

Baldwin, James. *Giovanni's Room*. New York: Dell, 1956.

To read Baldwin's books for *pleasure* is always a mistake. Although reading him *is* pleasurable, his works are not "easy." In this novel Baldwin captures that time in the world, even Paris in the late 1940s or early 1950s, in which certain men feel that they must have experiences with both men and women, to make a certain calculation about their sexuality. It is an era before there are labels that neatly divide us all into categories: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender . . . oh, yes, and straight.

David, the narrator, leads the reader through what seems like a maze: "I repent now—for all the good it does—one particular lie among the many lies I've told, told, lived, and believed. This is the lie which I told to Giovanni but never succeeded in making him believe, that I had never slept with a boy before. I had" (11). Joey, back in Brooklyn. And if it feels like we can't trust David, we can't.

Giovanni's *room* is the place where the two men share a rather turbulent life, even if such a life begins with a certain playfulness: "We had bought a kilo of cherries and were eating them as we walked along. We were both insufferably childish and high-spirited that afternoon and the spectacle we presented, two grown men jostling each other on the wide sidewalk and aiming the cherry pits, as though they were spitballs, into each other's faces, must have been outrageous. And at my age and the happiness out of which it sprang yet more so: for that moment I really loved Giovanni, who had never seemed more beautiful than he was that afternoon" (110).

The novel is about a man who wants it both ways, the respectability of having a wife but also having a male lover, with whom he is really more comfortable. It's like a museum piece, important that it's there for all to see but no longer that relevant in a world where gay men and women may raise the level of their play to include a legal marriage.

Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Between the World and Me*. New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015.

In some passages of this book, my impulse is to underline nearly every sentence I am reading; the text seems that important. Ta-Nehisi Coates has written a book that everyone, and I mean everyone, should read, regardless of who you are or where you live in the world. He, in the tradition of Malcolm X and Eldridge Cleaver, articulates what it is to be an African-American male in today's world, an image that illuminates the agony his ancestors have experienced for centuries. Indeed, the entire text is an address Mr. Coates is making to his son, informing him where he has come from, what he must watch for now, and how he can prepare for a future reflecting the fact that sixty percent of black men who drop out of high school wind up in prison.

Mr. Coates's most important motif may be that of "fear." He expresses in a multitude of ways the fear that African-Americans experience each day of their lives.

“I heard the fear in the first music I ever knew, the music that pumped from boom boxes full of grand boast and bluster. The boys who stood out on Garrison and Liberty up on Park Heights loved this music because it told them, against all evidence and odds, that they were masters of their own lives, their own streets, and their own bodies. I saw it in the girls, in their loud laughter, in their gilded bamboo earrings that announced their names thrice over. And I saw it in their brutal language and hard gaze, how they would cut you with their eyes and destroy you with their words for the sin of playing too much” (15).

But fear is nothing new to African-Americans. It is something that may be conducted through their dna from one generation to the next: “The nakedness is the correct and intended result of policy, the predictable upshot of people forced for centuries to live under fear” (17). And such fear he experiences first hand, realizing that men have disappeared from his life, uncles and others.

This compact book covers so much: Coates’s upbringing by parents who eschew religion, his education at Howard University, the loss of a great friend he makes there, Prince Jones, the afternoon-long conversation he has with Jones’s mother, a woman with a PhD, who lives in a gated community after having escaped poverty in Louisiana. Each sentence is a plea for Coates’s son to take heed of what his father is saying!

Cortese, Katie. *Girl Power and Other Short-Short Stories*. New York: ELJ Publications, 2015.

I liken Cortese’s short shorts to prose poems, narratives that are super compressed, requiring standard elements of a story to unfold quickly. You must pay attention to the cues and clues because they come up fast, like road signs on a ninety MPH romp through the countryside. At the same time, such clues are, at times, embedded a bit deeper, so you must, simultaneously, slow down. Cortese has created forty-four stories, which encompass great wit, pathos, and metaphoric imagery. She divides her collection into three parts: Maidenhood, Motherhood, and Matronhood.

In Maidenhood Cortese has no problem portraying the subjects of abuse or death: a girl drowns in the first sentence of “The Junior Superheroes Club of Tallahassee, Florida”; in “Best Laid Plans,” a baby boy strangles on a piece of hotdog; a PE teacher is shot, “not quite killing him,” in “Food, Shelter, Water.” Beginning in this section you notice a smooth linkage between the stories, shifting with the ease of an automatic transmission. For example, from the first story to the second, there exists a similar female voice of a certain age, coping with loss; later in the collection, an image in one story may be referenced in an adjacent or later story. Throughout most of these narratives lingers a menace: something bad is about to happen, and yet sometimes we’re surprised when it doesn’t. Biting satire, as well, becomes one of the author’s greatest tools: in “The Sum of Her Parts,” a younger sister copes with her eating disorder by storing her various body parts in jars in her room, while

continuing to carry on a normal life; and “LETLUVINTRIN®” lampoons a drug that treats “Singlitis.”

One of the most memorable stories in *Motherhood* may be “Insatiable,” in which a woman, who’s lived through seventeen infertile years, finally gives birth to a child—offering up the experience by way of hyperbole. “Now I was poisoned by love, heavy without daughter, beaten and weak, drowning, insensible to everyone else . . . .” (98). Cortese does not let up in the closing section, where the mother portrays her new infant’s lust for life: “She claimed his nose, which she loved to pull, then the rest of him. The cat, then the collie. She ate the front porch, then the neighbor’s split-level ranch. She swallows bathrobes off my back as soon as I can buy them” (98). What a wonderful way to express joy!

In *Matronhood*, Cortese pens “Gliese 581g,” a delightfully fanciful story in which she draws certain parallels between the celestial model Harmony, an astronaut, possibly, designs on her laptop of 581g, with an affair she’s had with her married scientist partner. By way of the model planet, Harmony is indicating that the heat and cold of her affair are similar to the heat and cold of 581g, the galactic distance she must now feel, as Harmony’s partner leaves the lab to return to his wife.

Cortese has taken a literary form fairly recent in its development and pushed its boundaries in gentle, yet startlingly ways. As a reader I hunger to see more from this exciting writer and scholar in her third year of teaching creative writing at Texas Tech University, and I believe we won’t have to wait long.

Dunham, Lena. *Not That Kind of Girl: A Young Woman Tells You What She’s Learned*. New York: Random, 2014.

An Open Letter

Dear Lena Dunham,

You’re probably wondering why I’d read your book in the first place. After all, I’m male, sixty-six, and gay. May that last one be one clue as to why I love your book.

First of all, I luv, luv, luv your HBO series, *Girls*—the one you produce, write (at least some episodes), direct, and star in. I find it enlightening (about today’s youth, particularly women). I find it deliciously funny, but in a way that’s different from when I’ve laughed at, say, Mary Tyler Moore, Carol Burnett, or Marlo Thomas. My laughing during an episode of *Girls* is because something has caught me by surprise, a situation, a comment, a look Hannah (or one of her friends) shoots someone, the utter absurdity of the context. At the same time, I find *Girls* quite poignant: Hannah does the same things that women did in the seventies, only better, freer, and yet with a braver insouciance. And yet, at times, with the same regret, the same guilt, only she gets past it sooner.

When I taught elementary I read Marlo Thomas’s *Free to Be You and Me* to my students, and I showed the sixteen-millimeter film that brought the book to life. It

was a subversive act. The girls in my class, I hope, felt free to volunteer to do some heavy lifting (within reason) if such was required (and they did); and boys felt free to keep the class library neat, or some lighter lifting (and sometimes they did). I never forced anything; I just made new thinking possible if I could. I'd like to believe that *Free to Be* helped women like you and Chelsea Handler, that you've felt free to become you and you, because someone (your parents, your teachers, the voice inside you that said you could) made new thinking possible for you.

Your book is one of those that ends too soon. I intend to keep reading and reading because one page easily followed after another, and then in two evenings, I'm done! It's over, and I'm waiting for the next book, the next episode, the next year of *Girls*. I luv, luv, luv, your honesty, particularly when you speak of sex. It isn't the salacious details that are honest; it's more with the attitude. By sharing what happens or doesn't happen for you early on, you are, by design, hoping to help girls younger than you. And I think you succeed.

I luv, luv, luv how you structure your book: the broad topics like sex, body, friendship, and work. And then the final one, The Big Picture. That may be my favorite section: all the anecdotes about summer camps are fascinating because most kids who don't live where there are forests and lakes don't get to go to camps. Ever. The same goes for kids whose parents don't have the resources. And you save the most poignant words for last, in your Guide to Running Away. Aristotle would love this chapter, using the rhetorical device of direct address to speak to young people (and any of us who will listen). I was a little spellbound as I read those two sections, one to nine-year-olds running away, and the other section for girls your own age. Sage wisdom in both.

I also luv, luv, luv the appearance of your book: that Tiffany's blue hardcover contrasted with black and pink fonts against a slick white cover—that wonderful author photo occupying two-thirds of the page. And those fly pages! Such beautiful yet iconic images, appearing almost like vintage wallpaper, yet capturing the images of your childhood and youth. Most of all, I may love the interior illustrations the most. They are reminiscent of how books were once illustrated, and not just the YA books that Maud Hart Lovelace wrote, or Beverly Cleary's books, but so-called adult books, as well. Your hands seem to be all over this book, in a way that has been denied to writers for decades now. Kudos and congratulations for seizing control (apparently) of the publishing situation and producing the book you wanted and getting Random House to pay for it!

All I can say, is keep giving us more of your candor, your wit, your intelligence, and love. Yes, you seem to love a certain public, or you wouldn't do what you do and do it so well. Keep it up as long as your energy will allow.

My very best,

Richard Jespers

Goldstein, Dana. *The Teacher Wars: A History of America's Most Embattled Profession*. New York: Doubleday, 2014.

More than any book I've read recently, this one is full of what I call "nuggets"—tidbits of information that are so astounding, so stupefying, in their obviousness that they've flown under the radar for decades or even centuries of education in this country without due notice. Or else, as I suspect may be true of national, state, and local persons in control of educational funding, most people (legislators) who could help DON'T CARE.

[I use the term "loc" to indicate the place in my Kindle where one might find this citation; unfortunately, on this particular book, the publisher does not also indicate the page number from the hardcover edition.]

## Introduction

"After all, one-fifth of all American children were growing up poor—twice the child poverty rate of England or South Korea" (loc 88). Yikes!

"Why are American teachers both resented and idealized, when teachers in other nations are much more universally respected?" (loc 96). Why, indeed?

"Henry David Thoreau, Susan B. Anthony, W. E. B. DuBois, and Lyndon B. Johnson are just a few of the famous Americans who taught. They resisted the fantasy of educators as saints or saviors, and understood teaching as a job in which the potential for children's intellectual transcendence and social mobility, though always present, is limited by real-world concerns such as poor training, low pay, inadequate supplies, inept administration, and impoverished students and families. These teachers' stories, and those of less well-known teachers, propel this history forward and help us understand why American teaching has evolved into such a peculiar profession, one attacked and admired in equal proportion." (loc 116-9). We're all in good company!

"... even the highest-poverty neighborhood schools in cities like New York and Los Angeles employ teachers who produce among the biggest test score gains in their regions. What's more, veteran teachers who work long-term in high-poverty schools with low test scores are actually more effective at raising student achievement than is the rotating cast of inexperienced teachers who try these jobs out but flee after one to three years" (loc 134). Clears up a certain myth.

"Even we set aside the nearly 50 percent of all beginner teachers who choose to leave the profession within five years—and ignore the evidence that those who leave are worse performers than those who stay—it is unclear whether teachers are formally terminated for poor performance any less frequently than are other workers" (loc 155).

"But teaching employs roughly five times as many people as either medicine or law. There are 3.3 million American public school teachers, compared to 691,000

doctors and 728,000 attorneys. Four percent of all civil workers are teachers” (loc 166-7). Quite a statistic.

“We must focus less on how to rank and fire teachers and more on how to make day-to-day teaching an attractive, challenging job that intelligent, creative, and ambitious people will gravitate toward” (loc 218). Hear hear!

“Advocates for universal public education called common schoolers, were challenged by anti-tax activists. The détente between these two groups redefined American teaching as low-paid (or even volunteer) missionary work for women, a reality we have lived with for two centuries—as children of slaves and immigrants flooded into the classroom, as we struggled with and then gave up on desegregating our schools, and as we began, in the late twentieth century, to confront a future in which young Americans without college degrees were increasingly disadvantaged in the labor market and those relied on schools and teachers, more than ever before, to help them access a middle-class life” (loc 222-7). This missionary philosophy couldn’t be truer than in the state of Texas.

### **Chapter One: “Missionary Teachers”: The Common Schools Movement and the Feminization of American Teaching**

Educator Catherine Beecher said: “[A] woman needs support only for herself” while “a man requires support for himself and a family,” she wrote, appealing to the stereotype that women with families did not do wage-earning work—a false assumption even in the early nineteenth century, when many working-class wives and mothers labored on family farms or took in laundry and sewing to make ends meet. Black women almost universally worked, whether as slaves in the South or as domestic servant or laundresses in the North. What was truly new about Beecher’s conception of teaching was that it pushed middle-class white women, in particular, into public view as workers outside the home” (loc 375-7).

### **Chapter Two: “Repressed Indignation”: The Feminist Challenge to American Education**

“In 1850, four-fifths of New York’s eleven thousand teachers were women, yet two-thirds of the state’s \$800,000 in teacher salaries was paid to men. It was not unusual for male teachers to earn twice as much as their female coworkers” (loc 613).

[Goldstein uses the word “snuck” instead of “sneaked,” the past participle of the word sneak (loc 753). “Snuck” is largely slang. In the context of writing that is speaking of education, the author should use the more formal word, “sneaked.”]

### **Chapter Three: “No Shirking, No Skulking”: Black Teachers and Racial Uplift After the Civil War**

“The federal government had acknowledged that the education of former slaves should be one of the major goals of Reconstruction, but Congress never

appropriated adequate funding for the task, nor did it compel states to do so” (loc 906). What’s new?

#### **Chapter Four: “School Ma’ams as Lobbyists”: The Birth of Teachers Unions and the battle Between Progressive Pedagogy and School Efficiency**

“A study by education researcher William Lancelot explained how administrators could record a ‘pupil change’ score for every teacher by testing how much the teachers’ students knew on a given subject at the beginning and then the end of a term. (Today this calculation is called a teacher’s ‘value-added’ score.)” According to peer reviewer Helen Walker—as well as many of today’s critics of value added—the pupil change measurement ultimately had a ‘low relationship’ to true teacher quality, since so many factors beyond a teacher’s control could affect a student’s test score, from class size to family involvement in education” (loc 1457). Value-added: a fancy term for such a deadly practice!

#### **Chapter Six: “The Only Valid Passport from Poverty”: The Great Expectations of Great Society Teachers**

“What Coleman’s research really revealed was that compared to white students, the average black child was enrolled in a poorly funded school with less qualified teachers and fewer science and foreign language classes. Those black students who attended integrated, well-resourced schools, however, tended to earn higher test scores than black students in segregated schools, and reported feeling a greater sense of control over their lives” (loc 2014-6).

#### **Chapter Eight: “Very Disillusioned”: How Teacher Accountability Displaced Desegregation and Local Control**

“In Japan the average teacher earned as much as the average engineer; in the United States, teachers earned only 60 percent as much as engineer” (loc 2882). Tokyo, anyone?

#### **Chapter Ten: “Let Me Use What I Know”: Reforming Education by Empowering Teachers**

“When many teachers resign each year, institutional memory is lost, and ties to the community weaken. There are fewer veterans around to show newbies the tricks of the trade” (loc 4205). Makes sense, doesn’t it?

“But the latest research shows schools simply do not have an unlimited capacity to absorb and train first-year teachers, and that students suffer when they are assigned to a string of novice teachers in grade after grade” (loc 4213).

#### **Epilogue: “Lessons from History for Improving for Improving Teaching Today**

“Since these schools are now producing a huge oversupply of prospective elementary school teachers—in some states, as many as nine times more prospective teachers than there are jobs—states ought to require these institutions to raise their standards for admission or to shut down their teacher prep programs” (loc 4471).

I could go on citing nugget after nugget of truth, things that to me, as a former teacher, are so **OBVIOUS**, but to the general public, even educated people, might not be quite so apparent. I urge anyone unsure about the history of public school teachers in this country to read this book by Dana Goldstein. It is worth its weight in value-added teaching.

Haddon, Mark. *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*. New York: Random, 2003.

A friend and former pupil recommended this book to me, and I put it on my Want-to-Read list right away. I'm glad I did.

Few writers, even those of YA books, are able to capture both the voice and heart of a child character in such a way that all the chords ring true. Yet Haddon has managed to do so quite effectively.

Christopher is a bright child, who may also be autistic. Haddon never actually *says*. The boy knows all the prime numbers up to 7,057. At the same time he has a terrible time understanding abstractions such as metaphors.

“The second main reason [that Christopher finds people confusing] is that people often talk using metaphors. These are examples of metaphors

**I laughed my socks off.**  
**He was the apple of her eye.**  
**They had a skeleton in the cupboard.**  
**We had a real pig of a day.**  
**The dog was stone dead.**

The word *metaphor* means carrying something from one place to another, and it comes from the Greek words . . . .

I think it should be called a lie because a pig is not like a day and people do not have skeletons in the cupboards. And when I try and make a picture of the phrase in my head it just confuses me” (15).

It is this lack of guile that often gets Christopher into trouble with the world at large. The inciting event of this novel, in fact, illustrates this principle. Christopher discovers that his neighbor's dog has been stabbed with a pitchfork. Instead of leaving the murder scene alone and calling authorities immediately, he removes the weapon from the animal, holds the dead dog in his arms, and that is how the owner finds them. And when she accuses him of the dastardly deed, he has not the skills

to defend himself. Thus begins Christopher's long journey to discover who killed his neighbor's dog.

In the bargain, he discovers much more than he had hoped to. In fact, the trail leads right up to the door where he and his father live. The narrative is complicated by the fact that Christopher makes a startling discovery about his parents' relationship. He must grow up and overcome whatever *disability* he might have—all at the same time.

An excellent read, as they say, but also a fine work of literature, well worth the time.

Isherwood, Christopher. *All the Conspirators: A Novel by Christopher Isherwood*. New York: New Directions, 1928, 1958.

Having made it my goal to read Isherwood's entire oeuvre, I begin with his first novel, published when he is twenty-four in 1928, although he later reveals he'd been working on it since he was twenty-one. It is a painful read, not because he's a poor writer. It's just that you now know he's going to become so much better!

At first, I am confused. I can't seem to locate any thread, any continuity holding the novel together. Then I realize, of course, however misguided the author's purpose may be, that this may be his intention. He's creating a narrative of a young man largely like him, chapters strung together, almost as journal entries—consisting of interior monologue, unattributed dialogue, and sections that are epistolary in nature.

The protagonist, Philip Lindsay, is in the battle of his life with a mother who has very little sympathy for his youthful desires: leaving a perfectly fine job (though he hates it) to return to the family estate and do little but paint and write. The novel is told alternatingly between his and three other characters. There is no central narrator or storyteller, the author asking readers to put all the elements together themselves.

Isherwood, it seems, is attempting to forge a new kind of novel, or if not, at least improve upon those that have recently come before him. He might have, at least, tried to master the traditional elements of a novel before experimenting so severely with point of view, inner monologue, and the rejection of traditional grammar, so much to the point that many times the text doesn't make sense. It isn't that Isherwood shouldn't have attempted such a novel; it is that perhaps he could have used the steady hand of a knowledgeable editor, someone to guide and advise him on how to achieve his goals.

Isherwood, Christopher. *The Berlin Stories*. With a preface by Isherwood. New York: New Directions, (1935) 1954.

In Isherwood's marvelous preface he delineates all the narratives that make up *The Berlin Stories*. *Mr. Norris Changes Trains* (known as *The Last of Mr. Norris in America*) comes out in 1935. *Sally Bowles*, a slim piece, is published in 1937.

*Berlin Diaries: Autumn 1930, The Nowaks, and The Landauers* are issued by John Lehmann's *New Writing*. Last in the book is *A Berlin Diary (Winter 1932-3)*, in which Isherwood once again becomes Herr Issyvo. Characters like Fraulein Schroeder reappear, as Isherwood realizes the cataclysm that is about to engulf Germany and takes his leave. Appearing in this order, these narratives comprise *The Berlin Stories*.

What are they, otherwise? Isherwood's stories of early 1930s pre-Nazi Berlin may provide one of the most realistic views of Germany before it is changed forever by World War II. A sort of free-and-easy gay demimonde exists alongside laws that, for the moment, rather ignore squalid but important bars and restaurants, not to mention thugs of all kinds, as well as artists and writers living and observing the colorful life of the city. Isherwood himself says in his preface:

"From 1929 to 1933, [age 25-29] I lived almost continuously in Berlin, with only occasional visits to other parts of Germany and to England. Already, during that time, I had made up my mind that I would one day write about the people I'd met and the experiences I was having. So I kept a detailed diary, which in due course provided raw material for all my Berlin stories" (v). Isherwood later throws out these diaries, making these stories his diary. Much later, he regrets that he had acted so rashly.

This may be the third time I've read *The Berlin Stories*. The first reading, in 1987, after I buy my copy at the old Taylor's Book Store in Dallas, I am thirty-nine, having just finished my MA in English. The gay novel, as it is understood, is making quite a bit of noise, and to read Isherwood's work, comparatively, makes it seem more of a whisper. Yet, for its era, his work is an act of courage. Like many of the characters in the book, he could disappear at any time, removed by the SA (*Sturmabteilung*). About my second reading I can only recall that I read it to feed my soul. This, the third time, however, I've kept my pencil in hand, used Google Translator to get at the German phrasing, tried my damndest to get a feel for what Isherwood is doing. I'm not sure I succeed after all. Reading *The Berlin Stories* is more of an existential experience. It's difficult to subject to analysis.

I believe that writers, particularly if young, should always keep a diary. All of these narratives that fit together so beautifully, are freshly harvested from the pages of Isherwood's diaries: an irascible landlady, Fraulein Schroeder; Otto Nowak, Bernhard Landauer, Sally Bowles. The lives of these flesh-like characters are what readers must concentrate on, allowing their essences to wash over them, so as to enhance their own humanity. When we see similar behaviors in our own people we won't be tempted to fall asleep as the Germans do at this time. Had they known what was to come, what Isherwood so clearly sensed, they surely would not have allowed it to happen.

Isherwood, Christopher. *Diaries Volume One: 1939-1960*. New York: Vintage, 1996.

First of all, these diaries are beautifully and ably edited by Katherine Bucknell, providing a fascinating introduction of over fifty pages. In addition to the journals

themselves, Bucknell delivers an Isherwood chronology, glossary, and index at the end. She divides the journal into three parts:

The Emigration, January 19, 1939–December 31, 1944;  
The Postwar Years, January 1, 1945–April 13, 1956;  
and The Late Fifties, April 14, 1956–August 26, 1960.

The voice of Isherwood evolves from that of a solid mid-career writer to that of an “emeritus professor,” beginning his senior years with as many projects as he can handle.

I’ve always felt a certain affinity for writer Christopher Isherwood (born in Wyberslegh Hall, High Lane, Cheshire, England) 1904-1986, for a number of reasons. Largely because he is one of the first important writers of his generation to write fiction with gay characters—with gay love lives, as if it is a normal situation—I’ve looked to his writing for a certain guidance. Through his well-traveled life he demonstrates a certain brand of courage. He never seems to hide who he is from the world at large—even Hitler’s Gestapo as he lives in Berlin during his twenties. He doesn’t marry a woman as cover, as many of his colleagues and friends do. He openly loves and shares a domestic life in a major way with at least two men, three, if you count one relationship that is rather ill-fated. The latter one, his partnership with artist Don Bachardy, thirty years his junior, endures from 1953 until Isherwood’s death in 1986.

I also feel close to Isherwood because of the career he chooses, one that is rather skin-of-your-teeth at times. He writes the projects he wants to, not the ones that necessarily earn him the most money. Granted, he does work in Hollywood, writing and co-writing screenplays for any number of films. Even with regard to these, he seems to turn down the less interesting projects or the ones in which he knows working with certain personalities will be difficult. He lives by his wits but also by a strong artistic intuition, and by his own well-honed critical skills. Seems that he is seldom wrong in assessing the work of others, and his own, as well. Through reading this 1050 page document, I’ve attained yet another view of Christopher Isherwood, and that is as human being. At one point, in the 1950s, he and Bachardy have around \$6,000 in the bank (a little over \$50,000 in today’s currency). You can’t get more skin-of-your-teeth than that.

Isherwood begins keeping diaries when he is twenty; however, those written prior to this time he himself destroys. He is in his mid-thirties when he begins keeping the series of diaries that are featured in this volume. It is also at this time that he begins publishing, in particular, the novel, *Mr. Norris Changes Trains*. This volume of diaries is a blend of many features.

Isherwood writes of his daily travails with lovers, physical ailments, which seem to grow in number as he ages, tussles with film studios, accounts of social events, both formal and informal. From the limited amount of Isherwood’s fiction that I’ve read (*The Berlin Stories*, *Down There on a Visit*, and *A Single Man*), I wouldn’t expect to encounter a person encumbered with a number of insecurities: his health, his

weight, his looks, his mostly tentative drug use (he has a real penchant for mescaline), alcohol consumption, driving, finances. You name it and he seems to fret over it. Daily. At the same time, there emerges from these journals a man who is quite serious about his work. I paraphrase some of his oft-repeated wording: *Didn't write today. Too hung over from last night's party. Wrote four pages on novel today. Want to write 100 pages by my birthday.* He is as critical of his own work, when it doesn't come together, as he is of others'. He lives for his art. Even in his fifties, to insure a proper income, he must accept film writing offers and part-time teaching opportunities at various colleges and universities in the Los Angeles area, where he chooses to make his home following his naturalization as a US citizen. In fact, an important part of each entry seems to be a report of the weather. *Went to the beach today. It was hot. It was cold. Still hot. Still foggy. Absolutely gorgeous.* These comments could well be a comment on his internal weather. At any rate, the *Diaries* provide any writer with plenty of positive and negative examples of how to be a "successful" writer.

Isherwood, Christopher. *Christopher and His Kind 1929-1939*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976.

My interest in this book was aroused after viewing a 2011 BBC production bearing the same title. Of course, reading the book version of a work is always more satisfying, though I do believe good films can spark interest in doing further research. The text is an appealing one for several reasons.

An older Christopher Isherwood (seventy-two) writes about these ten years in the third person, as if this "Christopher Isherwood" is one of his fictional characters. At the same time, any passage in which he's unsure about a fact or date or is definitely speaking retrospectively he employs the first person. I suppose the practice helps Isherwood to separate himself from the past, from the time when he may have acted as a callow yet, at times, callous fellow.

"Christopher's first visit to Berlin [1928] was short—a week or ten days—but that was sufficient; I now recognize it was one of the decisive events of my life. I can still make myself faintly feel the delicious nausea of initiation terror which Christopher felt as Wystan [W. H. Auden] pushed back the heavy leather door curtain of a boy bar called the Cosy Corner and led the way inside" (3). This is the callow part. It is indeed a lovely way of using the third person: "Christopher" is Isherwood's manifestation as a young man. He will never again be quite like he is in 1928, age twenty-four, away from his home in England for the very first time, frozen in history, just like a fictional character.

But Isherwood makes some startling admissions, one in particular concerning his feelings toward Heinz, a young man with whom he shares a life for five years, mostly in Berlin. When it comes time to help Heinz escape Nazi Germany (and conscription), many complications arise—including lengthy and expensive legal battles—that ultimately disallow it. They must part ways. Even though Isherwood draws on his diary for this passage, it is nonetheless very telling:

“Heinz is always the last person I think of at night, the first in the morning. Never to forget Heinz. Never to cease to be grateful to him for every moment of our five years together.

I suppose it isn't so much Heinz himself I miss as that part of myself which only existed in his company.

I had better face it. I shall never see him again. And perhaps this is the best for us both.

What should I feel, now, if, by some miracle, Heinz was let out of Germany? Great joy, of course. But also (I must be absolutely frank) I should be a little bit doubtful; for what, really, have I to offer him? Not even a proper home or a place in any kind of social scheme” (289).

Why this interest in a largely British writer (even though he became an American citizen and spent more than half of his life in Los Angeles), who was born over a hundred years ago, and, except for garnering high praise from other fine writers, has not gained due recognition for his literary contributions? Perhaps this passage from the late Virginia Woolf's diary sums up my response to his work:

“Isherwood and I met on the doorstep. He is a slip of a wild boy: with quicksilver eyes: nipped; jockeylike. That young man, said W. Maugham, ‘holds the future of the English novel in his hands’” (325). Indeed.

And this is why, over the course of the next twelve months, I am making it my goal to read (and re-read, in some instances) all twenty works in Mr. Isherwood's oeuvre. Stay tuned; I plan to tell you all about them.

Isherwood, Christopher. *The Memorial*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, (1932) 1999.

Isherwood's second novel is not a comfortable or cozy read. He is a bright, young author attempting to impress the literary world with perhaps a *Modernist* book, one like his heroes, E. M. Forster and Virginia Woolf, write. This novel, as the title would suggest, revolves, at first, around the World War I memorial that one English town erects to honor its own 130 fallen men, including one Richard Vernon. But the narrative is so much more: it tells the story of his surviving widow, Lily Vernon, her son, Eric, a host of other relatives, and a man, a friend of the late Mr. Vernon, who, as it turns out, is a homosexual. By novel's end this man, Edward Blake, is living in pre-Nazi Berlin with a young man named Franz—perhaps heralding Isherwood's courage to write more about gay life in his *The Berlin Stories*, which are to follow in 1934.

Isherwood, who later works in Hollywood as a screenwriter, writes here as if he is unreeling a film, endeavoring to tell his narrative without the aid of authorial explanation. For example, the four major parts shift from 1928, to 1920, to 1925, then back to 1929. Chapters unfold by way of various characters' points of view, sometimes, from person to person, within a single chapter. If you wish to know who is related to whom you must pay careful attention; you rarely see such words as “cousin,” “aunt,” or “uncle.” Moreover, certain symbols or motifs are sounded in the background, like distant chimes: clocks of all kinds, some ticking loudly, some

stopping entirely; conservative people pining for the past; rituals of how life had unfolded before the war. One way Isherwood mitigates the distance he may create with his disjointed threads is that he is particularly adept in portraying the inner lives of his characters, without telling *too* much. Here, Eric Vernon contemplates his Aunt Mary juxtaposed against his mother:

“And yet, here he was thinking about going to tea at Aunt Mary’s. He had another pang of guilt at his selfishness. It was curious that the thought of Aunt Mary often made him feel guilty towards his mother, apparently without any reason” (154).

And yet there is good reason, isn’t there? The woman, since the death of her husband, has treated Eric as if he is a grandchild who only comes to visit on special occasions, not a youth, who is attempting to reconstruct the world around him following such a catastrophic event. This novel may not be among Isherwood’s most noted, primarily because of its experimental nature, but it is still a solid, well-written book. Isherwood’s editors must sense his talent, are anxious to hurry him toward that next phase of his career.

Kramer, Larry. *Faggots*. New York: Grove, 2007.

I was thirty in 1978, the year this novel was first published, and yet I’ve waited until now to read it by way of a Kindle edition, primarily because of a documentary I’ve recently viewed on television, an HBO production called *Larry Kramer: In Love and Anger*. I knew Kramer was an outspoken advocate of AIDS research, but somehow the film softens him, makes him more human, presents a more complete picture of the man, has made me curious enough to read his book.

I think his novel now seems outdated, that, in some ways, it’s poorly written, that there are far too many characters to keep track of and care about, and that many of them are two-dimensional.

However, before rising too high on their high horses, younger gay men might consider this. In the 1970s, following the Stonewall rebellion of 1969, gay men feel liberated, mostly to feast on one another; job security, civil unions, and marriage are faint, romantic dreams that have little hope of being fully realized in our lifetime. Gay bars are the depots of our underground railroad, if I may say so, and in many parts of the country our lives are still out of sight. What Mr. Kramer does manage to do is to pose the question, and he does so prior to the AIDS crisis: Why must the lives of gay men revolve entirely around the next penis they might get their hands on? Might they not settle down, like their heterosexual friends, and pursue a life in which they devote themselves to one another? If nothing else, Kramer does, to great effect, bring this prescient dream alive for us, and we should be grateful.

Lewis, Timothy. *Forever Friday: a Novel*. Colorado Springs: Waterbrook, 2013.

I heard the author talk about how he came to write this book at a regular meeting of the Caprock Writers’ Alliance in Lubbock and won a copy of his book as a door

prize! How can you fail to read a free book? Besides, he claimed that the novel was NOT a romance but a love story.

The novel is a story within a story, a narrative that washes over itself many times from present to past again and again until the story is told. The frame of the narrative is about a Adam Colby, a small-estate sale business, who comes across a large collection of postcards that one man has committed to sending his beloved wife every Friday of their sixty-year marriage.

Adam, recently divorced, is both fascinated and puzzled by the love and devotion that the couple, Gabe and Pearl Alexander, have for one another. Author Lewis makes sure that the reader experiences every high and low of the couple's marriage, painting realistic *and* romantic views of their marriage.

Even so, the novel is a bit too sentimental for my tastes.

Maier, Thomas. *Masters of Sex: The Life and Times of William Masters and Virginia Johnson, the Couple Who Taught America How to Love*. New York: Basic, 2009.

For the last several years, I have watched Showtime's series by the same name, perhaps the reason I've come to know this book at all. In 1999, I read James H. Jones's *Alfred C. Kinsey: A Public/Private Life*, and, in 2004 T. C. Boyle's novel, *The Inner Circle* in which Boyle delves further into Kinsey's organization. Maier's book seems to pick up where Kinsey's story of investigating Americans' sex lives leaves off (he dies in 1956). Whereas Kinsey uses an interview method with obvious limits and weaknesses, Masters and Johnson pioneer primarily an area of laboratory research investigating how the female in American culture achieves sexual satisfaction.

Maier's research seems thorough, exploring the early lives of both William Masters and Virginia Johnson. As with all human beings, no matter how lofty their research aims later become, Masters and Johnson both have their strong and weak points as both scientists and human beings. Masters, after helping thousands of people in the St. Louis area achieve successful fertility, actually conceals from his first wife, Libby, that it is he who is the sterile partner. Because of her own initiative, Libby becomes informed of the situation and is artificially inseminated with Masters's own semen (for some reason frozen). Moreover, Masters is a cold man emotionally, more than likely due to having been physically abused by his father; he is virtually estranged from both of his children though they all live in the same house. Virginia, a free spirit since birth, owns her sex life from an early age, experiencing a full sex life with various men, including her business partner, William Masters. Their relationship in the TV series is deemed more romantic than actually seems to happen. Like everything else in their lives, marrying becomes the easier choice: to work and live together. Legally bland.

One of the amazing elements of their research is that they were able to keep it under wraps from the local and national media:

**“For nearly a decade, their secret remained safe. Rumors of a lab study devoted to sex, operating in the heart of St. Louis, never appeared on television or radio or in print. As a personal favor to Masters, *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* publisher Richard Amberg vowed his daily newspaper wouldn’t breathe a word to its readers. The city’s other competing paper, owned by Pulitzer, stayed mum. Reporters for the Associated Press and United Press International, the two wire services beaming scoops across the world, also knew of this sensational human experiment but refused to say anything to the American public” (150). Wow.**

Among Masters and Johnson's failures is their third book, one about homosexuality. It is basically panned and really begins a long, slow decline toward their ultimate demise in the 1980s. I annotated far more interesting points than I can present here. If you are at all interested in the research that most assuredly has brought our culture to where it is today—for good or ill—you need to read this four hundred page book. Soon.

Mills, Bear. *The Ecuadorian Deception*. Mills/CreateSpace, 2013.

If the protagonist, George d’Hout, says it once throughout the novel he must say it scores of times: “Doubtful.” This response seems odd for a man who claims to have a very strong faith, but he says it repeatedly, the first time at a Houston, Texas, airport when an airline agent comments on the ethnicity of his last name and how he ought to check out his heritage online. “Doubtful,” George says. The premise of this thriller is that when a wealthy Ecuadorian man offers George \$50,000 to go to South America to uncover to employ his skills as a “consultant,” George accepts the \$5,000 front money and airfare without further investigating the plan in advance. Makes for good adventure but not good storytelling.

Moreover, I’m put off by a couple of other overriding problems. One, even though George is supposedly a Christian, I’d rather that the author *show* us he is instead of so much *telling* us every so often. I don’t expect George to be a goody-goody by being Christian, but at times he’s too abrupt with others, too unkind, sarcastic. And the other overall problem is that for a “thriller,” the structure of the novel is not very sophisticated. Mills spends far too much time having George communicate with his wife back in Texas. Yes, we realize he *loves* her and vice versa, but sheesh, George can’t be with her right now, in the middle of this big mess he’s gotten himself into. He must get on with trying to disengage from it, and could get by with giving the reader just a whiff of what his married life is like, not changing the scene entirely. It slows down the pace of the novel and plumps up the number of pages unnecessarily. The POV, in other words, should remain entirely with George. Why does the reader need to know what his wife, his brother, and his lawyer are doing back in Houston?

Morgan, Carol. *Of Tapestry, Time and Tears*. Morgan/CreateSpace, 2010.

This novel is largely a Romance, written in the tradition of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*—in which two people in love forge a life against the strictures of society. In this vein Morgan operates from an emotional stance to portray the life of her protagonist, Edwina Kleberg. Edwina evinces certain ideals, like the equality of all people, the revelation of truth in her writings as journalist, and the historical construct that if we do not learn from our mistakes we are doomed. But the most important thing Morgan does is to create a narrative that is difficult to put down once one begins to read it.

Briefly, Edwina's father, Joseph Kleberg, a German immigrant, is orphaned in nineteenth-century Galveston, Texas, when a hurricane strikes the Gulf coast. He makes it to adulthood and marries, and he and his wife produce two children: the protagonist Edwina and her brother, Paul. A good bit of the novel is about Edwina's education and her work as a journalist in India during the World War II era. Edwina Kleberg is quite a daring writer, plunging into dangerous situations without thinking of her own safety, even posing as a nurse in order to get an important scoop—proclaiming a feminist stance before such a thing is widely popular. But journalism is only one career Edwina pursues, as she later opens and operates a school for many years—largely to be close to the man she loves.

A couple of important motifs arise throughout the novel, one in particular resonating from the title. At one point Edwina views a woman's tapestries, and the woman tells her they are a metaphor, that when turned over the back is a jumble of threads, "like the times when we make mistakes. But those mistakes are necessary for the finished product" (237). The threads of Edwina's life are indeed a jumble: she witnesses murder, mutilation, and violent political retribution; she bears a child out of wedlock in an era and a culture that are not very accepting; she descends into alcoholism when her longtime lover, Raj, a married man, is assassinated. Only many years later does she tell her son who his father is (although he has figured it out himself). Her life, her "jumble of threads," ends in a rather spectacular way.

Morgan develops the narrative on through Edwina's eighties. Ending with a tragic event, as the novel has begun, the author concludes by having Edwina go up in smoke along with the twin towers in New York—on her way to speak with her editor about publishing the autobiographical novel that it has taken her a lifetime to write. Yet Edwina's death is one suitable for a person who has spent her life searching out and publishing the truth. The last sentences of the novel culminate the use of the other important motif, as two doves, a black one and a white one, descend on the ashes of 9-1-1 and one pecks the jewel from Edwina's mangled ring, thus in some way continuing her life.

In spite of a few problems with presentation on the page, *Of Tapestry, Time and Tears* is a narrative that is as unforgettable as *Gone with the Wind* or *The Thorn Birds*! If you enjoy this combination of history, Romance, and heroism, you might very well enjoy the novel. Give it a whirl!

It pains me, because the author is a friend and former colleague of mine, but I'd be remiss if I didn't comment on the presentation of the book. The text is printed in

what looks like a space and a half, with an unjustified (even) right margin, rather than single spacing, causing her to use more paper than she needs to. Instead of beginning at the half page, all chapters begin wherever they may fall—and they are neither named or numbered; one only knows because of the epigram in bold print that seems to begin each chapter. Morgan does not follow the most rudimentary conventions in typescript: indenting paragraphs and when a different character speaks in dialogue. Simple proofreading by a third party would eliminate these and other errors such as the omission of a word here and there, the lack of hyphens in what should be hyphenated adjectives, the crucial convention of ending a bit of dialogue in this order: ,” not “, . And the most disconcerting problem may be that, even though this novel is so self-referential, Morgan never ever uses the past perfect tense, to show that a certain event happened before another or that an event took place in the distant past. She works entirely from the simple past tense, which manifests itself as a prose lacking a certain flexibility or sophistication.

McNeely, Thomas N. *Ghost Horse*. Arlington: Gival, 2014.

Do you recall how the world seemed to you, at times, when you were twelve? Not quite all of its pieces fit together? Mom and Dad speak in a foreign tongue? That’s how the entire novel, *Ghost Horse*, passes, as twelve-year-old Buddy Turner attempts to unearth this new world complicated by his parents’ divorce. McNeely recreates this vexing scenario so realistically that you feel as if you are Buddy.

McNeely’s novel is frustratingly inscrutable. What is the meaning of this little bit of conversation Buddy overhears between his parents? Why doesn’t his *real father*, the one Buddy knows before the man goes off to Louisiana to finish med school, return to their home, the one where his Mom lives? The author wishes for the reader to sense the utter confusion that is aroused in a child when his parents inexplicably decide to separate. Who wants “this?” is repeated over and over again, his mother or his father? He says she does; she says he does. Each parent tries to build an alliance with Buddy, one that is exclusive of the other adult.

To save himself, not really aware of his motivation, Buddy sets out to make an animated film about a horse with his friend Alex Torres, a boy he’s befriended in his *old* neighborhood, where he has attended a school called Queen of Peace. Even though his father now pays for him to attend an all-white school, St. Edwards, he continues to see Alex and work on *the film*. But all sorts of forces pull against him. There’s the horse that is constantly circling in the skies overhead, ready to pounce on Buddy’s enemies, yet is startlingly impotent when it comes to delivering real aid. Both of his grandmothers pull at him, tempting him to do one thing or another that will help him grow up into a fine man. His mother pulls at him. His father pulls at him. His father’s female friend, Mary, urges him to leave his mother and live with *them*. The boys at his new school attempt to initiate him into their comfortable world of long gold cars and spacious brick homes. But Buddy is no longer *comfortable* anywhere, not at his mother’s place, nor at his grandmother’s, where his estranged father stays in the very room in which he spent his boyhood, while his own father lies dying but a few feet away. Buddy Turner is so uncomfortable that he begins to act out in violent, erratic ways that are not like the old Buddy.

McNeely creates one long cloudy, gray day in the Houston, Texas, of 1975—a period of painful transition from old southern city to the vibrant metropolis of today. He must repeat the word “ghost” or its derivatives scores of times. Though the experience is uncomfortable for readers, McNeely wishes for them to undergo the hell of a child living through his parents’ divorce. And in great measure he succeeds.

Norris, Mary. *Between You and Me: Confessions of a Comma Queen*. New York: Norton, 2015.

People sometimes wind up working in a place that is far afield from their original degree program or their original intent. Mary Norris, copy editor for *The New Yorker* for over thirty years, is no exception. She begins, as a fifteen-year-old, by “foot-checking” at a public swimming pool in Cleveland, Ohio. She goes on to earn a degree in English from Douglass College, “the women’s college of Rutgers University” (2). Later, she toils as a self-described “milkman,” because she feels that “milk lady” is not feminist enough and “milkmaid” a bit fanciful. She begins her career at *The New Yorker* by occupying the lowest level possible in what is called the “editorial library.”

I first become acquainted with Norris and her book, as I do many nonfiction books, by way of C-SPAN’s Book-TV featured every weekend. Whether you view Norris live or read her prose about how American English works, she has a number of serious points to make, and she often does so through humorous or comical means. She makes a strong case for why, even as common citizens, we should pay attention to a number of linguistic issues. About “spelling” she says: **“A misspelling undermines your authority. And an eye for the misspelled word can give you an edge in the workplace”** (30). Norris goes on to tell how catching the misspelling of the word “idiosyncrasy” (sometimes people try to sneak in a “c” at the end) places her in good stead with one of the more curmudgeonly of the magazine’s many curmudgeons. She’s promoted, where she further demonstrates her abilities.

While nothing might replace a solid textbook on grammar (and she references a number), Norris’s book provides a refresher course that may be a lot easier and more fun to understand. She discusses homophones, types of clauses and whether they are set off by commas or not. She learns to check her work at least three times. Personally, I find that when I publish a blog post, I *must* allow myself at least three separate sessions with it (fresh eyes each time), in order to catch (I hope) all of the typos. Even then, I’m sometimes horrified to return to a post published sometime last year and discover an error. Thankfully, unlike with print media, I can go into the bowels of my server and correct the error and update it with little fanfare. I digress.

As much as I like Norris’s book and highly recommend it, it seems to run out of steam toward the end. The chapters about the apostrophe, the asterisk, and her obsession with always possessing a full cache of perfect pencils are less substantive

than the first seven chapters of the book. She does end, however, with a touching epilogue about a former colleague, a fellow copy editor, who, upon her death, leaves a modest million dollars to her local library in Connecticut. The gesture seems to say to Norris, at least, that even comma curmudgeons can be generous, if not in this life, then in the next!

O'Brien, Edna. *Lantern Slides: Stories by Edna O'Brien*. New York: Farrar, 1990.

At first I thought “lantern slides” were a different way of talking about the contemporary (yet obsolete) film slide, but no, they hark back to hundreds of years ago when photographic or other images were applied to a glass slide that then was placed in a “magic lantern,” to project images, say, on a white wall—a precursor to the motion picture. [I hate to defer to Wikipedia, but sometimes there seems to be no other source.] Edna O'Brien's stories, each one in this collection, might just serve as one of these lantern slides, many times seeming “distant,” yet always making readers feel that they, too, might be present in such a yarn. At any rate, I once again find myself enchanted by Ms. O'Brien's stories, even if I'm twenty-five years late in reading this volume. She has such a way with developing character, point of view, and other elements that allow her to engage readers quickly and not let them go until she's finished. For example, in some stories she may employ the second person to draw readers in as intimates, as she does in “The Widow”:

“You may ask, as the postmistress had asked—the postmistress her sworn enemy—‘Why have venetian blinds drawn at all times, winter and summer, daylight and dark? What is Bridget trying to hide?’” (36). Indeed *you* want to find out.

O'Brien possesses an impeccable vocabulary, challenging readers of the English language to season their reading in the same manner a chef might challenge diners with a rare but effective spice, for example “**viaticum**” meaning “prayer,” something an Irish Catholic would know but might be a bit arcane for an American Protestant.

And yet the meaning of some words may make themselves apparent by way of context of this opening sentence: “Bridget was her name. She played cards like a trooper, and her **tipple** was gin-and-lime” (35). Or this: “she kept **toiling** and **moiling**” (64), the latter meaning about the same as the former, a common phrase in the Emerald Isle.

Anyone who enjoys the short story as a form analogous to the poem will love these twelve stories by O'Brien, most of them having appeared either in *The New Yorker* or *The Paris Review*. I bought this copy in 2013 for \$2.50 from a used bookstore. Though its price has diminished, its value has not.

Quinn, Jay. *Back Where He Started: A Novel*. Los Angeles: Alyson, 2005.

Even though this book has been out for over a decade, it still speaks to gay people of today, particularly those seeking to marry. Perhaps it has even led the way.

Forty-eight-year-old Chris Thayer has spent twenty-two years *married* to a man who comes to the relationship as a widower with three children. Now that man has decided that he is bisexual and is positioned to dump Chris and really marry a real woman.

The novel then proceeds to show how Chris establishes a new life apart from his *husband* and children, who affectionately call him “Mom.” In the kind of legal agreement that can probably only take place in fiction, Chris receives a healthy monetary settlement without having to go to court and decides to build a new life, replete with a small home by the ocean in North Carolina. Yet his children, the youngest of whom turns out to be a gay man, as well, are somewhat imprinted, can’t seem to do without Chris’s help; that’s how close he’s gotten to them in the time that he has been Mom. Chris, who has never worked outside the home, also very easily finds a job as a receptionist for a couple of shrinks—good money, flexible hours. Nice, if you can get it. Chris then meets someone new, a man ten years his junior—such a contrast to the man he lived with so long, who was the older one. They fall in love and decide to build a life together, meshing their somewhat different lives together. Enough said about plot.

In some ways the book is ahead of its time. Only one or two states have adopted gay marriage at the time this book comes out, and so the novel seems prescient in one sense. On the other hand, all of us who write fiction should be wary of dwelling too much on *electronic devices*. No matter how up-to-date the device is in the novel, within a year, it’s going to be toast. In a decade it’s going to a real anachronism. The only other weakness I can see in the novel is that some scenes are a bit “talky.” Dialogue is always important; it brings the lives of the characters alive, creates a certain bit of the novel’s fabric. But if it slows the narrative pace, if it sounds stilted, or worse yet, apes the words that the author finds cute or important, it’s going to read that way. Otherwise, *Back Where He Started* is a fine read, worth the time, even now, early in 2015.

Sixsmith, Martin. *Philomena: A Mother, Her Son, and a Fifty-Year Search*. New York: Penguin, 2013.

After viewing the recent film *Philomena* several times, I sensed there was much of the narrative missing, and when I read Sixsmith’s book, I saw that my hunch was correct. While the film, with Dame Judi Dench starring as Philomena, focuses mostly on the mother’s search, Sixsmith’s book must otherwise spend nearly two-thirds of the narrative on Michael Hess, or Anthony Lee, Philomena’s long lost son, and her son’s search for *her*. The narrative, on film, might have been better served if it had been made into a miniseries largely because it is the two stories combined, the fact that mother and son search out each other, that makes it so compelling and poignant.

Anthony Lee and Mary McDonald—whose unwed mothers are allowed to “nurse” them while still toddlers, in the questionable haven known as Sean Ross Abbey in Roscrea, County Tipperary, Ireland—are both adopted in 1955 by a family from St. Louis, Missouri. The babes’ birth mothers, Philomena and Margaret, full of shame,

and manipulated by many of the sisters, are coerced into signing away their rights to ever see their children again.

So what kind of life does Anthony Lee/Michael Hess have in America? On the one hand, he becomes part of a family that is able, financially, to care for him and Mary. However, two of Michael's older brothers seem noncommittal at best, and a third one is downright hostile; he physically and emotionally abuses Michael. Michael's adoptive mother is nurturing, if in a clinging manner, and Doc, his adoptive father, is, at turns, aloof, then ever meddling, trying to make a "man" of Michael.

Sixsmith does an admirable job of recreating Michael's life from the time he enters America until he dies from AIDS in 1996—with a great deal of help from Michael's long-term partner, Pete Nilsson. In the years between, the reader learns of Michael's education, his time at Notre Dame, where he seeks help from a less than sympathetic priest about his sexuality. The reader learns of Michael's education on the streets, particularly in Washington, DC, where he pays his own way through law school at George Washington University (his father having withdrawn all financial support when Michael refuses to attend law school at Iowa University). A furtive life of seeking out sex with men that begins in Chicago during his undergraduate days then escalates in the DC area, where bars abound and he discovers that many underlings who work in congress are gay.

The entire narrative—Philomena's wrenching story in the abbey, where some of the nuns treat the mothers and their children despicably, Michael's childhood, his secret life as a gay man working for the Republican National Committee in the nation's capital, their mismatched search to find one another—is not only heart wrenching, but it serves the reader in a number of other ways, as well. Sixsmith's narrative exposes a kind of Catholicism that hopefully no longer exists anywhere in the world. He also revisits the AIDS crisis as it occurs during the Reagan years, when, because its victims are largely gay men, the US government elects to do little or nothing about it, creating a race in which modern medicine desperately attempts to catch up, something it has never quite been able to do.

We must remember . . . all AIDS stories, like all holocaust narratives, create a condition in which one is too many and a million are not enough. They will be with us always, and we must listen.

Solovitch, Sara. *Playing Scared: A History and Memoir of Stage Fright*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2015.

I'm not sure why I was drawn to this book, except that the chords it struck by way of a recent *New Yorker* article (August 3, 2015, "I Can't Go On!" by Joan Acocella) told me I must read it. I began studying piano when I was ten, and then at age thirteen I set about the study of classical organ, which continued throughout my successful completion of a bachelor's degree in music. I'd suffered certain moments of stage fright, not only while playing organ (I, like the author, gave up playing), but also when I taught Advanced Placement English classes (Pre-AP to be exact) each morning for ten years, always wondering if I would say something

wrong, or worse, something stupid. The most difficult situation for me was speaking before a group of adults, reading from my own writing! By sharing with us her life-long battle with stage fright, Solovitch has created a fine primer on how to approach the affliction that affects millions of people, whether, musicians, actors, athletes, or other public figures:

“A 2014 survey by the online research and consulting firm YouGov reported that 56 percent of Americans were ‘very’ or ‘a little’ afraid of public speaking. But it wasn’t their top-ranking fear; snakes and heights ranked higher. Among the British, YouGov found the same prevalence of public-speaking anxiety, but that figure exceeded a fear of heights and snakes” (177). Whoo!

Or, allow this to soak in:

“By 1987, a survey by the International Conference of Symphony and Opera Musicians, which represents instrumentalists in dozens of major orchestras, revealed that 27 percent of its members used beta-blockers. Of those, 70 percent got the drug from colleagues”(108). For those who don’t know, beta-blockers are a medicine that slows down the heart, gives the person a physical sense of calm.

Solovitch’s journey is a long one. She begins studying piano as a young child and continues throughout college. As an adult, she gives up performance and actually becomes a journalist, creating a successful career. However, she reaches a point where she feels she not only wishes to play again but wishes to conquer her extreme stage fright (sweaty palms, limbs that quake/my most dreadful symptom seems to be the emission of rather acrid farts). Over a number of years Solovitch must consult scores of experts: other musicians, therapists, both physical and psychological, sports coaches and many more. In the end she sets a goal for herself: to play at age sixty a challenging piano recital in front of a large audience of family, friends, and other musicians. Her journey is a remarkable one, one that’s instructive for all of us, whether we’re musicians, performers, speakers, or even audience members. Important to remember are those who appear before us, that they may be suffering from performance anxiety, the preferred term, and we can by our very understanding help them by being attentive and understanding and most of all, forgiving, something performers often cannot do themselves.

Steinem, Gloria. *My Life on the Road*. New York: Random, 2015.

In 1972, when I’m a graduate student at Southern Methodist University, I attend an event in which Gloria Steinem speaks to the student body. Her address, along with an inter-term class entitled Women in the Church and Society, converts me almost overnight from a chauvinistic twenty-three-year-old seminarian, who can’t lift a finger to help out his working wife, to a young man who begins to mend his ways. The month-long class precipitates a metamorphosis that ends in my coming out as a gay man and deciding the Church will not be a very felicitous place for me to work for the rest of my life. Feminism saves my life. The same philosophy that frees millions of women from sex roles also frees men from those passed on to them by their fathers, whether they want to be like their fathers or not.

Steinem begins with a dedication that is more like a confession. She thanks, posthumously, the British doctor, who performs an abortion for her twenty-two-year-old personage. She promises not to tell anyone about the procedure but also promises to do what she wants with her life. She says, “I’ve done the best I could with my life. This book is for you.”

Almost immediately, Steinem leaves England for India, where she spends two years helping women to organize. But first she takes the reader back to her childhood in Toledo, Ohio. Because she attends Smith College, I always assume she’s had a rather privileged childhood. Not so. Her father is an antique dealer, who packs up his family in a car every summer to search for treasures and adventures. Her mother, however, suffers from depression, more than likely for having never achieved the things that she would have liked, asserts the author. When my own mother suffers like the very women that Betty Friedan documents in her book *The Feminine Mystique*, I don’t have much sympathy for her. It seems like a choice she happily makes, come what may. She doesn’t anticipate that her first child will be mentally challenged or that because of her three needy children, she won’t be able to have a career in teaching, the one for which she’s trained, earned a degree. Of course, I every now and then experience a pang of guilt for not being as sensitive to my mother’s struggles as I could be. She devotes forty largely thankless years to the care of my sister. After fifty-six years of marriage, my father exclaims upon her death, “I never realized how much she did for me.” Me, either.

Steinem’s travels include work as a journalist in the 1960s; her most famous article may be one in which she gets hired as a Playboy Bunny and writes a scathing exposé of the Bunnies’ working conditions. She helps to organize the 1977 National Women’s Conference in Houston, and extends her travels to help Native women organize on their reservations—places where largely non-tribal men rape females with impunity. She develops lifelong relationships from coast to coast and around the world. This tome treats women’s issues with wisdom, humor, and a devotion that is unmatched. Like her five previous books, this one should be read by men and women alike. Steinem is a national treasure because of her courage and devotion to improving the lives of women everywhere, and we should never forget it.

### **Some golden nuggets from Ms. Steinem’s book:**

“I could see that, because the Gandhians listened, they were listened to. Because they depended on generosity, they created generosity. Because they walked a nonviolent path, they made one seem possible. This was the practical organizing wisdom they taught me:

If you want people to listen to you, you have to listen to them.  
If you hope people will change how they live, you have to know how they live.  
If you want people to see you, you have to sit down with them eye-to-eye” (37).

“We might have known sooner that the most reliable predictor of whether a country is violent within itself—or will use military violence against another country—is not poverty, natural resources, religion, or even degree of democracy; it’s violence against females” (43).

“If someone called me a lesbian—in those days all single feminists were assumed to be lesbians—I learned to say, “Thank you.” It disclosed nothing, confused the accuser, conveyed solidarity with women who were lesbians, and made the audience laugh” (51).

“When I was campaigning on the road and meeting with Republican or independent women, what I tried to say was: *You didn’t leave your party. Your party left you. Forget about party labels. Just vote on the issues and for candidates who support equality*” (47).

**Speaking of early-day airline requirements for female flight**

**attendants:** “. . . their appearance was prescribed down to age, height, weight (which was governed by regular weigh-ins), hairstyle, makeup (including a single shade of lipstick), skirt length, and other physical requirements that excluded such things as a ‘broad nose’—only one of many racist reasons why stewardesses were overwhelmingly white” (89-90).

“A journey—whether it’s to the corner grocery or through life—is supposed to have a beginning, middle, and end, right? Well, the road is not like that at all. It’s the very illogic and the juxtaposed differences of the road—combined with our search for meaning—that make travel so addictive” (179).

**Or perhaps this sounds familiar:** “The name of the Vatican body investigating the nuns is the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the same body that conducted the Inquisition, which came to be known as the Holocaust of Women because as many as eight million women healers and leaders of pre-Christian Europe were killed by torture and burning at the stake over more than five hundred years. Chief among their sins was passing on the knowledge of herbs and abortifacients that allowed women to decide whether and when to give birth” (208).

**On the Church’s complicity with slavery:** “From 1492 to the end of the Indian Wars, an estimated fifteen million people were killed. A papal bull had instructed Christians to conquer non-Christian countries and either kill all occupants or ‘reduce their persons to perpetual slavery.’ From Africa to the Americas, slavery and genocide were blessed by the church, and riches from the so-called New World shored up the papacy and European monarchs. Whether out of guilt or a justifying belief that the original occupants were not fully human, history was replaced by the myth of almost uninhabited lands” (215).

**Quoting Wilma Mankiller, tribal leader:** “Wilma said many Native people believed that the earth as a living organism would just one day shrug off the human species that was destroying it—and start over. In a less cataclysmic vision, humans

would realize that we are killing our home and each other, and seek out The Way. That's why Native people were guarding it" (239).

Williams, Michael Vinson. *Medgar Evers: Mississippi Martyr*. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas, 2011.

I turn fifteen on June 11, 1963, a day before NAACP field secretary for Mississippi, Medgar Wylie Evers, is assassinated by Byron De La Beckwith, in front of Evers's own home in Jackson, Mississippi. If the item is mentioned in the local media where I live in Wichita, Kansas, I am probably oblivious to it. Yet Evers's death seems to kick off a series of political assassinations that take place in the United States in the 1960s: John Fitzgerald Kennedy, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., Robert Fitzgerald Kennedy, and others. In spite of all its many charms—Motown, the Twist, the mini-skirt, mod clothing, the sexual revolution—the decade is really a rather dark period.

Evers's story, through the years, is one that echoes in my mind—as it is occasionally referenced on TV, in the news, or even a film—yet I never quite have the narrative of events straight, the motivation for such a heinous act. But after reading Mr. Williams's book, I can never look at the 1960s in quite the same way. The life of Medgar Evers is a remarkable one, a life that is often overlooked in the larger scheme of things, for example, that Mississippi is the wealthiest state among all the southern states, up until the Civil War and the abolition of slavery, that its wealth and position are entirely dependent on the institution of slavery and that when it is abolished, the South, including illustrious Mississippi, descends into poverty.

Contrast that status with the Mississippi of today, which holds the dubious distinction of being one of the poorest states, with the poorest level of per capita spending on education. What a descent, and yet it helps to explain why, even a hundred years after the Civil War—that's at least four generations—white Mississippians still hate *Negroes* in the 1960s, want to keep them suppressed. Yes, for those one hundred years, people with dark skin are still enslaved by draconian laws that keep them confined to their own schools, their own restaurants, their own libraries (if such exist), or their own sections of public places such as train stations or washrooms. And certain (not all) white Mississippians believe that to continue such segregation is not only all right but that it is somehow ordained by God. And furthermore, certain white Mississippians feel justified in using lynching to justify their rage over the stupidest kinds of slights imaginable: winking at a white woman, slapping a white boy, a fifty-cent debt.

Imagine your family trying to move about your daily life—school, work, church, social intercourse—and always being afraid you might offend or displease someone with white skin. You're often told you don't belong in this line, this room, this particular place, and often, in spite of certain signs—Coloreds Only—you're not always sure, until someone with no uncertainty informs you, either by way of verbal abuse or physical, sometimes violent, actions. This is the kind of society that Medgar Evers is attempting to change in his work as NAACP field agent. Several times in his life, Evers could leave the state of Mississippi for attractive job offers in

more enlightened spots in the country, but he loves his home state, its geography, its people, so very much that he chooses to stay and fight.

Unlike MLK, Evers is not necessarily swayed by the use of peaceful means. He keeps a revolver in the glove box of his car, as he often travels late at night, arriving home in the dark after having attempted, somewhere else in Mississippi, to help others negotiate the filthy waters of prejudice and desegregation. Evers speaks out, both verbally and in print. His assassination does not happen out of the blue. Prior to this event, he narrowly escapes being hit by a police car. His household receives threatening phone calls. For a time he does accept or ask for protection, and for a time he receives it. But finally, Evers realizes he can never be free to do what he needs to do for the African-Americans of Mississippi if he must constantly have body guards surrounding him, and besides, it becomes too expensive of a proposition and he begins to eschew the offers.

And you may be thinking, *All this is old ground, covered a thousand times in the past. Why don't we just move on and forget about it?*

If that's what you think, consider these passages from forty-year-old writer Tanehisi Coates' article in *The Atlantic's* September issue, in which the author addresses his son in light of his own fears:

"And yet I am still afraid. I feel the fear most acutely whenever you leave me. But I was afraid long before you, and in this I was unoriginal. When I was your age the only people I knew were black, and all of them were powerfully, adamantly, dangerously afraid" (85).

And Coates's fear is not only present in Baltimore where he grows up, but in the North, when he visits a grandmother:

"I felt the fear in the visits to my Nana's home in Philadelphia. You never knew her. I barely knew her, but what I remember is her hard manner, her rough voice. And I knew that my father's father was dead and that my Uncle Oscar was dead and that my Uncle David was dead and that each of these instances was unnatural. And I saw it in my own father, who loves you, who counsels you, who slipped me money to care for you. My father was so very afraid. I felt it in the sting of his black leather belt, which he applied with more anxiety than anger, my father who beat me as if someone might steal me away, because that is exactly what was happening all around us. Everyone had lost a child, somehow, to the streets, to jail, to drugs, to guns. It was said that these lost girls were sweet as honey and would not hurt a fly. It was said that these lost boys had just received a GED and had begun to turn their lives around. And now they were gone, and their legacy was a great fear" (85).

For many African-Americans the fear that Mississippians internalize in the 1960s rages on unabated, stoked by trigger-happy police, by photo ID laws that have more to do with white skin still asserting control over black skin than voter *fraud*. The real fraud is that white power continues to rage over black lives, that many of us don't realize it, think it's all in the past. Mr. Williams's biography, *Medgar Evers*:

*Mississippi Martyr*, helps us to see that there is still much change that must occur before we are a truly free country. Williams's research is amazingly thorough, and his insight into Evers's life and the 1960s is crystal clear.

### ***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 2015.]

Colin Barrett, "The Ways," *New Yorker*, January 5, 2015, 54.

Pell, sixteen, must retrieve her younger brother Gerry from school in this Irish town, because he's been suspended after a fight. ¶ This story seems to be what we're all taught a short story should be: a tiny sliver of time or life. We learn that Pell has dropped out of school after her parents' death from cancer, two summers apart. Pell's older brother Nick, twenty-five, is working in a hotel, attempting to hold the family together. Gerry likes to play a video game called *Blood Dusk 2* set in North America; he's memorized and *explored* two hundred square miles: Indian graves, buffalo, other wildlife—things he may never see in his own life. The pain of these three children, their loss, is always just beneath the surface of their talk, their lives. The language is raw, strange to American eyes and ears:

**"Besides, Gerry would go spare if Swanlon's rusting wreck of a car, parping cloudlets of straw and dung out the exhaust, came up the school drive to collect him" (55).**

Raw but beautiful. Beautiful.  
Barrett has written *Young Skins*.

Robert Coover, "The Crabapple Tree," *New Yorker*, January 12, 2015, 58.

This is the tale of three people who are buried under a crabapple tree located next to a farmhouse. ¶ I realize Coover's important position in contemporary literature, but if you take this story on its face value, it must seem a rather weak version of his earlier work. You have a difficult time caring about any of the characters, none of whom seem *developed*, more like explained to the reader. If a male writer is going to create a female first-person narrator, her voice ought somehow to *sound* as if it is a female voice (in its multifaceted portrayal). Who is the narrator? She's telling the tale from such a distance (friend of the wife buried under the tree because she's died in childbirth) that we have a hard time caring. ¶ Coover's seems to be a sad, wandering tale that tells more than it shows.

J. Robert Lennon, "Breadman," *New Yorker*, January 19, 2015, 60.

Samuel, as an agent of his wife, enters a sidewalk queue at a tchotchke shop to buy the Bread, in particular, loaves of focaccia. ¶ In a strange way this story may be about fidelity, not merely the fidelity between Samuel and his wife, but fidelity to traditions that are carved out by our capitalistic culture. Samuel must enter the line to buy bread from the Breadman in a certain manner and with a certain reverence for his wife's hallowed spot. Samuel must know her account number—51093—and

sign in. He must schmooze with the Breadman, ask about his children and pets. And Samuel must be understanding when the old man who crowds in front of him snatches up the last loaves of focaccia. Samuel must believe that the same wife, Kathy, who has dispatched him on this errand, would graciously “understand,” as the Breadman suggests to an enraged Samuel, after waiting in line forever. The story is reminiscent of the “Soup Nazi” episode of *Seinfeld* (Google it if you’ve never seen it, all three of you). See *You in Paradise* is Lennon’s most recent publication.

Isaac Bashevis Singer, “Inventions,” *New Yorker*, January 26, 2015, 66.

The narrator (as if he is the author himself) relates the story of Morris Krakower, who, in 1930s Warsaw, addresses a conference of leftist Communists and encounters a ghost keeping him awake much of the night before. ¶ Perhaps this story gives the twenty-first century reader a view through a couple of windows into the world of nearly a hundred years ago. One, how fiction is formed: the author who creates a narrator as if this story has happened to Singer himself. Two, the reader sees several sides of the political realities that people living in Communist countries faced. ¶ In the past I’ve been critical of the magazine for trotting out previously unpublished stories of deceased authors; it almost seems like a violation of the author’s person, his or her career. I suppose the editors have their reasons concerning this one, as well: is it a beat-you-to-the-punch stance of presenting something arcane, or do they wish to put forth a work with literary or historical value and ask the readers to consider its merits? Again, I have to wonder. Did Singer himself wish to have “Inventions” published in English? Could the piece have been rejected in the 1960s, when it was written? ¶ I have mixed feelings about the story. It *seems* like a simple tale, its metaphors perhaps a bit obvious. At the same time, the narrative *must* give the reader *some* insight into what it must have meant to be a Jew in Communist Poland, and that alone is a good reason to bring it before our eyes.

\*Usually dependable online sources disagree on Singer’s birth date, so I leave it to the reader.

Elizabeth Harrower, “Alice,” *New Yorker*, February 2, 2015, 56.

Alice, beautiful and adorned with two-toned red curls, must live her entire life in the shadow of two brothers, whom her mother favors over her. ¶ Set in the Depression years of Australia, this story traces Alice’s life: how she tries to please a mother presenting two faces to the world, one that ignores or berates little Alice, and one that *performs* for the world. Even as she marries a man named Eric, Alice remains as insignificant as a flea to her mother, and Alice begins to take on a few of her mother’s characteristics. ¶ When Eric persists on having “affairs with girls,” Alice divorces him, and she is married off again, this time to an older but well-off man. Alice’s only joy seems to be when a younger woman befriends her and invites Alice to *her* wedding. The ending, the resolution of this story, is a soft trajectory, Alice arriving at a certain realization about her life. The narrative seems to stand in a long line of pleasing, sophisticated *New Yorker* stories. *A Day in the Country and Other Stories* will be released by Text Publishing later this year.

Toni Morrison, “Sweetness,” *New Yorker*, February 9, 2015, 58.

A sixty-three-year-old African-American woman with “light skin” narrates the story of the daughter she bears, one who is “**midnight black, Sudanese black**”—something that is quite a shock to her and her husband both. ¶ Morrison is such a master of language, weaving back and forth between the distant past, the past, and present as if all three are one tense. The story seems to explore, or at least hint at, the self-hatred that some so-called light skinned blacks have had for themselves in the past, yet also the self-hatred of the narrator, who can’t seem to decide what her place in the raising of her daughter is: “**I wasn’t a bad mother, you have to know that, but I may have done some hurtful things to my only child because I had to protect her.**” The narrator sounds as if she, abandoned by her husband and then her daughter, has one foot in the last century and one in this century—can’t decide whether she loves her “blue-black”-skinned daughter or merely tolerates her. Morrison’s writing is always a wild ride you must trust as you jump aboard. This story is a fragment from her novel, *God Help the Child*, which is forthcoming in April.

Amelia Gray, “Labyrinth,” *New Yorker*, February 16, 2015, 60.

A man named Jim agrees to enter the labyrinth that his friend Dale has constructed from a field of corn. ¶ This story is yet another *New Yorker* foray into the mythological—this time, the Greek myth of Theseus. Jim enters as a mere mortal with a number of failings. But by the time he reaches the center of the labyrinth, he can hear people on the outside singing his praises. All along he’s carried a clay trivet with images of the Phaistos Disk on it, and as he reaches the center of the labyrinth, the disk seems to overpower him, taking him down, down, down. The narrative comes from Gray’s upcoming collection, *Gutshot*, due out in April.

Haruki Murakami, “Kino,” *New Yorker*, February 25 and March 2, 2015, 152.

When Kino finds his wife in bed with a colleague, he divorces her and opens a bar. ¶ Kino’s bar is a quiet place located off the beaten path, where he shares his favorite jazz LPs with his clients. Odd characters enter his establishment: Kamita, a young man with a shaved head, who drinks weak Scotch and reads at the end of the bar; a woman with cigarette burns on much of her body, a woman with whom he sleeps once; and a gray cat with a *lovely tail*. ¶ One day Kamita “convinces” some rowdy men to leave the bar, and he also convinces Kino that he must vacate the premises for a while, take a long trip. For some reason Kino trusts the man and takes his advice. He travels a great distance only, at last, to come to grips with his heart’s hurts, its losses. This is one of the longest stories the magazine has published, but because of the author’s fascinating, engaging narrative, it passes as if it only takes a few minutes to read—one of the more interesting translations in recent years. Murakami’s most recent novel is *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage*.

Stephen King, “A Death,” *New Yorker*, March 9, 2015, 76.

Just prior to the Dakotas achieving statehood, Jim Trusdale is accused of murdering a ten-year-old girl for a silver dollar, a “cartwheel.” ¶ As a fan of King’s *Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption*, I find this story a satisfying one for several reasons. King’s language, his prose, is spare, fits the era, and never plays

outside the boundaries of the story—on the surface, a simple one. For some reason the reader believes the accused will turn out to be innocent. Is it because the townspeople, the “judge” and prosecutor, have already hanged Trusdale before the gallows is built? Is it because of Trusdale’s protestations, even to the last second before he faces his inevitable death? Only one person, the sheriff, comes to believe that Trusdale may be innocent. In a very O. Henry-like conclusion, the reader discovers why the sheriff is wrong! At first one must believe the title refers to the girl’s demise, but it could just as easily be penned in honor of Trusdale. King’s collection, *The Bazaar of Bad Dreams*, will be out this fall.

Sarah Braunstein, “All You Have To Do,” *New Yorker*, March 16, 2015, 62.

Sid Baumwell, sixteen in 1972, enters a raffle at a small town grocery store, to win a lifetime supply of aluminum foil. ¶ The slick, handsome man handling the raffle, Bill Baxter, offers Sid a ride home and he accepts. You sort of expect something creepy to happen because in our culture we’re taught *not* to accept such favors—but nothing creepy happens. Well, Sid *does* win a lifetime supply of foil—imagine, his ticket out of an entire fishbowl! The prize amounts to eight rolls, which might last a lifetime in my house, but Sid is disappointed and intuits that Bill has selected his ticket *on purpose*. Again, the creepy feeling. Then Bill’s car reappears and Sid gets in. They talk. Sid senses that Bill is going to kiss him. The reader has no idea if Sid wishes for this to happen, just as Sid is unsure of what he wants his future to be. The final paragraph is stunning, completely neutralizes any creepy feelings the reader might have:

**“Sid looked down and saw that his hand was being touched by Bill’s hand. Bill’s long, cool fingers rested lightly on his own. He was filled with calm, alert curiosity. His impulse was to stay perfectly still, to freeze, like when a ladybug lands on your hand. Or not a ladybug—something weirder. A glowy beetle, an insect you’d never for a second believe lived in your ho-hum corner of the universe. But it does. It is showing you. Stay still. Do not move a muscle. That thing could have landed anywhere, on anything. The word for this is luck” (68).**

See! Not creepy at all. Braunstein is the author of the novel, *The Sweet Relief of Missing Children*.

Colm Tóibín, “Sleep,” *New Yorker*, March 23, 2015, 78.

A gay Irishman living in New York City addresses his lover, a Jewish man twenty years his junior—who leaves him because the Irishman suffers from alarming nightmares that disturb his young lover in more than one way. ¶ The Irishman flies to Dublin, where he has a single session with a psychiatrist, who has spoken with the patient once via a transatlantic call. During the session, the Irishman, an important writer, tells of the time his bother dies of a heart attack. The climax is moving—too moving to recreate here. ¶ You must read the story, to experience this most ephemeral yet effective scene of a person on a shrink’s couch, to experience one of the most moving stories the magazine has ever published. I am grateful to the editorial staff for presenting an important narrative with a gay protagonist,

written by an openly gay author of some stature. Please don't stop. *Nora Webster* is Tóibín's most recent novel.

Thomas Pierce, "This Is An Alert," *New Yorker*, March 30, 2015, 62.

Some time in an almost dystopian future, a family's road trip to visit grandma is disrupted by an alert from the skies overhead. ¶ I listened to the young author read his story from a podcast at the magazine's Web site, as I followed the text onscreen. His rendition of the omniscient voice saying *This is an alert* is alarming, all right—sounding almost dead, four or five tones lower than his normal voice. Some time in our own future, we, too, may be hearing these four words. Though Pierce seems to be satirizing this warning—one, by the way, which Americans have been *listening* to since the 1950s—he could be issuing an updated one. If we don't stop the fighting worldwide—then we may all be on alert for the war above us—drones are not going away—for the rest of our lives. Pierce's latest book is a collection entitled *Hall of Small Mammals*.

Kamel Daoud, "Musa," *New Yorker*, April 6, 2015, 66.

A French-Algerian man reconstructs the life and death of a revered older brother, Musa, along with the life of their mother. ¶ A wandering tale, much like the nomadic people from which it must be derived, this narrative is one that expresses more than the bitter mourning over one man, Musa. It seems to mourn the loss of a culture, one that is swallowed up or defined by another, expressing **"a strength that comes from anger" (67)**. The author articulates what seem like a number of truths or axioms: **"The last day of a man's life doesn't exist. Outside of storybooks, there's no hope, nothing but soap bubbles bursting. That's the best proof of our absurd existence, my dear friend: no one is granted a final day, only an accidental interruption of life" (69)**. What an odd look at life . . . and death, we must muse as Westerners, but is it? ¶ The story seems to be as much about the narrator and brother's mother as it does about Musa. **"After Musa died, my mother turned fierce, in a way. Try to imagine the woman: snatched away from her tribe, given in marriage to a husband who didn't know her and who hastened to get away from her, the mother of two sons, one dead and one a child too silent to give her the proper cues, a woman who lost two men and was forced to work for *roumis* in order to survive" (73)**. It is a bitter tale—this one that is part of Daoud's novel, what the magazine refers to as a "reimagining" of Camus's *L'Étranger*—whose taste will not soon leave the teller's tongue, nor ours. Daoud is the author of *The Meursault Investigation*, the novel containing this story, due out in English in June.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "Apollo," *New Yorker*, April 13, 2015, 64.

Okenwa tells the story of Raphael, once the family's houseboy, who is now an armed robber in their Nigerian region. ¶ Okenwa reveals the friendship he had struck up, as a child, with Raphael: their mutual interest in Bruce Lee movies, how Raphael had fashioned a nunchaku out of wood and metal for Okenwa, how the child secretly treats Raphael's eyes when he contracts conjunctivitis because the houseboy is squeamish about putting drops in his own eyes. Okenwa confesses to his betrayal of Raphael when he later sees the young man flirting with a female

servant of a neighbor. The adult Okenwa never says so, in so many words, but he must wonder if making up a story about Raphael, on the fly, to get him fired, is what eventually contributes to Raphael's current downfall as a common thief. *Americanah* is Adichie's most recent novel.

Ann Beattie, "Major Maybe," *New Yorker*, April 20, 2015, 76.

In this brief narrative a woman looks back on the days in the 1980s, in which she shares an apartment in Chelsea with a young man named Eagle Soars. ¶ The two are so much alike that they almost act old-age married—until they have sex. Then they both eventually marry other people. The story strikes me as being sort of a prose poem, in which certain names or phrases are echoed throughout, where everything relates to everything else in the piece. There seems to be no "plot," only facts about the characters that float around the reader until you grab them and make them into the proper narrative yourself. The narrator's recollection of a crazy red-haired woman *back then* is the inciting event for this nonlinear prose poem-story-ode to an earlier time when people are just becoming afraid of AIDS and widespread use of PCs is just around the corner. Beattie's collection, *The State We're In: Main Stories*, comes out this summer.

First name Last name, "Title of story," *New Yorker*, Date, ##.

Luke Mogelson, "Peacetime," *New Yorker*, April 27, 2015, 64.

Papadopoulos, a divorced paramedic in the New York National Guard, resides in the armory, where he pays no rent and takes whatever he can for his own use. ¶ Mogelson is covering a different kind of war in this story. Papadopoulos has seen it all—attempted suicides, drug overdoses, lonely widows who call 9-1-1 weekly—and from each scene he steals *something*. His female partner finally catches on, and he feels his "career" coming to an end. One of the last thefts he makes is a suicide note that belongs to a very unhappy man he has resuscitated. It is Papadopoulos's last mistake as well. ¶ I hate people who write as well as Mogelson—especially if he's thirtyish and also a successful journalist. Actually, that's the way I express my extreme admiration for his story. I love a writer who says much with few words. I love a writer who can peel a metaphor from the leather pants of his own character, in a manner in which the image becomes a meme for Papadopoulos and his co-workers. I hope to see many more of Mogelson's stories. The author is a freelance journalist living in Mexico.

Milan Kundera, "The Apologizer," *New Yorker*, May 4, 2015, 56.

Alain, a young Parisian, ponders why his mother, who wishes to abort him but does not, abandons him to be raised solely by his father. ¶ This story is a gentle one in spite of its content. It is gentle because the teller, Kundera, seems that way (he shifts briefly to first person). Alain's mother wishes to take her own life in order to destroy his tiny one (but instead drowns a young man, her "savior"). Then his mother emerges from the river to drive off and be free of her guilt. In spite of his strained beginning Alain loves life, thinks his is pretty fine, wishes to live even if he has never (like anyone) asked to be born. And yet Alain imagines that his conception is one of violence, in which his father breaks his promise to withdraw before orgasm:

**“He stood at his mirror and examined his face for traces of the double, simultaneous hatreds that had led to his birth: the man’s hatred and the woman’s hatred at the moment of the man’s orgasm, the hatred of the gentle and physically strong coupled with the hatred of the courageous and physically weak.”**

Who apologizes in life, Kundera asks, the angry woman who jostles a man on the street or the man who has been jostled out of his reverie by such anger? This narrative seems very much in the tradition of others French, Albert Camus, for one, giving us a disjointed, bumpy narrative until all its pieces come clattering into place at the end. Kundera may be best known for his 1982 novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*.

Sheila Heti, “My Life Is a Joke,” *New Yorker*, May 11, 2015, 64.

I normally don’t care for the genre of fantasy, but Heti’s story is rather an outlier. Her narrative does not have the normal features of what the reader may think of as fantasy. Her narrator’s return from death is more of a metaphor. The story, similar in some ways to Ann Beattie’s *Major Maybe* (April 20, 2015), is also sort of prose poem in which Heti effectively echoes certain words or phrases: *witness* or *witnessing*, a number of *jokes*, *chicken-crossing-the-road* (to die). It’s one of those stories that requires not only a leap of faith but also a suspension of disbelief of normal perceptions (most notably the reality that you cannot rise from the dead). And much to my surprise I love this story causing me to think of what my own chicken-crossing-the-road threshold might be. Heti’s most recent work is a novel, *How a Person Should Be*.

Justin Taylor, “So You’re Just What, Gone?” *New Yorker*, May 18, 2015, 84.

Charity, a sixteen-year-old girl, travels by plane with her mother from Boston to Seattle to check in on her Grams, whose health is in question. ¶ So . . . I love airplanestories . . . but wait . . . this one is only partly an airplanestory. Yet it is the portion that sets the story in motion. Seems that Charity is separated from her mother on the plane and must sit between Aisle Guy and Fat Hawaii, author Taylor using a trope called periphrasis to substitute an apt (and sarcastic) description for a proper name—just what a smart teen might think. However, in a moment of poor judgment, the fairly intelligent girl accepts Aisle Guy’s business card, and he suddenly morphs into *Mark*. Later in the week Charity texts Mark at his hotel, and he begins to stalk her . . . electronically via cyberspace. Through texts they exchange intimate photos, and when Mark becomes particularly insistent that they meet and abusive when she demurs, Charity becomes frightened. ¶ With her mother’s permission (and her mother’s two twenties), Charity heads to the Seattle aquarium she’s wanted to see since they first arrived. There she does something nearly as odd as texting with a perv, something totally unexpected and yet *not* for a teen living in our texting/Instagram/phonecam world of putting it all out there. One wonders if she’ll still be alive at thirty-four! After reading this story I have great faith in a new generation of writers, particularly in Taylor, who can use *periphrasis* effectively and cleverly thread a connection between Charity’s required reading, *A*

*Tale of Two Cities*, and *this* tale of two cities. I can die happy. *Everything Here Is the Best Thing Ever: Stories* is Taylor's most recent book.

Dorthe Nors, "The Freezer Chest," *New Yorker*, May 25, 2015, 64.

This story is a short-short, one about a number of Danish students' trip on a ferry to England in 1989. ¶ During the crossing one of the students, Mark, an older man returning to high school to finish his diploma, tells the story of having his fingers smashed in a Freezer Chest. The narrator Mette looks back on this trip in which she is intimidated in different ways by two individuals. First, Mark outright declares his dislike for Mette and later humiliates her in a rather indelicate manner.

Henrietta, a *friend*, betrays Mette in a more savage though subtle manner. An evocative short-short story! Nors's most recent book is *Karate Chop: Stories*.

Salman Rushdie, "The Duniazát," *New Yorker*, June 1, 2015, 62.

Ibn Rushdi, philosopher *and* physician, in the year 1195, is banished by the Berbers from Córdoba in Arab Spain, for his liberality, to live in exile in the village of Lucena. ¶ Unlike *A Thousand and One Nights*, a work Rushdie seems to be emulating, this narrative condenses many mythical years into a few pages: Ibn Rushdi's cohabitation with the supernatural sixteen-year-old Dunia and their production of "a multiplicity of children" (63), all minus earlobes like Dunia; Ibn's naming all his children and their descendants the Duniazát, or children of the world; the distribution of these offspring throughout the world, particularly to North America; and finally Ibn Rushdi's return to his rightful place following acts of the reigning caliph, who brings the "ascendancy of the fanatical Berbers to an end" (65). Rushdie, the author, is a wordsmith supreme, to be sure, drawing readers in as easily and surely as if they've been devoured by one of his novels. And, in fact, this tale is lifted from Rushdie's upcoming book, *Two Years Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights*.

[The theme of this year's *The New Yorker* Summer Fiction issue is "Secret Histories," and these five stories provide a little something for everyone! Take them to the beach or on your trip and enjoy!]

Zadie Smith, "Escape from New York," *New Yorker*, June 8 and 15, 2015, 38.

Michael, Marlon, and Elizabeth—best buds—flee their totally Upper West Side milieu when the city is attacked in a familiar 9-1-1 scenario. Seems a bit passé to be writing about the (real or imagined) 9-1-1 as this trio rent a "smelly Toyota Camry" and hightail it to Pennsylvania and beyond. Oh . . . turns out this is *the* 9-1-1 scenario. Yet I must confess that I carefully peruse those "urban legend" headlines found on tabloids as I pay for groceries, and I've *never* heard of this one in which Michael Jackson, Elizabeth Taylor, and Marlon Brandon all escape the city thusly! I also have to confess I had to read the magazine's "This Week in Fiction" blog's interview with author Smith to learn of her method for developing the madness of this story. I believe Smith had more fun writing it than I had in reading it. The key to getting the story from the very start may entirely rest on Sara Cwynar's illustration, in which Michael Jackson's famed glove is the primary image. Shame on me for missing it. Smith's most recent book is *NW: a Novel*.

Jonathan Safran Foer, “Love Is Blind and Deaf,” *New Yorker*, June 8 and 15, 2015, 45.

Foer reimagines how Adam and Eve occupy “paradise” in this narrative. The author humanizes the couple to the point that they seem like an ordinary duo trying to survive in any cramped urban environment, except that they are presumably in paradise. “It worked until it didn’t work” seems to be the couple’s philosophy and a realistic condition in which they live. End of story. Foer’s most recognized work may be his 2005 novel, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*.

Primo Levi, “Quaestio de Centauris,” *New Yorker*, June 8 and 15, 2015, 56.

After a long introduction, which is necessary for Levi to set up his mythological premise, the narrator tells the shameful tale of how he allows himself to be coupled with Teresa De Simone, when it is centaur Trachi who really wishes to woo her. ¶ Trachi goes on a rampage with mares all across the countryside to prove his potency. Levi leads us to believe that Trachi then morphs into a dolphin—never to be seen again! This is one of the more believable tales of this sort that I’ve read, largely because Levi goes to such great lengths to massage the reader’s suspension of disbelief—not that you believe, but that you see how such a beautiful lie could be true. Levi’s Complete Works is out in September.

Jonathan Franzen, “The Republic of Bad Taste,” *New Yorker*, June 8 and 15, 2015, 62.

If I’d been at the beach when I read this 16,000+ word story, I would have come away charred on all four sides of my body, so engrossed I would have become in its rich fabric! In the two years leading up to the reunification of Germany, young Andreas Wolf, *counselor*, falls in love with Annagret, a fifteen-year-old girl who seeks his help with a fairly knotty problem. ¶ Seems that Annagret’s mother is a drug addict and could lose her job if found out, and the girl’s stepfather is abusing her, *mildly* at first, then ready to move in for the kill, when she comes to the priest-like man Andreas, who lives a secular life in the basement of an East Berlin church. No spoilers here. You *must* read this long story to savor the elegance of Franzen’s prose, be reminded of the intelligence of his novels, *The Corrections*, his *The Twenty-Seventh City*! This story is worth every second of your time. Franzen’s novel, *Purity*, is out in September.

Karen Russell, “The Prospectors,” *New Yorker*, June 8 and 15, 2015, 90.

Jean and Clara, women in their early twenties, flee from 1930s Florida to Oregon, where they continue to *prospect*, or relieve others of their valuables. ¶ At one point the two women catch a chairlift and travel up a mountain to what they believe is the grand opening of the Evergreen Lodge, an opulent structure, where many wealthy people will be gathered. Jean and Clara are welcomed, however, into a very similar but different lodge, the Emerald. Here the story takes a very odd and unexpected turn. The reader must suspend all disbelief, that is, enjoy or appreciate the genre of fantasy! Russell is quite a wordsmith, possessing the ability to hold one’s prolonged attention, as her characters invite you into their lives. She is most well known for her novel, *Swamplandia!*

Ben Marcus, “The Grow-Light Blues,” *New Yorker*, June 22, 2015, 66.

Carl Hirsch, twenty-nine, works for Mayflower, a research and diagnostics corporation that, among other things, develops non-food forms of nutrition. ¶

Lucky Carl is selected to test Mayflower's most daring product, a grow-light for humans. What may be most notable about this narrative—besides its scathingly sharp satire—is how Marcus creates a Carl Hirsch who pretty much hates humanity at the beginning of the story: **“Tonight’s party was in one of those long, skinny city apartments you’re supposed to verbally fellate with praise” (67)**. But by the end, after Mayflower has essentially starved Hirsch not only physically but spiritually, as well, he meets a woman and they have a child. In the last few paragraphs he softens: **“Someone new is among us. Someone special” (73)**. Yet he is always *Carl*, suspicious, skeptical: **“. . . he would work as hard as he could to keep the verdict on that question, along with every other question that pressed in, as far away from his family as humanly possible” (73)**. Marcus is the author of a collection, *Leaving the Sea*.

Louise Erdrich, “The Flower,” *New Yorker*, June 29, 2015, 56.

In 1839 frontier America, Wolfred, a seventeen-year-old boy and an eleven-year-old Ojibwe girl kill Mackinnon, their trader captor, and move south to flee the area. ¶ Erdrich so often takes the reader into a world that no longer exists, yet one that has always existed, a world of *Indians* that is not layered underneath our neat architecture of farms and cities but exists parallel to the air we breathe. We need only inhale to see it, to follow it. This world, where a white boy and young native girl can see and hear things the rest of us can't, is brought to life by Erdrich, who has taken great pains to learn of it and make certain we never forget its haunting riches. “The Flower” is as *real* as any story by Dickens and just as satisfying. Erdrich's novel, *LaRose*, is due out in 2016.

Alejandro Zambra, “Reading Comprehension: Text No. 1,” *New Yorker*, July 6 and 13, 2015, 74.

Zambra presents a Chilean story-within-a-story, in which the Covarrubias twins, Luis and Antonio, conspire to be different by parting ways. ¶ Yet at a particularly crucial period in their lives—both enter the legal profession—they further conspire. This time one twin sits for the other at an exam. In a satiric move, the author ends the brief story with a “comprehension” quiz about the Covarrubias twin narrative. (No key is provided.) The English version of Zambra's collection, *My Documents*, was released in April.

Lauren Groff, “Ghosts and Empties,” *New Yorker*, July 20, 2015, 60.

A woman in her thirties living in northern Florida takes winter evening walks, in part, to dissipate a certain anger. ¶ Groff creates the appearance that the narrator is on one long walk, but, of course, she is presenting to the reader an accumulation of walks. Through these sojourns the reader understands a bit of the woman's ire: a world of decay from her very own mixed neighborhood to melting glaciers to the Pacific Ocean's swirl of plastic water bottles, to the silent dying off of innocent species, to a certain unfaithfulness of a husband she truly loves, and, by way of extrapolation, probably the two sons who will grow up to be like their father.

**“Soon, tomorrow, the boys will be men, then the men will leave the house, and my husband and I will look at each other crouching under the weight of all that we wouldn't or couldn't yell, and all**

those hours outside walking, my body, my shadow, and the moon. It is terribly true, even if the truth does not comfort, that if you look at the moon for long enough night after night, as I have, you will see that the old cartoons are correct, that the moon is, in fact, laughing, but not at us, we who are too small and our lives too fleeting for it to give us any notice at all.”

Groff's third novel, *Fates and Furies*, will be out in September.

Tessa Hadley, “Silk Brocade,” *New Yorker*, July 27, 2015, 60.

In 1953, two young Bristol women, who run a dress shop, agree to make a wedding ensemble for a friend who appears to be rising in a class-driven British society. ¶ Ann, the dressmaker, really thinks she's *better* than the woman for whom she's making the dress (her friend seems to be marrying *up*), but in the end Ann receives nothing for her work because the young bride-to-be dies abruptly of diphtheria. Hadley, who is quite a wordsmith, creates what might be the real climax of the story (and not the woman's death) with the following, when all the principles attend a picnic at the wealthy man's *deer park*:

**“And somehow that afternoon they achieved that miraculous drunkenness you get only once or twice in a lifetime, brilliant and without consequences, not peaking and subsiding but running weightlessly on and on.”**

From this wild stupor the story spirals downward toward Nola's death. And worse, the narrative jumps to the future, 1972, when the dressmaker's teenage daughter accidentally leaves a jacket made from the discarded brocade from years before . . . she leaves it behind in the very home where the ill-fated wedding was to have taken place (now a public building)! Either climax, the picnic or Nola's death, is like an orgasm that doesn't quite make it to fruition. The story, pardon one, sputters to an end.

**“And, amid all the complications and adjustments that ensued, she forgot to collect her jacket when they left, though she didn't confess this to her mother until months later. A jacket hardly mattered, in the scheme of things.”**

Indeed. Not quite up to the author's usual excellence. Hadley's novel, *Clever Girl*, was released in April.

Heinz Insu Fenkl, “Five Arrows,” *New Yorker*, August 3, 2015, 58.

Insu, a Korean boy, listens to a story told by his Big Uncle who, because of a gangrenous foot, is banished, fated by the family to live out his days across the river. ¶ Big Uncle tells Insu a wandering tale based on a dream that, to Big Uncle, is more real than his life—so much so he's willing to sacrifice his foot for a beautiful woman's love. Insu, in turn, tells Big Uncle the legend of Robin Hood, and Big Uncle is so impressed with the narrative that he adopts Robin's request of being buried at the point where his arrow shoots into the earth. The story ends quietly,

dreamlike, as Insu swims in a rather impressionistic manner across the river—giving the reader a satisfying blend of Eastern and Western folklore. Fenkl is the author of *Cathy* and is working on a novel, *Skull Water*.

Michael Cunningham, “Little Man,” *New Yorker*, August 10 and 17, 2015, 66.

In this retelling of a Brothers Grimm tale, a two-hundred-year-old gnome agrees to spin straw into gold for the miller’s daughter because if he doesn’t the king will slay her. ¶ The gnome, with the help of his Aunt Farfalee, does manage to spin a room filled with straw into gold two consecutive evenings, and each time the maid gives the gnome a humble piece of her jewelry. On the third night of spinning, in which the maid spins more gold than ever, she has nothing to offer him, but he asks for the soon-to-be queen’s first-born child. When she demurs, he strikes a deal with her: if, upon the child’s birth, she can guess the gnome’s name within three days, she will not have to sacrifice her son (try explaining *that* to the king). When the moment arrives this author’s rendering of the tale is surprising for several reasons. ¶ Cunningham, because of his multifarious talents, can do no wrong, and so saves this modern retelling, rather plumps it up, in a satisfying manner that lesser writers could not. His collection, *A Wild Swan: and Other Tales*, which contains this narrative, will be released in November.

Alice McDermott, “These Short, Dark Days,” *New Yorker*, August 24, 2015, 58.

When thirty-two-year-old Jim, a sacked Brooklyn Rapid Transit trainman of the early twentieth-century, sends his pregnant wife Annie out into the bitter cold of a February day, to run an errand, he gasses himself in their small “railroad” apartment. ¶ Later, Sister St. Savior, sixty-four, with a full bladder, on her way back to her convent from a day of “collecting alms” in the vestibule of Woolworth’s, sees the commotion of what looks like an apartment fire. She fights her way through a crowd, and denizens of the building assume she’s been summoned after the explosion. When she is informed of the dead man’s intent, the man’s young widow now fears that he will be barred from being buried in the Catholic cemetery:

**“Your man fell asleep,” Sister St. Savior whispered now. “The flame went out. It was a wet and unfortunate day.” She paused to make sure the girl had heard. “He belongs in Calvary,” she said. “You paid for the plot, didn’t you?” The girl nodded slowly. “Well, that’s where he’ll go.”**

The nun, Sister St. Savior, employs a quirky but humane theology of her own, as she attempts to cover up or rewrite the young husband’s death. She is accustomed to rendering aid to the helpless, mostly women, and Jim’s poor widow is no exception. Sister, praying to God, does not take lightly her empathic impulse toward breaking the Church’s rules in order to comfort others:

**She would get him buried in Calvary if only because the Church wanted him out, and she, who had spent her life in service to the Church, wanted him in. “Hold it against the good I’ve done,” she prayed. “We’ll sort it out when I see You.”**

Indeed, Sister St. Savior realizes that, for her compassion, she will mostly likely exact a price—one way or another. The author's novel, *Someone*, was published last October.

Jensen Beach, "The Apartment," *New Yorker*, August 31, 2015, 74.

Across the courtyard from Louise and Martin, a couple in their fifties, a Stockholm apartment, empty for eight months, finally receives an occupant, someone named Sara. ¶ Louise, the fact becomes apparent, has a problem with alcohol, consuming entire bottles in one sitting and attempting to conceal the glassy evidence from others. She believes, by reading the last name on the call box of the apartment that she may know the father of this new resident, Sara. ¶ Many years before Louise had an affair. **"He was the second man she'd slept with. Martin still didn't know about it."** And the man's unusual last name is the same as the new neighbor's, Sara. One evening when Martin is out celebrating his retirement with colleagues, Louise, heavily plied with liquor, ventures across the way with a small gift of welcome for Sara. In her inebriated state Louise says entirely too much, and author Beach deftly ends the story, with Louise saying things like "Forgive me," words that might apply to the present situation, in which she breaks a plate in her own kitchen, but might also pertain to the much larger sin from her past. One senses Martin, who finds her in this condition, knows what her sin is and forgives her repeatedly each day. Beach's new collection, *Swallowed by the Cold*, is forthcoming from Graywolf.

Danielle McLaughlin, "In the Act of Falling," *New Yorker*, September 7, 2015, 68.

An Irish woman is concerned when her husband, who is jobless, allows their nine-year-old son to remain out of school after his suspension for striking a boy is over. ¶ Finn is a curious child, intelligent, but his father indulges his fondness for dead animals, particularly birds. The wife, intelligent herself, tries not to pressure either Bill to find a new job or for her son to return to school. Yet a certain balance has been lost, and she wishes to restore it. One day she comes home to find her child entirely too comfortable in the company of a female minister, who has also exerted influence over husband, while the wife has been at work. The ending, unlike some of the birds in this story, is left up in the air. Will the wife finally express her discontent with the situation? Will her husband be offered a job? Will the child return to school? Will he lose his obsession with dead flesh? It really is better that we not know, and yet we do, don't we? McLaughlin's first collection *Dinosaurs on Other Planets* is out October 1, in Ireland.

Joy Williams, "Chicken Hill," *New Yorker*, September 14, 2015, 76.

Ruth, an old woman living alone, becomes acquainted with a young girl who lives next door in a **"house painted a prominent aubergine."** ¶ The second-grader may exist nowhere except in the old woman's thoughts, for the child's vocabulary and world view otherwise seem far too sophisticated. For example, she asks Ruth if she may draw her **"in plein air."** Yet Ruth's mind, though it may be fading, is still sharp in other ways, her heart sensitive to world problems like the over harvesting of tuna. Moreover, the story opens with a scene in which Ruth attends a fundraiser for a little boy who runs into the street and is hit by a policeman. Something tells the reader that the event is a sham, but Ruth doesn't

seem to get it. ¶ When she decides to meet the magnanimous doctor next door who has “adopted” the young girl, Ruth gets no farther than his front porch, and then she turns around and rushes home. The clues are all here: Ruth simply does not have complete control of her faculties any longer. Are her dogs gone, one asks, because they’ve been confiscated or because they disappeared long ago? The following passage seems to sum up the story, a line Ruth feeds to herself: **“You can’t live a life that’s no longer your own.”** Yes her entire life has become the ultimate “Chicken Hill,” a childhood scene, in which a daring Ruth slides down a dirt hill on a piece of cardboard and schemes to stop just short of tumbling into the street. One of Williams’s most popular books may be *The Quick and the Dead*.

Amos Oz, “My Curls Have Blown All the Way to China,” *New Yorker*, September 21, 2015, 88.

One morning over breakfast Moshe informs his wife of more than thirty years, Bracha, that he’s leaving her for a younger woman, someone he’s met while working up the coast in Netanya. ¶ At first one has some sympathy for Bracha for being dumped. She’s been faithful in every possible way to Moshe: raised two sons, kept his home, shopped, cooked, cleaned, performed the *Chalice*, a suggestive sexual favor, on any number of occasions when she doesn’t feel like it. Come to think of it, Moshe isn’t such a prize. In fact, he smells of body odor, especially orally, the reason why, Bracha explains, she prefers doggy style, so she doesn’t have to bear being near *his* mouth. As Bracha contemplates her future, she thinks of an old friend whom she might visit in Geneva, someone now known as Blanche, not her Hebrew name. And one realizes, perhaps, why Bracha’s been abandoned; she has to go back thirty-five years to recall one *friend*. Not such a pleasant person is Bracha, nor very empathetic. She seems to blame the failure of her marriage on some rather superficial factors. And for her lost man she seems not to shed a single tear. *A Tale of Love and Darkness* is one of Oz’s most popular books.

Thomas McGuane, “The Driver,” *New Yorker*, September 21, 2015, 64.

McGuane is a master at compressing the implications of a lifetime into 2,400 words. When nine-year-old Spencer Quantrill, in the presence of his local Brahmin mother, is informed by the school principal that he must enroll in “special education,” Mrs. Quantrill refuses to allow it. On her drive home, she accidentally leaves Spencer behind, and the point of view shifts. ¶ Unsure of what to do, Spencer wanders in the cool of dusk until a strange driver stops and offers him a ride. Because of Spencer’s inability to communicate, a series of events occurs including the fact that the car is stopped and the driver is arrested for kidnapping. All this in 2,400 words! But wait, there is more, and the outcome really isn’t clear, left purposely ambiguous, for the reader to ponder, I suspect—like many yarns of this nature, portrayed by way of the muddled mind of a man who never received his special education:

“On the radio, in the papers, but mostly in people’s mouths, news of the kidnapper ballooned. In town, the driver’s relatives were dismayed to learn of this side of his character and anxious to put some distance between them and him. The interrogator from Helena was delayed by a passing hailstorm, and by the time he

got to the town jail the driver had done away with himself, an expression that Spencer failed to understand and which his mother explained by using her hands to illustrate a bird flying off. Even so, he suspected that he was being misled. Now the newscasters were full of questions as to whether it had been mothball- or golf-ball-size hail. A widow up at Ten Mile went on TV with a hailstone the size of a grapefruit, but subsequent investigation revealed it to be something from her freezer.”

McGuane’s *Crow Fair: Stories* was out in March.

Tim Parks, “Vespa,” *New Yorker*, October 5, 2015, 64.

Mark, a British art student, loses his Vespa by way of the motor’s theft, and spends a frustrating period attempting to recalibrate the equilibrium of his life. ¶ In some ways this story is a timeless one. Young lad, Mark, forms a relationship with Brazilian immigrant girl, Yasmin, whom he trusts completely—even after his parents and the police point out what may be her obvious faults, one of which may be a lack of trustworthiness. One really can’t tell, which makes the story intriguing. Mark seems like the kind of person who can detect things quite clearly, like the obese artist’s model whom he must draw week after week, every flabby curve. And at the same time Mark appears to have a blind faith in Yasmin’s fidelity, even after one senses she may know a bit too much about a stolen and then reappearing Vespa motor. ¶ The story ends with a rather charming ultimatum Mark offers without ever saying a word to Yasmin. *Either jump on the back of my Vespa and join me in my life, or stay with your friends who are just a bit too comfortable with missing Vespa parts.* Tim Parks’s *Where I’m Reading From: The Changing World of Books* was published earlier this year.

Rivka Galchen, “Usl at the Stadium,” *New Yorker*, October 12, 2015, 86.

Twenty-eight-year-old Usl, a man who evaluates used gold for a living, is caught sleeping by the Jumbotron camera at a Yankees game, and becomes the focus of widespread Internet harassment. ¶ In this compact story author Galchen captures the essence of fame, the bad kind, for what can be worse, it seems, than nodding off at a Yankees game. Her prose is airtight, waterproof, solid, not a word or thought out of place. You trust it. You’re in it from start to finish, from the point that Usl’s ever-loving mother defends him publicly to where his boss Gregory poses this philosophical nugget: **“The question isn’t, Why is there evil? The question is, Why is there good . . . Why is there spring and love and barbecue? Why is there ever an unrequired kind act?”** (91). Galchen sets up her metaphoric imagery without beating the reader over the head, giving Usl the ability to recognize real gold from the fake and eventually the ability to recognize real friends, real people, from the fake. His mother texts him, via automated delivery, as *automated* as her love: **“Gold is unaffected by oxygen at any temperature”** (89). Because her son is golden, she’s saying, he will survive this onslaught, will, in fact, rise from a certain fire to be stronger than ever. Rivka Galchen is the author of *American Innovations*, a collection of stories released in 2014.

Ben Marcus, “Cold Little Bird,” *New Yorker*, October 19, 2015, 68.

Ten-year-old Jonah abruptly indicates to his parents, Martin and Rachel, that he no longer loves them, no longer needs or desires their love and attention. ¶ What is more, this very intelligent boy twists the dagger once he's inflicted the initial pain. He becomes more like an adult, helping out with this younger brother, to the degree, however, that he begins to indoctrinate the six-year-old, is able to tame the boy's tantrum at the dinner table. Jonah is so skilled in his calculations that he blackmails his father into not hugging him, by threatening to report him to the school officials for touching him inappropriately. The narrative blows wide open when Martin finds Jonah reading a book blaming 9-1-1 on the Jews. Because the family is nominally Jewish, and because Jonah's sympathies seem to lie with the lunatic author of the book, the boy's parents decide it's time to seek a therapist. The boy's cold, calculating ways are not resolved in this chilling but perceptive story except perhaps by way of the last sentence, which, in a sense, gives the reader a clue:

**“On the cover a boy, arms outspread, was gripping wires in each hand, and his whole body was glowing.”**

The author edited *New American Stories*, an anthology that came out in July.

Lesley Nneka Arimah, “Who Will Greet You at Home,” *New Yorker*, October 26, 2015, 64.

Ogechi, a young Nigerian woman, makes dolls of various materials until she can construct one that will live of its own accord. ¶ This delightful myth—one almost spun off another embedded within the story—expresses what women must experience during actual motherhood:

“There was an old tale about hair children. Long ago, girls would collect their sheddings [of hair] every day until they had a bundle large enough to spin a child” (67).

As in all myths, this one reflects certain values or morals to be passed down to others—in this case, perhaps the trials that mothers experience bringing their children to life and seeing that they are made of the right fiber to live a long and productive life. All of the *babies* in this narrative are, indeed, strung together like dolls. As in life, only the undying devotion of their mothers can fully bring them to life. This young author recently has published the story “Light” in *Granta* and is currently working on a collection, as well as a novel.

Ariel Dorfman, “The Gospel According to García,” *New Yorker*, November 2, 2015, 76.

A nameless substitute teacher enters a classroom of twelve pupils, whose teacher, García, has been relieved of his position. ¶ The author employs an effective but limiting first person plural, by which readers only know what the class tells them, namely that García is a charismatic teacher, who has left them a “gospel” of behavior, whose precepts alone will help them to survive their futures. For example, he tells them, **“Never speak . . . You cannot capture anyone until you have heard his voice.”** And there are others: *ferret out the weakest link; never apologize if you haven't done anything wrong*. As a result readers learn

all about the absent character García by way of his previous actions and words in this classroom of students who are on the verge of graduating—if only the sub will evaluate the half of twelve exams remaining ungraded, a task he seems to find more intimidating than even the silence which enshrouds the classroom, the precept García’s students seem to have most readily accepted. The exam question? *Why is indifference worse than murder?* This story begins in the past tense but evolves to the present as if the class might still be seated in that classroom, even to the last sentence. **“We remain absolutely silent and wait.”** Dorfman’s most recent book, *Feeding on Dreams: Confessions of an Unrepentant Exile*, came out in 2011.

Julianne Pachico, “Honey Bunny,” *New Yorker*, November 9, 2015, 66.

A young Columbian-American woman in New York lives off her trust fund by investing in little baggies of a substance that alters her reality. ¶ Good fiction often takes readers to places they would like to visit vicariously—*rather see than be one*—and this story about someone addicted to cocaine is no exception. I, for example, would not want to go where this young woman travels—into a subterranean world of unlikely perceptions. I don’t like feeling what she must feel, as if she’s inside a Laundromat’s drier, tumbling here, tumbling there until the damn thing stops because she’s run out of coins to feed it. I don’t like having lost most of my native tongue yet not being in total control of my new one. The world of assignments in Volvos to buy more stuff, in which the driver is your lover’s wife, is all too crazy for most of us to enter into, but through well wrought fiction I can go there, and then like commuting via the A Train, I can get off conveniently when I’m finished gawking. Pachico’s collection, *The Tourists*, came out in 2014.

Mark Haddon, “The Weir,” *New Yorker*, November 16, 2015, 72.

Fifty-three-year-old Ian spots a figure on the weir (British for “dam,” I discover), and when she goes over into a rushing river, he dives in to rescue her. ¶ Haddon prepares the reader for what is to come: that buttercups contain the same chemicals as semen and corpses; that a day is warm *and* cold at the same time; that an invisible boundary exists between town and country, at very nearly the spot where Ian saves Kelly, a twenty-four-year-old woman who has mental difficulties. In spite of her initial anger over Ian’s having saved her life—he nearly loses his own—they continue to meet in tea shops and cafés to exchange information: he about his failed life, and she about the voices that cause discomfort when they’re not present. ¶ Ian finally puts in a garden in the back of his house: **“I’m sick of looking out onto a piece of wasteland” (79)**. The story ends philosophically, echoing all the imagery Haddon has introduced earlier, swirling together toward a deep drain in that river:

“He still dreams of the river, the thunder of the weir, the currents unfurling downstream. May blossom and cirrus clouds. He is no longer drowning. No one is drowning. Though they will all go down into the dark eventually. Him, Maria, Kelly, Timothy. . . . And the last few minutes may be horrible, but that’s O.K., it really is, because nothing is lost and the river will keep on flowing and there will be dandelions in spring and the buzzard will circle above the wasteland” (79).

Haddon's most recent work, published in 2015, is *The Red House*.

Ann Beattie, "Save a Horse Ride a Cowgirl," *New Yorker*, November 23, 2015, 94.

Bradley, a widower presumably in his sixties, sells his old house in Maine and purchases one from which he can still view, across an expanse of water, his old one. ¶ This point of view may provide a literary device by which Bradley can examine his former life: a childless union with a woman he has loved but to whom he may not have been all that close; the damaging period in Vietnam; a fuck-up of a brother, who continues to fuck up by wrecking Bradley's old pick-up; Bradley's career as a lawyer; his unproductive therapy with a Dr. McCall. Only people over sixty may get the film reference, the fact that a minor character is named Bree, same as the prostitute from the 1971 film, *Klute*. This narrative, 7,000 words, seems to wander aimlessly, forcing the reader to learn the names of characters who turn out to mean little to Bradley's story, perhaps the author's intent—all of them filtered through a title based on a bumper sticker that itself may or may not successfully portray Bradley's real attitude toward his late wife. The author's collection, *The State We're In: Maine Stories*, came out in September.

Rachel Kushner, "Fifty-Seven," *New Yorker*, November 30, 2015, 66.

A homeless man with a certain strength remaining, who is released from the Los Angeles county jail, kills a young woman, and later, because he murders a prison official, is transferred to Pelican Bay State Prison. ¶ This story explores the life of a criminal, from the time, as a child, he loses his father and mother and an aunt, to when he flees the California school system and carves out a life on the streets, to the irony of his final trial when, in the course of the proceedings, his attorney determines that because of a clerical error the prisoner's original I.Q. of 57 receives a "1" in front of it. If he is deemed *smart* he would receive death, but because he can't possibly know what he is doing, he is given life—such as it is—in a maximum security prison. In a narrative filled with compelling imagery, perhaps the spit hood, made of a black mesh you can see out of but through which no one can see in, is a persuasive metaphor for this nameless wretch of a man's life and the millions of others held by our nation's prisons. Kushner's most recent book, *The Flamethrowers*, came out in 2014.

Martin Amis, "Oktober," *New Yorker*, December 7, 2015, 64.

The narrator, a character much like his own author, ends a reading tour in Munich, in October 2015, as Syrian refugees pour into Europe and are officially welcomed by the Germans. ¶ Sometimes there exists a serendipitous coincidence with regard to one's reading. Earlier this week I posted a profile of Christopher Isherwood's 1935 *The Berlin Stories*, in which he, too, creates a character much like himself, who must see how a city can be shaped by millions of refugees, at that time, Russians. In this narrative, Amis braids together several strands: another Englishman who speaks rather rudely on his cell phone (turns out to be the man's mother, who has lost her house in a fire); a hotel lobby pianist providing sort of a soundtrack by way of Liszt's "Hungarian Rhapsody"; different generations of refugees fleeing oppression to find freedom, including Vladimir Nabokov, who flees Russia, Germany, and France in the 1930s. Of the Syrian wave the narrator notes: **"Theirs was a journey with charts and graphs and updates**

(those cell phones) but with no destination" (67).

And why do the Germans feel compelled at this time to give safe harbor to the Syrians (an answer I've yet to see America media explore, if in actual fact they know)?

**"In the period from 1945 to '47, there were ten million homeless supplicants on the periphery of what was once the Reich, all of them deported (in spasms of greater or lesser violence, with at least half a million deaths en route) from Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Romania. And they were all Germans" (67).**

Amazing. In this very Isherwoodian story, the narrator's Iranian-German friend asserts: **"Bernhardt said, 'You know, they won't stop coming. They pay large sums of money to risk their lives crossing the sea and then they walk across Europe. They *walk* across Europe. A few policemen and a stretch of barbed wire can't keep them out. And there are millions more where they came from. This is going to go on for years. And they won't stop coming'" (65).**

In the end, the narrator, like Amis, with more ease than one would think possible, returns to his home in Brooklyn, New York, where he has lived less than a decade, as an *immigrant*. This story may tell us more about so-called immigrants than we've heard from so-called experts, and the author has written, polished, and published it in a major magazine less than two months after observing it! Kudos to Amis on all counts. His most recent book, *Money: A Suicide Note*, came out in 2010.

Dana Spiotta, "Jelly and Jack," *New Yorker*, December 14, 2015, 70.

In 1985 Syracuse, forty-one-year-old Jelly calls important, creative men by phone and induces them to fall in love with her. ¶ This narrative takes place in a time when people may have *enjoyed* speaking on the phone . . . enjoyed rampant paid phone sex, which is where one thinks this story is beginning. Yet it is one of those rare ones that seems to s-t-r-e-t-c-h time, unrolling second by delicious second:

**"And it worked like this: you found the words—out of a million possible words—that truly described the experience. That part, the search for the right language, was fun, almost like solving a puzzle. You thought of the word, and then you felt it in your mouth, pushed breath into it, and said it out loud. The sound of it contained the meaning—she had to hear the words to know if she had it right. Then, as it hung there, she revised it, re-attacked it, applied more words to it" (72).**

Jelly takes great pains to make herself sound seductive, younger than her years, and lures men into falling in love with her—in spite of her "jelly doughnut," stretch-mark laden body, which they never see.

**"She would not call anytime. She would call on Sunday, at the same**

**time. Only Sunday, and it would only be her calling him. Parameters. Predictability. That was the way it would work best for both of them, for this thing they were building between them" (72).**

Each time the *relationship* reaches a certain point—a man wishes to see her photograph or meet her in person—Jelly breaks it off. With Jack, a film score composer living in Los Angeles, the situation plays out differently. She seems actually to fall for him. As with previous phone partners, to extend their time a bit, she sends Jack a photograph of a young, lithe friend, a mother of one of her blind clients, whom Jelly works with in real life, having nearly lost her own sight years before.

**"It was the first time she'd understood what the phone could be—a weapon of intimacy" ( 76).**

Spiotta's book, *Innocents and Others: A Novel*, comes out in March 2016.

Tim Parks, "Bedtimes," *New Yorker*, December 21 and 28, 2015, 98.

Thomas and Mary, married with two teens, seem to avoid going to bed at the same time. ¶ The habit is indicative of a deeper rift in their lives. Mary reads many books about dogs, which she finds "fascinating" and Thomas, excessive. His "work" (laptop) appears to be more important than connecting with Mary—though Thomas does find plenty of time to share joviality with his children. Both adults have arrived at a certain intractability, which is dangerous for any marriage. The third-person omniscient point of view works well at the end as Thomas wonders if he should remain awake until his wife returns from one last "pee" for the dog, Mary cries into her pillow, and their two children wonder if they can do anything so save their parents' marriage while watching TV in a stone-cold playroom. Parks's latest book, out last May, is *Where I'm Reading From: The Changing World of Books*.