nussbaum's book offers certain prescriptions for helping one to see that one's brain can retain plasticity as we grow older. The brain does not have to atrophy, as once was the common thinking. I found the book helpful for a number of reasons. One, the author distills some complex information into something we can all understand. Two, for each of the five things we must do, he offers simple but effective ways to increase our brain power as we age.

Nussbaum's develops five critical areas: 1) Socialization 2) Physical Activity 3) Mental Stimulation 4) Spirituality and 5) Nutrition. He then tells how each one of these concepts is important and what we need to do to optimize each area. For example, he makes it clear under nutrition that the brain must have certain fats to

thrive, and not the kind that comes from chips and fries. Under spirituality, he makes the case that regular meditation, prayer, or other types of mental rest and reflection help the brain to take a break from its rigors.

I wish I'd had this book when I was in my thirties; I might be much smarter now. Kidding. But I do think, from what Nussbaum says, that it's never too late. One of his most important points is that taking care of the brain helps to build a mental reserve, which helps to fight off or delay dementia. Each one of the five areas is important and works in conjunction with the others. If you're curious about how your brain works or how to stave off old age, this book may be a good place to begin.

One other point Nussbaum makes repeatedly is that we must continue to learn things that are "novel and complex" for us. For me, I ought to learn sign language because I've never done anything like that before. For others, it might be trying to learn a complex camera or studying a musical instrument. The task must be novel and complex *for the individual*. Take up knitting if you're normally all thumbs!

O'Brien, Edna. *Country Girl: A Memoir*. New York: Little, Brown, 1976.

I wanted to love this book because I'd read two volumes of O'Brien's short stories, and I believed that her memoir would be as energetic, as artful as the stories, and I don't believe it was. And it may have to do with her attitude toward the volume:

"I made bread. Broken piano or not, I felt very alive, as the smell of the baking bread filled the air. It was an old smell, the begetter of many a memory, and so on that day in August, in my seventy-eighth year, I sat down to begin the memoir which I swore I would never write" (4). Aha.

Having said that, I do find a number of things about the book that are particularly appealing.

First, I love her devil-be-damned attitude about almost everything: her loves, her children, her abusive ex-husband, how she writes or doesn't write.

Some lovely nuggets:

". . . I was too unsightly to be shown and therefore kept me hidden under the red herringbone quilt. ¶ Such is the ragbag of anecdote, hearsay, allegory, and consternation that filled the canvas of my early life, at once beautiful and frightening, tender and savage" (8).

"Men for me were either lovers or brothers; the lovers were more intimidating and often unobtainable, and though I dearly wanted to, I could never combine the two qualities in the same man. Richard Burton was a brother, and a bard brother at that" (198).

“Places are at the heart of writing, and I was no match for that rugged world of crag and granite and scree. I inclined toward softer, leafier places, ditches choked with wildflowers, weeds, and convolvulus, small rivers where the brown and speckled trout ran. I could not imagine myself into it, its dictions too gnarled for me.” (308).

I found my attention waning at certain points (where there was little detail), and then pricking up again (as when she discussed her relationship with certain celebrities) at others. Perhaps other readers will experience the book differently.

Pasternak, Boris. *Dr. Zhivago*. New York: Signet, 1958.

As a high school youth I saw the film *Dr. Zhivago* at least twice. Then when I went to college I was required to view it for a humanities class, whose theme for the semester was “creativity.” Among other titles we also read Leo Tolstoy’s *What is Art?* It cost a dollar. One evening early in the semester the entire college, who was required to take humanities, showed up at the local theater to view *Dr. Zhivago*; the venue could hold all 700 of us. Even out of the three showings all my tender mind could derive from the three-hour film was that Dr. Zhivago simply wished to live his life, free of political wranglings. He also had no thoughts of being rich; he merely wanted to live his life creatively by writing poetry. Through the years I’ve continued to revisit the film, and, as an older man, derived different gifts from it.

Back when I was in college I bought a Signet paperback version (the cover says) for ninety-five cents. I estimate that *Dr. Zhivago*, the novel, moved with me at least a dozen times from Winfield, Kansas to Dallas to Lubbock, Texas, each time packed up in a box and then placed in its alphabetical niche on various shelves. But only this year did I find the time to pull the yellow-paged copy off the shelf and read it—close to fifty years after I bought it. I’ve not been disappointed in Pasternak’s novel first published in Italy in 1955. It caused a furor both in Russia, where it was officially denounced, and in the Western world, where it was heralded as a realistic account of Tsarist Russia’s shift to communism.

The plot, of course, is only too familiar. Dr. Zhivago comes from a rather well to do Russian family, and he receives his education with grace and anticipation of living a charmed life. He marries Tonia, and they have a son. Later he works with Lara, a nurse, and though he is attracted to her, he does not admit it. Years later they are reunited at work in a hospital, and they fall in love. At some point Zhivago is swept up in Russian history as he is captured by the partisans, who conscript him as a medical officer. He “serves” with them for a long period. Unlike the film, which seems to end with Yuri’s heart attack on the street, the book ends with a detailed account of the life of Tania, the love child of Yuri and Lara. The film devises a frame by which Zhivago’s brother searches out Tania and the entire book seems to be told as one flashback.

I was struck by a number of passages. First, young Zhivago regards his Uncle Nikolai’s position:

“ . . . Nikolai had gone through Tolstoyism and revolutionary idealism and was still moving forward. He passionately sought an idea, inspired, graspable, which in its movement would clearly point the way toward change, an idea that like a flash of lightning or a roll of thunder capable of speaking even to a child or an illiterate. He thirsted for something new” (11). Yuri Zhivago is intrigued by his uncle’s ideas.

Pasternak seeks to portray the savagery of the war:

“Zhivago had told him how hard he found it to accept the ruthless logic of mutual extermination, to get used to the sight of the wounded, especially to the horror of certain wounds of a new sort, to the mutilation of survivors whom the technique of modern fighting had turned into lumps of disfigured flesh” (99).

“On one stretcher lay a man who had been mutilated in a particularly monstrous way. A large splinter from the shell that had mangled his face, turning his tongue and lips into a red gruel without killing him, had lodged in the bone structure of his jaw, where the cheek had been torn out. He uttered short groans in a thin inhuman voice; no one could take these sounds for anything but an appeal to finish him off quickly, to put an end to his inconceivable torment” (101).

I’m glad to have finally read Pasternak’s novel. His words continue to reach out to us, imploring us, worldwide, to find diplomatic solutions to our conflicts. War does nothing but to separate people, obliterate their lives into something that is forever after incomprehensible. It serves to separate those who might love one another and raise children in relative peace.

Proulx, Annie. *Bird Cloud*. New York: Scribner, 2011.

In this book author Annie Proulx speaks of what it means to build a home. She begins with her origins, an almost unlikely tale in which she and her sister are delayed by a very weird merchant, so much so that they come upon a car accident they might have been a part of if it hadn’t been for the weird man who is instrumental in delaying them. When she tells her mother of the incident, her mother reveals that the man’s name was Proulx, too.

Proulx has lived in many locales but seems to have taken quite a liking to the West, most assuredly New Mexico and Wyoming, where she decides to purchase a section of land and build a place where she will live out her days:

“A bald eagle perched in a dead tree, watching us. The landscape was bold. Not only was the property on the North Platte River but the river ran through it, taking an east-west turn for a few miles in its course. The land was a section, 640 acres, a square mile of riparian shrubs and cottonwood, some wetland areas during June high water, sage flats and a lot of weedy overgrazed pasture” (46).

Proulx decides to buy the land as the site for her house, Bird Cloud. She then gives the reader a treasure trove of history concerning her patch of land. The archaeological. The ecological.

“Trying to understand Wyoming’s landscape where I could see the remains of Indian trails, stone flakes from their toolmaking, the tools themselves, images scratched into the dark desert varnish of rock faces, cairns and fire pits forced recognition: where there are humans there is always ecological change” (165).

The political wranglings.

“White men never understood the Indian way of consensus and insisted on dealing with a tribal leader or ‘chief,’ another concept alien to Indians who learned to greatly distrust the lying, devious white men whose treaties were worthless. On the other side, most whites regarded Indian oratory as a kind of obstructionist filibustering, boring harangues, though some admired them and saw them as akin to classical Roman oratory” (171).

The two most interesting aspects of the book, to me, are following the narrative of her house’s construction, and two, the observation of bird life. It’s as if she, while telling of the building of her “nest,” recounts another story, as if she herself is just another bird attempting to make a home in the area. They seem to observe her as much as she observes them.

“The first day I saw Bird Cloud, in July 2003, I was astonished by the great number and variety of birds in this river habitat. A bald eagle sat in a tree near the river’s edge. Pelicans sailed downstream. I saw swallows, falcons, bluebirds, flocks of ducks burst up the North Platte and flew over my head in whistling flight. Ravens croaked from the cliff. I thought my great avocation for the rest of my life would be watching these birds and learning their ways” (191).

Proulx does much to depict the arduous nature of living in the mountainous setting. At times strong and constant winds. Foot after foot of snow. Impassable roads. Bitterly cold temperatures day after day.

“Gerald kept smashing a path through the drifts on the county road and managed to get in and out most days, taking a risk lover’s joy in the nauseating slides toward the ditch, the scrape of ice and packed snow on his truck’s undercarriage” (119).

Even after the house is finished, even as Proulx stays until the last day of December before fleeing to her other home in New Mexico, she finally sees she will never be able to realize her dream of living in this environment year round.

“So ended the first and only full year I was to spend at Bird Cloud. I returned in March and for several more years came in early spring and stayed until the road-choking snow drove me out, but I had to face the fact that no matter how much I loved the place it was not, and never could be, the final home of which I had dreamed” (231).

Sad. And yet something to admire: her almost unstoppable desire and courage to see the building of her home through to its completion, something most of us can only dream of.

Schulman, Daniel. *Sons of Wichita: How the Koch Brothers Became America's Most Powerful and Private Dynasty*. New York: Grand Central, 2014.

Whenever I meet others who are also from Wichita, I'm often asked which high school I graduated from. It is a subtle way of determining very quickly to which *class* I must belong. Indeed, I grew up on the other side of several sets of tracks, certainly far from the East Thirteenth Street address, where the Koch brothers spent their early years. In fact, beyond a certain point the Koch brothers didn't even attend public schools in Wichita, but exclusive preparatory or military schools in other parts of the country. And only one of the brothers, Charles, continues to live in Wichita today. The rest of them live (given they own multiple residences) in the Northeast.

In the past few years, since Charles and David have made their political will so well known, they are either exalted or reviled, depending on which camp one belongs. Schulman seems to remain quite objective, neither favoring them nor shielding them from criticism. Readers certainly discover more about the Koch brothers than they ever thought they might learn.

The four brothers' father, Fred Koch, for example, originally hailed from Quanah, Texas, making Wichita more or less a place of happenstance for the brothers. Fred is a cold and tyrannical father, yet all but one of the sons sets out to try and please their father, that is, emulate him and his maniacal competitiveness in every way. Only one, Frederick, Junior, chooses to follow his own path. Rather than taking his millions and establishing his own dynasty, he prefers the life of the arts: living in a lush place in Manhattan (and in Europe) and attending musical and visual arts productions, purchasing expensive art as if it's going out of existence. Throughout their lives, the brothers will sue one another for various reasons, until some time in the 1990s, they decide to call a truce—although there still exist deep suspicions among some of the brothers for each other to this very day. Charles and David, though eight years apart, seem to share the most concerning political beliefs and set out to change the country through their activism. They're just as fervent as their father was, when he served as one of the founding members of the John Birch Society. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Birch_Society> When all the facts are laid out, one can see how the Koch brothers have become the men they have. It still doesn't make some like their political stands, but at least one does understand how perhaps they became the men they did, wanting and fighting for completely unfettered (by government) freedom to earn as much money as they want. That, they believe, is the salvation for everyone. If you have the utter freedom to earn as much money as you want, you will be happy, and everything will turn out well in the end. Funny, what drives some people, when it would be so easy for them to wrap themselves in their billions, like a cocoon, and waste away inside. This they do not do.

Shelton, Richard. *Going Back to Bisbee*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1992.

In this long-heralded memoir, Shelton accomplishes many things. For one, he takes the reader on an extended journey, not only over his life on this earth, but, citing sources, he also brings an awareness to us of the fascinating town that is Bisbee, Arizona. He achieves a certain paradox by seemingly moving forward through time and backward at the same time. Shelton seems to know so much. He knows botany.

“The popular, as opposed to scientific, names for plants and animals are often based on figurative language, the language of impression and comparison, the language of poetry. These names are descriptive, concrete, highly compressed, and usually require some kind of imaginative leap. I am not a linguist, but it seems to me that the more ‘primitive’ a language is by our standards, the more it relies on such names” (16).

He knows archeology.

He knows history.

“Gradually, a terrible tension developed between life as it was actually lived in Bisbee and the deeply felt moral, spiritual, and religious impulses of the day. Starting just before the last decade of the nineteenth century and lasting until well after World War I, most of the non-Hispanic residents of Bisbee were trapped between the hardships of life in a small Western mining community, including the horrors of mining itself, and the pressures of an uncompromising Calvinist God. It is no wonder that those two pressures, one from below and one from above, created a society that was basically fatalistic and often hypocritical. The wonder is that the society survived at all” (265). That’s Bisbee!

Richard Shelton knows, of course, literature, a great big chunk of it from the Greeks, to prose, to poetry.

My favorite chapter may be Chapter Ten, in which he relates what his first year of teaching in Bisbee’s Lowell School—seventh and eighth graders—is like for a young man who has already served time in the army. He’s not wet behind the ears, and yet he is honest enough to admit how astounded he is by the experience, how profoundly it affects him. He develops enough courage to tell off a rather officious faculty member who seems to have been after him since his first day (every school has a Molly Bendixon):

“Whatever it was, it caused me to be late getting the roll taken, and I had just turned to that task when the door opened and Molly Bendixon walked in abruptly.

‘Where’s your absence report?’ she demanded. ‘They’re waiting for it in the office. It’s holding everybody up. Haven’t you been told that you’re supposed to take the roll first thing and get it down there?’ Her tone was sarcastic and patronizing.

'I'm just taking it now,' I said. 'I'll have it down there right away.' I was furious but determined not to show it in front of the students. Molly turned and marched out, and I followed her, closing the door behind us. I hadn't had my morning coffee yet, and my anger was getting the upper hand. 'Miss Bendixon,' I said, 'let me explain something.' She sighed and turned, evidently expecting an excuse. 'My classroom is off limits to you. You are never again to enter it unless I invite you. And if you ever humiliate me in front of my students again, I will knock you on your ass. You can tell that to the principal if you want to, and if you don't believe me, try me.'

I went back to my classroom and slammed the door, hard. Several of the students had slipped up to the door and had been straining to hear what I was saying to Molly, but they scuttled back to their seats when I came in, and everybody was very quiet."

I love this guy! Not only for his courage, but he goes on to say that when Ms. Bendixon is ill and in the hospital, he makes a point of visiting her. They do not speak of the incident, but instead, share a kind of camaraderie, just the two of them against all the other stupid sons of bitches in their school, the world at large. Yes, courage on the one hand, but also compassion on the other. Makes for great teaching.

Having made a visit to Bisbee myself, about ten years ago, I consider Shelton's book *my* trip back to Bisbee, too. I can visualize so very much that he puts before the reader, and I can see the town in a different light. If, like me, you've never read Shelton's book, check it out. Still available in fine bookstores everywhere! Click on title above. I wish to thank my friend Peter for turning me on to this book, in fact, for getting me my copy!

Szczepanski, Marian. *Playing St. Barbara*. (City): High Hill Press, 2013.

Playing St. Barbara begins in 1929 with an eighth-grader's winning essay describing the seventh-century legend of St. Barbara, patron saint of miners. The salient features of Barbara's life—a cruel and unyielding father, her unbending conversion from paganism to Christianity, her apparent disappearance into the earth—play out in various ways throughout Szczepanski's novel, and it is important for the reader to internalize the saint's story before moving on.

The narrative reveals the lives of three daughters, one of whom writes the winning essay, and the wife of a coal miner, primarily during the decade of the 1930s in southwestern Pennsylvania. As an aside, in 1957, my family's car broke down in a coal mining town in this region, and we spent three days there in a "hotel" waiting for our car to be repaired (my parents wound up buying a new Pontiac before we returned to our home in Kansas). Coal dust was so prevalent that my mother felt compelled to wipe every chair before we sat down, even the toilet seat. She must have prayed before each meal we ate, that we would not breathe in any more of the powder than necessary. Such fine dust is spread throughout this story like a black

veil.

The father, Finbar Sweeney, is an abusive brute. Not a day goes by that he doesn't verbally abuse his wife, Clare, or physically harm her by way of a brutal slap or unwanted sexual advances. Not a day goes by that he doesn't abuse one of his three daughters. All three seem like shards of the same person, and they are, in a sense, all reflections of their mother, Clare. It may be because of their suffering that Clare in some way consumes what seem like magic seeds to free her body of a number of pregnancies.

One bright thread in the lives of the coal miners and their families is the annual St. Barbara pageant (the other is baseball), offered up to the martyred life of the patron saint of miners. Each of the Sweeney daughters, very close in age, is called upon to play the life of the saint over several years—and each in her own way fails. The event emphasizes the class differences in that the play is directed by a woman the youths call The Queen, a wife of an “upperhillier,” a woman whose husband is in management. However, The Queen must depend on the miners' children to play the parts and is not always pleased with their performances.

Each of Clare's daughters, in her own way, manages to escape from the town: the eldest by marrying well, another by becoming a nun, though she sacrifices her own love of a man to do so, and the third by her very wits, bidding good-bye to the town and venturing off to nearby Pittsburgh to start a new life. Clare, too, long-suffering wife must make a decision with regard to Finbar. After the mine experiences a huge explosion and collapse and Fin must spend time in the hospital, she goes to see him every day, and each day, unless sedated, he lashes out at her. Temporarily free of his ill treatment at home, she, of course, drinks in her freedom. Her friends and daughters urge her to leave Fin, an act of desperation at a time and place where the strictures of the Roman Catholic Church are clear, where most women wouldn't leave their husbands for any reason. But the women in Clare's life are clear: Finbar, alcoholic brute, is never going to change.

Thornton, Margaret Bradham, editor. *Notebooks: Tennessee Williams*. New Haven: Yale, 2006.

I've been drawn to writers' notebooks, journals, and letters for a long time, having read documents of John Cheever, Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor, and others. William's notebooks are multifaceted. It is clear that he is writing for himself; many entries have the same dreary tone that an ordinary person might use to write in a journal: physical complaints, gossip [“Gielgud too difficult to work with, somehow antipathetic” (485)], critiques of other people's work [“Helen Hayes has flashes of great virtuosity but her performance lacks the heart and grace and poetry of Laurette's and sometimes it becomes downright banal” (485)]. But you can categorize many threads found throughout Williams's notebooks.

Daily complaints: his health (he must spell the word “Diarrhoea” scores if not hundreds of times), and while he did have a number of documented health problems, most of them were self-inflicted by way of extreme alcohol, tobacco, and

drug use, which he freely admits to, enumerating the number of secondals, he would take in a day, along with how many scotches.

Sex: if not narrative accounts of his numerous sexual pursuits with individual men, Williams gives at least a mention of said person and how long the affair did or did not last. He would remain lovers with a man named Frank Merlo, until the latter's death, even though they were often separated and conducted a rather "open marriage," long before the 1970s term was ever coined.

Events about which he had no compunction: stealing books from the University of Iowa and New Orleans libraries; being jailed along with a male companion as suspicious characters and not having his draft card with him.

His ideas on cruising: "Evening is the normal adult's time for home—the family. For us it is the time to search for something to satisfy that empty space that home fills in the normal adult's life" (281).

His opinions on writing: "A sombre play has to be very spare and angular. When you fill it out it seems blotchy, pestilential. You must keep the lines sharp and clean—tragedy is austere. You get the effect with fewer lines than you are inclined to use" (305).

On loneliness: "This evening a stranger picked me up. A common and seedy-looking young Jew with a thick accent. I was absurdly happy. For the first time since my arrival [in Florida] here I had a companion" (325).

Personal philosophy: "One lives a vast number of days but life seems short because the days repeat themselves so. Take that period from my 21 - 24 yr. when I was in the shoe business, a clerk typist in St. Louis at \$65 a month. It all seems like one day in my life. It was all one day over and over" (349).

Success: Williams is clear in a number of places about how the purity of his writing life is upended by success (*Glass Menagerie* in 1944):

"The trouble is that I am being bullied and intimidated by my own success and the fame that surrounds it and what people expect of me and their demands on me. They are forcing me out of my natural position as an artist so that I am in peril of ceasing to be an artist at all. When that happens I will be nothing because I cannot be a professional writer" (493).

"I have been twisted by a world of false values—And the talent died in me from over-exposure, a sort of sun stroke under the baleful sun of 'success'—naturally I will go on trying to live as well as I can and the probability is that tomorrow, or the day after tomorrow, I will begin to edge back into the state of illusion. And hope" (515).

"The tragedy [death of Tom Heggen] points up once more the crying need for a different sort of theatre in America, one that will be a cushion to both fame and

fortune which will provide the young artist with a continual, constructive contact with his profession and a continual chance to function in it. Otherwise these losses will be repeated then, and there is no field of creative work in which they can be less afforded" (503).

"I want to shut a door on all that dreary buy and sell side of writing and work purely again for myself alone. I am sick of being peddled. Perhaps if I could have escaped being peddled I might have become a major artist. It's no one's fault. It's just a dirty circumstance, and now's maybe too late to correct it" (635).

Books Williams read that I now believe I must now put on my list: Yukio Mishima's *Confessions of a Mask*. *The Denton Welsh Journals*, edited by Jocelyn Brooke. Denton Welch's *Maiden Voyage*, *In Youth Is Pleasure*, *A Voice Through a Cloud*, *Brave and Cruel*, and *A Last Sheaf*. Jean Cocteau's *Le Livre Blanc*. Donald Windham's *The Dog Start*, *The Hero Continues*, *Two People*, *The Warm Country*, and *Emblems of Conduct*.

Countless interesting or titillating photographs of Williams (and some of his paramours) when he was young:

Thornton, the editor, sites *New York Herald Tribune* critic Walter Kerr, concerning Williams's *Camino Real*, when he addresses the playwright: "You're heading toward the cerebral; don't do it. What makes you an artist of the first rank is your intuitive gift for penetrating reality, without junking reality in the process; an intuitive artist starts with the recognizable surface of things and burrows in. Don't swap this for the conscious, rational processes of the analyst, the symbolist, the abstract thinker" (565). It remains the creative writing teacher's biggest caveat: always begin with the concrete, and the metaphor will rise out of it naturally.

So much of Williams's life seems to be self destructive. Not until 1957, at the age of forty-six does he consider beginning psychoanalysis. "The moment has certainly come for psychiatric help, but will I take it?" (701).

To anyone who wishes to understand Tennessee Williams and his work, you must realize your work is probably not complete until you read this tome, including the 1,090 footnotes (*most* of which I did plow through because they are substantive and interesting in their own right).

Warren, Elizabeth. *A Fighting Chance*. New York: Metropolitan, 2014.

This book is full of acronyms: AFSCME=American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, AFR=Americans for Financial Reform, ARM=adjustable rate mortgage, CDO=collateralized debt obligations, CFPB=Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, CRL=Center for Responsible Lending, COP=Congressional Oversight Panel, TBTF=Too Big to Fail, TARP=Troubled Asset Relief Program, and many others. I learned that I'd better memorize them or keep a key beside me because to understand them is to understand Warren's story.

This memoir by Warren is largely about her stance on how finance is handled in America. At the same time, her autobiography is threaded throughout the book, from her truly humble beginnings in Oklahoma to her much-heralded run for US Senate in Massachusetts in 2012—at which point her opponent, Scott Brown, accuses her of misrepresenting her Native American roots. Through her struggle the reader sees his or her own. She may be the least political politician currently in office. Many of her ideas appeal to Progressives, as well as Tea Party members. Repeatedly she says, “The system is rigged.” It is rigged in favor of corporate interests, which have eroded and continue to erode middle-class life in America.

One way to fight back, she says: “When you have no real power, go public—really public. The public is where the real power is” (126). And this is the kind of action she takes all throughout her career. When before a crowd or audience, she speaks plainly and easily about complex problems, sounding much like the law school professor she has been for many years. Now instead of educating law students, she’s educating the public.

Warren, of course, is reviled by the financial community (Wall Street), but that is because she’s on the side of the middle and working class families, whose incomes have been diluted over the last thirty years. Her run for the Senate begins when someone makes a video of her speaking in someone’s home. I’m paraphrasing her words: No one in this country makes it alone. People who succeed in business must work hard—that’s a given—but they must use roads and other forms of infrastructure that our taxes pay for; and the more heavy-duty their business is the harder they are on this infrastructure, yet they feel entitled to pay less in taxes than their secretaries. I would add that local, state, and federal laws combine to give corporations all kinds of breaks, the large oil companies receiving government subsidies being one of many examples.

Warren lays all this all out in prose that is simple yet artful. She threads her words with figurative language that demonstrates further what she is saying to her audience. I believe Warren when she says she’s not running for president. I believe her goal is to spend the rest of her life leveling the playing field, so that the middle and working classes might again have the opportunities they once had. So that young people might attend college for reasonable prices and finance it through loans at rates that are no higher than what banks have to pay for money. Yet, everywhere she goes, she creates energy, energy that is contagious. Might she just be drafted to run for president? Might she give another woman a run for her money?

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 2014.]

Antonya Nelson, "First Husband," *New Yorker*, January 6, 2014.

This outing provides a short, or long, few wee hours in the morning, when a middle-aged woman is called upon by her youngest stepdaughter, her favorite, to sit with *her* three children, while she hunts down her alcoholic husband. ¶ This story seems to have too many characters for the modern reader to keep track of (you expect to do so while reading a novel): an ex-husband, three stepchildren and *their* spouses, *their* offspring, in this case two squalling girls and one dutiful boy, whom Lovey, the step grandmother loves more than the others. In their ongoing game of Monotony (Caleb's renaming of Monopoly), Lovey keeps allowing him to win, even if he is the banker. It may be emblematic of Lovey's relationship with all of her relatives, all her spouses and lovers: she's the ultimate "loser," putting everyone's happiness above her own. ¶ Nelson's natural milieu seems to be this nexus of modern relationships, who somehow rule each others' lives in a stranglehold of angry love. She understands this tangle (though I hate so many names to keep track of for no apparent reason than to show how many people are in this family) and distills it for us with loving insight. Caleb's last words of the story, when he discovers that Lovey has been hiding the money she was winning at Monopoly:

“‘Lovey,’ he said, ‘what happened to your money?’ ¶ ‘What do you mean?’ ¶ His face was suddenly furious, his rage as rare as his laughter, and this time aimed at her. ¶ ‘Don’t let me win,’ he demanded. ‘Don’t you dare let me win!’” (61).

Nelson had three stories published in the magazine in 2012 and none in 2013. She gets 2014 off to a rousing start! Just not so many characters, please! The magazine states that Nelson “will publish *Funny Once*, her seventh short-story collection, next spring.” Watch for it.

Dinaw Mengestu, “The Paper Revolution,” *New Yorker*, January 13, 2014.

Two young men enter a university in Kampala, Uganda, in the 1970s, and quietly go about starting or involving themselves in a “revolution.” ¶ The “boys,” Isaac and “Professor Langston,” the narrator, wish to become noticed on campus and devise ways to do so on “paper.” The narrator, at least, has been inspired by a historical writers’ conference that had taken place about a decade earlier. As a result, they “publish” pamphlets (handwritten) with clever sayings, but they don’t have much bearing on the current politics, nor are the two young men influenced much by such politics; they simply wish to forge a future for themselves in their new Africa. Mengestu’s novel *All Our Names* will be out in 2014.

Akhil Sharma, “A Mistake,” *New Yorker*, January 20, 2014.

An Indian family of four move from Delhi to Queens in the late 1970s to establish a new life. ¶ The title of a story, usually, is the harbinger of what is to come, and yet

we're often surprised by what happens. Here we think the *mistake* might be the move to America, where everything is strange to the seven-year-old narrator who gets bullied in his new school—until his father puts a stop to it. Then we think the *mistake* might be his older brother Birju's application to a science academy—studying day and night for months—and then Birju is accepted! But the “real” mistake may occur when Birju sustains a serious accident, and it is clear his life will never be the same. ¶ The story reads like autobiography at first—all the delicious details that a child recalls of his world—then it shifts. All of these events *could* have happened in one's life—the exchange of humor among family members, affection, fun, then tragedy—but fiction has a way of making us sustain the most difficult part of it last—after the fun is over. A great story. Check it out by clicking on its title above. Sharma's novel *Family Life* is forthcoming from Norton.

Robert Coover, “The Frog Prince,” *New Yorker*, January 27, 2014.

A princess kisses a frog, and he becomes a handsome prince (sort of), while retaining many of his amphibian qualities. ¶ This story looks like one of those exercises in which a (famous) writer takes a (well-known) fairy tale and retells it from a fresh, new perspective—perhaps on a day when he can't think of anything else to write. (Actually, according to Coover, this is true; he's planning an entire book around reimagined fairy tales.) Only in this instance, Coover seems to leave out the fresh and new parts. Oh, yes, the prince *does* retain a certain number of his froggy characteristics, but to what end? Humor alone (ha ha)? To show that he would still rather be a frog than a prince (uh, yeah)? Maybe that's Coover's fresh and new take on this brief fairy tale. In all other renditions (including the way I heard it as a child) the reader is led to believe that frog would rather be a prince and project his muddy-tasting goop into a beautiful human princess. Is Coover telling us that this assumption just may not be true? Ribbit. (That's frog talk for “Amazing!”) Coover is the author of *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre: Director's Cut*.

Donald Antrim, “The Emerald Light in the Air,” *New Yorker*, February 3, 2014.

Billy French, a man in his fifties, a man who has suffered through a number of family deaths and whose wife has left him, muddles through a series of experiences that serve up a certain redemption. ¶ Some stories envelop the reader from the first sentence. Then the second one swallows you further. And then you're mired, like Billy, in the muck of the road, where, in his vintage Mercedes, he gets stuck. The man, a middle school art teacher, has endured the loss of his wife who's left him.

“I'm searching for something that isn't quite there,' she once said" (63).

Billy has endured electroconvulsive therapy, which the author describes in such vividly seductive detail that you sense he may have experienced it himself. Billy endures one more test, one that even in his potted sensibilities, he manages to surpass himself—and most of us—as a human being. This story, you must read. Antrim's story collection *The Emerald Light in the Air*, in which this story appears last, comes out in September.

Zadie Smith, "Moonlit Landscape with Bridge," *New Yorker*, February 10, 2014.

The Minister of the Interior of an island nation deluged by a typhoon abandons his place in the world by using his last shred of power to board a plane to Paris, where this man in his sixties will join his family, whom he has sent ahead. ¶ The Minister's internal turmoil is the engine that propels this story: along his way to the airport, his last ride in an official SUV of black, with a driver whose courage is fading fast; a look back at his purpose as he stops and unloads crates of bottled water to islanders so crazed with thirst that they are more greedy than grateful. During the water delivery, the Minister loses a shoe in the muck of the storm—emblematic of something else he is leaving behind. Then his one-hour trip to the airport evolves into a five-hour ordeal, and he suffers a broken elbow in a melee while stopping to take a leak in a public place. A knife-wielding maniac, a man the Minister was once comrades with, "hails" a ride to the airport only to shout BON VOI YAH GEE at the minister as he boards his jet. One senses, as the minister grimaces and moves toward across the tarmac, that his elbow will be the least of his pain. Smith is the author of *NW*.

Karl Ove Knausgaard, "Come Together," *New Yorker*, February 17 and 24, 2014.

Boy meets girl. Boy is enticed by girl to go "out." They kiss for fifteen minutes, breaking a record of the boy's friend. Girl calls it off, breaking boy's heart. ¶ Coming-of-age stories are tricky to write. If they're too generic, they can be horribly uninteresting, except perhaps to other twelve-year-olds. The perfect modulation is needed, and such an element seems to be missing from this story. It seems a bit disingenuous for an adult writer to pretend that he is twelve again. A bit of the retrospective point of view is needed, I think, to put the story in its proper place. ¶ Also, I keep expecting something new or different to happen: Karl's older brother is setting him up for a fall or his parents are going to catch the two mid-kiss or *something!* ¶ And I issue the same disclaimer I often make with regard to translations. Something seems to get lost, indeed! Perhaps I've missed some finer nuance of the story, but I don't think so. It seems like a very elemental narrative by someone who must be a very fine writer in his own language. Knausgaard strikes a number of chords—music albums, song titles, rock groups from the period—but they fail to make a sound that I can hear. This story is part of the author's forthcoming title, part of his *My Struggle* series of novels.

Denis Johnson, "The Largesse of the Sea Maiden," *New Yorker*, March 3, 2014.

Bill Whitman, a sixty-three-year-old ad man living in San Diego, recalls his life as he returns to New York to receive an award for a thirty-second bank commercial. ¶ There is in this story a bit of Johnson's mordant wit: ". . . and what little of it she managed to make comprehensible didn't even merit being called shallow"—much of what I cherished about his novel *Resuscitation of a Hanged Man* (1991). ¶ Johnson's story is comprised of ten sections, each a mini-narrative of its own. They seem somewhat disjointed, but one comes to realize that they make up the cumulative narrative of this man's life—much like our own narratives, wandering but all related to one another in the end. Whitman is at that point we all reach, whether we realize it or not: "I note that I've lived longer in the past, now, than I can expect to live in the future." ¶ The title *must* be derived from the final paragraph (Johnson claims to have seen the phrase in a book of fairy tales):

“Once in a while, I lie there as the television runs, and I read something wild and ancient from one of several collections of folktales I own. Apples that summon the sea maidens, eggs that fulfill my wish, and pears that make people grow long noses that fall off again.”

Johnson's *The Laughing Monsters* is out next fall.

Yiyun Li, “A Sheltered Woman,” *New Yorker*, March 10, 2014.

Auntie Mae, a Chinese immigrant who works as a baby nurse in San Francisco, must decide if she wishes to continue her work or move onto something else. ¶ The use of internal monologue seems to enhance this story. If we didn't know some of Auntie Mae's thoughts, we wouldn't know her very well. Would we know, for example, that she's worked for eleven years as a baby nurse? ¶ The woman seems to have two personalities, one a rather mystical one that sees a statue of an egret fly away, but she's also a woman who believes in strict routines for the beginning of a baby's life. She talks to her late husband as if he were still around, yet she grounds herself in her work, sort of befriending a plumber her age, yet not really trusting him. ¶ Li asks much of the reader. To be patient in seeing the story develop. She asks us to forget that we never know how her husband died. We don't know how Auntie Mae spends her money, keeping it a secret from all of us, as well as her new friend, Paul. ¶ The story is reminiscent, in tone, of Katherine Anne Porter's “The Jilting of Granny Weatherall,” but while it mimics its tone, its mysteries, Li's story does not seem to achieve the same depth. Maybe, however, in fifty years, high school students will be studying Li's “A Sheltered Woman” for its mysteries, unpacking its gems during AP exams in which they must decide who is the more sheltered woman, Auntie Mae or the mother she is helping. Li's *Kinder Than Solitude* was published recently.

T. Coraghessan Boyle, “The Relive Box,” *New Yorker*, March 17, 2014.

A nameless man narrates his tale of a “relive” box, by which he can recite a date and time and relive that moment. ¶ What makes this an enjoyable story is the universality of the conceit. Which one of us wouldn't like to say “Reset,” and go to a time in our lives when we were younger, happier, livelier, sexier? Who wouldn't like to relive those times we can't quite recall in order to get them straight in our minds? Boyle's characters make clear the potential problems with using such a device. We would wear ourselves out reliving the past. Oh, hm. We often do that anyway: reliving the times we were in love, in the throes of passion, reliving our wounds from some sort of battle so that we can “win” it the second time around. The narrator sums up the situation best in the last lines of the story. When his fifteen-year-old daughter Kate asks him—mid-trance by way of the relive box—if he is there, he replies, “I'm not here. I'm not. I'm not.” When we live in the past—with or without a relive box—we're definitely not *here*. Boyle published *When the Killing's Done* in 2011.

Tessa Hadley, “Under the Sign of the Moon,” *New Yorker*, March 24, 2014.

Greta, in her sixties, travels by train from London to Liverpool to visit her daughter and experiences a chance encounter with a much younger man. ¶ Hadley's greatest gift may be developing character. She so thoroughly creates interesting individuals that the plot seems to unfold as a result of their willful actions—as if they are actual people. We are drawn along with Greta from her past—two *husbands*, her life as a wife and mother—to the present, as a woman recovering from cancer. The young man's attentions seem odd; she speculates he must have a mother fixation to be so attentive to her needs. At the same time she feels rejuvenated.

“. . . the way you might describe a limb getting over an attack of pins and needles—that she was coming back to life.”

When Greta has a second stranger-on-a-train encounter with the young man, he awkwardly spills his drink in her lap, and while he moves to clean her dress, he places his head on her knee. She insists that he leave the establishment immediately. He has left her a gift, a worn copy of a historical novel, in which he has written what turns out to be her name (though he'd said her name was the same as his mother's):

“Greta was confused, and for one long moment she really believed that it was fated, that this stranger had known her before he ever met her, and that he had written her name inside his book before she even told him what it was.”

Hadley is comfortable with Greta's ambiguous feelings, and it feels natural because often it is the way we feel about our own lives.

The New Yorker published three of Hadley's stories in 2013, and with this one, she gives this year a great start. Hadley's novel *Clever Girl* is out now.

Louise Erdrich, “The Big Cat,” *New Yorker*, March 31, 2014.

A nameless narrator, over time, marries two different women—one who snores and one who does not. ¶ As always, Erdrich's story contains a bit of the mystical. The narrator and Elida, his first wife, spend a Christmas with her parents in a poorly insulated house, whose interior walls exude frost early in the morning. He tells his daughter the layers of frost are the snores of his wife and her sisters. Later, he divorces his first wife and marries Laurene, a rich woman who does *not* snore. Having sacrificed so much sleep early on, the narrator now takes afternoon naps to catch up. ¶ He has monthly meetings with Elida over their daughter's issues. One day he kisses Elida, and they conduct an affair, then get back together and remarry. Of course, the narrator is faced with living with the snoring again. In the last scene, Elida's snores now take on the “gurgling purr of a big cat digesting prey meat.” The narrator wakes, in a sweat, perhaps realizing that *he* may be the prey meat. Erdrich's book, *The Round House* came out in 2012.

Jonathan Lethem, “Pending Vegan” *New Yorker*, April 7, 2014.

Paul Espeseth is coming off an antidepressant and visits San Diego's Sea World with his wife and twin four-year-old daughters. ¶ Lethem seems to capture that

netherworld between an on-drug/not-on-drug life. His nameless wife is but an aloof caregiver, as if he is another one of her children. And in any number of ways he is. Paul renames himself Pending Vegan, fully aware of the questionable methods by which meat-eating is achieved, yet loving the saltiness of pork. With the thought of having to postpone his hunger-busting behavior, Paul buys a turkey leg to gnaw on. His wife is *annoyed*, and he becomes a victim of his love for meat. ¶ I enjoy Lethem's writing very much. His literary references, his cultural and spiritual references, are all in service of the narrative, in this case, about a man caught between two worlds. Paul Espeseth, too, like F. Scott Fitzgerald, whom he cites, has the "capacity to keep two opposed ideas in mind at the same time." Read to find out how! Lethem's most recent novel is *Dissident Gardens*.

Roddy Doyle, "Box Sets," *New Yorker*, April 14, 2014.

Sam, a Dubliner who has lost his job, takes his dog for a walk and is run into by a cyclist. ¶ Prior to his accident, Sam has thrown a coffee mug at the kitchen wall. He's angry, not necessarily at his loving wife, Emer, but at his circumstances. It's like stirring a pot of anger over slights he feels their friends have committed, over not having a job, over Emer's suggestion that he should *volunteer* until something turns up. As in all good short stories, the protagonist experiences a change. How does his transformation relate to all that has happened, to the boxed sets of TV dramas like *Mad Men* and *The Wire* mentioned so early in the story? Tune in to see! *The Guts* is Doyle's latest novel.

Thomas McGuane, "Hubcaps," *New Yorker*, April 21, 2014.

Owen, a child of two heavy drinkers, develops a quiet life that includes hiding a couple of small turtles at the bottom of his lunchbox and stealing hubcaps for his collection. ¶ As always, McGuane's story is rich with details about the setting, the characters. Owen's inner life, like that of many lonely children, is both desolate and rich. He may collect other people's hubcaps as a way of feeding his bereft inner life. But this life is also rich with kindness and an awareness that others do not have. He, for example, is able to enumerate both the gifts and the deficits of all the Kershaw brothers' abilities as baseball players—without judgment. He is able to befriend the mentally challenged youngest Kershaw brother without gathering much attention. The subtle climax seems to occur when something precious of Owen's is taken from him. As his parents separate, he continues to steal hubcaps at football games. "As time went on, it wasn't only the games: any public event would do." McGuane's *Driving on the Rim* was published in 2010.

Shirley Jackson, "The Man in the Woods," *New Yorker*, April 28, 2014.

Christopher, a college student, finds himself walking in a forest for several days. ¶ The story unfolds as a myth, each element and each character having its own purpose. Even the trees are personified, have their purpose of *welcoming* Christopher to the forest, "bending their great bodies toward him." A cat joins him, acting more like a dog would. An old woman named Circe enters the story. ¶ I believe one reason Ms. Jackson may have left this story unpublished is that it has no tension. It unfolds from beginning to end with little variation in tone. I don't mind reading a story that ends a bit mysteriously, causing the reader to wonder, but if the entire story is uttered in the same breath without a clear shape, it may not,

FORGIVE ME, be a story. And once again this selection aces out a younger and LIVING writer from being published in the magazine. *Garlic in Fiction* is, as I write, being edited by Ms. Jackson's children for a Random House release next year.

Sam Lipsyte, "The Naturals," *New Yorker*, May 5, 2014.

Caperton (great name) flies from Chicago to Newark to be with his dying father, and during his flight back to Chicago his father . . . dies. ¶ Lipsyte packs so much into what seems like a simple narrative about a grown man unable to accept his father's impending death. On the plane to *and* from Newark, Caperton meets the Rough Beast—a professional wrestler who acts as sort of a surrogate father, though he may be younger than Caperton—one of those literary coincidences that *must* happen in a narrative though it rarely does in life. His stepmother Stella has a "deal" with her fridge, mainly that she wants no one rooting around in there except her. She and Caperton have a major argument over his intrusion, and he winds up crushing a tomato against his bare chest—making his years of cumulative rage palpable. ¶ Every character in this tale is a "storyteller," particularly Burt, Caperton's father's best buddy, who now tells stories to children at the library to occupy his old-man time. Lipsyte has created the ultimate story for any man with a dying father. There's always a *story*, a narrative between those two men, and it is, in many case, a sad one—just is, that's all. Lipsyte's latest book, *The Fun Parts: Stories*, was out in 2013.

Lyudmila Ulitskaya, "The Fugitive," *New Yorker*, May 12, 2014.

Boris, a Soviet dissident, to avoid arrest, flees Moscow to live in the countryside. ¶ Boris's crime is that he is an artist who expresses bitter political satire through his work. He begins his exile in the winter by spending it with Nura, an old woman who only wishes to receive vodka as pay. Boris passes the long winter by drawing on rolls of old wallpaper. They are later sold to help Boris earn income. He evades arrest until 1976, four years after leaving Moscow. ¶ More and more post-Soviet literature may now find its way into the world. This story seems so timeless because it reads like a "tale," the fictional narrative of what may have been real events. And like the Holocaust, there is no way authors can write too much about the over seventy years of suffering the Russian people experienced. Their narratives contribute to a tapestry of human history. The author's novel, *The Funeral Party*, was published in 2002.

Robert Coover, "The Waitress," *New Yorker*, May 19, 2014.

A woman working at a diner is granted three wishes by an old *bag lady* who "turns out to be a fairy godmother in disguise." ¶ An odd little story, a fairy tale, with few, if any, revisions over the old ones. This is the second of Coover's fairy tales that the magazine has published recently. Why? one wonders. To show that we're still children? That we still enjoy experiencing a certain suspension of disbelief? That we, too, wouldn't mind receiving three wishes, by which we would make fools of ourselves? *The Brunist Day of Wrath*, a novel, is Coover's most recent novel.

Alejandro Zambra, "Camilo," *New Yorker*, May 26, 2014.

Two men and their sons meet and form relationships with each other over a life time. ¶ I love this kind of story, one that moves back and forth lazily through time and across various spaces—as if the various parts represent one journey. Zambra’s story is sophisticated—revealing little bits of information at a time, each piece of the puzzle falling into place until the very end, when they all make sense. Harder to accomplish than one might think! Zambra has achieved acclaim for his novel, *Bonsai*.

Thomas Pierce, “Ba Baboon,” *New Yorker*, June 2, 2014.

Brooks, a forty-four-year-old brain injury patient, and his sister Mary break into the house of Wynn, her married boyfriend’s place, to locate sex tapes that Wynn has made of Mary. ¶ Because of Brooks’s brain injury some of the story seems to be told from his stream-of-consciousness point of view, although the author hands Mary the POV in alternating sections to tell about things Brooks might not remember. In any case, they’re hiding from, then running from, Wynn’s guard dogs. After an encounter in which Brooks is bitten by one of the dogs, he learns from a figure hiding under the covers the secret words, *Ba Baboon*, that will cause the dogs to become docile. ¶ The story begins in a satisfying manner with a proper *complication*, but somehow the narrative gets lost in the home somewhere, meanders to a point that leaves one wondering what the story is about. An account of brain injuries? What to do when one’s boyfriend makes a secret sex tape of you and you wish to recover the evidence? How to handle vicious dogs? The relationship between the two characters does not seem wholly developed. Pierce’s *House of Small Mammals* will be out in January.

Ramona Ausubel, “You Can Find Love Now,” *New Yorker*, June 9 and 16, 2014.

Cyclops develops an online persona in order to attract (lure) young women into his underground lair. ¶ Cyberspace meets Cyclops of Greek mythology. Ha ha. Funny. Clever. Sad. Poignant. End of story. ¶ My problem, I fear. I have an aversion to stories paralleled a little too closely to mythology. Slight references or allusions, yes, but adapting an entire story around a musty, old character! Blechh. Ausubel’s story collection, *A Guide to Being Born*, is out now.

David Gilbert, “Here’s the Story,” *New Yorker*, June 9 and 16, 2014.

In 1967, Ted Martin and Emma Brady, of Los Angeles, married to other people, each with three children, are en route to the east coast via TWA. ¶ The couple have become acquainted earlier, when Ted has wandered from a boring baseball game to a city park, where Emma and her youngest son are on an outing among the “hippies.” The couple have actually met earlier by way of their children attending the same school. ¶ On the plane, Ted exchanges seats with a woman, so that he may sit with Emma. On what must be upward to four hours, they become much better acquainted, so much so that they hold hands on the plane’s final approach to Cincinnati. What happens next is totally unexpected . . . and yet Gilbert informs the reader in the first sentence what is about to transpire: **“It ends with his right hand gripping her left, the curve of her knuckles the pulling yoke” (46)**. If the reader recognizes the names of their six children—*Greg, Peter, and Bobby, and Marcia, Jan, and Cindy*—there’s a good reason for it. Gilbert’s novel, *& Sons*, was released in 2012.

Karen Russell, "The Bad Graft," *New Yorker*, June 9 and 16, 2014.

Two young people, Angie and Andy, leave Pennsylvania to travel through Joshua Tree National Park in California's Mojave Desert. ¶ Angie's body is overtaken by a Joshua tree, and she seems to take on its life.

"During a season of wild ferment, a kind of atmospheric accident can occur: the extraordinary moisture stored in the mind of a passing animal or hiker can compel the spirit of a Joshua to Leap through its own membranes. The change is metaphysical: the tree's spirit is absorbed into the migrating consciousness, where it lives on, intertwined with its host" (95).

Using an omniscient third-person point of view, the author Russell weaves the reader in and out of the consciousness of one character to another, including the Joshua tree. Wow. Russell seems to be exploring rumors (news?) that the Joshua tree is headed for extinction. A park ranger has different ideas:

"'Oh, it's a hardy species,' the ranger says. His whiskers are clear tubes that hold the red firelight. 'Those roots go deep. I wouldn't count a tree like that out'" (101).

I believe this may be one of the top *New Yorker* stories of the year, if for nothing else, the sheer joy of its imaginative nature. The next leap for us, as a species, might be to aid in preserving all the Joshua trees of the world. Russell's novel, *Swamplandia!* was released in 2011.

Haruki Murakami, "Yesterday," *New Yorker*, June 9 and 16, 2014.

Tanimura narrates the story about his friend Kitaru, when they are both twenty. ¶ Tanimura is perplexed by Kitaru, who takes the Beatles song "Yesterday" and sets it to what he refers to as a crude Japanese dialect: Kansai. An odd character, Kitaru asks Tanimura to go out with his girl, Erika, someone he has known since childhood. They do and have a great time but never go out again. Shortly after, Kitaru leaves the coffee shop where both friends have been working. So does Tanimura. ¶ Sixteen years later Tanimura runs into Erika. She says that Kitaru has moved to Denver to be a chef. They chat. ¶ Odd story—without the usual arc. A little dull. The kind of story that ordinary people in real life tell each other while chatting during a chance meeting. Oh. Murakami's three-volume novel *1Q84* came out in 2009-10.

Maile Meloy, "Madame Lazarus," *New Yorker*, June 23, 2014.

A Parisian man gives his male lover, the nameless narrator, a small dog, which he does not really want. ¶ Yet Cordelia, the dog, keeps the nameless narrator, an old man, company when his young lover is out of town. A fine narrative seems capable of juggling several important events, some in the past bouncing in interesting ways off those closer to the present. Meloy's story accomplishes this (not so) simple task beautifully. ¶ As a young boy, the narrator falls for another boy, who is tortured by the Germans during World War II. They meet again after the war, and the lover, now with tuberculosis, dies on the narrator's parents' dining room floor. This

seminal event—witnessing the death of a young love—continues to resonate throughout the narrator's life. ¶ Cordelia ages, as dogs do, and one day dies on a Parisian pavement. The nameless narrator attempts to revive the dog, as he had wished to revive his lover on that dining room floor. Meloy's ending is satisfying because she takes an old, old conceit and makes it her own. A being can sometimes rise from the dead, but, in the end what does such a miracle really mean? ¶ Meloy's *The Apothecary* came out in 2011.

Rebecca Curtis, "The Pink House," *New Yorker*, June 30, 2014.

A young woman, a writer, gathers a number of other *failed* writers to a place on the Mexican border to share a tale of how she ruined a man's life. ¶ At first you wonder why Curtis must relate this story as she does—with all these writers to filter it through—but it is a clever manner in which to get a broader take on it. ¶ The story provides a fascinating character study: the young woman is uncontrollably candid about everything, her bleak upbringing by cold and uncaring parents, the black men she's attracted to, how pinkish white men repulse her, how, in spite of this revulsion, she stays with one (a competent writer), who helps edit her work so that it gets published. ¶ Curtis is successful in relating what is essentially a ghost story that, enhanced by the reader's suspension of disbelief, feels as if it *could have happened!* Curtis's "The Christmas Miracle" was the magazine's last story of 2013 (a great read), and her latest book is *Twenty Grand: and Other Tales of Love and Money*.

Allegra Goodman, "Apple Cake," *New Yorker*, July 7, 2014.

Jeanne, a seventy-four-year-old woman, is dying of lung cancer, and her entire family drop in to pay respects before she actually departs. ¶ I've read few short stories in which the author employs the third person omniscient point of view; such is usually reserved for the large scope of a novel. But here Goodman uses it effectively to depict Jeanne's family. We float in and out of her consciousness, as we wonder if she just might hold on. We trail out of Jeanne's room or house to see and hear what Jeanne's older sisters are saying and doing. Her two sons, as well. Why is it, Goodman seems to be saying, that at the end of life, a once energetic and talented musician and teacher becomes something less than human? A burden. A problem to dispose of. And perhaps she addresses this question. So close to death, Jeanne is far removed from the playing of her violin, though it is just out of reach. She doesn't wish to be buried next to her husband of thirty-eight years. Is she crazy? Is the story a bit "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall" meets *Good-bye Columbus*? Goodman published *Intuition* in 2006.

Greg Jackson, "Wagner in the Desert," *New Yorker*, July 21, 2014.

Two couples visit the desert area of Palm Springs and do non-stop drugs before beginning their search for Wagner, a man who may or may not finance a film one of the men wants to make. ¶ This story is truly one of, for, and about people under thirty-five. The author's extremely articulate and lyrical prose walks (or rolls) us in a trance-like way through their lives. He names every drug, every substance (including some scrumptious food) they consume on a New Year's weekend several years earlier. How are they different from the last group of young uns to go through this? May be the sheer magnitude, the sheer panoply of drugs and substances that are so readily available to them and how they so easily ingest great amounts of these

substances and still rise the next day to do anything more than pee! It's a miracle!

“First we did molly, lay on the thick carpet touching it, ourselves, one another. We did edibles, bathed dumbly in the sun, took naps on suède couches. Later, we did blow off the keys to ecologically responsible cars. We powdered glass tables and bathroom fixtures. We ate mushrooms—ate and waited, ate and waited . . . we smoked cigarettes and joints, sucked on lozenges lacquered in hash oil. We tried one another’s benzos and antivirals, Restoril, Avodart, YAZ, and Dexedrine, looking for contraindications.”

And yet there may be a cynical self-awareness among these characters that the previous generation didn't possess. When the narrator's girl friend (though she clinically explains why they should *not* have sex) exclaims, high or mellow on mushrooms, **“It's like . . . it was all *choreographed* for me,”** while viewing the hush of a desert sunset, the narrator replies, **“‘But that's what it is,’ I said, ‘That's what being on drugs is.’”**

With the last sentence, you realize, perhaps, the entire story has been *choreographed* precisely so he can say that. And yet the story is plump with realizations—epiphanies, dare I say—that just might not have surfaced without the use of drugs. Either way, whether the writer himself is stoned while writing the story or not, he certainly makes one feel that he could be! It makes you wish your own life could be transformed so easily.

Jackson graduated from Harvard and UVA and is working on a collection of stories entitled *Prodigals*. He is, I believe, a writer to watch. Be sure and check out the magazine's interview with him.

Saïd Sayrafiezadeh, “Last Meal at Whole Foods,” *New Yorker*, July 28, 2014.

A twenty-eight-year-old male narrator whose mother has three months to live recalls his life as a child with his single parent. ¶ I kept thinking as I read this story: *I've been here (caring for elderly parent), and I find it uncomfortable*. Yet Sayrafiezadeh takes us to a familiar place that also belongs just to his narrator and mother: the professor who impregnates his mother but who's too busy to marry her or provide for his son; their life of living on Goodwill and Whole Foods; his mother's fixation on seeing that he receives a proper education—even to the point of playing Scrabble missing an “F”. She is squeamish about his manners:

“When I was a child, she would screech and recoil anytime my finger approached the vicinity of my nose” (66).

The narrator is at a painful point: wanting to care for the only person who may have cared for him, and, yet hoping to move on with his own life. And again, most of us have been there or will be at some point, and his story is an insightful reminder that we will also become the one who requires care. The author's collection of stories, *Brief Encounters with the Enemy*, came out in 2013.

Paul Theroux, "Action," *New Yorker*, August 4, 2014.

Albert, the fifteen-year-old son of a Boston shoe store owner, runs an errand for his father in the late 1950s and faces some unforeseen hazards. ¶ Danger seems to lurk everywhere, whether it's a man that steals his dime pastry or a store owner who asks Albert if he want to get "bollocky" and have his picture taken. Albert's friend Eddie has told him about his girl, Paige, who is twenty, stating that she's "action." After attending to his father's errand of picking up some shoes, Albert stops to visit Paige at her flat. She is ironing and offers him some lemonade. Having survived the previous perils, Albert doesn't fare so well now, as a rather large men enters the apartment. During Paige's brief absence an incident occurs, and Albert exits in a hurry, leaving his father's shoes behind. Instead of punishing his son, Albert's father, who is normally quite strict, senses something has happened, something profound, something he cannot change on behalf of his son. Theroux's collection, *Mr. Bones*, is out this fall.

César Aira, "Picasso," *New Yorker*, August 11 & 18, 2014.

A man encounters a genie while visiting the Picasso Museum and is offered a choice: would he rather own a Picasso or become Picasso himself? ¶ The narrator explores the ramifications of both positions. If he chooses to *be* Picasso, he is presented with a particular set of problems. If he elects to *have* a Picasso, he is presented with another set. Perhaps Aira wishes for the reader to wonder about the meaning of art. What is its value for the artist? The individual viewing it? After subconsciously wishing for a Picasso, the narrator is granted his wish. Now what? Aira's *The Musical Brain and Other Stories* will be released in 2015.

Tessa Hadley, "One Saturday Morning," *New Yorker*, August 25, 2014.

Ten-year-old Carrie of 1960s London is mesmerized by and also a bit frightened by a family friend, who shows up at their door while her parents are out shopping. ¶ The circumstances lead the more lascivious reader to suspect that Dom, the visitor, has some evil purpose in mind, primarily because Carrie innocently lets him into the house when, for now, she is all alone. ¶ It turns out that Dom has recently lost his wife. This is the reason why he's so goofy: playing *her* Bartók piece on the piano, as she skulks around upstairs, bearishly embracing her mother on a balcony below Carrie's room, his grief overwhelming her mother's presence with something that resembles dancing. ¶ As often happens in life, a child doesn't understand until years later the evanescence of that moment:

"Already, Carrie hardly knew if she'd actually seen Dom dancing on the balcony with her mother, or if that had happened only her imagination, a vision of what consolation might be—something headlong and reckless and sweet, unavailable to children."

Hadley's *Married Love: and Other Stories* was published in 2012.

Joseph O'Neill, "The Referees," *New Yorker*, September 1, 2014.

Thirty-six-year-old Rob Karlsson moves back to Manhattan from Portland, Oregon, after a divorce, and requires referees to let an apartment in a co-operative building. ¶ At first the focus of the story seems to be Rob's search for two of what Americans

call *references*. He contacts first one person then another, but most decline to help him. A friend of his former wife, for example, feels that she must remain aligned with Samantha—there’s nothing inherently *wrong* with him. Then Rob’s cousin offers to sign a letter if Rob will write it. And Rob finally does receive a second letter of reference from *Billy*—a childhood friend from whom he has been disengaged over a decade. So it would seem that there is a certain irony by way of his receiving references from parties who are now least acquainted with him. ¶ The story concludes with Rob’s own rundown of his character, basically claiming, “I’m an okay guy who won’t make trouble.” His rant continues with a short biographical sketch that further demonstrates why he is one who should be trusted to occupy a certain piece of urban property . . . even if, over most of his life, he isn’t exactly the most reliable . . . friend. I suppose one must experience this kind of dehumanization to *get* what O’Neill is going for here. His book, *The Dog*, is out in September.

Thomas McGuane, “Motherlode,” *New Yorker*, September 8, 2014.

David Jenkins, a cattle breeder in his twenties, is coerced into driving Ray, an old man, out into the Montana countryside to meet up with a young woman Ray has become acquainted with online. ¶ With McGuane writing seems to be all about details, sensory details. The story begins in such a way that it could go in five different directions: is it about cattle geneticists out of Oklahoma, ranch clients, a dog with a first-class stamp on its butt, an old man (Ray) who ostensibly has come to Jordan, Montana, to do some comet watching? ¶ Ah, no. In short order Ray points a gun at young David and says they’re headed out of town to a ranch so that he can meet up with the woman he’s met online. I won’t spoil the fun or exploit the danger, but no one hits the motherlode in this story—it’s all about getting there, arriving at the end of it alive. I’m speaking of the reader, of course. *Gallatin Canyon* is one of McGuane’s most recent books.

Danielle McLaughlin, “Dinosaurs on Other Planets,” *New Yorker*, September 15, 2014.

Kate and Colman’s daughter Emer and grandson Oisín come home to Ireland from London to visit Emer’s parents, and bring the young woman’s current boyfriend, Pavel, a man nearly old enough to be Emer’s father. ¶ Some interesting symbolism. “Dinosaurs” by way of a sheep’s skull. Colman puts it in bleach as his grandson watches. The process forces out maggots and other insects. More symbols. Emer, the couple’s daughter, doesn’t appear to like her parents much—she’s made the trip out of a sense of duty. The only two characters who seem in any way *nice* are Kate and Emer’s guest, Pavel, whom Emer brings along unannounced. ¶ He’s close to being Kate’s age, and they have a brief but nearly meaningful conversation as they take a walk. Finally Emer reveals she and her six-year-old son will be moving to Australia. It seems to be indicative of the vast emotional distances that exist between most of the members of the ensemble. Well written but almost airless. I feel nothing on behalf of the characters, but I don’t think that is their fault.

Victor Lodato, “Jack, July,” *New Yorker*, September 22, 2014.

Jack, twenty-two, of Tucson, is a meth addict who’s been rejected by his mother, his sister, and girlfriend, Rhonda. ¶ In a way you feel like a voyeur while reading this story, so intensely does Lodato let us in on what it is like to be a crystal meth user.

Living *fast* is what Jack calls it, life speeded up past the speed of sound. You witness Jack's stink. You witness his thoughts of the past (sister mauled by a dog, a less than competent mother). You feel the searing July 4th heat as Jack negotiates this fast life. You even glide into the fuzzy, foggy world of meth as he returns to the place where he's flopped for the last two weeks, the only home he has left. His obese *roommate* pats his kimono pocket, and answers Jack's silent question with "I do I do I do." Life couldn't seem any bleaker than this, yet somehow you hope. You hope. Lodato's novel, *Mathilda Savitch*, was published in 2010.

Paul La Farge, "Rosendale," *New Yorker*, September 29, 2014.

April P moves from Boston to Rosendale and lives with Dara, a potter, who creates a golem. To make money, April P accepts a job as a lap dancer in a local bar. She makes good money, the job not being *too* seedy, and it gives April P the cash to buy some crack cocaine. Throughout the narrative April P continues to see the golem, and she wonders what the golem (a she) is trying to communicate to April. ¶ The story is told in the third person limited, mainly by way of April P, but occasionally a "we" seems to creep into the narrative, and the reader senses that the golem herself has taken over the story. At the very end, April P asks the golem to *go*. She no longer needs her, the golem. April P is now free. This story is a kind of sequel to La Farge's "Another Life" from the magazine's July 2, 2012 issue. His *Luminous Airplanes* came out in 2011.

Kevin Canty, "Story, with Bird," *New Yorker*, October 6, 2014.

A youngish couple living in a university-town apartment are occasionally plagued with a bird that enters, presumably, through a skylight (although the narrator claims that this dwelling, located in a northern clime, is "open"). ¶ The bird is sort of a distraction for the couple who seem like they are about to break up. They quit drinking, both getting a lot of work (writing) done, their lives returning to a very regulated boredom. The narrator seems to recall fondly their days and nights of debauchery. ¶ Then the woman goes off to her sister's wedding with the intent of drinking and screwing (he will later find out). He, too, returns to drinking, and when she comes back, they, for a moment, return to their wild days. In any case, gone is the bird, the wild thing that enters their lives for a short time and then disappears just before they decide to break up. Short but satisfying story. One of Canty's most recent books is *Where the Money Went*.

Haruki Murakami, "Scheherazade," *New Yorker*, October 13, 2014.

Nobutaka Habara, a thirty-one-year-old man living in Tokyo, for some reason is sequestered, and a woman whom he refers to Scheherazade is assigned to take care of his needs while he is hidden away. ¶ Murakami seems to show great admiration for the legendary character of Scheherazade. Habara's woman comes to his house twice a week, armed with food and her body, which she offers to him easily. She likens herself to a lamprey eel she claims to have been in a former life: "the quiet around her was absolute." ¶ Scheherazade then tells a tale of how she used to sneak into the house of a boy she had a crush on in high school. It is an image that overtakes Habara himself: **He pictured himself and Scheherazade side by side, their suckers fastened to a rock, their bodies waving in the current, eying the surface as they waited for a fat trout to swim**

smugly by.” Murakami repeats the lamprey eel imagery throughout the larger tale, creating the idea that in various forms, people lie in wait to capture those with whom they are obsessed. But as with Habara's Scheherazade, their passions fade, the crush ends, and all involved return to a normal life. Murakami's latest novel is *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage*.

Kirstin Valdez Quade, “Ordinary Sins,” *New Yorker*, October 20, 2014.

Crystal, a single woman pregnant with twins, works in a Santa Fe rectory for two priests and is confronted with a number of jagged truths about priests and the Church. ¶ Valdez Quade is a courageous writer, daring to enter into these domains of the priest: his office, his rectory, even his bedroom. Father Paul, a reformed alcoholic, has taken pity on her and given her a job as a housekeeper . . . who also types. Not only does he pay her, but he seems to offer her a kind of forgiveness—that perhaps she's not even seeking. ¶ The other priest, young, fresh from Nigeria, is stiff, cold, judgmental. Within these two extremes, Crystal must enter the rectory each day, perhaps symbolic of the Church itself: offering *forgiveness* in one breath and condemnation in the next. The author has entered into what has always been thought of as a sacred place and rooted around to find that it isn't quite so. ¶ I became acquainted with Ms. Valdez Quade in 2000 as we participated in a weeklong writers' workshop, she fresh out of undergraduate school. Need I say, even then, that she brought the best story to the group? She certainly knocks this one out of the park. Her book, *Night at the Fiestas* will be out in March.

Tom Hanks, “Alan Bean Plus Four,” *New Yorker*, October 27, 2014.

A nameless narrator tells how he and three others—two men and a woman—launch themselves so that they can circle the moon in a vessel they call the Alan Bean (NASA astronaut who landed on the moon in 1969). ¶ Imagine that the character played by Tom Hanks in the film *Big* wrote a short story about four people rocketing to the moon . . . and this story is what you might get. It is told in the fashion of a fairy tale or perhaps a child's picture book—yes, it's fantasy! Facile moves that make it possible for the fearless four suddenly to make their launch as the moon comes into view! The writer's logic is all in the narrator's youthful head. ¶ And I'm not sure why this voyage is made. Do these participants hope for fame for themselves and the iPhone photos? Or is it for the smell of it (they reek upon splashdown)—miraculously enough—as they land near Oahu? To have gone to the far side of the moon . . . I'm not sure there is enough awe. ¶ Mr. Hanks's story is successful enough—enjoyable for what it is—but does its writer have the skills to write a story that stands up to other *New Yorker* stories? The likes of Alice Munro? T. C. Boyle? I repeat a question I've posed before: Is it fair for the magazine to provide space here for a famous actor with a powerful agent, when there are hundreds of English-speaking writers who could turn in a story (on the same subject) far more sophisticated than this one? I guess the fiction editor will never be able to admit the following. A big old kid—sentimental and nostalgic—wrote this story so that the youngsters of today may never forget the heroes of our once great and honorable space program! Is that enough of a reason?

Jess Row, “The Empties,” *New Yorker*, November 3, 2014.

Two years after a permanent power outage occurs in August, 2015, people of a community in Connecticut barter and worse to get the basic things they need to live. ¶ Interesting. When one tries to imagine a future without electric power, even a two-hour blackout does little to tell one what it would be like *permanently*. But Row's story give one a fearful glimpse. **“Not about the old dead life: only about the life that took its place.”** That's right. The closet of J. Seiden, a woman in her late thirties, tells us more than anything what it would be like, at least, superficially. Where is her laptop? “Heaped in the back of a closet somewhere, upstairs, with all the other dead things they weren't able to cannibalize: the surge protectors and headphones, Nathan's guitar amp, their digital cameras and printers; iPods, iPads, the Rumsons' Tivoli stereo receiver and Harman Kardon speakers.” The human loss, which would seem to be greater, does not register as clearly with these characters: a body frozen in the snow until spring, for example. This life in 2017, after the disaster, is like any story of its ilk: desolate and yet hopeful. *The Empties* is perhaps a better description of the people than all the unrecycled receptacles that remain behind. A sad but *realistic* peek into what *could* happen to us. Move over, Orwell and Huxley. Row has captured a future that even you could not imagine. *Your Face in Mine* is Row's most recent book.

Antonya Nelson, “Primum Non Nocere,” *New Yorker*, November 10, 2014.

The teenage daughter of a psychiatrist is home alone when one of her mother's ex-patients shows up at their door. ¶ I love this story. I'm a fan of Nelson's earlier collection, *Female Trouble*, but I've had difficulty appreciating her *New Yorker* stories of late. This one, however, by comparison, seems more complex, more nuanced, and more sophisticated in ways that others from the last five years are not. ¶ Nelson loves lists, it seems: lists of a character's likes, lists of traits—which carry the reader to a deeper understanding. She provides a *list* of characters, though this time only nine: Jewel, the daughter who's shocked when the patient suddenly materializes in their kitchen; Claudia, Jewel's psychiatrist mother, a woman who loves retro so much that their New Mexico home is furnished with nothing but rotary phones; Robby, Jewel's brother, is off at college but is also a buddy to Jewel; Zachary, Jewel's stepfather, thirty-three, nine years younger than her mother, a misplaced surfer wearing old band T-shirts; Kenny, Jewel's “gentleman caller,” giving a nod to every high schooler's chore of reading Tennessee Williams's fine play; Anthony, the boy Jewel really likes, someone who lives down the block; Joy, the disgruntled patient who shows up with knives, a gun, and a bullet, to square some kind of slight perpetrated against her by the shrink; and finally, Lester, the gray-haired man Claudia comes rushing home with to end the fracas Joy has caused in her house. Turns out, he's indeed *not* Dr. Lester as he asserts, but one of the doctor's patients, whose session has been stunted *in media res*, so to speak. ¶ Nelson cleverly toys with Latin to provide a certain texture to the story. The title, familiar to physicians, means *First, do no harm*. The words *Ad astra per aspera* come into play, as well, when Jewel's classmate Kenny ends his screened message with those words. It is the Kansas state motto (where Nelson hails from): To the stars, through difficulty. Jewel thinks it means “failure,” and she's sort of right. Kenny is failing to win her over. Jewel senses somehow, that her mother has done some harm, perhaps not to Joy, but to everyone in general, with her abrupt, know-it-all, have-it-my-way plowing through life. The story ends with everyone standing in

the kitchen, frozen, waiting for the good doctor to do no more harm. Nelson's most recent collection is entitled *Funny Once*.

Dave Eggers, "Alaska of Giants and Gods," *New Yorker*, November 17, 2014.

Josie, thirty-eight-year-old mother of two, leaves her husband and profession as a dentist behind to begin a new life with her two kids in Seward, Alaska. ¶ Eggers is an individualist, writing the way *he* wishes to, for example, occasionally wending his way into the third person omniscient. Contemporary writing teachers sometimes refer to this practice as head-hopping, particularly when amateurs do it, but Eggers performs this magic with aplomb, instantly—"Now the old man was delighted. His face came alive, he lost twenty years, forgot all the funerals" (77)—and effectively, because he's slipping into the man's head through Josie's suppositions. ¶ Eggers leads readers on what they may believe to be a journey through the Alaskan wilderness—after all, Josie the ex-dentist has left her husband, disenfranchised her children—and then readers wind up climbing aboard one of those huge white cruise ships (just like that, guests of a crazy old man) to witness the show of a magician from Luxembourg. Josie consumes three glasses of wine in short order, and a certain insight hits her:

"With incredible clarity she knew, then, that the answer to her life was that at every opportunity she'd made precisely the wrong choice. She had been a dentist for a decade but for most of that time had not wanted to be a dentist. What could she do now? (80).

What Josie does is something we're not privy to, but we certainly feel, intuit, that with all imaginable hope, Josie's life will now be different. Eggers's latest book is *Your Fathers, Where Are They? And the Prophets, Do They Live Forever?*

Brad Watson, "Eykelboom," *New Yorker*, November 24, 2014.

In what seems like a *sub*-suburban cul-de-sac of the 1960s South, Emile Eykelboom, aka Ikey, moves in from Indiana with his brute of a father and whisper for a mother. ¶ Mr. Eykelboom, who drives a dump truck, couldn't be more abusive if he tried. The three McGowan brothers have Emile cowed for a while, but Emile is actually bigger than they are, and one day he snarls back, fights them off. Watson does a great job of recreating a period in our history in which parents beat their kids, especially if "they had a good reason." ¶ The boys realize the difference, however. Mr. Eykelboom seems to *enjoy* abusing his son. After a neighborhood incident that leaves everyone on the cul-de-sac shaken, the Eykelbooms move away. To say any more is to say too much. Watson's latest book is *Aliens in the Prime of Their Lives*.

Etgar Keret, "One Gram Short," *New Yorker*, December 1, 2014.

The Israeli narrator, wishing to impress a young woman, goes through some rather extreme machinations to procure some very illegal weed from a lawyer (who receives it as a prescription). ¶ To obtain small amounts of the contraband, he and his friend Avri must go to court and pose as part of the family the lawyer is representing. The two must protest vehemently against the *Arab* man whose driving has killed a young girl. But things go awry in such a setting, and even though the

attorney lives up to his end of the deal, as the narrator does quite painfully, he and his friend come up short . . . of something. And the most important part of the deal, whether the woman the narrator wishes to impress will go out with him because he now has weed? Well, we'll never know—the story fades quite abruptly—but I think we can make an excellent guess. Keret's new memoir, *The Seven Good Years*, comes out in 2015.

Tim Parks, "Reverend," *New Yorker*, December 8, 2014.

In this reverie, Thomas, a British man of fifty-eight, contemplates the life and death of his father, a minister. ¶ Parks uses a traditional and effective way of developing character, both of Thomas, who is recalling, and the recalled, Thomas's father. As readers we drift with Thomas, in and out of his thoughts: growing up with a brother and sister; his father marrying Thomas and his wife, from whom he is now divorced; his mother. Thoughts of why Thomas didn't believe as his father had. Thoughts of his father's attempt to exorcise the demons from his brother's life. Thoughts of what his father now means to him, now that he himself is reaching the age at which his father died. ¶ Thomas finally recalls an event from his youth, when the family vacations at the seaside. His father, with poor eyesight, calls out to Thomas who has swum further away from the shore.

"He's worried for me, Thomas realizes. He's worried that I've gone too far and may never make it back."

This final line captures the essence of this father-son relationship, a perfect metaphor for how far Thomas would stray from the religious faith his father had tried to instill in him.

Italian Ways: On and Off the Rails from Milan to Palermo is Parks's most recent book.

Elizabeth McKenzie, "Savage Breast," *New Yorker*, December 15, 2014.

A woman returns to her apartment to prepare for a party, but because she is tired she easily falls into a nap. ¶ Once the reader catches onto the writer's intent, the story unfolds easily, and one *must* follow. The nameless narrator finds herself in her childhood home, revealing to us those details we all have stored in our memories: for her, a stained blind with a crocheted ring on a string to raise and lower the blind, and many other clues. The savage beasts she encounters seem to be representations of her childhood family. In the sequence she seems to spend days with them, recalling the past—even the fat fifth-grade teacher-beast whom she believes hates her for daring to pun a revered literary passage into "savage breast." The narrator has an odd ability to float back and forth between different time periods, not at all like the little girl-beast of her reverie: she recalls the Korean War, a specific issue of a 1953 issue of *Life*. ¶ One imagines that we all are capable of such a reverie if only we'd fall onto our beds exhausted and refuse to go to a party that no one cares whether we attend or not. *Stop That Girl* is one of the author's most popular books.

Nuruddin Farah, "The Start of the Affair," *New Yorker*, December 22 & 29, 2014.

James MacPherson, a retired professor of politics at Wits, Johannesburg, buys a North African restaurant in Pretoria and becomes attracted to a much younger man, a Somali, who owns and runs a nearby shop. ¶ James acts somewhat like a cunning animal, as he envelops the Somali youth in his net of generosity. James sees that the young Ahmed is fed properly each day, takes him to his own dentist for his first visit ever, and clothes him. Ahmed even comes to stay with James in his huge house. ¶ They become close, emotionally as well as physically, holding hands as they watch TV. In the last scene the two men—James is three times the youth's age—lie down together, but Ahmed begs off going any farther. The patient MacPherson prepares to wait even longer. The man is that confident. Nuruddin's novel, *Hiding in Plain Sight*, was released this year.