

Briggle, Adam. *A Field Philosopher's Guide to Fracking: How One Texas Town Stood Up to Big Oil and Gas*. New York: Norton, 2015.

I first heard of Briggle's book by way of C-SPAN's Book-TV. Having long been concerned about fracking, I was impressed with his oral presentation and ordered the book immediately. To his credit, he explores both sides of the issue—all throughout—the full spectrum of choices citizens have concerning the issue of fracking.

Philosopher Briggle opens with an epigraph from Goethe's *Faust*, which I cannot possibly translate, so I offer up what two different auto-translate sources seem to do with it.

**Daß ich erkenne was die Welt
Im Innersten zusammenhält**

**That I know what the world (Google Translator)
At the core holds together**

**The fact that I recognize what the world
In the most inner holds together (Reverso)**

From the start Briggle, a philosophy professor at the University of North Texas in Denton, is trying to convey what his book will be about: an ancient struggle, which continues today, between those who have little power (David) to stand up against those who seem to possess it all (Godzilla).

His narrative is part memoir, part science, part philosophy, and part sociopolitical. He sets it motion by relating how he first comes to know what fracking is. Pushing his son's swing at Denton's McKenna Park in 2009, he chats with a young mother, who matter-of-factly informs him that the area next to the park, open ranch land, is soon to have three new gas wells.

In some ways how else can a philosopher examine this situation except through the lens of his specialty? Such a lens offers a logical and sensible view, not often held by proponents of fracking.

“Fracking exemplifies the technological wager, by which I mean a gamble or even a faith that we can transform the world in the pursuit of narrowly defined goals and successfully manage the broader unintended consequences that result. In many ways, we are gambling on present innovations. I think that if we are to live with high technology we cannot avoid this wager. The question is whether we can establish conditions to make it a fair and reasonable bet. In the case of fracking, I will argue, these conditions are largely not in place” (3).

In other words, hydraulic fracturing of regions deep within the earth for the purpose of sucking out energy in the form of gas is perfectly acceptable to oil and gas companies, no matter what the cost. *Our children and their children*, state the corporations, *will have to figure out how to correct any mistakes we make, if any.*

But Briggles' book is also, as I said, part science. He walks us through the ugly steps of the fracking process. First, pieces of heavy equipment deface the land. Then millions of gallons of fresh water are mixed with toxic chemicals, forced back into the earth to shake loose the shale, and then disposed of once again by pumping it deeper into the earth once the process is complete—for now the water cannot be filtered and purified for reuse, because it has been so utterly polluted. Next, at certain times these toxic chemicals leak into the air, and if you live downwind, they can complicate, in the least, chronic breathing problems such as asthma, and at worst, after multiple exposures, cause more dire conditions. He provides proof of how the groundwater in Denton and the surrounding counties is being depleted, often with little or no remuneration to ANYONE. To the big companies the water is “free,” part of their ownership of the mineral rights to what lies below the soil which a family may have owned for generations. And I have mentioned neither the number of “earthquakes” that plague Oklahoma and North Texas nor the noise that pollutes 24/7, once the well is being constructed. Neither one of which is a minor consideration for urban life.

The sociopolitical aspect of this book may provide its most prominent strand, as Adam Briggles relates the struggle of Denton's Drilling Awareness Group (DAG)—an amalgam of Democrats, Republicans, and Libertarians—who battle Godzilla to keep their city fracking free. The years-long crusade results in a referendum which appears on the ballot in November 2014. Briggles and his associates debate the issues with the Big Boys in every possible venue. Thugs make threatening phone calls. They are sneered at or spat upon by local gentry, who believe a ban on fracking, among other things, will cause Denton's merchants to lose millions of dollars in revenue.

Close to the end of the ballot count, the numbers are 9,000 in favor of the ban on fracking and 6,000 against. When pro-bans are sure they've won the victory, there is much rejoicing on the part of those who have for many years sacrificed time, energy, and sleep. Briggles and his wife even spend the night in a hotel room, having been informed that their house might not be safe if the ban goes into effect.

In the acknowledgements, Briggles writes that immediately following the election, several oil and gas companies file lawsuits against the city of Denton. And Governor-elect Greg Abbott and his cronies have vile words for them, as well.

“I don't know how things will turn out, but I do know that I have been educated and inspired by my journey as a field philosopher in Denton” (284), Briggles concludes, er, uh, *philosophically.*

On election day, Briggie monitors one of the polling stations for twelve hours to make sure there are no shenanigans by the opposition, and he speaks with a young man who fracks wells in West Texas. He wants to know why DAG wants a ban in the first place. When Briggie explains that the companies plan to *frack within the city limits*, the young man says, **“They’re fracking in the city? That’s crazy”** (277).

From his mouth to . . . Godzilla’s ears. Adam Briggie’s book is a candid yet uplifting read! Get it. Read it. Give it to your friends. Seriously.

Carmon, Irin and Shana Knizhnik. *Notorious RBG: The Life and Times of Ruth Bader Ginsburg*. New York: Dey St., 2015.

Without the effective images, the colorful and useful marginalia, this book about Ruth Bader Ginsburg might be reduced to a much smaller size, yet making it far less attractive. The young authors have fully exploited the capabilities of modern printing by taking such aspects to their most interesting extremes. Not only that but they have produced a fact-filled yet engaging tome about a woman who may be the most fascinating and knowledgeable justice now sitting on the bench of the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS).

Each chapter title is penned in a splashy font that looks as if someone printed it with a black marker. The authors include attractive timelines demonstrating where RBG’s eighty-two-year-old life fits in. They include not only photographs of RBG but also of important letters and documents. They include an effective chart of “RBG’s Women’s Rights Cases,” that illustrates what was at stake, RBG’s role, and the result. Important annotations in the margins are inked in red!

RBG’s rise is a difficult one, but once she sets her sights on something she doesn’t stop until she’s reached her goal. In fact, such an outlook guides her entire career. For example she shocks women by stating that *Roe v. Wade* is won too early:

“If only the court had acted more slowly,’ RBG said, and cut down one state law at a time the way she had gotten them to do with the jury and benefit cases. The justices could have been persuaded to build an architecture of women’s equality that could house reproductive freedom. She said the very boldness of *Roe*, striking down all abortion bans until viability, had ‘halted a political process that was moving in a reform direction and thereby, I believe, prolonged divisiveness and deferred stable settlement of the issue.’ (85).

But RBG does not plan to ease up on the issue. “Ten years into the Roberts court, much of what RBG has fought for remains at risk, starting with reproductive freedom. The court is poised to consider restrictions on abortion clinics that affect tens of millions of women. ‘We will never see a day when women of means are not able to get a safe abortion in this country,’ RBG told me. An abortion ban, she

said, only ‘hurts women who lack the means to go someplace else.’ Public sector unions and affirmative action are already in the court’s crosshairs” (175-6).

Of legalese, or more properly, legal prose, RBG says, “‘If my opinion runs more than twenty pages,’ she said, ‘I am disturbed that I couldn’t do it shorter.’” The mantra in her chambers is ‘Get it right and keep it tight.’ She disdains legal Latin, and demands extra clarity in an opinion’s opening lines, which she hopes the public will understand. ‘If you can say it in plain English, you should,’ RBG says. Going through ‘innumerable drafts,’ the goal is to write an opinion where no sentence should need to be read twice. ‘I think that law should be a literary profession,’ RBG says, ‘and the best legal practitioners regard law as an art as well as a craft’” (121).

This Carmon/Knizhnik book is beautiful, informative, and smartly written! Buy it for your friends for birthdays, for Christmas for the next decade and beyond.

Faderman, Lillian. *The Gay Revolution: The Story of the Struggle*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015.

There are two things the world may not realize: one, that homosexuality has been in existence since the beginning of time (with variations worldwide of how homosexuals are treated throughout history and by which culture), and two, that “being gay” (more of a political declaration someone once said) is not much more than a half-century old. Lillian Faderman, noted LGBT author, addresses the latter struggle with great clarity and insight. As with much of the nonfiction I read, I first hear about this tome through C-SPAN’s forty-eight hour weekend programming, Book-TV. If your cable system doesn’t carry C-SPAN, you can access Faderman’s reading on Book-TV by clicking this link to its Web site. Her presentation is very compelling.

I’m also not sure the citizen-at-large understands how, legally, the deck has been stacked against gay people in this culture for decades if not centuries. There is a time, according to Faderman, when not even the ACLU would handle Gay Rights cases. There is a time that the mere whisper of your name in the wrong circles could cost you your job or career. She documents this assertion with notable case after case. The first real fighter for men is the Mattachine Society established in the 1950s. For lesbians it is the Daughters of Bilitis.

Faderman’s book, including copious Notes and Index, is nearly 800 pages long, but she leaves no story untold: Gay Liberation of the jubilant seventies, the AIDS crisis of the eighties and nineties. The struggle for gay men and lesbian women to serve in the military. The struggle to achieve the right to marry. The transgendered. She documents every stage of our struggle with accurate, historical detail, yet with a prose that is compelling.

A few golden nuggets concerning this valiant struggle:

“In California, there was Atascadero State Hospital, constructed in 1954 at the cost to taxpayers of over \$10 million (almost \$110 million in today’s money). Atascadero was a maximum-security psychiatric prison on the central coast where mentally disordered male lawbreakers [including homosexuals] from all over California were incarcerated. Inmates were treated at Atascadero by a variety of methods, including electroconvulsive therapy; lobotomy; sterilization, and hormone injections. Anectine was used often for ‘behavior modification.’ It was a muscle relaxant, which gave the person to whom it was administered the sensation of choking or drowning, while he received the message from the doctor that if he didn’t change his behavior he would die” (10).

“They agreed the manifesto must say that lesbians are just like other women, but more so. ‘A lesbian is the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion’ would be their opening line. They’d say that heterosexual women become feminists when they finally understand that society doesn’t allow them to be complete and free human beings—but lesbians had *always* understood that. Feminists are finally realizing that sex roles dehumanize women—but lesbians had *always* understood that; they’d *always* refused to accept the limitations and oppressions imposed by the womanly role” (233).

“To be sure, in the years after Frank Kameny’s [one of the pioneering activists] death the advance in rights hasn’t been without setback and confrontation. For instance, the continued failure of Congress to pass a no-exemption Employment Non-Discrimination Act wreaked mischief, as in the case of a much-loved fifty-seven-year-old physical education teacher at a Catholic school in a suburb of Columbus, Ohio” (631). Even as late as 2013, this long-time teacher, Carla Hale, loses her job because her sexuality is made known by way of her lover’s newspaper obituary! Private school or no, this kind of action must stop.

For anyone, old or young, struggling to understand the history of the LGBT community in this country, Faderman’s book is required reading. I found a copy at our local B & N. Go figure.

Fleming, Fergus, ed. *The Man with the Golden Typewriter: Ian Fleming’s James Bond Letters*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2015.

When Ian Fleming achieves notoriety as author of the James Bond 007 series, following the publication of *Casino Royale*, in 1953, he purchases a gold-plated typewriter. Presumably, he continues to pound out the remaining books in the series on this golden instrument. I’m not sure why I am drawn to this book except that, like most voyeurs, I enjoy reading authors’ letters, especially those written to other authors, agents, and publishers. Their words open up a world of publishing

that many of us only dream of. In large part, I am not disappointed by the letters' contents.

As the title would suggest, the letters all pertain to the famed James Bond novels. Twelve of the sixteen chapters are organized around those titles. The remaining four relate in different ways to the 007 series, not the least of which are letters exchanged with Herman W. Liebert, Yale librarian in the 1960s. Mr. Liebert is a fan but a critical one, the type of fan that Fleming seems almost obsessively drawn to, the type of fan who seems to have caught Fleming in a mistake or two and is intent on seeing that they are corrected. Fleming, rather than being put off by it, as would be many writers, rather enjoys corresponding with such critics. He drains them dry for information that, in his estimation, will make his corrections for the novel's next edition or, indeed, his next book, even better. And he composes such charming letters, how could one possibly refuse? The following passage provides a fine example:

“What I would pray you to do is to pay particular attention to the gangsterese—improving, re-writing, and even editing snatches of conversation wherever you think fit” (303).

Here Fleming cleverly enlists the aid of an unsuspecting critic, and he aims to milk the epistolary relationship for all he can. I don't believe his pursuit is mean-spirited or cynical. I only think he wants to make his novel as authentic as possible. Later in this same letter, Fleming says:

“So, as you see, I am taking your kind offer very seriously indeed and I am embarrassed to suggest what fee to offer you for this invaluable work. But if you can successfully bring about this vital piece of collaboration I propose to present you with a handsome present from Cartier as a memento.

I am coming out to New York by the Queen Elizabeth sailing on July 20th and shall be about two weeks in the States, when perhaps we might meet and I could make the presentation!” (303).

How could one *not* accept? Well, as it turns out Mr. Liebert declines payment of any kind, responding:

“Grateful as I should be, I hope you will not indulge in a present, for the pleasure and pride I have in the offer to go over the book are more than sufficient reward. The fact that I am doing this work will be graveyard so far as I am concerned” (304). He continues by offering to meet Fleming in New Haven, a proposal which Fleming must decline because of a tight travel schedule, so the two gentlemen never meet. However, the exchange of letters is a fascinating one, highlighting Fleming's generosity, as well as his pursuit of perfection in his work.

Editor Fleming has selected the best to publish, but toward the end of the author Fleming's life, (he has severe heart problems), the letters diminish by way of texture and content. Yet the overall collection is worth the time whether the reader is a James Bond fan or merely one of the art of letter writing. Judging by these that are over fifty years old, it is an art that has probably been lost. I dare anyone's most recent e-mail to stand up to the quality of these missives.

Franke, Katherine. *Wedlocked: the Perils of Marriage Equality, How African Americans and Gays Mistakenly Thought the Right to Marry Would Set Them Free*. New York: New York University Press, 2015.

Ms. Franke, Sulzbacher Professor of Law and Director for Gender and Sexuality Law at Columbia University, puts forth an interesting, almost quirky thesis for her book. She believes that same-sex couples receiving the right to marry is similar to laws that *compelled* African-American men and women who had been co-habiting prior to the end of the Civil War, to marry following its end. And she asserts some compelling arguments or at least some ideas to ponder.

In her introduction, Franke writes: **“State licensing means your relationship is now governed by law, and that you have to play by law’s rules. An affair or a breakup now has legal in addition to emotional consequences. Put most bluntly, when you marry, the state acquires a legal interest in your relationship. Cloaking freedom in state regulation—as the freedom to marry surely does—is a curious freedom indeed, for this freedom comes with its own strict rules”** (9).

The author points up a number of problems with marriage equality, one of which is the following: **“Given that sexual orientation-based discrimination is legal in twenty-nine states, many Americans in same-sex relationships find themselves in the situation where they have a right to marry but exercising that right could result in losing their job once their employer learns of their marriage”** (59).

“Lawyers who advise non-traditional families on their legal rights have noted that once states started to allow same-sex couples to marry, the rights of couples in non-marital families began evaporating. Whether it be relationship contracts between unmarried partners, de facto parental rights, or rights that might accrue between two partners as a matter of common law, little by little courts are saying: you could have married, and since you didn’t we won’t recognize you as having, or being able to create, any kind of alternative family relationship between or among you that is legally enforceable. The right to marry, thus, extinguishes a right to be anything else to one another” (98).

Franke later reasserts what she claims in her introduction, which is worth repeating, for it seems to reinforce her thesis: **“Getting married means that your**

relationship is no longer a private affair since a marriage license converts it into a contract with three parties: two spouses and the state. Once you're in it you have to get the permission of a judge to let you out. And what you learn when you seek judicial permission to end a marriage is that it's a lot easier to get married than it is to get divorced" (121).

As Franke begins to conclude her arguments, she often shifts to speculative language. "Of course we can't know for sure, as the court documents tell us far too little. But I have a couple of guesses about why these unwed mothers went to court and filed form papers announcing the fathers of their children" (174). "Another possible explanation for the frequent filing of bastardy petitions was the mothers were initiating these cases not for a local legal audience, but for one up north" (176). "It's not hard to imagine unmarried mothers' turn to 'bastardy petitions' as a way of healing the deprivation of kinship that all enslaved people suffered" (177). "The police had been summoned by another of Garner's lovers who was jealous and had reported to the police that 'a black man was going crazy' in Lawrence's apartment 'and he was armed with a gun' (a racial epithet rather than 'black man' was, in fact, probably used)" (181). Well, which is it: "probably" or "in fact"? The latter example, in particular, seems inauthentic if the author cannot, *in fact*, locate a proper citation to prove her assertions.

Near the end of her book, Franke sets up an important and stimulating question: "One might also provocatively ask whether marriage is better suited for straight people. By posing this question I don't mean to align myself with those, such as the conservative National Organization for Marriage, who feel that only straight people should be allowed to marry, but rather to ask whether the legal rules and social norms that make up civil marriage have heterosexual couples in mind. Put another way, is there something essentially heterosexual about the institution of marriage? Are marriage's rules and norms well suited to govern the lives and interests of same-sex couples?" (209). Yes or No? Her question would make for an interesting debate!

"One lesson we can draw from the early experience of same-sex couples with the right to marry is that marriage may not be for all of us. While we might all support the repeals of an exclusion from marriage as a matter of basic constitutional fairness, we need not all jump into marriage to demonstrate our new rights-bearing identity. If this book has any overarching message it is that we ought to slow down, take a breath, and evaluate whether marriage is 'for us'" (225).

In an appendix, Franke issues "A Progressive Call to Actions for Married Queers." I won't list them here, but the eight points do seem to summarize what her book is about: making sure that that marriage laws help rather than hinder same-sex

couples as they seek equality in this arena. The fact that her book comes out shortly before SCOTUS makes its historic declaration does not diminish the importance of the issues she raises. Hers is an important book.

Highsmith, Patricia. *The Price of Salt*. Mineola NY: Dover, 2015.

How many times have I read a book because first I saw the film (and yet how many times have I not)! The most recent example, *Carol*, starring Cate Blanchett in the titular role, inspired me to read the novel. I've read Highsmith's work before: *The Talented Mr. Ripley* and *Ripley Underground*. I'm not sure, in spite of the awards won, that she's ever been truly honored as a writer. *The Price of Salt* is not "just" a woman's book or a "lesbian romance," as some critics have suggested. The novel, originally published in 1952, portrays the story of two women who travel from New York to the West, and it heightens the ideal of love rather than diminishes it. Through its specificity of love between two women of a certain time period of a certain geography (ranging over two-thirds of the US), the novel creates a universality that is appealing across a vast number of readers.

Depending on whom you read or side with, Highsmith's title bears a biblical reference. It may either refer to Lot's wife or Matthew 5:13. I prefer to think it is the latter: **"You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored. It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trodden under foot by men."** Could it be that Highsmith chooses to be quite specific, referring to Carol's nefarious husband perhaps, when she suggests that a relationship without love might as well be stomped on by men? In chapter twenty-two Highsmith makes perhaps the most transparent reference to this idea of *salt*: **"In the middle of the block, she opened the door of a coffee shop, but they were playing one of the songs she had heard with Carol everywhere, and she let the door close and walked on. The music lived, but the world was dead. And the song would die one day, she thought, but how would the world come back to life? How would its salt come back?" (225).** Therese now believes that everything with Carol is over, but a small part of her also believes that the salt, the flavor, of their relationship shall in some way be restored. And she is right. The final paragraph, though it may be "romantic," is certainly not sentimental (see below).

Some nuggets:

Therese senses a certain role she's been playing with regard to Carol and their magical trip westward. **"But at moments she felt like an actor, remembered only now and then her identity with a sense of surprise, as if she had been playing in these last days the part of someone else, someone fabulously and excessively lucky" (174).**

"Therese squeezed the wheel, then deliberately relaxed. She sensed a tremendous sorrow hanging over them, ahead of them, that was just beginning to reveal the edge of itself, that they were driving into. She remembered the detective's face and the barely legible expression

that she realized now was malice. It was malice she had seen in his smile, even as he said he was on no side, and she could feel in him a desire that was actually personal to separate them, because he knew they were together. She had seen just now what she had only sensed before, that the whole world was ready to be their enemy, and suddenly what she and Carol had together seemed no longer love or anything happy but a monster between them, with each of them caught in a fist” (199).

“But the most important point I did not mention and was not thought of by anyone—that the rapport between two men or two women can be absolute and perfect, as it can never be between man and woman, and perhaps some people want just this, as others want that more shifting and uncertain thing that happens between men and women” (221).

And here is the final paragraph I mentioned before: “She stood in the doorway, looking over the people at the tables in the room where a piano played. The lights were not bright, and she did not see her at first, half hidden in the shadow against the far wall, facing her. Nor did Carol see her. A man sat opposite here, Therese did not know who. Carol raised her hand slowly and brushed her hair back, once on either side, and Therese smiled because the gesture was Carol, and it was Carol she loved and would always love. Oh, in a different way now, because she was a different person, and it was like meeting Carol all over again, but it was still Carol and no one else. It would be Carol, in a thousand cities, a thousand houses, in foreign lands where they would go together, in heaven and in hell. Therese waited. Then as she was about to go to her, Carol saw here, seemed to stare at her incredulously a moment while Therese watched the slow smile growing, before her arm lifted suddenly, her hand waved a quick, eager greeting that Therese had never see before. Therese walked toward her” (248-9).

Hodgman, George. *Bettyville: A Memoir*. New York: Penguin, 2015.

Even if you don't read this book (but I suspect you will) you must watch Hodgman's reading on C-SPAN's Book-TV. <<http://www.c-span.org/search/?searchtype=All&query=george+hodgman>>. His wit is a razor-sharp knife crusted with the salt of a Bloody Mary. It cuts both ways—going in and coming out—and you either laugh or cry or both as the joke pops up in front of you like a sudden obstruction in the road. In this particular reading he shares the stage with another gay man of the same age, writing a memoir about a dying parent whom he is called upon to care for. (I have Bob Morris's *Bobby Wonderful* on my shelf ready to start at any moment).

I love, love, love how Hodgman drifts in a fairly chronological line from beginning to end, yet, like an amoeba, darting or sometimes gliding, into the past to fill us in on a bit of information we must have about the past: his years as a student at the

University of Missouri's noted school of journalism; years that he works for *Vanity Fair*; years that he slaves as an editor for a large publishing company (who lets him go under the guise of "restructuring"). Back and forth we drift with him as he cares for his elderly mother now beset with many problems. Back and forth we drift, as he divulges only enough information to keep us returning for more, with him as he becomes addicted to drugs (particularly speed). Back and forth we drift with him between caring for Betty in Bettyville, a little town of her own making, as he spends summers on Fire Island at the height of the AIDS crisis. You keep waiting for the other shoe to drop, that we will have to live through Betty's funeral after she dies of cancer, but no. Hodgman's book isn't about Betty's death; it is about her life. And his. And how the two have come together in not always such a beautiful manner as mother and son. If you have been through, are going through, or will ever go through caring for a parent, this book is one that just may help you to cope.

A few nuggets from the book:

"My counselor in New York, Paul Giorgianni, asked about my family, my life, my feelings, sex life, vices. When he asked if I used drugs, I said only when they were available. He asked if they were a problem. I said not for me. He said I should not use them as an avoidance. Why else I would [sic] use them?

'You don't have to entertain me,' he said.

'Then what are you paying me for?'

'You are hiding from your feelings.'

'Can you teach me how to hide a little better?'

'Why did you come here?'

'Lobby art.'

'Why did you come here?'

'Because I can't get a job.' I explained that I could not get through an interview and that I kept making a fool of myself on dates. 'I lose myself,' I told him. 'I go away. I can't be there when I need to be. I go away'" (167).

"Back in my office, I reviewed the form calling for everything but organ harvest and the renunciation of God and country. It was lengthy. I got a little emotional. I felt like Jane Fonda in *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* When I tried to call my authors to tell them what had happened, I froze. Within moments, the publisher was back at my door.

'Have you signed the form yet?'

I didn't respond. My head was full of voices; I went outside to try to get it together. As I passed the publisher's office, the question came again.

'Have you signed the form yet?'

I stayed in bed for days, listening to the voices fling curses. I hadn't worked hard enough. I hadn't gotten it right. Work was all. I am nothing, nothing without work. No one is. Not without work.

Harry worked hard. Bill worked hard; Mammy worked hard; Betty worked hard. Shut up’” (234).

“Sometimes a few decades of Final Net are all an honest woman can count on in this life” (238).

“It was October in Pennsylvania and on the first morning the ground was frosted. As I walked to breakfast, some guy yelled out, ‘Thirteen inches in the Poconos.’

‘Is that I porn film?’ I asked” (238).

“It is interesting, gratifying even, to watch this almost human let down his guard, warm up, grow less frightened. I have watched him transform from a pup reluctant to leave his mat or crate to a daring household forager who considers it his God-given right to poop copiously in the middle of the living room. ‘Get some OdoBan,’ a neighbor advises when I share our housebreaking problems.

‘How much,’ I ask, ‘do I take?’” (273).

Isherwood, Christopher and W. H. Auden. *The Ascent of F6: a Tragedy in Two Acts*. London: Faber, (1936) 1957.

After having taken in so much of Isherwood’s material, I feel strange reading a collaboration between him and Auden. Whose idea belongs to whom? Where do the words of one author pick up and words of another leave off? The allegory seeming somewhat dated, would anyone produce it today?

The main character, Michael Ransom, succumbs to his mother’s persuasion and his brother James’s support, and leads an expedition up F6, a mountain peak on the border between Britain and a fictitious nation of Ostnia. A number of his men die on the trip, and he himself perishes at the end. In interspersed scenes, a sort of Greek chorus, a Mr. A and Mrs. A, comments in verse on his expedition and contrast it with their mundane lives. If I have to guess, I would suggest that Isherwood models Mrs. Ransom after his mother (a domineering woman, we learn from his *Diaries*), and Auden is responsible for the rhymed lines the chorus recites. Benjamin Britten, friend of both men, writes music for the play.

Some interesting passages:

“James [Ransom]: Merely that the mountain is said to be haunted by a guardian demon. For this reason, no native will set foot upon it. As you will notice, it stands exactly on the frontier line. Both Ostnia and ourselves claim it; but, up to the present, no European has ever visited the district at all . . . [t]he natives have begun telling each other that the white man who first reaches the summit of F6, will be lord over *both* the Sudolands, with his descendants, for a thousand years” (25-6).

“Announcer: There are many legends about this mountain and the troll who lives on the summit and devours all human beings who dare approach it. No Europeans have, so far, ventured into this region, which is barren to a degree and inhabited only by monks who resent foreigners” (31).

“Mr. A and Mrs. A.: Why were we born?”

James [Ransom]: That’s a very interesting question, and I’m not sure I can answer it myself. But I know what my brother, the climber, thinks. When we take, he said to me once, the life of the individual, with its tiny circumscribed area in space and time, and measure it against the geological epochs, the gigantic movements of history and the immensity of the universe, we are forced, I think, to the conclusion that, taking the large view, the life of the individual has no real existence or importance apart from the great whole: that he is here indeed but to serve for his brief moment his community, his race, his planet, his universe; and then, passing on the torch of life undiminished to others, his little task accomplished, to die and be forgotten” (115).

Isherwood, Christopher. *The Condor and the Cows*. New York: Random, 1948.

Writers don’t do this much anymore: take long journeys to foreign countries like those found in South America and pen a single book about it, but that’s what Isherwood does in *The Condor and the Cows*. He writes about his trip taken with lover-at-the-time and photographer, William Caskey, one that spans six months in 1947-48.

“The meaning of the title should be evident, but perhaps I had better explain that the Condor is the emblem of the Andes and their mountain republics, while the Cows represent the great cattle-bearing plains, and, more specifically, Argentina—no offense intended” (3).

It is an interesting concept, recording all your impressions from a trip: your conveyances, whether they be ships by which you travel five days from one continent to another, or whether they be the relatively new airplane, which can soar above mountains and shorten days-long trips to a few hours. You record the food you eat. The pillows upon which you lay your head. Trains traveling through a dust storm on the Argentine plain, yielding a gritty experience from one end of your sleeping car to the other. Chauffeurs driving ninety miles per hour across that plain because the road is smooth and there is relatively little traffic and because the matron in charge shows no reason to be concerned.

North American schools seem to teach little about geography anymore, the different types of maps that one can study in advance of a trip, during, and after: climate maps, economic, physical, political, road, or topographical maps. Isherwood’s partner provides the frontispiece map for *The Condor and the Cows*:

an inkling of their half-year journey beginning in Curaçao, to Cartagena, to Medellín, to Bogotá, to Quito and Guayaquil, to Trujillo and Lima, to Machu Picchu and Cuzco, to Lake Titicaca, to Arequipa, and finally Buenos Aires (not on the map). Isherwood details every morsel of food they eat, every visit they make with friends who live in various cities, the new friends he and Caskey make along the way, every drop of liquor, details of minor illnesses borne on such a long expedition, clothing natives wear, commentary on local and national and continental politics. Little is out of his focus, and he and the publisher include twenty-four pages of Caskey's photographs. I admire the author's due diligence in writing down enough of the bones of his trip to amount to 217 pages of interesting, sometimes titillating, reading that, year by year, may become more so because it also has become a bit of history.

A few nuggets derived from Isherwood and Caskey's voyage:

"We stopped at El Banco just after dark . . . [o]n the narrow gangplank the two streams of human beings collided, surged and mingled; a yelling mob of white-cotton clothes and dark bodies—yellow, red, velvet black and plum purple, with an occasional, strangely arresting blond head. Above the confusion the ship's band played its lively clattering music, and through the open doors of the church on the hill there was a glimpse of a priest at the altar, a remote quiet candle-lit figure, saying vespers" (34-5). A lovely description despite Isherwood's slightly racist point of view.

We witness that POV here again as he describes Guambian Indians: **"The men have short glossy black hair, shocked up into an untidy tuft, and lively impudent black eyes. Some look strikingly Mongolian. Their mouths are a bit apelike. They smile readily and don't in the least mind if you examine their ornaments or their clothes" (67).**

Isherwood's descriptions are not as insulting as perhaps his patronizing and paternalistic tone. Perhaps we can forgive him if, for no other reason, we remember he is a product of the imperialistic British Empire, born in 1904.

When caught in a certain badlands between Ecuador and Columbia, a town called Pasto, the author remarks: **"We were put down at the Hotel Granada, a shabby wooden building with inside balconies around a central dining room. The bedrooms are like stables. Windowless, with great barn-doors closed by padlocks. The combined shower and toilet—the only one on the ground floor—is unfit for pigs. While we were eating a tepid greasy supper, in strolled the mail-car driver with his girl. On seeing us, he smiled without surprise but didn't offer a word of explanation or excuse [earlier they've had an altercation]. We neither washed nor shaved, brushed our teeth in bottled mineral water, and went sadly and shiveringly to bed at eight-thirty" (75).**

Here the author compensates for his grumpy-tourist temperament with the following account:

“And at this very moment, like a miracle, the rail-bus appeared. We waved our arms frantically, hardly daring to hope that it would stop. It did stop. We scrambled thankfully on board.

That is the irony of travel. You spend your boyhood dreaming of a magic, impossibly distant day when you will cross the Equator, when your eyes will behold Quito. And then, in the slow prosaic process of life, that day undramatically dawns—and finds you sleepy, hungry and dull. The Equator is just another valley; you aren’t sure which and you don’t much care. Quito is just another railroad station, with fuss about baggage and taxis and tips. And the only comforting reality, amidst all this picturesque noisy strangeness, is to find a clean pension run by Czech refugees and sit down in a cozy Central European parlor to a lunch of well-cooked Wiener Schnitzel” (80).

Isherwood now echoes his title with this anecdote: “Mr. Cooper used also to keep a boa-constrictor and two condors. But the boa had to be gotten rid of; it was always trying to get at the other animals, or escaping and terrifying the neighbors. The condors flew away, which is a great pity; perched on the roof, they must have given the house the air of a Charles Addams drawing in the *New Yorker*.

“He describes how a party of his friends were riding along a narrow trail in the high mountains when they saw three condors and fired at them. The condors disappeared—to get help, apparently—for they returned a few minutes later with twenty-five others, and all of them swooped down upon the pack-train. In the confusion, two horses fell over the precipice; their riders jumped clear just in time. Condors will peck the eyes out of cows and then drive them with their wings off the edge of a cliff; the cows get killed and the condors eat them” (125).

Very subtly Isherwood tells what he believes has happened to the indigenous Indians when attacked by the Conquistadors long ago. “These people, like the Chinese peasants [referring to another trip, made in 1938 with W. H. Auden, detailed in *Journey to a War*], have an uncanny air of belonging to their landscape—of being, in the profoundest sense, its inhabitants. It would hardly surprise you to see them emerging from or disappearing into the bowels of the earth” (143).

It is not beneath Isherwood’s dignity to criticize others: “Cuzco is right on the trans-Andean tourist trail. This hotel is full of tourists. The majority are North American—middle-aged women schoolteachers, mostly. Grimly devout, complaining but undaunted, they make their way over the mountains from Lima to Buenos Aires—gasping in the high altitudes, vomiting and terrified in planes, rattled like dice in buses, dragged out of bed before dawn to race along precipice roads, poisoned with strange foods, tricked by shopkeepers, appalled by

toilets” (145). This is an interesting comment, especially in light of the fact that he seems to be echoing some of his own prissy complaints listed above.

In Buenos Aires, Isherwood makes arrangements to stay with an acquaintance from his Berlin days of the 1930s: Berthold. The author tells a long story, which I will not cite in full, in which Berthold tells of visiting New York City and running into someone he had known previously, someone whom he'd buried in Africa, thinking the man was dead! What a second-hand tale this makes. (186-8).

“Argentina, like the United States, has practically liquidated its Indian problem. And much the same manner” (193). In the same breath that he is criticizing the US for wholesale liquidation, Isherwood is betraying his own racist bent with the words “Indian problem,” as if the subjects are unwanted vermin that must be disposed of. It is perhaps a warning to all of us in this era: our words of judgment could, in future years, wind up similarly betraying us.

Nonetheless, even sixty-eight years after its publication, Isherwood's prose seems fresh, if only because he is able to write down crisp first impressions of lands he has wanted to visit since he was a child, and yet temper his prose with the studied hand of a professional author.

Isherwood, Christopher with a preface by Christopher Hitchens. *Diaries Volume Two: 1960-1969 The Sixties*. London: Chatto, 2010.

As I said with regard to the letters exchanged between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell in their *Words in Air*; a writer's diaries, likewise, allow the reader to be a voyeur in a manner that is socially acceptable. I probably enjoyed this volume even more than Isherwood's first one because here he's writing between his mid-fifties and mid-sixties. His writing ethic is almost as good as it is in his earlier tome, but because of certain physical ailments (real and imagined, he admits), he gets sidetracked. And also he loses entire days to the previous evening's drunkenness: he simply doesn't feel like writing with a hangover. He really doesn't like to socialize as much as he has in the past, and yet he must because he also writes for the film industry and must hobnob with those people. Ah, the pain.

He has formed a loving relationship, though stormy at times, with a man thirty years his junior, artist Don Bachardy. He must, at times, also be a patient father figure, and willing brother, bold example to Don. When Bachardy is out of town, Isherwood mourns their loss of time together. He often doesn't work or doesn't get as much done. He must draw on this mournful situation when he pens *A Single Man*, to understand the pathos of a man who has lost his lover to death. And yet Isherwood also forms lifelong friendships with a wide range of people in the arts and religion: Igor and Vera Stravinsky, Aldous and Laura Huxley, Gore Vidal, Truman Capote, Tennessee Williams, as well as many writers, directors, and producers in the theatre and cinema. These are people who nourish his artistic and personal life.

As I did with *Volume One*, I'm now reading the works of fiction and nonfiction that he composes during this decade: *A Single Man*, *Down There on a Visit*, *A Meeting by the River*, and others. My third reading of *A Single Man* will now be different, colored by knowing the agony of how he approaches it, how he weathers the mixed critical reviews he receives for what he thinks is his very best book. Below I've listed a variety of citations typical of his journal writing. Now onto the 1970s and 1980s!

Nuggets:

"[Don] seems to be having constant attacks of my age-old complaint, spasm of the vagus nerve—at least I *hope* that's all it is" (24). [health]

"On the 29th, I finished revising 'Waldemar' and sent it off right away to Edward [Upward]. It isn't perfectly all right yet, but it's as good as I can get it until I have the whole book and can go through it relating all the parts to each other" (30). [writing]

"Well, I can't help that. It [*Down There on a Visit*] certainly has its faults. Parts of it—particularly 'Paul'—are still sloppily written and I must tighten them up before they go to press. But I feel confident that the whole thing does add up to something, and that it has an authenticity of direct experience and is altogether superior to the slickness and know-how and inner falsity of *World in the Evening*. If people don't like it, I am sincerely sorry; but already I feel in my bones that I shall never repudiate it or have to apologize for it. So we'll see" (66). [writing]

"Then Chester Kallman will be coming and we finally approach the talks about the Berlin musical [*Cabaret*]. I have a feeling these will end badly. Especially as I don't really like Chester, and as I feel the terms they are proposing are not fair to me: they want us to split three ways, while I feel that I should have something extra as the original author" (72). [writing]

"A story told me by Michael Barrie: Jesus and the Blessed Virgin go out to play golf. The Blessed Virgin is at the top of her form, drives and lands on the green. Jesus slices and lands in the bushes. A squirrel picks up the ball and runs off with it. A dog grab the squirrel, which still holds the ball in its mouth. An eagle swoops down, picks up the dog, squirrel and ball, and soars into the air. Out of a clear sky, lightning strikes the eagle, which drops the dog which drops the squirrel which drops the ball, right into the hole. The Blessed Virgin throws down her driver and exclaims indignantly, 'Look, are you going to play golf or just fuck around?'" (130). [joke]

". . . and a description of how the 'reassuring' type of writer takes you by the hand and leads you step by step from a familiar into an

unfamiliar situation. (Cf. Hemingway, leading you into a game hunt or a battle; and, if he's in a place you don't know, he tries to persuade you that you *do* know it—'You know how it there early in the morning in Havana, etc.')" (181). [writing]

"Sure, I am prejudiced, but I feel always more strongly how ignoble marriage usually is. How it drags down and shackles and degrades a young man like Henri, who is really sweet and bright and full of quiet but powerful passion. The squalid little shop, the little business premises, you have to open, and the deadly social pattern which is then imposed on you—of dragging some dowdy little frump of a woman all around with you, wherever you go, for the next forty years. Not to mention the kids. It is a miserable compromise for the man, and he is apt to punish the woman for having blackmailed him into it" (188). [marriage]

Have just finished *Mrs. Dalloway*. It is a marvellous book[.] Woolf's use of the reverie is quite different from Joyce's stream of consciousness. Beside her, Joyce seems tricky and vulgar and cheap, as she herself thought. Woolf's kind of reverie is less 'realistic' but far more convincing and moving. It can convey tremendous and varied emotion. Joyce's emotional range is very small" (219). [literature]

"Yesterday I reread my novel, the fifty-six pages I've written so far. I am discouraged; very little seems to be emerging. Maybe I really have to sit down and plot a bit before I go on. I do not have a plot and I don't even know what I want to write a novel about No, that's not quite true. I want to write about middle age, and being an alien. And about the Young. And about this woman. The trouble is, I really cannot write entirely by ear; I must do some thinking" (221). [preliminary discussion of his writing of *A Single Man*, which originally featured a woman]

"Since it was no good my sitting with Charles, I had time on my hands and so I drove up to the Griffith Park Observatory to watch the sun set. Astonishing, how empty and wild the hills still seem. As I stood there I felt, as I have felt so often, why don't I spend more time in *awareness*, instead of stewing in this daze? How precious these last years ought to be to me, and how I ought to spend them alone—alone inside myself, no matter who is around" (238). [philosophy]

"The Stravinskys came to supper on Monday evening, along with the Huxleys. Bob Craft told us that Igor and Vera were quite transformed while in Russia. They were so happy to be speaking the language in which they were really fluent. All their pride in Russia emerged—especially, of course, Igor's. Igor, like Picasso, is still

really a tolerated exception in the arts; the authorities still don't approve of what either of them stands for. Igor was chiefly pursued by young people, to whom he is an avant-garde champion. But more of all this, I hope, tomorrow night, when we have supper with them, at their house" (250) [friendship]

"David Roth has a friend who, when he was being examined by the psychologist at the draft board, was asked, 'Could you kill a man?' and answered, 'Yes, but it would take years'" (389). [humorous anecdote]

"Don and I parted discreetly at the car door. As for Gigi, I politely kissed her goodbye on the cheek. Danny took out ten dollars' worth of life insurance (which pays off three hundred thousand, I think he said). Danny spread his between his children and Gigi, I guess. So I took out the same amount in favor of Don—just to show Danny that we animals are very bit as valuable as humans" (411). [relationship with Don]

"Well, the *Cabaret* film is on. We stand to win at least ten thousand dollars, for a treatment; then, if that's accept, ninety thousand for the screenplay; then, if the picture is made, a bonus of twenty-five thousand if we're the sole credited authors and of ten thousand if we share the credit!" (556). [finance]

"Don said at breakfast this morning that he is so happy with me and with our life together now. I feel the same way, but it is so important to remember that what is alive and flexible is also subject to change—change is a sign of emotional health. Therefore all statements and facts of this kind are merely to be recorded as one records the weather. Which doesn't make it any the less marvelous when the feather is fine!" (459). [relationship with Don]

Friend and writer E. M. Forster once offers Isherwood some advice which he echoes through this diary a number of times: "Get on with your own work; behave as if you were immortal." I believe Isherwood takes heed.

Isherwood, Christopher and W. H. Auden. *The Dog Beneath the Skin or Where Is Francis?* London: Faber, 1935.

Isherwood, Christopher. *Down There on a Visit*. New York: Farrar, 1959.

I first read this novel in 1980 on my way back from a trip to Europe. I marked very little, and, frankly, I don't think I understood much of what Isherwood was talking about. I hadn't yet studied literature in depth. I hadn't studied Buddhism or the act of meditation. It meant little to me. This reading seemed richer, especially in light of the fact that I've read almost all the author's works including his thousand-page *Diaries, Volume One, 1939-60*.

One of the main characters of Isherwood's novel, Paul, scoffs at the character named Christopher Isherwood by saying: **"You know, you really *are* a tourist, to your bones. I bet you're always sending postcards with 'Down here on a visit' on them. That's the story of your life (308).** So, in effect, the novel is a threading together of four visits *down there*.

"Mr. Lancaster" begins in London, in 1928, when the *character* Isherwood is twenty-three and takes a voyage to northern Germany by way of a tramp steamer called the *Coriolanus*. He does this courtesy of one Mr. Lancaster, who becomes both like a father and a son to Isherwood. Lancaster dies at his own hands, it is conjectured, because of his impotence. And another character, Waldemar, makes his first appearance in the book, this section, which seems more like a short story than a novel segment.

The second part of the novel is "Ambrose," a former mate of Isherwood's at Cambridge (one supposes W. H. Auden is the model), who buys property on a Greek island, St. Gregory, and is in the process of building a house in this 1930 segment. He invites Isherwood and his Berliner companion, Waldemar, to venture down to visit. The only other inhabitants of the island are some scamps who, though working as laborers on the new house, also get into a lot of mischief as they head to the mainland each night. The island is rife with snakes, flies, and a host of other problems that probably only young men could tolerate. Yet the place is not without its charms:

"When we have eaten supper, we sit out in front of the huts, at the kitchen table, around the lamp, unhurriedly getting drunk. As soon as the lamp has been placed on the table, this becomes the center of the world. There is no one else, you feel, anywhere. Overhead, right across the sky, the Milky Way is like a cloud of firelit steam. After the short, furious sunset breeze, it gets so still that the night doesn't seem external; it's more like being in a huge room without a ceiling" (85).

The Ambrose story seems to chronicle the then universal loneliness of the homosexual. Now, however, since we are such a liberated group derived from such a liberated society, there exists is no such thing, right?

The "Waldemar" section of the novel is set in 1938 and begins on another boat, this time outside the Dover Harbour. Isherwood, the man, the author, has just returned from his 1938 trip to China with Auden. In this section, Auden is again the model for a different character, Hugh Weston. As character Isherwood and companion Dorothy step off the boat, whom should they run into but Waldemar! There would be no such thing called a novel without the idea of coincidence. Isherwood is terribly concerned with the concept of class and is horrified when on a visit to his family, they treat Waldemar as a low-class ragamuffin, instead of their son's dear friend. Christopher is also very concerned with the lead-up to war in Germany. Waldemar begs *Christoph* to take him with him to the US, but

Christopher says it is impossible. Yet Waldemar reappears once again!

In “Paul,” the fourth and final part of his novel, Isherwood moves to Los Angeles, the time 1940. He connects with a male prostitute, a gorgeous, highly paid young man who is really difficult to get to know, but Christopher tries. This section reflects Isherwood’s attempts to achieve a spiritual life by way of Buddhism. He makes an acquaintance with a swami, Augustus Parr, and, when Paul indicates that he would like to become more spiritual, the two connect, spend almost an entire day together. This section wears thin before the end, in which Paul, winds up returning to Europe and dying essentially of drug usage. Isherwood, the author, does a little too much *deus ex machina* to make things turn out easily for him, instead of allowing the story to end with a bit more conflict or complexity.

I think *Down There on a Visit* is in actually a collection of long stories more than it is a novel. Just because you refer to a character that appears earlier does not make it a novel. Even if Waldemar keeps reappearing in all four parts, one cannot necessarily call this work a novel. A novel is one large sweep of motion, with one climax. This one has one for each part, and then the author has, with great skill threaded the four of them together. I’m not criticizing the execution, exactly. I’m just saying it should have been sold as linked stories (though such a thing had not yet been marketed by the publishers at that time) or four novellas, but not as a novel. That said, one cannot praise Isherwood enough for his sense of lyricism and competence with the English language. They are always superb.

Isherwood, Christopher and W. H. Auden. *Journey to a War*. New York: Random, 1939.

Books have a strange life of their own. In checking the date due slip of this tome accessioned to the Texas Tech University Library, I see that it is checked out in November, 1966, the autumn I go away to college, then in 1968, when I’m a junior, 1969 a senior. 1971, 1972, 1973. And last, 1976. This book about Isherwood and Auden’s joint trip to China in 1938—brown and worn with its spine heavily taped—sits on the shelf for forty years, until I pick it up, as part of my marathon to read all twenty works of Isherwood. Odd. I literally blow dust off its top and begin to read.

Journey begins and ends with verse, most likely Auden’s. This first section of six poems is entitled London to HongKong [sic]: “The Voyage,” “The Sphinx,” “The Ship,” “The Traveller,” “Macao,” and Hongkong.” The journal as a whole covers a long journey the two men—good friends, having studied together at Cambridge—make to cover the war Japan is waging against China (from the late 1930s until the Japanese empire’s demise in 1945)—a piece of history the West often ignores or forgets.

Isherwood’s accounts are as lively and engaging as his novels, including many details. **“It was a fine, hot, steamy morning [February 28, 1938]. We breakfasted on board, and hurried out on to the deck, eager to miss none of the sensational sights which had been promised us. Friends in Hongkong, who had made the trip, had described how Japanese**

planes, returning from a raid, might swoop low over the *Tai-Shan*, playfully aiming their machine-guns at our heads” (27). His tone is almost lighthearted as he and Auden cruise the river. At times, the conflict indeed seems more like a cat and mouse game: the Japanese appearing to pick their targets carefully so as not to kill too many people, and the Chinese hiding skillfully, waiting to pounce, rather than returning fire openly—largely because the Chinese are poor and undermanned and underarmed.

The book closes with two sections, *In Time of War*, a Sonnet Sequence of twenty-seven poems and thirteen pages of “commentary” in the form of verse—all courtesy of W. H. Auden.

Some nuggets from the book:

“That is what War is, I thought: two ships pass each other, and nobody waves his hand” (29).

“During the past fortnight, eleven Japanese had been brought down. The Government had offered a reward to anybody who could bring down a plane; as a result, anti-aircraft defence had become a local sport, like duck-shooting. When the planes came over, everybody blazed away—even the farmers with their blunderbusses in the fields” (37). Isherwood peppers his prose with “Japs,” an acceptable appellation in those days.

“Most of the Germans have been in China for several years. They belong to the pre-Hitler emigration period, when an ambitious officer could foresee no adventurous military career in his own country, and often preferred to be abroad” (57). Isherwood speaks fluent German, and he sometimes has interesting interchanges with the Germans.

“As we walked home the whole weight of the news from Austria descended upon us, crushing out everything else. By this evening a European war may have broken out. And here we are, eight thousand miles away. Shall we change our plans? Shall we go back? What does China matter to us in comparison with this? Bad news of this sort has a curious psychological effect: all the guns and bombs of the Japanese seem suddenly as harmless as gnats. If we are killed on the Yellow River front our deaths will be as provincial and meaningless as a motor-bus accident in Burton-on-Trent” (59). The two men are conflicted about their past involvement—in their twenties—with Germany and Austria.

“China, says Dr. MacFadyen, is a terrible place for growths and tumours. In the hospital he has a whole museum of bladder-stones. One of his patients had a polypus [polyp] growing out of his nose, so long that you could wind the pedicle round his neck” (103-4). From this passage one realizes just how backward, how terribly poor 1930s China is.

Isherwood manages to capture the ironies of war, a pretty dog with no moral sensibilities: “Meanwhile there was time for a stroll round the village. It was a glorious, cool spring morning. On a waste plot of land beyond the houses a dog was gnawing what was, only too obviously, a human arm. A spy, they told us, had been buried there after execution a day or two ago; the dog had dug the corpse half out of the earth. It was rather a pretty dog with a fine, bushy tail. I remembered how we had patted it when it came begging for scraps of our supper the evening before” (112).

Here, he comments on the hale attitude with which the Chinese approach war: “The average Chinese soldier speaks of China’s chances with an air of gentle deprecation, yet he is ultimately confident or, at least, hopeful. ‘The Japanese,’ said one of them, ‘fight with their tanks and planes. We Chinese fight with our spirit.’ The ‘spirit’ is certainly important when one considers the Chinese inferiority in armaments (today’s new guns were a remarkable exception) and their hopeless deficiency in medical services. European troops may appear more self-confident, more combative, more efficient and energetic, but if they had to wage this war under similar conditions they would probably all mutiny within a fortnight” (117).

Here Isherwood comments on the amenities of a particular inn: “The Guest-House at Sian must be one of the strangest hotels in the world. A caprice of Chang Hsueh-liang created it—a Germanic, severely modern building, complete with private bathrooms, running water, central heating, and barber’s shop; the white dining-room has a dance-floor in the middle, and an indirectly rose-lit dome. Sitting in the entrance-lounge, on comfortable settees, you watch the guests going in and out. With the self-assured briskness of people accustomed to luxury and prompt service, inhabitants of a great metropolis. Those swing-doors might open on to Fifth Avenue, Piccadilly, Unter den Linden. The illusion is nearly complete” (129).

The following is an interesting anecdote that a Dr. Mooser passes on to Isherwood: “While he was working in Mexico he was summoned to the bedside of an Englishman named David H. Lawrence, ‘a queer-looking fellow with a red beard.’ I told him: ‘I thought you were Jesus Christ.’ And he laughed. There was a big German woman sitting beside him. She was his wife. I asked him what his profession was. He said he was a writer. ‘Are you a famous writer?’ I asked him. ‘Oh no,’ he said. ‘Not so famous.’ His wife didn’t like that. ‘Didn’t you really know my husband was a writer?’ she said to me. ‘No,’ I said. ‘Never heard of him.’ And Lawrence said: ‘Don’t be silly, Frieda. How should he know I was a writer? I didn’t know he was a doctor, either, till he told me.’

Dr. Mooser then examined Lawrence and told him that he was suffering from tuberculosis—not from malaria, as the Mexican doctor had assured him. Lawrence took it very quietly. He only asked how long Mooser thought he would live. ‘Two years,’ said Mooser. ‘If you’re careful.’ This was in 1928” (138). [Lawrence died in 1930.]

In Hangkow, near their journey’s end, Isherwood comments thusly about one of the hotels: “Running out to meet us came a drilled troop of houseboys in khaki shorts and white shirts, prettily embroidered with the scarlet characters of their names. Mr. Charleton’s boys were famous, it appeared, in this part of China. He trained them for three years—as servants, gardeners, carpenters, or painters—and then placed them, often in excellent jobs, with consular officials, or foreign business men. The boys had all learnt a little English. They could say: ‘Good morning, sir,’ when you met them, and commanded a whole repertoire of sentences about tea, breakfast, the time you wanted to be called, the laundry, and the price of drinks. When a new boy arrived one of the third-year boys was appointed as his guardian. The first year, the boy was paid nothing; the second year, four dollars a month, the third year, ten. If a boy was stupid but willing he was taken on to the kitchen staff, and given a different uniform—black shirt and shorts. All tips were divided and the profits of the business shared out at the end of the year” (178).

And of course, the two writers cannot end the book without commenting on war, what they have come to learn about it: “But war, as Auden said later, is not like that. War is bombing an already disused arsenal, missing it, and killing a few old women. War is lying in a stable with a gangrenous leg. War is drinking hot water in a barn and worrying about one’s wife. War is a handful of lost and terrified men in the mountains, shooting at something moving in the undergrowth. War is waiting for days with nothing to do; shouting down a dead telephone; going without sleep, or sex, or a wash. War is untidy, inefficient, obscure, and largely a matter of chance” (202). What has changed?

More of the same: “Mr. Wang was the civil governor of six counties, and he had prepared an exhaustive report on the atrocities of the Japanese against the civilian population. In Mr. Wang’s area eighty per cent of the houses had been burnt. Out of 1,100 houses in Siaofeng only 200 remained. Out of 2,800 in Tsinan only 3. Three thousand civilians had been killed during the past four months. Children were being kidnapped by the Japanese and sent to Shanghai—for forced labour or the brothels. Out of 110,000 refugees only ten per cent had been able to leave the district. The rest were returning, where possible, to their ruined homes, with money from the Government to buy seeds for the spring sowing. If they belonged to areas occupied by the Japanese they would be given work—either in repairing the roads or in their own handicrafts” (213).

Isherwood's guilt over being conveyed by the coolies in carts over muddy terrain: "The coolies strode along, relieving each other with trained adroitness. We gazed at their bulging calves and straining thighs, and rehearsed every dishonest excuse for allowing ourselves to be carried by human beings: they are used to it, it's giving them employment, they don't feel. Oh no, they don't feel—but the lump on the back of that man's neck wasn't raised by drinking champagne, and his sweat remarkably resembles my own. Never mind, my feet hurt. I'm paying him, aren't I? Three times as much, in fact, as he'd get from a Chinese. Sentimentality helps no one. Why don't you walk? I can't, I tell you. You bloody well would if you'd got no cash. But I *have* got cash. Oh, dear. I'm so heavy Our coolies, unaware of these qualms, seemed to bear us no ill-will, however. At the road-side halts they even brought us cups of tea" (226).

Isherwood's utter amazement at the absolute thriftiness of the Chinese: "We stopped to get petrol near a restaurant where they were cooking bamboo in all its forms—including the strips used for making chairs. That, I thought, is so typical of this country. Nothing is specifically either eatable or uneatable. You could begin munching a hat, or bite a mouthful out of a wall; equally, you could build a hut with the food provided at lunch. Everything is everything" (231).

From Sonnet XIX:

But in the evening the oppression lifted;
The peaks came into focus; it had rained:
Across the lawns and cultured flowers drifted
The conversation of the highly trained.

Isherwood, Christopher. *Kathleen and Frank*. New York: Simon, 1971.

Kathleen and Frank makes the twenty-second book of Isherwood's that I've read in about a year, and I thought perhaps that his work couldn't get any better, that his best writing occurred when he was younger. But I was wrong. Mr. Isherwood, in his late sixties when he pens this book, distinguishes his latter years as a writer by undertaking, instead of fiction, nonfiction. In this tome of over 500 pages, he culls through letters that pass back and forth between his parents in the early part of the twentieth century, as well as his mother's daily diaries. He then stitches them together in not only a seamless narrative about his parents' courtship and marriage but a curiously interesting one, by inserting commentary or historical information from third sources. Even after having read all of Isherwood's diaries, I believe he saves some intimate or startling details for this book.

In his previous works Isherwood's parents always seem rather cardboardy, perhaps purposely, or perhaps because of a blind spot Isherwood has. In this book, one finds his mother, Kathleen, a very early feminist, one who sympathizes with the Suffragist movement in England. Not only that. She's not really that keen on having

children at an early age. She is well past thirty when she marries and nearly forty when she gives birth to Richard, Christopher's younger brother by eight years. She is highly cultured, and very opinionated about any bit of theater that she's seen or literature that she's read. One can almost hear Christopher's voice in hers or vice versa. At the same time, one might have thought that Christopher, as a gay man had a distant father, but if that were true it would have only been in the geographical sense. His father, Frank, was a soldier who fought with distinction in the Second Boer war in South Africa, and later died in World War I in France. Frank made a point of telling Kathleen that he didn't wish to make Christopher conform to societal norms for being a boy; he preferred that Christopher make his own way. What a gift from a father to a son who is *different*. Frank, before he leaves for war, is also interested in the theater, so much so that he plays the piano, performs in certain kinds of musicals. But he isn't a soft officer. He is a distinguished one, an officer whose men honor and respect him. His loss in 1915 is exaggerated by the fact that his body cannot be accounted for. Months pass before Kathleen gives up all hope, in fact, receives official notice from the Royal army.

There is a third character, one that is not present in most American family sagas. In fact, there are two additional characters: Marple Hall, the Bradshaw-Isherwood home, and Wyberslegh, the *younger* Isherwood home. Both are over three hundred years old at the time Isherwood writes. His vivid descriptions of both halls (he defines "hall" loosely as the home of the owner of a large estate) are not necessarily flattering. Of Wyberslegh he says that it is damp most of the year, and that may be the kindest thing he has to say. The upkeep and maintenance on a large residence is quite costly. Yet Wyberslegh is the home where Christopher lives until his father is stationed in Ireland and before he is sent to boarding school at a rather early age. It is the estate Christopher signs over to his brother Richard, when he realizes he is never returning to England to live—quite a generous act.

Isherwood, Christopher. *Liberation: Diaries, Volume Three: 1970-1983*. New York: Harper, 2012.

Having now read Isherwood's diaries, except for his *Lost Years*, which is a reconstruction of his life from 1945-1951, I feel, in a sense, that I've lived life alongside him. Yes, I believe I can say I've lived a parallel life of voyeurism as I've read all three diaries (2,681 pages), covering the greater part of his life, right up to his death in 1986. I've more or less lived in his house with him, sometimes sharing his bed with some of the (apparently) sexiest men in the world, including his long-time companion, Don Bachardy. I've struggled through his writing, as he articulates what he fears are certain problems taking place in the manuscript he is working on at the time. I've been to every party he has, where he often, by his own admission, drinks too much—so much so, in fact, that he can't remember exactly what has happened or whom he's insulted. I've accompanied him every time he strolls along the beach in Santa Monica, California, where he lives, or squabbles with local residents or fusses over a neighbor's nocturnally barking dog or rascally kids who have no respect for the private bridge that somehow sets their property apart from others. I am exposed to every opinionated thought he holds about other writers, artists, agents, actors, directors, composers or religious leader, *and their work*. Oh,

yes, I've suffered through his anguish over not being able to participate in Hinduism as authentically as he wishes, almost daily writing something about his Swami or the monastery or his inability to meditate properly. I've sat on the toilet with him as he struggles with the indelicacies of an aging body. I've noted his weight, daily, as he records it in his diary and stewes over how he can lose even more, while at the same time ingesting great quantities of empty calories found in drink and rich food. I sympathize yet am a bit impatient with his concern over his fading looks. Photos of his youth indicate a stunning gentleman, who, besides being smart, is handsome, and often wins over any *body* he indeed decides to win over. So as he ages, he must accept it, and does, with a certain reserved grace. In some ways he is an average person with sometimes extraordinary foibles. Though he is highly intelligent, his life seems tinged by racism and classism, perhaps a product of his time and birthright, however hard he otherwise tries to escape them. He drops out of Cambridge University after one year, yet it doesn't seem to hurt his career. Maybe it only narrows him in some way, although god knows he travels the face of the earth enough to be capable of empathizing with a broad range of peoples.

As I near the end of this document, I become a bit bored with his obsessions, particularly with death, since he knows he is going to experience a slow decline from prostate cancer (one of his biggest fears). At the same time, he is able to view his life in a larger context—he's kept such copious records of it—and make some rather stoic and pithy statements. **"I'm not in a good state. Death fears—that's to say, pangs of foreboding—recur often. They seem to be part of a quite normal physical condition; the pangs of a dying animal, thrilling with dread of the unknown"** (686). He writes these words on October 23, 1983, a little over two years before he dies. In spite of the struggle of his last years—all chronicled in this tome—he often lives with a *joie de vivre* that most of us only hope to experience a few times ever. As I often do, I've listed some nuggets from this, the final installment of Christopher Isherwood's diaries.

The following comes under the category of gossip, interesting only because of its noted victims: **"The usual pronouncement that Truman Capote is a 'birdbrain.' Gore [Vidal] has finished a novel called *Two Sisters* in which he admits that he and Jack Kerouac went to bed together—or was that in an article? (Gore told me about so many articles he's written and talks he has given that my memory spins.) Anyhow, Gore now regrets that he didn't describe the act itself; how they got very drunk and Kerouac said, 'Why don't we take a shower?' and then tried to go down on him but did it very badly, and then they belly rubbed. Next day, Kerouac claimed he remembered nothing; but later, in a bar, yelled out, 'I've blown Gore Vidal!'"** (11).

"Howard is an American, Jewish New Yorker, with possibly some Negro in him" (63). Speaks for itself.

On writing: **"I have kept this diary doggedly, day by day, because I believe a *continuous* record, no matter how full of trivialities, will always gradually reveal something of the subconscious mind behind**

it. I've never regretted keeping a diary yet. There are always a few nuggets of literary value under all that sand" (65).

On aging: "Partly, of course, this rattles me because I'm getting old; I feel I can't keep up with it all. Why do things have to change so fast? It no longer seems exhilarating that they do. For instance, I mind enormously that they finally are going to put up this monster apartment building at the end of the street, two twenty-floor towers. And yet, why not? Why shouldn't we have to move? We've been here ten years, already" (81).

On *Cabaret*: "Scammell told us he has read the script of the *Cabaret* film (because for part of Chris) and 'Chris' (now called Brian) is queer, that's to say he can't make love to Sally at first and then later he can then Sally does it with a mature but very attractive baron and Chris is jealous and makes a scene about it with Sally, and Sally exclaims, 'Oh, fuck the Baron!' (meaning that he's unimportant) and Chris replies coyly, 'I do.' That's the kind of thing which offends *my* dignity as a homosexual. The queer is just an impotent heterosexual" (127).

Aging: "Oh, I am such a compulsive old thing, jogging down the road to the beach, sitting for a moment only on the sand alert for dogs (lest they should pee on my towel), then into the ocean, alert for surfers (lest they should collide with me) then to take a shower on the beach (hurrying lest someone else should get there first) then hobbling uphill over the gravel and wiping off the sand from my feet on the lawn of the corner house (hastily, lest they should look out and tell me not to). *My* secret life isn't a bit like Walter Mitty's—it's mostly ratlike scurrying to secure myself some tiny advantage" (182).

Anecdote: "John Gielgud told us this story about Mae West. She was asked, 'Do you ever smoke after you've had sex?' She answered, 'I never looked.'" (235).

On keeping a journal: "Have been dipping into my old journals of the early sixties; a mistake. Now I feel sad as shit, but must admit things are much better nowadays, at least from my point of view. Is it really good to keep a journal? I loathe doing it at the time and I get depressed when I read it. But it's such a marvellous treasure trove. I have vowed to make an entry a day throughout July, so I'll stick to this, but I protest, I protest" (249).

Gossip: "Roddy [McDowall, actor] has a weird hobby, he makes candles. He brought us one, or rather a sort of wax embryo containing three wicks and many lumps of colored wax embedded in wax. Without my glasses, I took it for some sort of fruit dessert and was about to put it in the icebox" (263).

On *Cabaret*: “Yesterday, I saw *Cabaret* for the second time and liked it much better than before. I still don’t think it adds up to anything much, but Michael York this time seemed not only adorable and beautiful but a really sensitive and subtle actor. Liza Minnelli I liked less, however; thought her clumsy and utterly wrong for the part, though touching sometimes, in a boyish good-sport way” (289).

Anecdote: “The evening ended delightfully with a sort of victory party given by J. J. Mitchell’s handsome and nice friend Ron Holland, at a restaurant called Ma Bell’s, where they have telephones on all the tables which you can use for free, anywhere in the New York area. Ron told a story about a boy he picked up at a gym he goes to. He brought the boy to this restaurant and told him he could call anybody he liked. The boy was delighted. He called his mother and started telling her what a wonderful place he was in. Then his face fell. He turned to Ron and said apologetically ‘I’ve got to split—she says my father’s dying’” (307-8).

Prejudice: “My relations with Patrick weren’t as pleasant as usual, I’m sorry to say. Maybe all his talk about settling down in France irritated me, after a few drinks, for I launched into one of my tiresome cantankerous Francophobe tirades. Also I declared that, as a writer, I needed all my life to master the English language—implying that Patrick and the rest never had and never would—and that I therefore had no time to waste in dabbling in foreign tongues. Patrick rightly found this statement pretentious. It was also rude to Eric, who speaks at least three languages fluently” (335). I don’t get why Isherwood is being so “honest” here. Is it for his or our benefit?

“This afternoon Julian Jebb is due to arrive here with his assistant, Rosemary Bowen Jones, and we are to be in the grip of the BBC for a week. Am at present sulking about this, wishing to Christ I’d never agreed to it, even wishing I’d agreed to go to Berlin because maybe once I was there I’d have remembered something interesting. Now it seems to me that Berlin was one of the least important episodes in my life, which is nonsense of course—but it does bring home to me that my life in those days was a pretty shabby little affair in comparison with what I have had since” (409). Ironic, isn’t it, that Isherwood’s Berlin life is “shabby,” but his writing notable, but later an LA life is great, but his writing not as lively.

Isherwood pinpoints the problem of an older writer finding fresh content. It hits him hard, I think. “I keep plugging at the book. At present, not joyfully. I feel it is somehow flat—that I’m failing to give it the sparkle of life. One thing that keeps bugging me is that I have covered so much of the material in my fiction and what’s left for me to write is just—leftovers” (471).

“No use apologizing to myself for the huge gap [between entries]. The truth is I am slowing down; I simply cannot get through all the jobs I set myself to do. And so I develop a masochistic attitude toward myself as my own taskmaster” (473). Yeah, it sort of works when you’re in your thirties, but not so much later on.

“On March 17, Mort Sahl, on his T.V. show called ‘Both Sides,’ made antihomosexual remarks, against which Cici Huston, who was one of his guests, violently protested. Here are four of Sahl’s remarks (addressed to Cici and some other women): ‘They despise you because you have the real thing,’ ‘They dominate classical music,’ ‘Do you know a *poor faggot?*’ ‘They’re your enemy.’” Odd that Isherwood sees this as prejudice but NOT his own anti-Semitism or racist comments.

“Instead he went to bed and left Jack to cope with us, Zizi Jeanmaire, her daughter Valentine, Ustinov’s daughter Pavla, Nellie Carroll and Miguel. He failed to make us jell and nobody raised a finger to help him except Don and me. I can’t help it, I do so dislike Frogs” (534). This remark is typical of the British hatred for the French, or perhaps it is a typical “islander’s” small prejudices against *everybody!*

On aging: “A really interesting and horribly depressing talk, last night on T.V., about the approaching oil famine within thirty years and consequent plans for transmitting solar energy via satellites, etc. I got such a sense of a future which I don’t want to, and anyway, can’t live on into. At the same time, I quite realize that my aversion is merely romantic; I hate to part with the notion of space as something awesome, of the moon as a shining mysterious orb, etc., and contemplate a time when the earth will be surrounded by a sort of backyard full of skyjunk” (541).

On writing: “Today I reached page 203, which is almost certainly much more than two-thirds of this draft. I still haven’t the least idea what is caught in the net. It is still entirely possible that the question, ‘Why are you telling me all this?’ won’t be adequately answered. But, in all my long experience, I have never been able to find anything better than this fumbling way of getting down to the nerve” (545).

On writing: “The writer of any kind of autobiographical book is in deadly danger whenever he is trying to get from point A to point B in a hurry—when, that’s to say, he isn’t interested in what he’s immediately writing. Somehow or other, one must *make* such bridge passages interesting. There are many of them in my narrative, and that is really what’s worrying me” (582).

Speaking very poetically of his local geography, yet it seems to be a metaphor for his writing, his life: **“I think the sun has now definitely set beyond the headland, into the sea, but can’t be certain because of how-lying clouds, I creep on with the Swami book [*My Guru and His Disciple*]. My old head is so thick and stupid it’s brutal. I fight my way on, sentence by sentence, and always a cold scornful remnant of reason waits for the next morning, when it looks through the latest page and says, idiot, can’t you see that the sentence ought to be the other way around, and that that adjective is utterly wrong? Are you really so senile? And it’s right—I do see it”** (588).

Anecdote: **“On New Year’s Eve, Don painted Rick Sandford because it was his birthday. Rick asked me, ‘How long was it after you met Don that you and he had sex?’ I said: ‘We had sex and *then* we met.’”** (681).

As I finish reading the last few pages of this diary and absorb the editor’s statement about Isherwood’s death, I weep a little. Yes, after 2,700 pages of three diaries, I feel in a sense that I have lost a friend. I know, that is *so* sentimental as to be crap, the sort of thing Isherwood loathes, yet I can’t help it. And he started it! I don’t believe he would have written the diaries and left them to us if he hadn’t wished for us to *know* him, the good *and* the bad. And know him I do, at least a little.

Isherwood, Christopher. *Lions and Shadows: an Education in the Twenties*. Norfolk: New Directions, (1938), 1947.

As I examine this copy borrowed from the Texas Tech University main library, I note that it is accessioned in 1964. By examining the date due slip, I can see I’m only the third person to check out this book since 1972—making me a rare cat indeed. In remarks at the beginning, Isherwood says that his book **“is not, in the ordinary journalistic sense of the word, an autobiography; it contains no ‘revelations’; it is never ‘indiscreet’; it is not even entirely ‘true’”** (7). He goes on to state that the book is a record of a man, him, in his twenties, as he forges ahead in his life as a young novelist.

This young artist makes a short trip to France. He attends university in England. **“I had not been in Cambridge a fortnight before I began to feel with alarm that I was badly out of my depth. The truth, as I now discovered for the first time, was that I was a hopelessly inefficient lecturee. I couldn’t attend, couldn’t concentrate, couldn’t take proper notes”** (62).

He records the meaning that relationships there give him, including Mr. Holmes, a benefactor of sorts. **“Isherwood the artist was an austere ascetic, cut off from the outside world, in voluntary exile, a recluse”** (97).

Isherwood co-writes narratives with a close friend. One book in particular, a “Hynd and Starn” story, would be accompanied with fireworks, gramophone, and dialogue

would be spoken. Copies would be free. **“Our friends would find, attached to the last page, a pocket containing banknotes and jewels; our enemies, on reaching the end of the book, would be shot dead by a revolver concealed in the binding”** (114). Isherwood simply doesn't live long enough; today's technology might have afforded him at least a few of these book innovations!

At the end of his second year Isherwood deliberately fails his exams by giving nonsensical answers. At the time, because the professors and administration act as if he has simply chosen to leave Cambridge, no one knows what he has done. Failure is painful, but he believes he is right to strike out on his own. **“Suppose I stayed on and did, somehow, get a degree: what would become of me? I should have to be a schoolmaster. But I didn't want to be a schoolmaster—I wanted, at last, to escape from that world. I want to learn to direct films . . . [h]ow I longed to be independent, to earn money of my own! And I had got to wait another whole year!”** (125).

After leaving Cambridge, Isherwood takes a series of positions, one as a personal secretary, another as an English tutor for young pupils. During this time he also teaches himself how to write. A dear friend, also a writer, “Chalmers,” asserts his theories, and Isherwood concurs: **“I saw it all suddenly while I was reading *Howards End* . . . Forster's the only one who understands what the modern novel ought to be . . . Our frightful mistake was that we believed in tragedy: the point is, tragedy's quite impossible nowadays . . . We ought to aim at being essentially comic writers . . . The whole of Forster's technique is based on the tea-table: instead of trying to screw all his scenes up to the highest possible pitch, he tones them down until they sound like mothers'-meeting gossip . . . In fact, there's actually *less* emphasis laid on the big scenes than on the unimportant ones: that's what's so utterly terrific. It's the completely new kind of accentuation—like a person talking a different language”** (173-4).

The author chronicles his early experiences: **“. . . I had sent the manuscript, already, to two well-known publishers. They had refused it, of course. One of them wrote saying that my work had 'a certain literary delicacy, but lacked sufficient punch'—a pretty damning verdict, when your story ends with a murder”** (205).

He indirectly addresses the idea of being gay, as well as the issue of being an artist, critical of society: **“Does anybody ever feel sincerely pleased at the prospect of remaining in permanent opposition, a social misfit, for the rest of his life? I knew, at any rate, that I myself didn't. I wanted—however much I might try to persuade myself, in moments of arrogance, to the contrary—to find some place, no matter how humble, in the scheme of society. Until I do that, I told myself, my writing will never be any good; no amount of talent or technique will**

redeem it: it will remain a greenhouse product; something, at best, for the connoisseur and the clique” (247-8).

Isherwood writes of the Great War: “I came to regard Lester as a ghost—the ghost of the War. Walking beside him, at midnight, on the downs, I asked him the question which ghosts are always asked by the living: ‘What shall I do with my life?’ ‘I think,’ said Lester, ‘that you’d make a very good doctor.’ Isherwood had already tried that at Cambridge and failed!

Most of all Isherwood continues to modify his craft: “Therefore epics, I reasoned, should start in the middle and go backwards, then forwards again—so that the reader comes upon the dullness half-way through, when he is more interested in the characters; the fish holds its tail in its mouth, and time is circular, which sounds Einstein-ish and brilliantly modern” (297).

Early on, “a lady novelist who was an old friend of our family,” reads his manuscript and in part tells him: “‘If you really have *talent*, you know, you’ll go on writing—whatever people say to you’” (119).

Isherwood takes her advice and—twenty books later—never looks back, except, of course, to write about it!

Isherwood, Christopher. *Lost Years: A Memoir 1945-1951*. London: Chatto, 2000.

With the completion of this book I’ve now read all 3,069 pages of Isherwood’s diaries. Though he calls this one a memoir, it is a *reconstructed* diary of the years 1945-1951. In essence, Isherwood keeps two records: a day-to-day account of people he interacts with, major and minor events. In the more expanded *Diaries Volumes One - Three*, he writes out detailed accounts of events, observations, prejudices, fears about his health, and high and low spots with his lovers, particularly Don Bachardy. In *Lost Years*, however, Isherwood holds nothing back. Except for changing some names of partners, he tells all about his sex life during these six years. At one point he quietly boasts (or otherwise he would not mention it) that he has had over 400 sex partners (and he’s only in his forties, heh, heh). His pattern in this volume is to list the day-to-day events, and, as of this writing (1973) he combs his (excellent) memory to expound on those events. At the same time, as a heavy drinker, he often admits he can remember little or nothing about things he has written. Still, he does comment on his writing projects, his relationship at the time (a younger man, William Caskey, a photographer), and notes about books he is reading and films he’s worked on as a screenwriter or viewed for entertainment. His prejudices against Jews, the French, and dark-skinned people seem more entrenched than when he is older. Again, is he a victim of his time and place of birth, or does he willfully deny that these prejudices are immature and wrong-headed? In spite of his flaws, I find much to admire in Isherwood: a man who creates, sings, listens to and critiques his own tunes. Opinionated people often become that way because they realize they are correct about so many things, and

that reinforcement causes them to be even more opinionated. We trust them. And often we should.

Some nuggets:

Editor Katherine Bucknell, from her Introduction: "Isherwood never gave up his writing as [Edward] Upward did; for he was a writer above all, not an activist, even when it came to his homosexual kind. By writing in explicit sexual detail about his intimate behavior and that of his close friends and acquaintances in the years immediately following the war, he was portraying the hidden energies and affinities of homosexual men all over the United States who during that period were gathering increasingly in certain, mostly coastal cities as peace and prosperity returned to a country much altered by vast wartime mobilization. This hidden social group, whose consciousness of itself as a group was intensified by the demographic shifts brought about by the war and then extended throughout the 1950s, was to emerge in its own right as a significant force of change in American and in western culture generally during the final third of the twentieth century. Much of this change began in southern California, and Isherwood was living at its source. His personal myth is part of, and in many ways emblematic of, the larger myth of the group to which he belonged: and his reconstruction of his life during the postwar years foretells much of what was to come" (xiv).

Writing about himself in the third person, CI says, helps him to separate himself from the "I" of the rest of his writing: "Isherwood would never cease to be aware of the way in which all success, and indeed all art, excludes or marginalizes somebody. In a sense, his art tries to do the opposite, but whatever is brought to the fore must push something else aside. As a schoolboy he had written to his mother: 'I have an essay on "omission is the Beginning of all Art" which it may amuse you to see.' And he explains at some length in *Christopher and His Kind*, much of the difficulty he had with his work, throughout his career, can be understood as his struggle with the question of how the artist decides what to leave out of his art. The subjects not chose, the themes not addressed, haunt the imagination with the pain of their rejection; for the novelist who feels a strong loyalty to historical fact, the necessity to omit is like the burden of original sin, a crime of neglect which must precede the possibility of artistic creation" (xxxiii).

Isherwood reveals a romantic notion has: "The rest of the day was spent at Bill's La Cienega apartment. It seems to me now that La Cienega was perhaps the most romantic street in Los Angeles, in those days. It had an un-American air of reticence, of unwillingness to display itself. Its shops were small and unshowy; its private houses were private. Also—and this was what really appealed to Christopher—it

seemed to have a bohemian, self-contained life of its own. It was a 'quarter,' which didn't make any effort to welcome outside visitors. Many of its dwellers were hidden away in odd little garden houses and shacks, within courtyards or on alleys, behind the row of buildings which lined the street. It was in one of these that Bill lived" (15).

A bit of literary gossip: "Katherine Anne [Porter] treated them like favored nephews; she even cooked meals for them. Unfortunately, however, beneath Christopher's deference and flattery, there was a steadily growing aggression. By her implicit claim to be the equal of Katherine Mansfield and even Virginia Woolf, Katherine Anne had stirred up Christopher's basic literary snobbery. *How dare she*, he began to mutter to himself, this vain old frump, this dressed-up *cook* in her arty finery, how dare she *presume* like this! And he imagined a grotesque scene in which he had to introduce her and somehow explain her to Virginia, Morgan [Forster] and the others . . . [t]hus Katherine Anne became the first of an oddly assorted collection of people who, for various reasons, made up their minds that they would never see Christopher again. The others: Charlie Chaplin, Benjamin Britten, Cole Porter, Lincoln Kirstein" (68-9).

CI became acquainted with the famed Joseph Pilates, designer of physical education for compromised bodies, when CI joined the man's gym: "Mr. Pilates was a bully and a narcissist and a dirty old man; he and Christopher got along very well. When Christopher was doing his workout, Pilates would bring one of his assistants over to watch, rather as the house surgeon brings an intern to study a patient with a rare deformity. 'Look at him!' Pilates would exclaim to the assistant, 'That could have been a beautiful body, and look what he's done to it! Like a birdcage that somebody trod on!' Pilates had grown tubby with age, but he would never admit it; he still thought himself a magnificent figure of a man. 'That's not fat,' he declared, punching himself in the stomach, 'that's good healthy meat!' He frankly lusted after some of his girl students. He used to make them lie back on an inclined board and climb on top of them, on the pretext that he was showing them an exercise. What he really was doing was rubbing off against them through his clothes; as was obvious from the violent jerking of his buttocks" (120). Lust may be in the eye of the beholder!

CI on screenwriting, something he did to pay the bills: "Christopher had always been a model employee. He despised amateurs like Brecht who, when they condescended to work at a film studio, whined and sneered and called themselves whores or slaves. Christopher prided himself on his adaptability. Writing a movie was a game, and each game had a different set of rules. Having learned the rules, Christopher could play along with enjoyment—especially if he had a fellow player like Gottfried Reinhardt who was enjoying himself too.

Once Christopher had accepted the fact that this game was to be played according to the Viennese code, he became almost as Viennese as Gottfried and Fodor. I have no doubt that some of the script's most Viennese touches were contributed by him, though I can't remember which they were" (152).

CI quotes author Cyril Connolly: ". . .the true function of a writer is to produce a masterpiece . . . no other task is of any consequence. Obvious though this should be, how few writers will admit it, or having made the admission, will be prepared to lay aside the piece of iridescent mediocrity on which they have embarked! Writers always hope that their next book is going to be their best, for they will not acknowledge that it is their present way of life which prevents them from ever creating anything different or better" (275).

This statement may have continued to resonate with Isherwood as his life progressed, because he kept an active social (and often sexual) life, rife with smoking and drinking. Though he did finally give up the former, drinking (though he was not a classic alcoholic, often giving it up for weeks or months at a time) to excess remained a part of his life until quite late in life.

Isherwood begins keeping journals when he is a schoolboy and continues during his short time at Cambridge. He continues while living in 1930s pre-Nazi Berlin. After he writes *The Berlin Stories*, he destroys those diaries, thinking that they have served their purpose, that he'd rather relive his past through his fiction than his journals. However, he lives to regret his decision and spends the rest of his life attempting to document his life. I believe that perhaps these diaries may end up being his true literary legacy. They provide the scaffolding upon which his other twenty or so works rest. And for all his "fumbling," his is a life truly fulfilled. He both works hard and has a great deal of fun, and he never apologizes for either.

Isherwood, Christopher. *A Meeting by the River*. New York: Farrar, 1967.

Isherwood's final novel, *Meeting* is both enjoyable and frustrating to read. The story of two brothers—told mostly in an epistolary fashion—holds one's attention most of the time. The prose, as always, is seductive, leading a reader from one sentence to the next, one letter to the next. The author's grasp of his material, that one of the brothers, Oliver, is planning to become a Hindu monk, is quite adequate—based on his own extensive study of and participation in the religion.

But the storytelling seems facile at times. The plot becomes a bit more complex when the other brother, Patrick, is married but is having an affair with a young man named Tom. Oliver finds out rather by accident and is unmoved by it, stating that from the standpoint of being Hindu, he doesn't care. What is odd and a bit disconcerting is that none of the letters that Patrick or Oliver writes is ever answered directly. They both dutifully write their mother, and Patrick writes his wife. However, except for very rare indirect references to their responses, all of the

information is *outgoing*—limiting the scope of the narrative, no doubt Isherwood’s intent. But why?

I located his thoughts concerning the novel from the second volume of his *Diaries*: “Yesterday I finished the first draft of *A Meeting by the River*; it has taken me exactly three months, to the day! I have just finished reading it through. There *is* something in it. But it seems quite boring in parts. Perhaps it needs cutting down to a long short story. It’s now 110 pages—let’s say a bit over 35,000 words” (367). I believe his instincts are headed in the wrong direction. He must add to it!

Isherwood also receives a response to a third draft from friend and writer, Edward Upward: “Obviously the reader isn’t meant to accept Patrick’s view that Oliver is becoming a monk in order to escape the ambitiousness which is natural to him but which he knows their mother wouldn’t approve of in him On the other hand the reader can’t quite believe that Oliver becomes a monk solely because the social work he’s been doing doesn’t seem ‘real’ enough to him” (400). *Diaries*.

I believe this observation is what makes the novel not as strong as it might be: one is never convinced of either character’s viability. One doesn’t learn enough about Oliver’s former social work to be able to compare it to what he might accomplish as a monk. One doesn’t quite believe that Patrick works in Hollywood, that he either loves his wife and children, or that he loves Tom, his paramour. And both characters, because of the similarities in their prose, might as well be two manifestations of the same character! Though Isherwood talks himself and his editor into publishing the book in this condition, there seems to be a lot missing. It, like *A Single Man*, is only about 50,000 words. If Isherwood could have added at least 30,000 words and developed both characters to their fullest, if he could have used the letter writing to its fullest capabilities, the reader might have become a bit more compelled to care about either brother and what happens to him.

Isherwood, Christopher. *My Guru and His Disciple*. New York: Farrar, 1980.

In his final book Isherwood attempts to chronicle his struggle to be an adherent of the Hindu religion. Over the many decades of study he is not always successful, and yet there are times in which he attains a certain level of satisfaction—particularly concerning his relationship with *Swami*, his guru. Importantly, Isherwood seems never to stop struggling, and the last two paragraphs of his book capture his feelings:

“Meanwhile, my life is still beautiful to me—beautiful because of Don, because of the enduring, fascination of my efforts to describe my life experience in my writing, my fellow travelers on this journey. How I wish I were able to reassure them that all is ultimately well—particularly those who are quite certain that it isn’t; that life is meaningless and unjust! I can’t reassure them, because I can’t speak with the absolute authority of a knower.

All I can offer them is this book, which I have written about matters I only partially understand, in the hope that it my somehow, to some

readers, reveal glimpses of inner truth which remain hidden from its author” (338).

Isherwood, Christopher, author, and Don Bachardy, artist. *October*. Los Angeles: Twelvetreets, 1981.

In October of 1979, these two men who were longtime companions produced material for this art book with pages of twelve by nine inches. Isherwood wrote text for each day of the month, and Bachardy produced thirty-two portraits of their friends or associates. The text is not coordinated in any way with the drawings, nor should it be. This is one of print run of 3,000 copies, and much of the text repeats or is a variation on material that Isherwood has already covered in either his diaries or other contemporary books, such as *Kathleen and Frank*, a memoir of his parents.

Nuggets:

“The beginning of October is a joyful, hopeful, inspiring time of the year for me—it always has been. For me, born so late in the summer, autumn is my spring. This is the season which I associate with fresh work-projects in their earliest, most creative phase—the phase of discovering what the project is really about, rather than how I can execute it” (8).

“Since 1973, I’ve been gradually reading through the Marchand edition of Byron’s Letters and Journals, volume by volume, as they are published. Now I’ve nearly finished volume nine, which covers October 1821 to September 1822” (15).

“There are students who are doing term-papers or these about my work or the work of my friends. They expect me to drop everything and answer pages of questions, instead of themselves looking for the answers in the library. All right, I sympathize with their laziness. But, too often, they make the crudest of all mistakes; they think they can flatter me into helping them by claiming, ‘I’ve read everything you’ve written’—a statement which could only be true of maybe twenty people in the Unites States” (17). And I’m now one of those twenty (surely more by now)! Frankly, I wouldn’t *tell* an author such a thing but would hope my questions or our discussion would reflect that I had read all his books.

October is a project the two men designed so that they might work together (although they did also collaborate on a number of scripts). Nonetheless, I enjoyed reading the book and look forward to viewing the drawings again and again.

Isherwood, Christopher and W. H Auden. *On the Frontier: A Melodrama In Three Acts*. New York: Random, 1938.

This play is another of three that Auden and Isherwood co-wrote. It tells of the

conflict between the fictional countries of Ostnia and Westland—as one can imagine, the former symbolizing the East and the latter the West, or at least one that represents freedom and one that does not. The most interesting, perhaps innovative, aspect of the play occurs in Act Two, where an Ostnian household occupies the left half of the stage, and a Westland household occupies the right half. Some of the more moving and dramatic dialogue takes place here, as competing radio programs shout out their announcements, the very texts contrasting two ways of life:

OSTNIAN RADIO. In view of the extreme gravity of the situation . . .

WESTLAND RADIO. The Leader . . .

OSTNIAN RADIO. His majesty the King . . .

WESTLAND RADIO. Has decided . . .

OSTNIAN RADIO. Has graciously consented . . .

WESTLAND RADIO. To address the nation . . .

OSTNIAN RADIO. To address his people . . .

WESTLAND RADIO. The address will be broadcast from all stations at midnight.

OSTNIAN RADIO. The address will be broadcast from all stations at midnight (57).

At any rate, the Ostnian family and the Westland family proceed as if the other isn't there, and yet, like their radio stations, their lives seem to dovetail. In a manner similar to Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, Eric, a son of one family is drawn to Anna, a daughter in the other family but only in a spiritual sense, perhaps indicating that love can cross all political boundaries. Their idealistic views hark toward an uncertain if hopeful future.

Another memorable scene could very well be the last one, in which the young people “meet” again:

[ERIC and ANNA, dressed and made up exactly as in Act Two, Scene I, emerge from behind the screens at the heads of their respective beds, and advance into the light-circle. The beds fade into darkness.]

ANNA. Will people never stop killing each other?

There is no place in the world

For those who love.

ERIC. Believing it was wrong to kill,

I went to prison, seeing myself

As the sane and innocent student

Aloof among practical and violent madmen,

But I was wrong. We cannot choose our world,

Our time, our class. None are innocent, none (118).

These last lines perhaps sum up why the two authors penned the play in the first place. Isherwood, having lived in pre-Nazi Germany, sees first-hand what it is like to exist in a country where one is relieved of the privilege of making choices, particularly the one to escape. It is a play that, precisely because of its time period, does not easily survive the future.

Isherwood, Christopher. *Prater Violet*. London: Random, 1945.

Prater Violet is a short novel about the film industry of 1933 London. The movie being made, *Prater Violet*, is set in pre-1914 Vienna, where a young woman named Toni sells violets in the streets. Soon she meets a handsome young man, who, at first, seems like a student but turns out to be Rudolf, the Crown Prince of Borodania. As Isherwood does in other fictional works, his persona becomes a character in this work. The novel draws upon his experience as a scriptwriter, a role that he will later continue in Hollywood. As always, he has a sharp eye for telling details. In this passage, he describes the director with whom the fictional Christopher must work, Friedrich Bergmann:

“Bergmann’s strong, hairy, ringless hand rested on the table. He held his cigarette like an accusing forefinger, pointed straight at Chatsworth’s heart. His head was magnificent, and massive as sculptured granite. The head of a Roman emperor, with dark old Asiatic eyes. His stiff drab suit didn’t fit him. His shirt collar was too tight. His tie was askew and clumsily knotted. Out of the corner of my eye, I studied the big firm chin, the grim compressed line of the mouth, the harsh furrows cutting down from the imperious nose, the bushy black hair in the nostrils. The face was the face of an emperor, but the eyes were the dark mocking eyes of his slave—the slave who ironically obeyed, watched, humored and judged the master who could never understand him; the slave upon whom the master depended utterly for his amusement, for his instruction, for the sanction of his power; the slave who wrote the fables of beasts and men.”

One sees that the author begins with the concrete details of Bergmann's body. But he masterfully moves beyond the merely physical, which is vivid enough, to venture into the director's soul, creating the master/slave image which inhabits one character. In this lyrical paragraph Isherwood brings alive the director of the film, the heart of *Prater Violet*.

Moreover, he slyly indicates that the “Christopher Isherwood” of the novel is homosexual but never, of course, uses any such language:

“But there was a little waiter who, for some reason, had taken a fancy to me. We always exchanged a few words when I came in. One day, when I was sitting in a large group and had ordered, as usual, the cheapest item on the menu, he came up behind my chair and whispered, ‘Why not take the Lobster Newburg, sir? The other gentlemen have ordered it. There’ll be enough for one extra. I won’t charge you anything.’”

Or consider this passage:

“Love had been J. for the last month—ever since we met at that party. Ever since the letter which had arrived next morning, opening the way to the unhopd-for, the unthinkable, the after-all-quite-thinkable and, as it now seemed, absolutely inevitable success of which my friends were mildly envious. Next week, or as soon as my work for Bulldog was finished, we should go away together. To the South of France, perhaps. And it would be wonderful. We would swim. We would lie in the sun. We would take photographs. We would sit in the café. We would hold hands, at night, looking out over the sea from the balcony of our room. I would be so grateful, so flattered, and I would be damned careful not to show it. I would be anxious. I would be jealous. I would unpack my box of tricks, and exhibit them, once again. And, in the end (the end you never thought about), I would get sick of the tricks, or J. would get sick of them. And very politely, tenderly, nostalgically, flatteringly, we would part. We would part, agreeing to be the greatest friends always. We would part, immune, in future, from that particular toxin, that special twinge of jealous desire, when one of us met the other, with somebody else, at another party.”

“J” could be a woman to an unknowing reader, or a naïve one. Isherwood can only be speaking of his relationship with another young man—this book set in 1933, published in 1945. Ah, young love, dissipated before it ever begins—and does so in such a way that would never occur now, or would it? As can happen with the production of any dramatic fare, all parties can become close, and this telling passage arrives very near the ending:

“We had written each other’s part, Christopher’s Friedrich, Friedrich’s Christopher, and we had to go on playing them, as long as we were together . . . [f]or beneath our disguises, and despite all the kind-unkind things we might ever say or think about each other, we knew. Beneath outer consciousness, two other beings, anonymous, impersonal, without labels, had met and recognized each other, and had clasped hands. He was my father. I was his son. And I loved him very much.”

That last bit of sentimentality, a rarity in Isherwood’s writing, might be excusable if we recall that he lost his own father at a very young age to the Great War. The excerpt gives voice to one of those deep needs that anyone of us can fall prey to, and Isherwood never ceases to address it in one way or another.

Isherwood, Christopher. *Ramakrishna and His Disciples*. New York: Simon, (1959) 1965. By way of his own studies and attempted practice of Hinduism, Isherwood becomes interested in writing the biography of Ramakrishna (1836-1886), who spends most of his life meditating and teaching in Calcutta. Isherwood promises the Swami he is studying with in 1950s Los Angeles that he will write such a biography and spends a number of years compiling a fairly extensive bibliography and writing the text. After studying Volume Two of Isherwood’s *Diaries*, I believe that

Isherwood sees himself as a vessel by which to relate the teachings of Hinduism, even if he sometimes falters in his own faith and practices. Yet Isherwood's unfailing prose—its elegant readability, its lyricism, its invisible service to its subject—makes this book equal to the best of his fiction and nonfiction alike. I list below a number of nuggets from the text.

Isherwood straightaway explains the idea of caste: “To understand Caste as an idea rather than as a system, we have to go back to the Bhagavad-Gita, which dates from about the fifth century B.C. and is still the most widely read work of Hindu religious literature. In the eighteenth chapter of the Gita, we find Caste presented as a kind of natural order. The four castes are described in relation to their duties and responsibilities, without any mention of their privileges” (7).

“Ramakrishna replied calmly that this was the right way to meditate [naked]. Man labours from his birth under eight forms of bondage, he told Hriday: they are hatred, shame, fear, doubt, aversion, self-righteousness, pride in one's lineage and pride in one's caste-status. All these forms of bondage tie man's mind down to worldly thoughts and desires and prevent him from raising his mind to spiritual things. The sacred thread reminds a man that he belongs to the highest caste, that of the brahmins; therefore it makes him proud of his birth. And so it must be discarded, along with every other pretension, possession, desire and aversion, before one can approach the Mother in meditation” (59).

“The Hindu will therefore entirely agree with Oscar Wilde's epigram that ‘every saint has a past and every sinner has a future.’ But a saint is still a human being and an avatar is not; he is other than a saint. An avatar has no ‘past’ in this sense, for he has no karma. He is not driven by his karma to be born; he takes human birth as an act of pure grace, for the good of humanity” (94).

“In India, when a disciple comes to his guru for initiation, he is given what is called a *mantra*. The mantra consists of one or more holy names—Om is usually included—which the disciple is to repeat to himself and meditate upon for the rest of his life. It is regarded as very private and very sacred” (106).

“Mother heard the news and expressed some grief—but then she started to console *me*. ‘This world is transitory,’ she told me, ‘everyone must die some day, so what's the use of grieving?’ and so forth. It seemed to that the Divine Mother had tuned Mother to a high pitch, like a stringed instrument keyed up to a very high note” (149).

“Something has already been said, in Chapter 4, about the influence of the British upon India. One of the many evils of foreign conquest is the tendency of the conquered to imitate their conquerors. This kind of imitation is evil because it is uncritical; it does not choose certain aspects of the alien culture and reject others, but accepts everything slavishly, with a superstitious belief that if you ape your conquerors you will acquire their superior power” (154).

“We have seen that Ramakrishna did not expect too much of the Brahmos; their previous conditioning had left them incapable of any radical change of life and mind. Contact with them made Ramakrishna long all the more earnestly for some really dedicated disciples—young ones preferably—who would be ready to renounce every worldly desire and follow his teaching without any reservations. The others, he was accustomed to say, could no more be taught true spirituality than a parrot can be taught to speak after the ring of coloured feathers has appeared around its neck” (167).

“During his first visit, Ramakrishna subjected Baburam to certain physical tests. Ramakrishna often did this, saying that an examination of a man’s physical characteristics revealed his spiritual character—at least, to the insight of an initiated person. For example, Ramakrishna would say that eyes shaped like lotus petals betokened good thoughts; that eyes like those of a bull betokened a predominance of lust” (219).

After a long parable about a snake and a cowherd, and how the snake lets the cowherd beat him: **“You have to hiss at wicked people. You have to scare them, or they’ll harm you. But you must never shoot venom into them. You must never harm them” (270).**

The last part of the book profiles each of Ramakrishna’s disciples and their continuing work throughout the world.

Isherwood, Christopher. *A Single Man*. New York: Farrar, 1964.

I suppose I had to reach a certain maturity (age 68) to truly get or appreciate the beauty and artistry of this book (see previous reviews). Isherwood is a master, in complete control of his material, and the reader damn well better be prepared to go beyond a surface or superficial understanding of the book.

I claimed in the earlier reading that Isherwood tells us little or nothing about Jim. Pieces of Jim are buried all throughout George’s consciousness—a sliver of Jim hither, a sliver of him thither!

“Jim is dead. Is dead” (13).

“Breakfast with Jim used to be one of the best times of their day. It was then, while they were drinking their second and third cups of

coffee, that they had their best talks. They talked about everything that came into their heads—including death, of course, and is there survival, and, if so, what exactly is it that survives. They even discussed the relative advantages and disadvantages of getting killed instantly and of knowing you're about to die. But now George can't for the life of him remember what Jim's views were on this. Such questions are hard to take seriously. They seem so academic" (15).

"How dearly Mrs. Strunk would enjoy being sad about Jim! But, aha, she doesn't know; none of them know. It happened in Ohio, and the L.A. papers didn't carry the story" (28).

"Jim used to moan and complain and raise hell over a head cold, a cut finger, a pile. But Jim was lucky at the end—the only time when luck really counts. The truck hit his car just right; he never felt it. And they never got him into a place like this one. His smashed belongings were of no use to them for their rituals" (95).

"An uncle of Jim's whom he'd never met—trying to be sympathetic, even admitting George's right to a small honorary share in the sacred family grief—but then, as they talked, becoming a bit chilled by George's laconic *Yes, I see, yes*, his curt *No, thank you*, to the funeral invitation—deciding no doubt that this much talked of roommate hadn't been such a close friend after all . . ." (126).

"George and Jim (who had just met) were out there among them evening after evening, yet not often enough to satisfy the sad fierce appetite of memory, as it looks back hungrily on that glorious Indian summer of lust" (148).

For some reason reading Isherwood's *Diaries, the Sixties*, helped me to read this novel differently this time. I believe it may have been all the autobiographical information that Isherwood includes in the fabric of the novel: his teaching at a Los Angeles university; his *mourning* when his companion, Don, is out of town, a woman friend very much like Charley, the small charming house by the sea. His prose for each is so different, mainly by way of tone. The *Diaries* are so free, the tone so honest, at times bitter and at others loving. The novel's tone doesn't vary much until the end. George is grief-stricken with his loss. Every emotion from sarcasm to lust is poured through this funnel of grief. The tone is such until he has the escapade with his college student, Kenny, in which they go skinny-dipping in the Pacific after having gotten properly drunk. Then and only then does George's *tone* change to one of acceptance. And then he dies. I had not taken note of that before, how Isherwood shifts to a very nineteenth century omniscient view of George's last few seconds before a heart attack takes him:

"The body on the bed stirs slightly, perhaps; but it does not cry out, does not wake. It shows no outward sign of the instant, annihilating shock. Cortex and brain stem are murdered in the blackout with the

speed of an Indian strangler. Throttled out of its oxygen, the heart clenches and stops” (186).

I hope this is the last time I misjudge a book so harshly, but I suspect it won't be.

Isherwood, Christopher. *Where Joy Resides: A Christopher Isherwood Reader* edited by Don Bachardy and James P. White with an introduction by Gore Vidal. New York: Farrar, 1989.

In this compendium I have either read or plan to read from a more complete document many of the pieces: *Goodbye to Berlin*, *Prater Violet*, *Down There on a Visit*, *Kathleen and Frank*, *Lions and Shadows*, *My Guru and His Disciple*, and *A Single Man*. I shall only report on the Vidal introduction and Exhumations, six short essays on various writers or topics, which I've not previously read.

Vidal comments on Isherwood's ability to observe humanity without judgment and report on it in the form of well-honed fiction.

[H]e is never without surprises; in the course of what looks to be an undemanding narrative, the author will suddenly produce a Polaroid shot of the reader reading, an alarming effect achieved by the sly use of the second person pronoun. You never know quite where *you* stand in relation to an Isherwood work” (x).

Vidal goes on to say

As I now reread the two memoirs in sequence [*Christopher and His Kind*, 1929, and *Lions and Shadows*, 1939], it is odd how little Isherwood changed in a half century. The style is much the same throughout. The shift from first to third person does not much alter the way he has of looking at things and it is, of course, the *precise* way in which Isherwood perceives the concrete world that makes all the difference. He is particularly good at noting a physical appearance that suggests, through his selection of nouns, verbs, a psychic description” (xiii).

In Exhumations, Isherwood pens essays about H. G. Wells, Robert Louis Stevenson, Katherine Mansfield, Vivekananda and Sarah Bernhardt, Klaus Mann, and one entitled, “Hypothesis and Belief.” Particularly appealing to me are the pieces about Katherine Mansfield and Sarah Bernhardt, two women who lived way ahead of their times.

“There are some writers you revere; others you fall in love with. The loved ones are seldom the greatest; indeed, their very faults are a part of their charm. For several years I was violently in love with ‘Kathy,’ as my friends and I (who never knew her personally) used to call her” (175).

She later has a child out of wedlock and dies at a relatively young age of TB. Bernhardt lives longer than Mansfield and experiences far more success in her chosen field of acting. The remaining essays are noteworthy and well-written, of course, but I don't, for some reason, find them as interesting.

Isherwood, Christopher. *The World in the Evening*. Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota Press, 1952, 1982.

Evening, set in the late 1930s and early 1940s, seems to be hung on a simple frame. Part One is entitled "An End." In it the protagonist, Stephen Monk, catches his second wife, Jane, in a compromising position with another man and leaves her immediately—almost too easily, it seems. Isherwood introduces a number of principle characters, including Stephen's "Aunt" Sarah, as well as his nurse, Gerda. Part Two is called "Letters and Life." In this section Stephen recovers from a horrendous accident which occurs at the end of Part One, in which he is hit by a truck (described rather ethereally with little blood or pain). In this new milieu of body casts and long, empty days of convalescence, Monk untangles his life for the reader (often by way of letters he has saved): he flashes back to the life with his first wife, Elizabeth, a famous author, older than Stephen by twelve years, and how she dies. All of this section takes place in his family home in Pennsylvania which his aunt manages. He also describes an early episode in his married life with Elizabeth in which a younger man inveigles him into having a brief and unsatisfactory affair. In Part Three, "A Beginning," the reader is brought back to the beginning time period where Stephen's body is healed, and he ties up all the loose ends of the story. Stephen and his ex-wife Jane have lunch, and the reader finally learns what really happens in the beginning with her and the man she's with in bed (actually, it's a large children's playhouse in the back yard where a party is being given). For some readers (even to Isherwood as a younger man), the novel might conclude a bit sappily, a bit too neatly. The ending is perhaps saved by the witty repartee the couple exchange. For twenty-first century readers, it may be a bit too sweet.

A few nuggets from the novel:

In this passage we read a portion of a letter written by Elizabeth, with regard to Hitler's rise to power, while she lives in Europe: "**Oughtn't I to be *doing* something to try to stop the spread of this hate-disease? Oughtn't I to be attacking it directly? But, of course, this very feeling of guilt and inadequacy is really a symptom of the disease itself. The disease is trying to paralyze you into complete inaction, so it makes you drop your own work and attempt to fight it in some apparently practical way, which is unpractical for you because you aren't equipped for it—and so you end frustrated and doing nothing**" (171). It may remind some of us of how we *and* the media are paralyzed by a particular presidential candidate at the moment.

"Suddenly, I didn't care any more. The problem had dissolved itself in the beer; and now there wasn't any problem at all, no drama, no tenseness. This was all clean fun, I told myself; and it didn't have to be anything more than that.

In the darkness I remembered the adolescent, half-angry pleasure of wrestling with boys at school. And then, later, there was a going even further back, into the nursery sleep of childhood with its teddy bear, or of puppies or kittens in a basket, wanting only the warmth of anybody” (194). Here, Stephen describes (barely referring to it) his sexual experience with a young man. It helps him, a heterosexual man, to rationalize his one-night stand, a move rather dated by standards of contemporary gay or straight fiction.

“This was the next day, in New York. Jane and I had met—for the first time since our divorce—to have cocktails and lunch at a hotel on Central Park; and I had finished telling her about the civilian ambulance unit in which I’d enlisted as a driver, to go to North Africa” (293-4). This passage makes me wonder why Isherwood chooses this kind of job for Stephen Monk, when Hemingway has selected it over twenty years earlier for his noted character, Frederic Henry, in *A Farewell to Arms*. Perhaps it is a common way for a civilian to become involved in a war effort.

“‘Well, thanks,’ I grinned. ‘You aren’t looking any too repulsive yourself, right now’” (294). Isherwood does this occasionally, uses a speech attribution which is not really a synonym for the word “say”—a practice that may be acceptable in British publishing but one which current practitioners of fiction abhor. Also, the remark itself seems rather a backhanded compliment given to a woman who has once been your wife.

More so than any book of Isherwood’s that I have read so far, this reading seems to be an academic exercise, not as enjoyable as the previous twelve.

James, Marlon. *A Brief History of Seven Killings*. New York: Riverhead, 2014.

At the end of 2015, I watched BBC America as Mr. James won the Booker Prize in London—an approximation of America’s National Book Award. Because I’m constantly juggling the reading of several books, I have a difficult time with rather lengthy tomes—this one is 688 pages—but *Brief History* is well worth the time, is worthy of the many accolades it has received. On the cover some reviewers call it is a masterpiece. Only time will tell on that score, but it is certainly a hearty and substantive read, plenty of red meat for any reader.

You know you’re in for an exhilarating great ride when the author provides a cast of characters totaling seventy-six. Now only thirteen actually narrate, but still, thirteen alternating points of view provide great layers of texture to the narrative, a broadening of its scope. The first two parts take place in 1979 and fictionalize the assassination attempt on the life of musician Bob Marley—referred to as the Singer. The third part takes place in 1979, the fourth in 1985, and the fifth in 1991—the aftermath that keeps unfolding. A coda of sorts, consisting of twelve short chapters, serves as a very satisfying denouement, in which everyone’s questions are answered.

Yet the novel is so much more than an inside look at Jamaica’s drug trade. I’m not sure any writer has ever captured Jamaican life in the manner that James does.

First, he succeeds in recreating, in print, not only one but probably several Jamaican dialects (much like Twain does in *Huckleberry Finn*). Do I know that for sure? No. It's a guess. But I do know this. The text seems authentic. Nowhere in the book, do you find the word "Goddamn," except when an American is speaking. You will run across, scores of times, the words "Bombocloth" or "bloodcloth." If you let your imagination run wild, you can guess what kind of cloth is a bloodcloth. This male-dominated society would rather use iconography of menstruation to swear than risk the wrath of the Pentecostal God that reigns over its shores. Then there is the word, "fuckery." Beautiful. James's prose is so clean, free not only of traditional syntax but free of conventional thought, as well. He recreates a world you will never see when your cruise ship stops for the day in Montego Bay.

Three paragraphs, and I've barely touched on the novel, but here are what I deem to be a few of its finer nuggets:

"Listen.

Dead people never stop talking. Maybe because death is not death at all, just a detention after school. You know where you're coming from and you're always returning from it. You know where you're going though you never seem to get there and you're just dead. Dead" (1). What a fabulous opening. And there's more from this character, who is actually dead—Sir Arthur George Jennings, a former politician, a ghost!

"Me want enough money to stop want money" (55). —Demus, a gang member

"The white man say we're fighting for freedom from totalitarianism, terrorism and tyranny, but nobody know what he mean" (73). —Bambam, a gang member

"Certain parts of town you let the baby walk the street and you leave him when he play in the shit water. And when him get sick so that he is just a ballooning, bursting screaming belly that used to be a baby, you take your time to go to clinic which too packed anyway and the baby dead while you waiting in the line, or maybe you take pity and cover the baby with your pillow the night before and either way, you see and wait, because death is the best thing you could do for him" (179). —Papa-lo, don of Copenhagen City, 1960-1979

"Please, please, please, please, please shut up. Just shut up. I'm going to go find my head" (308). —Kim Clarke, unemployed woman. Reminiscent of woman's speech in Hemingway's story, "Hills Like White Elephants," in which she uses "please" seven times (no commas) to demand that a man to stop talking. Effective in both cases.

"—Eh, what do you really think you know about the Central Peace Council? I bet you didn't know that it was a joke. Peace. Only one

kind of peace can ever come down the ghetto. It's really simple, so simple even a retarded man can catch the drift. Even a white man. The second you say peace this and peace that, and let's talk about peace, is the second gunman put down their guns. But guess what, white boy. As soon as you put down your gun the policeman pull out his gun. Dangerous thing, peace. Peace make you stupid. You forget that not everybody sign peace treaty. Good times bad for somebody" (387). —Josey Wales, don, speaking to Alex Pierce, journalist for *Rolling Stone*

"It is a thing to watch, the kind of feeling that take up a white man every time you take him to Port Royal. You wonder if this is the same spirit that leap up in them as soon as they land on any rock. I'm betting it is so, from as far back as Columbus and slavery. Something about landing from sea that make a white man free to say and do as he please" (411). Whoa! —Josey Wales, head enforcer, don of Copenhagen City, 1979-1991, leader of the Storm Posse

"Now something new is blowing through the air, an ill wind" (430). — Sir Arthur George Jennings, ghost, repeats this phrase—*something new is blowing*—scores of times in this chapter. "Tony McFerson stands up first with a wide smile on his face, a heave and a sigh of relief one could see from four hundred feet away. The third bullet goes through his neck sideways, explodes the medulla and kills everything below the neck before his brain realizes he's dead" (432). What description!

"But Weeper have this thing where he just can't get along with any woman, or rather this thing where no woman can tell him what to do. Then again Griselda is not a woman. She a vampire who cock drop off a hundred years ago. She lose her patience with him and when a madwoman like her lose her patience with you she would make even a hardcore Jamaican rudie go, Bombocloth bitch yuh wicked no fuck. Was just a matter of months before she kill Weeper herself" (465). — Josey Wales, speaking of Weeper, a gang enforcer, Storm Posse head enforcer, Manhattan/Brooklyn

"Right now everybody know that whoever shoot the Singer was aiming for the heart but get the chest and only because he exhale instead of inhale, right? I mean, it even in the book on him" (544). — Tristan Phillips, inmate at Rikers

A Brief History of Seven Killings is one of those major works I know I shall read again—largely because there is so much to digest and understand. It's that dense with irony, with meaning. It's that enjoyable, if I dare use such a word.

Levin, Adam, and Beau Friedlander. *Swiped: How to Protect Yourself in a World Full of Scammers, Phishers, and Identify Thieves*. New York: Public Affairs, 2015.

When you aren't an expert in a particular field, you can be cowed by someone who IS (supposedly) an expert. That's how I feel as I read Levin's book *Swiped*. It's a clever title. You think at first: Oh, he's talking about how you swipe your card in a reader when purchasing an item, and then you get caught up in the pun. He's really talking about when someone *else* swipes your card and *swipes* it in a reader or uses it to *swipe* your data. As a student of rhetoric, I'm always suspicious of what seems like hyperbolic speech, oversell, overkill. At the same time, Levin could be Paul Revere, and most of us just aren't listening. Although Levin's book provides a great deal of usable information, I do believe he could have honed it down to one well-edited magazine article, and it would have been just as effective. You be the judge.

Let me share a few of the nuggets I found interesting:

“More than 500 million photographs are uploaded to major websites every day. More than 2 billion pictures are taken on mobile devices every day” (Kindle Location 85). Elsewhere Levin cautions against using geotagged photos at websites like Facebook because it can give thieves clues to your PII (personally identifiable information). It probably begins with the settings in your camera or iPhoto. I think it makes sense NOT to geotag.

“Debit cards increase your exposure to fraud. Use a credit card” (Kindle Location 578). Levin asserts that “carefully placed cameras” (by thieves?) can record PIN numbers as you enter them in an ATM or device at your favorite store. Not sure what his authority or source is on this assertion, and he's assuming that thieves could EASILY install their own cameras at ATM stations. Seriously?

He warns against the free release of your social security number: **“With your Social Security number in the wind, whoever finds it—or, more likely, whoever buys it on one of the many black-market information exchanges on the deep web—holds the keys to every part of your life. What that means—plain and simple—is that you're going to need an efficient way to keep one eye over your shoulder, all the time” (Kindle Location 591).** The paranoid tone notwithstanding, Levin's advice is probably good. Elsewhere in the book, he directs the reader to keep only a COPY of your Medicare card in your wallet with all but the last four numbers blacked out, the “M” or “F,” as well. This way, you can still inform someone who needs the number (medical personnel) but protect yourself from unwarranted use if someone should steal your wallet. He also warns against carrying your Social Security card (or copy) for the very same reasons.

At one point Levin makes a list: **“We expose our most sensitive personal information any time we**

Pick up a phone, respond to a text, click on a link, or carelessly provide personal information to someone we don't know;

Fail to properly secure computers or devices;

Create easy-to-crack passwords;

Discard, rather than shred, documents that contain PII;

Respond to an email that directs us to call a number we can't independently confirm, or complete an attachment that asks for our PII in an insecure environment;

Save our user ID or password on a website or in an app as a shortcut for future logins;

Use the same user ID or password throughout our financial, social networking, and email universes;

Take [online] quizzes that subtly ask for information we've provided as the answers to security questions on various websites.

Snap pictures with our smartphone or digital camera without disabling the geotagging function;

Use our email address as a user name/ID, if we have the option to change it;

Use PINS like 1234 or a birthday;

Go twenty-four hours without reviewing our bank and credit card accounts to make absolutely sure that every transaction we see is familiar;

Fail to enroll in free transactional monitoring programs offered by banks, credit unions, and credit card providers that notify us every time there is any activity in our accounts;

Use a free Wi-Fi network [i.e. cafés or even airports] without confirming it is correctly identified and secure, to check email or access financial services websites that contain our sensitive data” (Kindle Location 668-678).

These tips are all good advice. I only question whether we need to check our accounts EVERY DAY. Perhaps every second or third day, even once a week?

“The deep web is a hidden part of the Internet. It consists of a vast number of sites, most of them thoroughly boring, that can't be found by a traditional search engine like Google. To access these sites, you need a password, a specific URL, a sophisticated understanding of how computers communicate, or sometimes all of the above. The deep web is four hundred to six hundred times larger than the

‘surface web,’ that is, the familiar sites you can access via search engines and see every day” (Kindle Location 781). Hm, yes, okay. On the one hand, I want to run screaming into the street. On the other, I want to laugh. So . . . the deep, dark web is **LARGER** than our mere regular Internet? But it is also harder to break into? Perhaps the underworld of crime has always been that way, but something about Levin’s tone makes me wary. Moreover, he repeats many, many times that everyone, **EVERYONE**, will be hacked or in some way attacked by parties wanting access to our personal digital information. Mathematically, that doesn’t seem possible. It’s like saying **EVERYONE** will have a car accident in his or her lifetime, or **EVERYONE** will contract TB or AIDS. Some people just won’t.

All these admonitions, in a nutshell, are what Levin’s entire book is about. If I were to liken his book to a musical form I would say it is a rondo: Theme **ABACADA** or perhaps Variations on a Theme. He keeps repeating the same themes in slightly different ways. A full quarter of the book consists of five appendices, which repeat oft-harped-on information presented earlier.

Again, Levin seems to offer the reader/consumer/citizen-of-the-world valuable data, but his Paul Revere appeal could have been reduced to bite-sized pieces. He could have skipped many of the useless or situation-specific anecdotes and provided the reader with a little card to keep in the wallet or purse. Sometimes too much information can also be too little.

McMurtry, Larry. *Roads: Driving America's Great Highways*. New York: Simon, 2001.

“I wanted to drive the American roads at the century’s end, to look at the country again, from border to border and beach to beach” (11). This statement is how McMurtry begins his travel book, which is not so much about the places he sees—although he does go into some detail about literary people, places, events—as much as it is about the *roads* that take him there. McMurtry loves to drive and not along those quaint roads where you can get stuck behind a slow-moving RV or semi, but the big ones, the Interstates. And every road he introduces with the article, t-h-e: the 15, the 40, the 35. He’ll often take a plane to a target city, rent a car, and drive back to his native Archer City in Texas.

Some nuggets:

“My casual intention, in thinking about these journeys, was to have a look at the literature that had come out of the states I passed through. For Minnesota there is not a whole lot. Scott Fitzgerald, though a native son, spent most of his life east of Princeton or west of Pasadena. His work seems to me to owe little or nothing to the [M]idwest. Louise Erdrich lives in Minneapolis now, but most of her work is set well to the west, near the Turtle Mountain Reservation in North Dakota” (30).

“Most Mexicans still feel that they have an innate right to be on the north side of the [Rio Grande] river, where their grandparents or great-grandparents lived. The Border Patrol can deport them, but it can’t extinguish this feeling” (54). If only Texans especially would understand this idea.

“Despite the Army Corps of Engineers’ elaborate strategies for controlling the lower Mississippi, most people who know and love the river know that it is more powerful than many plans human beings may design: one day it may rise up in flood and take out much of southern Louisiana, blowing through human constraints as easily as *Moby Dick* blew through the whaling boat” (68) LM wrote this in 2000. Not too prescient, eh?

“Once, when I was about ten, we were approaching the ranch after veering north to look at some pasturage when we saw a small barefoot boy racing along the hot road with terror in his face. My father just managed to stop him. Though incoherent with fear, the boy managed to inform us that his little brother had just drowned in the horse trough. My father grabbed the boy and we went racing up to the farmhouse, where the anguished mother, the drowned child in her arms, was sobbing, crying out in German, and rocking in a rocking chair. Fortunately the boy was not quite dead. My father managed to get him away from his mother long enough to stretch him out on the porch and squeeze the water out of him. In a while the boy began to belch dirty fluids and then to breathe again. The crisis past, we went on home. The graceful German mother brought my father jars of her best sauerkraut for many, many years” (185). This anecdote speaks for itself.

Once in a while, McMurtry allows his prejudices to overpower his reason: “I’m not entirely comfortable in Idaho—fortunately it’s only seventy-five miles across the Idaho panhandle from Coeur d’Alene over the hills to Montana. I suppose my discomfort has to do with the Aryan Brotherhood and similar organizations, several of which make their official home in Idaho. In no state is there such obvious hatred of law and government—hard to explain, since there is scant evidence that there *is* much law and government in Idaho. A lot of frontier types who aren’t quite up to Alaska hang out there, secure in the knowledge that they’re in part of the country where the outlaw mentality is still encouraged” (195).

Once, while with friends in Boise, Idaho, following our attendance of a play set in an outdoor amphitheater, we and our hosts got in the car. I dreaded the wait for all of those vehicles to vacate the huge parking lot (recalling how savagely impolite most Texans are when it comes to their own motto of *Drive Friendly*), but I was hugely surprised when, at a certain juncture, as if there were a four-way stop, drivers politely took their turns until each car, of the hundreds, had made its way to the

exit—all without frenzy, all without rancor or rudeness, and in record time. Surely such a land is not as bad as McMurtry makes out. Think of all the wise academics at Idaho universities. Think of all the Mormons and other religious people who make their homes in Idaho. Are they all to be tainted by a group such as the Aryan Brotherhood? Come on, Larry. And talk about hatred of government: once when I was on a trip with forty other West Texans to visit the city of Ottawa, Canada, a majority of my fellow travelers booed the very mention of our president's name. You see, this particular bakery had deigned to rename their maple leaf cookie the Obama cookie. I never felt so ashamed to be an American in my life. I personally HATED George W. Bush, but I NEVER would have booed his name in any public setting, particularly in a foreign country—because much as I detested him and his policies, he was still my president. Larry, please, no more generalizations about people who hate or don't hate. They're just not relevant. We are all capable of hate in almost any context. And I won't let it stop me from loving your book!

Mailer, Norman. *The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel/The Novel as History*. New York: New American Library, 1968.

Almost fifty years after its publication, *Armies of the Night* needs no summary. For that you can easily consult Web sources and get a take on its juxtaposition to similar literature of the time period. Nor need I comment much on the author's penchant for referring to himself in the third person. I merely thought it was about time I read some Mailer, and because this tome was recommended to me by friends, I selected *Armies*. It so clearly limns the times in which I lived as a youth who, except for a certain dumb luck, was spared the agony of being called to serve in the Vietnam War.

Instead, I offer, as usual, what I believe is perhaps the book in a **nugget**, what the novel is all about—a passage from the chapter, “Why Are We in Vietnam?”:

“Mailer had been going on for years about the diseases of America, its oncoming totalitarianism, its oppressiveness, its smog—he had written so much about the disease he had grown bored with his own voice, weary of his own petulance; the war in Vietnam offered therefore the grim pleasure of confirming his ideas. The disease he had written about existed now in open air: so he pushed further in his thoughts—the paradox of this obscene unjust war is that it provided him new energy—even as it provided new energy to the American soldiers who were fighting it.

“He came at last to the saddest conclusion of them all for it went beyond the war in Vietnam. He had come to decide that the center of America might be insane. The country had been living with a controlled, even fiercely controlled, schizophrenia which had been deepening with the years. Perhaps the point had now been passed. Any man or woman who was devoutly Christian and worked for the American Corporation, had been caught in an unseen vise whose pressure could split their mind from their soul. For the center of

Christianity was a mystery, a son of God, and the center of the corporation was a detestation of mystery, a worship of technology. Nothing was more intrinsically opposed to technology than the bleeding heart of Christ. The average American, striving to do his duty, drove further every day into working for Christ, and drove equally further each day in the opposite direction—into working for the absolute computer of the corporation” (188).

“Christians had been able to keep some kind of sanity for centuries while countenancing love against honor, desire versus duty, even charity opposed in the same heart to the lust for power—that was difficult to balance but not impossible. The love of the Mystery of Christ, however, and the love of no Mystery whatsoever, had brought the country to a state of suppressed schizophrenia so deep that the foul brutalities of the war in Vietnam were the only temporary cure possible for the condition—since the expression of brutality offers a definite if temporary relief to the schizophrenic” (188).

Wow! (No emoji needed.)

Mayer, Jane. *Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires Behind the Rise of the Radical Right*. New York: Doubleday, 2016.

If you’ve ever sat down and a friend told you a truly horrific story, you’ll know how I felt reading *Dark Money*. I haven’t read a more challenging book than this one in a long time—not that the 450-page tome is technically difficult to read (seventy pages are comprised of notes and an index). It is more of a textbook that could very well be studied over the course of an entire semester. Yes, it is the immensity of sickening information washing over me chapter after chapter that makes it difficult to forge ahead. I heard the author speak on C-SPAN’s Book-TV’s “In Depth” series in March (a three-hour interview), <<http://www.c-span.org/video/?404809-1/depth-jane-mayer>>and her earnest discussion of not only this book but her entire career convinced me I should soldier through to the end. And at long last, I have.

Dark Money begins with the following caveat issued by Louis Brandeis, former Supreme Court justice, which also serves as the book’s epigraph: **“We must make our choice. We may have democracy, or we may have wealth concentrated in the hands of a few, but we can’t have both.”** And thus Mayer breathes life into the premise of her entire book, which she structures into three main sections: Part One, Weaponizing Philanthropy: the War of Ideas, 1970-2008; Part Two, Secret Sponsors: Covert Operations, 2009-2010; and Part Three, Privatizing Politics: Total Combat, 2011-2014. Essentially, for almost fifty years, a few individuals have attempted over and over again to exert political muscle by purchasing it. And since SCOTUS’s *Citizen’s United* decision these individuals have succeeded beyond one’s wildest dreams.

In Part One, Mayer traces the lives of two of the most politically active Koch brothers, Charles and David, and how the four brothers are raised by their father,

Fred Koch, to be ruthless business people. Only two manage to “succeed” to the degree that Charles and David do, but Bill and Freddie snatch their share of their inheritance and create lives for themselves apart from the family. Mayer includes the fact that the elder Fred Koch does business with the Nazis prior to World War II, helping them to build a great capacity for fuel storage. And it isn’t merely a business venture that makes him quite wealthy; Fred actually admires the fascistic elements coming to power in 1930s Europe. This fact helps to establish the ruthlessness that trickles down to Charles and David, the lengths to which either will go to get what he wants. Charles, especially, has the patience of a large feline predator, waiting, re-strategizing after defeat to attack again and again until he is victor. Part One also details others who ally themselves with the Kochs: Richard Mellon Scaife, John M. Olin, and the Bradley brothers, Lynde and Harry, how they exploit so-called philanthropy [501(c)(3)s], loopholes to accumulate vast sums of untaxed money and use it illegally for political purposes. Because of limited space, I will not summarize the contents of Parts Two and Three.

Mayer weaves together her sources and observations with the icy remove of an experienced and award-winning journalist, but she never wavers from the premise that hugely wealthy individuals are conspiring always to gain power over the lives of ordinary Americans by effecting policy changes in Congress which favor Big Business. And as I do read, I must circle her titular words “dark money” at least a dozen times as she hits home the motif chapter after chapter.

Some nuggets worth the reader’s digestion (or *indigestion*, as the case may be):

“Almost all of the recipients [of Bradley Prizes] had played major roles in tugging the American political debate to the right. And almost all had also been supported over the years by a tiny constellation of private foundations filled with tax-deductible gifts from a handful of wealthy reactionaries whose identities and stories very few Americans knew but whose ‘overarching purpose,’ as Joyce [Bradley] said, ‘was to use philanthropy to support a war of ideas’” (119). This might as well be Mayer’s thesis statement.

“Koch claimed there was no need for government policing [of corporations] because corporations’ concern for their reputations would cause them to self-regulate” (154). Hah!

The crux of how power corrupts Washington and turning point for the ACA: “‘The Republican leadership in Congress, [Grover Norquist] said, ‘couldn’t have done it without August, when people went out on the streets. It discouraged deal makers, like Grassley’—Republicans who might otherwise have worked constructively with Obama. Moreover, the appearance of growing public opposition to Obama affected corporate donors on K Street, the center of Washington’s lobbying industry: ‘K Street is a \$3 billion weather vane,’ Norquist said. ‘When Obama was strong, the Chamber of Commerce said, “We can

work with the Obama administration.” But that changed when thousands of people went into the street and “terrorized” congressmen. August is what changed it.” (194). What this statement means is that once again we citizens must “terrorize” our Congress, but how?

“In Boucher’s view, the polluters had triumphed by overturning the campaign-finance laws. ‘There was a huge change after *Citizens United*,’ he contends. ‘When anyone could spend any amount of money without revealing who they were, by hiding behind amorphous-named organizations, the floodgates opened. The Supreme Court made a huge mistake. There is no accountability. Zero.’” (252).

“The [carried-interest] loophole was in essence an accounting trick that enabled hedge fund and private equity managers to categorize huge portions of their income as ‘interest,’ which was taxed at the 15 percent rate then applied to long-term capital gains. This was less than half the income tax rate paid by other top-bracket wage earners. Critics called the loophole a gigantic subsidy to millionaires and billionaires at the expense of ordinary taxpayers. The Economic Policy Institute, a progressive think tank, estimated that the hedge fund loophole cost the government over \$6 billion a year—the cost of providing health care to three million children. Of that total, it said, almost \$2 billion a year from the tax break went to just twenty-five individuals” (255). Astounding and morally offensive.

“Later, in a round of image-repairing interviews, the Kochs would portray themselves as disinterested do-gooders and misunderstood social liberals who championed bipartisan issues such as criminal justice reform. But when put on the spot and stripped of public relations help, David Koch made his priorities clear. He regarded his self-interest and the public interest as synonymous” (272). And worse, he believes that ordinary Americans agree with him!

“The numbers regarding Koch Industries’ pollution were incontrovertible. In 2012, according to the EPA’s Toxic Release Inventory database, which documents the toxic and carcinogenic output of eight thousand American companies, Koch Industries was the number one producer of toxic waste in the United States. It generated 950 million pounds of hazardous materials that year. Of this total output, it released 56.8 million pounds into the air, water, and soil, making it the country’s fifth-largest polluter” (275).

“Contrary to predictions, the *Citizens United* decision hadn’t triggered a tidal wave of corporate political spending. Instead, it had empowered a few extraordinarily rich individuals with extreme and often self-serving agendas. As the nonpartisan Sunlight Foundation concluded in a postelection analysis, the superrich had become the

country's political gatekeepers. 'One ten-thousandth' of America's population or '1% of the 1%,' was 'shaping the limits of acceptable discourse, one conversation at a time'" (332).

The following passage demonstrates the Far Right's perceptions: "We got our clock cleaned in 2012,' Fink began. 'This is a long-term battle.' The challenge, he said he had learned, was that the country was divided into three distinct parts. The first third already supported the Kochs' conservative, libertarian vision. Another third, the liberals, whom he referred to as 'collectivists,' using the old John Birch Society term, were beyond the Kochs' reach. 'The battle for the future of the country is who can win the hearts and minds of the middle third,' Fink said. 'It will determine the direction of the country'" (358).

"The 100 biggest known donors in 2014 spent nearly as much money on behalf of their candidates as the 4.75 million people who contributed \$200 or less. On their own, the top 100 known donors gave \$323 million. And this was only the disclosed money. Once the millions of dollars is unlimited, undisclosed dark money were included, there was little doubt that an extraordinarily small and rich conservative clique had financially dominated everyone else" (371).
Enough said?

These are Mayer's last few sentences of the book: "But sharing was never easy for Charles Koch. As a child, he used to tell an unfunny joke. When called upon to split a treat with others, he would say with a wise-guy grin, 'I just want my fair share—which is all of it'" (378).

Mogelson, Luke. *These Heroic, Happy Dead*. New York: Tim Duggan, 2016.

Each story in this powerful collection falls in line with a long tradition of narratives about war: Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, and Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*. And there are scores of others, of course, but each of these three epitomize the three major wars of the twentieth century. What Mogelson does is to examine the PTSD-driven lives of men who return from this century's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Two of these stories first came to my attention in *The New Yorker* magazine, and I was stunned at their honesty, clarity, and integrity. Mogelson writes without either judgment or adulation; instead, the characters just *are*, alive on the page.

"Total Solar" is one of those stories I want both to speed by and yet s-t-r-e-t-c-h, never end, at the same time. An American in Afghanistan narrates his tale about time spent there as a journalist. There is so much to be said for authors who travel, particularly journalists: they never want for subject matter. Mogelson repeats a number of motifs from his Kabulian stew: the brown sky, dogs with tumors the size of cantaloupes, birds, elevated particulates of fecal matter in the air, and people talking on phones about those whom they might assassinate. The story has a Paul Bowles feel to it, except that the narrator is nearly suicidal over his *visit* to the

region, whereas Bowles is perhaps more sympathetic in his day (his *The Sheltering Sky* is published in 1949). After all, the narrator is in the MIDDLE of a war. He watches as a woman with whom he is acquainted stops to care for a child the narrator knows is faking illness as a lure. She is shot and killed: **“That was the end of Sue Kwan,” (173)**, he thinks, quickly distancing himself emotionally from the event. He portrays himself as nearly a buffoon, one of his CNN pieces having been YouTubed into oblivion for its comic qualities. Finally, he himself is shot, and he momentarily escapes up a mountain, where the air is much clearer. The man he believes is helping him later turns him into *authorities*, who show up and *interrogate* him. The story’s ending echoes the telephone motif, as the narrator overhears the planning of someone’s demise:

“That’s when I saw the man talking on his cell phone. ‘No, no one is with him, I can easily grab him,’ the man was saying. Or was he? I didn’t know. I still don’t” (184).

Morris, Bob. *Bobby Wonderful: An Imperfect Son Buries His Parents*. New York: Twelve, 2015.

Morris appeared with George Hodgman on C-SPAN’s Book-TV to give a reading about how they helped to care for an ailing parent. <<http://www.c-span.org/search/?searchtype=All&query=george+hodgman>> I don’t think it is as good as Hodgman’s book. It is fine in its own right, but it hasn’t the flair, the utter wit that Hodgman’s book has. Early on Morris turns to factual information:

“Caring for parents has become the new normal for boomers. It is estimated that 65 million people in this country are caregivers, with seven out of ten of them looking after someone over the age of fifty. Many of these caregivers report depression and some a decline in health. Most aren’t the perfect and selfless children who want to move their parents in with them and have their ashes scattered at a ballet. And they don’t have the vision to see what only the selfless and enlightened can know when in the middle of it, and what I only know now that the experience is behind me, making it easy to say: Caring for your parents is an opportunity” (6).

I had the same experience over ten years ago when my father came to town to live near me. Overseeing the last four years of his life may have been the biggest challenge of my life—including twenty-seven years as a public school teacher. When I finally did accept the experience as an opportunity and not a burden I was able to understand things about my father that had always puzzled or angered me, but it wasn’t easy. And I believe this fact may be what leaves me cold about Morris’s book. He brings little new to the table, either by way of experience or how he reports it. He, too, like Hodgman (like me) is gay, caring for an elderly parent with whom you have unresolved issues, but somehow he writes about it as if it, too, is just another assignment from his editor.

Russell, Karen. *Swamplandia!* New York: Vintage, 2011.

I begin, as usual, to annotate my copy of *Swamplandia!* because that's what I do when reading a book. However, with Russell's novel I repeat a habit I had as a child: I get lost in time and turn page after page, soak up word after glorious word (a few of which I have to look up). Her narrative beckons me to travel as quickly as she does.

Swamplandia! is an amusement park on an island, which is part of the Florida Everglades. The park features, among other things, alligator wrestling, and the main wrestler is a woman, Hilola Bigtree, who is struck with cancer. Her husband, the Chief, operates the place, and their three children help out. With the death of Hilola Bigtree, which occurs on page eight, her family must cope, but what happens, instead?

Without their star attraction, the business begins to fail. The Chief decamps, and the children aren't even sure where, on the mainland, he has landed. Teenage Kiwi, the only son, also leaves. He realizes he must send money home to keep the park afloat and takes a job at a competing park called World of Darkness. The elder daughter, Ossie, exits with an entity she believes is a ghost, and for a time, the reader might be fooled into thinking she actually does. Ava, the young narrator of most of the novel (her chapters are the only ones written in first-person), is left to fend for herself, and she does a most unwise thing: trusts a male adult who is not a member of her family, not even someone she knows tangentially, to help her locate her sister. To tell any more is to spoil your read.

I can say, however, that in the same manner in which I envy someone's great photograph, I wish I'd written a book like this. At first, it fools you into thinking it's sort of a comic romp, but then these people Russell has created are too smart for that alone. Though home schooled (by way of Florida state curriculum), all three children have great vocabularies, use their common sense to help them out of the trouble that even smart kids can get into. They pay attention (to some things, anyway). They become acquainted with the unjust and tragic history of the Seminole Indians, which perhaps keeps them from feeling as sorry for themselves as they might. Russell's metaphors are apt, growing naturally out of this swampy environment. Here, little Ava compares alligators to her missing sister:

“Even if she'd [Ossie] gotten away from him [her ghost fiancé] the prognostications were grim—alligators with unusual pigmentation can't camouflage themselves in the dust-and-olive palette of the swamp. Their skin is spotlit for predators. That's why you don't see albino Seths [Ava's pet name for alligators] in the wild. Once an alligator reaches a size of four feet its only real predator is man” (338).

Ava's mind is using the image of alligators to speak the unspeakable: that her sister has probably disappeared with a ghost, who has the unlikely name of Louis Thanksgiving. Yet Ava faces her own trials (this is NOT a Young Adult novel), and in the end, by what seems a great coincidence which the author has earned the right

to employ, the family is united, or reconstituted. At any rate, Russell, who has also published fiction in *The New Yorker*, is sure to garner our attention for a long time if she can create other exciting narratives like *Swamplandia!*

Seale, Jan. *The Parkinson Poems*. Beaumont: Lamar University Press, 2014.

Seale's striking collection of poems is divided into four parts: Onset, Progression, Treatment, and Abiding.

The poems in Onset are beset with astonishment, anguish, a bit of denial. The "unwanted guest" serves as an extended metaphor for "The Guest": **"His name was Parkinson/and his presence was permanent" (15)**. Across these eight stanzas, this guest runs the gamut from one who **"hung up his clothes/wrong side out" (16)** to one who **"dropped silverware, knocked over glasses,/spilt food, complained of dull knives" (17)**, one who **"became the conversation director,/insisting they discuss him at least/several times a day" (18)**, one who **"went everywhere with them/but wasn't interested in staying long" (19)**, to finally, the one who **"had no plans to leave,/because he dearly loved the husband" (21)**. He becomes **"The Man Who Came to Dinner,/The bass ack[w]ards/of their lives" (23)**.

In Progression the unwanted guest becomes a slow-mover in "You and Turtles": **"You've absorbed their abilities: perfected 'slow,'/the hokey-poke-along, stop and go,/the sudden hustle away from danger. Silence./More than once, you've been found on your back,/but helped to turn over, proceeded your stoical way" (43)**.

"Group Therapy" sums up Treatment, where caregivers and caremakers meet separately. **"Here for an hour they will dump out/the boxes of their souls/and the dregs of their bodies./The caregivers will marvel that strangers/are saying their thoughts aloud./The Parkies will nod at their histories,/grimace at the previews./Some will wish only for home" (58)**.

"Abide" is a kind word for bearing or putting up with, and Seale captures that singular meaning, as well, in "Sleep-talking."

**They tell us the disease does not make distinctions
between dreaming and waking. The Parkinsonian
will speak his glossolalia, sometimes for all.**

**Even though I foolishly long to know him better,
this husband of many years, I am barred
at the gateway of his dreams.**

**His words waking me are like the light pebbles
he tossed upward at my dorm window in the days
when we loved, both dreaming and awake" (65)**.

I'm not sure why I am drawn to these poems. Is it with the hope that I and my loved ones will not be saddled with this unwanted guest? Or is it in some way to prepare myself for his coming, should he arrive for either me or my partner of forty years? If I could, I would offer Seale and her husband a bit of comfort, but what would it be? A soft word? A touch of understanding to the elbow? What can I offer the caregiver or the caremaker of any dread disease? Anything other than my attempt to *understand* would seem profane and empty.

Travisano, Thomas, ed., with Saskia Hamilton. *Words in Air: The Complete Correspondence between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell*. New York: Farrar, 2008.

Reading the published letters exchanged between two important figures in twentieth-century American literature, among many things, has allowed me the proper venue for being a voyeur! The details Lowell and Bishop reveal about themselves, their families, and friends is astounding. The entire enterprise took me the better part of six months, not because I was a particularly slow reader or because I found the reading boring but because each time I opened the book I was only able to take in ten or twenty pages before becoming saturated. By reading nearly every footnote and making a note on every book or poem or piece of music or work of art that these two fine artists recommended or alluded to, I was slowed to the pace of enjoying a box of chocolates, a bit at a time.

Elizabeth Bishop herself cites composer Virgil Thompson: “one of the strange things about poets is the way they keep warm by writing to one another all over the world” (494). Indeed, these two keep each other warm for thirty years, from 1947, when both are beginning to experience *success*, to 1977, when Robert Lowell dies of a heart attack in a “taxi from Kennedy Airport on his return to New York on September 12” (xli). Bishop dies on September 21 “in the early evening of a cerebral aneurysm” (xli). No one, absolutely no one, writes letters like these any longer, not even literati. Or if they do, they are not saving them in boxes. As soon as a party dies, unless he or she has made copies of their emails there shall remain no record. And do those electronic memoranda even count as letters?

I would love to share the thousands of bits of information that Lowell and Bishop leave us by way of their letters, but I shall confine my nuggets to several categories of information: Literary Criticism, Keen Observations, the Personal, and Gossip.

Nuggets:

EB: “There’s a little Catholic girl named Flannery O’Connor here now [Yaddo], who will remain if she can—a real writer, I think one of the best to be when she is a little older. Very moral (in your sense) and witty—whom I’m sure you’d like” (79).

EB: “Good lord—there’s a fifteen year old girl next door whose voice & general personality is just about as restful as a stuck automobile horn” (85).

EB: “Marianne [Moore] is wonderful, that’s all. If I don’t mention my health she writes implying that she knows I’m concealing my dying throes from her. If I say I’ve never felt better in my life (God’s truth) she writes ‘*Brave Elizabeth!*’ (Lota [EB’s longtime companion] says it’s a form of aggression). She used to send one rather stolid, timid friend of ours on Errands of Mercy, to people he’d never met. She told him that ‘*poor Peter Monro Jack*’ was in desperate straits, sick, lonely, heaven knows what all, and the friend went to call, probably taking a bag of groceries or a bunch of flowers, and found a large gay party going on, with everyone in evening dress” (189).

EB: “Ll showed me a long verse-letter, very obscene, he’d received from Dylan T[homas] before D’s last trip here [New York]—very clever, but it really can’t be published for a long, long time, he’s decided. About people D. met in the U.S. etc.—one small sample: *A Streetcar Named Desire* is referred to as “A truck called F——” (215).

RL: “Psycho-therapy is rather amazing—something like stirring up the bottom of an aquarium—chunks of the past coming up at unfamiliar angles, distinct and then indistinct” (92).

RL: “I have just finished the Yeats *Letters*—900 & something pages—although some I’d read before. He is so Olympian always, so calm, so really unrevealing, and yet I was fascinated” (160).

RL: “Probably you forget, and anyway all that is mercifully changed and all has come right since you found Lota. But at the time everything, I guess (I don’t want to overdramatize) our relations seemed to have reached a new place. I assumed that would be just a matter of time before I proposed and I half believed that you would accept. Yet I wanted it all to have the right build-up. Well, I didn’t say anything then” (225).

EB: “so I suppose I am just a born worrier, and that when the personal worries of adolescence and the years after it have more or less disappeared I promptly have to start worrying about the decline of nations . . . But I really can’t *bear* much of American life these days—surely no country has ever been so filthy rich and so hideously uncomfortable at the same time” (229). 8/28/57

EB: “We actually did go through the Doldrums—a day of them. The water absolutely slick and flat and the flying fish making sprays of long scratches across it, exactly like finger-nail scratches. Aruba is a little hell-like island, very strange. It rarely if ever rains there, and there’s nothing but cactus hedges and prickly trees and goats and one broken-off miniature dead volcano. It’s set in miles of oil slicks and

oil rainbows and black gouts of oil suspended in the water, crude oil—and Onassis’ tankers on all sides, flying the flags of Switzerland, Panama, and Liberia” (245).

RL: “The man next to me is [in McLean’s, a mental health facility] a Harvard Law professor. One day, he is all happiness, giving the plots of Trollope novels, distinguishing delicately between the philosophies of Holmes and Brandeis, reminiscing wittily about Frankfurter. But on another day, his depression blankets him” (252).

RL: “You must read the [Boris] Pasternak *Dr. Zhivago*, badly translated but dwarfing all other post-war novels except Mann. Everyone says it’s great but too lyrical to be a novel. I feel shaken and haunted by the main character” (267). “bigger perhaps than anything by Turgenev and something that alters both the old Russia and the new for us—alters our own world too.” (271).

EB: “When your letter came I *was* reading *Dr. Jivago* (Zhivago, in English)—in French. I stopped part way through because the book’s owner wanted it back, and I think I’ll finish it in English. I agree with you completely, I even liked the poems at the end, as much as one could tell about them” (274).

RL: “Fred Dupee, and James Baldwin (the colored writer) [sic] and I talked at Brandeis last week. We were each paid \$200 and had limp little audiences of about thirty wriggling students. I like Baldwin’s Negro [sic] essays very much—no blarney like [Richard] Wright’s when he isn’t giving a real scene and has to generalize. I am now trying to obliterate my abolitionist pangs before seeing [Jarrell] Randall” (291).

RL: “The other night [Allen] Ginsberg, [Gregory] Corso, and [Peter] Orlovsky came to call on me. As you know, our house, as Lizzie [Hardwick] says, is nothing if not pretentious. Planned to stun people. When they came in, they all took off their wet shoes and tiptoed upstairs. They are phony in a way because they have made a lot of publicity out of very little talent. But in another way, they are pathetic and doomed . . . there was an awful lot of subdued talk about their being friends and lovers, and once Ginsberg and Orlovsky disappeared in unison to the john and reappeared on each other’s shoulders . . . I think they’ll die of TB” (297-8).

EB: “Also Ned Rorem wrote me he’d seen you in Buffalo. He’s quite a good song writer, I believe (& he thinks so, too)” (307). Meow!

EB: “That Anne Sexton I think still has a bit too much romanticism and what I think of as the “our beautiful old silver” school of female writing which is really boasting about how ‘nice’ we were. V[irginia]

Woolf, K[atherine] Anne Porter, [Elizabeth] Bowen, R[ebecca] West, etc.—they are all full of it. They have to make quite sure that the reader is not going to mis-place them socially, first—and that nervousness interferes constantly with what they think they'd like to say . . . I wrote a story at Vassar that was too much admired by Miss Rose Peebles, my teacher, who was very proud of being an old-school Southern lady, and suddenly this fact about women's writing dawned on me, and has haunted me ever since" (333).

RL: "there's just a queer, half-apocalyptic, nuclear feeling in the air, as tho nations had died and were now anachronistic, yet in their anarchic death-throes would live on for ages troubling us, threatening the likelihood of life continuing" (381).

RL: "I was rather on tiptoe that my poems had been intrusive, and read you letter with great relief. Your suggestions on 'Water' might be great improvements. By the way, the mermaid wasn't your Millay parody, but something in one of your letters, inspired by Wiscasset probably. Glad this and my tampering with 'In the Village' didn't annoy you. When 'The Scream' is published I'll explain, it's just a footnote to your marvelous story" (405).

EB: "Your piece on Frost is awfully nice, Cal [RL's nickname]. And 'Buenos Aires' is certainly The Latin City—I'll have to go there, I see why you liked it so much. I like the first stanzas best. But I DON'T like the phallic monument, Cal. This has nothing to do with the preceding paragraph—it is just that I think it is unoriginal. It seems to me I've read so many 'Phallic monuments' in poetry—Spend used to use it ad nauseam, for one. Oh I know it's the Idea, and Peron, and Power, etc.—it couldn't be more appropriate. But I feel that *you* can surprise us better than that.— I hope you won't mind my saying this— The first part has so many enlightening images, then I found 'phallus' too expected" (448).

RL: "The Stone Phallus was meant to be awfully raw and obvious, but maybe the poem ought to end earlier" (455).

RL: "What you say about the 'Union dead' poem is subtly true, must be a huge hunk of health that has survived and somehow increased through all these breakdown[s], eight or nine, I think, in about fifteen years. Pray god there'll be no more" (559).

EB: "I seem to get to places at just the wrong time—before that I spent four days at the University of Oklahoma. That was really fun; I had a wonderful time—but the desolation of that scenery, at that time of year, is incredible.— I've seen 'lonely New England farmhouses'— but nothing can compare to a lonely, small-sized, ranch-house in Oklahoma. One can see for miles—all pale tan—only the pumping oil-

wells *lend animation to the scene*—even the ‘Wild Life Reservation’—pumping away like lost lunatics—” (741).

RL: “I see us still when we first met, both at Randall’s and then for a couple of years later. I see you as rather tall, long brown-haired, shy but full of des[cription] and anecdote as now. I was brown haired and thirty I guess and I don’t know what. I was largely invisible to myself, and nothing I knew how to look at. But the fact is we were swimming in our young age, with the water coming down on us, and we were gulping. I can’t go on. It is better now only there’s a steel cord stretch[ed] tense at about arms-length above us, and what we look forward to must be accompanied by our less grace and strength. Well, no more dies irae; I wonder if Christians believing in immortality saw their lives as less circular” (776).

EB: “However, Cal dear, maybe your memory *is* failing!— Never, never was I ‘tall’—as you wrote remembering me. I was always 5 ft 4 and ¼ inches—now shrunk to 5 ft 4 inches— The only time I’ve ever felt all was in Brazil. And I never had ‘long brown hair’ either!” (778).

RL: “I still thrill to your visit. After a little, it seemed as if almost thirty years had rolled back, and we were talking, brownhaired, callow and new in New York, Washington or Maine. Voice and image seemed much more what we were than what we are—or is the essence as it was?” (793).

Volandes, Angelo E. *The Conversation: A Revolutionary Plan for End-of-Life Care*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2015.

Medical Doctor Volandes offers a plan for terminal patients to share with their family members and loved ones concerning how and when their lives should end. He informs the reader that **“only 24 percent of Americans older than sixty-five die at home; 63 percent die in hospitals or nursing homes, sometimes tethered to machines, and often in pain”** (3). He blames the medical profession—doctors like him— for their failure **“to have discussions with patients about how to live life’s final chapter”** (3). If you should become a terminally ill patient, you must have The Conversation with your doctor.

I am reminded of a scene from the Mike Nichols’s 2001 HBO film *Wit* (based on Margaret Edson’s play), starring Emma Thompson as a highly educated woman dying from late-stage Ovarian cancer. A kind nurse played by Audra McDonald asks Thompson what her wishes are when her heart stops. Thompson indicates she prefers DNR status: Do Not Resuscitate. Thompson’s young intern, a former university student of hers, makes an error on her chart, and the Full Code treatment to revive her ensues instead. McDonald, fortunately, is on hand to remind the doctor, and Thompson is allowed to die in relative peace—as she’s wished. All too often, according to Volandes, Americans are not afforded the

courtesy of having *The Conversation*, and patients are subject to CPR, when statistics show that only a small number of the elderly survive such efforts.

At the same time, Volandes explains that medical doctors are trained in the following manner: **“To doctor patients is to learn how not to die” (8)**. They and their staffs often can’t help themselves. With all the lifesaving equipment and procedures available to them, physicians forget the old saw, “First, do no harm,” and forge ahead *because they can*. Volandes states, **“Patients can drive change by having greater knowledge of their options, while doctors can drive change by communicating and advocating for those choices . . . every doctor knows that in the end, we all find ourselves on the patient’s side of the stethoscope” (9)**.

Most of the research, he tells us, indicates that terminal patients are healthier and have a better outlook at the end of their lives if they know what their choices are, and the two choices are pretty much this: you either want to be at home, made comfortable with pain control, or you want to be Full Code, where the hospital staff does everything to keep you alive until your loved ones say “Turn it off.” The doctor’s book is simply written and lacks the dry, overlaid rhetoric of medical speak. Instead, he employs moving anecdotes about patients facing the end of their lives, including one about his own father. He describes the video <https://www.acpdecisions.org/products/videos/> he produces to screen for patients and their loved ones to help them decide how their lives should end, instead of, defaulting to the hospital.

I plan to keep *The Conversation* handy and study it when and if the time arrives. I could always get hit by a truck!

Wilder, Thornton. *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* with an introduction by Kay Boyle. New York: Time, (1927) 1953.

Always a difficult thing to profile or review a book as renounced this, a Pulitzer-Prize winner. So I won’t, but just to say that the book is indeed a fine read. To see what five lives who are about to be lost amount to, in their full humanity, like characters in Wilder’s play, *Our Town*, gives one pause about the human condition.

Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs. Dalloway* with a foreword by Maureen Howard. New York: Harcourt, (1925) 1953.

I will need to read it a second time before I can make a comment!

***The New Yorker* Readings**

[Each year I peruse 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 2016. The short story is really an entertaining and edifying art. Read one, if you’re not afraid.]

Otessa Moshfegh, "The Beach Boy," *New Yorker*, January 4, 2016, 66.

Dermatologist John and wife Marcia, both in their fifties, vacation on a tropical island, where young male prostitutes offer their services. ¶ At first, this narrative seems to belong to Marcia, but after the couple return to their home in Manhattan and share, over dinner, with their friends the features of their trip, Marcia dies of an apparent heart attack (subtly foreshadowed with two mentions of a severe headache). Okay, now where does the story go? one wonders, because up until now Marcia has been the life of their marriage:

"John always wished for whatever Marcia wished for. 'This way, we both win,' he said" (66).

When, after Marcia's demise, he picks up her photos from the trip (of course, only old people, you see, still use throwaway cameras) there is a half-shot at the end of the roll indicating to John that his wife had hired one of the beach boys, and he suddenly seems to hate her because of her *infidelity*, blames her for having commandeered his life. He decides to return to the island to spread Marcia's ashes on the beach. When he is finished doing that he heads for the hotel bar.

"He ordered a Glenfiddich, saluted the bartender, and drank. 'How much for the whole bottle?' John asked. 'No, don't tell me. Just charge it to my room.' He flashed the number on his key. A whole bottle just for him, out from under Marcia's shaming gaze. Why had he let her control him like that? He'd lived his entire life on his best behavior, a slave to decorum. For what? John shook his head and poured himself more whiskey. He could do whatever he wanted now" (70).

This perhaps includes hiring one of the beach boys, just as he'd suspected his wife of doing. The closing scene, particularly the last finely honed sentence, poignantly profiles his predicament.

"He collapsed on the sand. The boy stood and stared for a while, then yawned, turned, and walked away. It was clear to him and to the other beach boys watching from their perch in the dunes that the old man wasn't carrying any money" (70).

Anne Carson, "1 = 1," *New Yorker*, January 11, 2016, 61.

This work rather resembles a prose poem in which a female persona speaks of swimming, refugees, chalk, and foxes. ¶ The poet, yet using also the tools of fiction, weaves together a morning in which the persona swims in a lake:

"She peels a swim cap onto her head, goggles, enters the water, which is cold but not shocking. Swims" (61).

reads of European refugees:

“Back at home, the newspapers, front-page photos of a train car in Europe jammed floor to door with escaped victims of a war zone farther south . . . [f]ilthy families and souls in despair pressed flat against one another in the grip to survive, uncountable arms and legs, torn-open eyes” (61).

tells of her mushroom-loving neighbor, Comrade Chandler:

“ he had been able to see a patch of mushrooms, boletus, from his window and he used to go hunting for those in the woods with his mother when he was a kid and it made him sad . . . John Cage was out mushrooming with his mother, after an hour or so she turns to him and says, We can always go to the store and buy some real ones” (62).

and the fox Chandler draws on the pavement with colored chalk:

“The finished fox drawing is under a streetlamp. It glows. He has used some sort of phosphorescent chalk, and the fox, swimming in a lucent blue-green jelly, has a look on its face of escaping all possible explanations” (62).

Ludmilla Petrushevskaya, “The Story of a Painter” *New Yorker*, January 18, 2016, 64.

In this contemporary Russian tale, a painter, in a convoluted and circuitous chain of events, first loses his apartment, then gains it back. ¶ Igor is an honest, caring, but gullible man, and the only time in the story that he lies is to fool Adik, the very man who has swindled him out of his property. Several pages into the story Petrushevskaya skillfully releases information when the hungry reader must finally know about the thieving scoundrel:

“Full of compliments, Adik had offered to help such a gifted painter sell his apartment at a profit and buy a cheaper one. The same day, he’d given Adik the power of attorney for all his property. We know how that ended” (68).

And that is how we learn of the original sin. Even though written in the twenty-first century, this narrative—because of a certain magical realism—creates a feeling of a folk tale. It is nice change to have our nonmagical, realistic eyes fall upon this kind of story.

Tatyana Tolstaya, “Aspic,” *New Yorker*, January 25, 2016, 58.

The narrator, a contemporary denizen of St. Petersburg, Russia, prepares the ancient, ritualistic, and gelatinous recipe for aspic. ¶ In the second-person account in which she addresses herself, she muses over the ancient tradition requiring hooves or even muzzles of particular animals. It is a tradition she traces back to pre-tsar leaders like **“Truvor, who, as it turns out, never even existed” (59)**—making the reader ponder the origin of any tradition. The author employs a certain personification of the animal parts involved to sensitize the reader to this

pointlessness of tradition: **“The chopped-up legs . . . [t]hey’ll twitch, break free, and run away, clacking across the ceramic tile: *clippity-clop*”** (59). Then our narrator takes us step-by-step through the six-hour ordeal/joy of preparing aspic, at the end of which you take **“the bowls and plates out to the balcony, cover the coffins with lids, stretch some plastic wrap over them, and wait”** (59). She remains outside, crying, for this is a New Year’s tradition, a time for all the ugly aspects of the old year to fall away, like the tears from her face.

Adam Ehrlich Sachs, “The Philosophers,” *New Yorker*, February 1, 2016, 58.

In this exceptional story divided into three parts, the author utilizes satire, hyperbole, and paradox to portray the complexities of father-son relationships. In “Our System,” a chain of father-sons covering nearly fifty years passes along the eldest man’s philosophy—depicting perhaps how a particular habit or even one’s imperfect DNA can pass from one generation to the next. In “Two Hats,” a philosopher’s son employs a ball cap and a fedora to distinguish his “son-of-Perelmann” role from his “biographer-of-Perelmann” role; eventually this collection of hats burgeons to over twenty, delightfully exaggerating the number of traits a son can inherit. In “The Madman’s Time Machine,” a man tortured as the most intelligent being alive travels to 1932 Berlin to murder his grandfather so that he, the grandson, will not be born, thus eliminating his agony. Of course, this plan fails in a most paradoxical and delicious manner.

George Saunders, “Mother’s Day,” *New Yorker*, February 8 and 15, 2016, 84.

Alma receives a visit from her two adult children, sparking a long flashback about Alma, her late husband Paul, and the woman living across the street, Debi, with whom he has an affair just prior to his death. ¶ Saunders deftly shifts the point of view from Alma to Debi midway through the story so that the reader can get not only Debi’s side of things but perhaps Paul’s, as well. This narrative is mainly about hubris: thinking, first of all, that with two young children, a young couple can continue fucking any time, anywhere they want to, or second, that Alma, the woman scorned, can ignore her neighbor Debi forever simply because she’s had a blazing affair with her husband whom she’s dearly loved, or that even during Alma’s impending death-by-hailstorm she despises Debi enough NOT to accept her offer of a sturdy black umbrella. Usual Saunders’s biting satire, this time of an era of free love gone awry.

Don DeLillo, “Sine Cosine Tangent,” *New Yorker*, February 22, 2016, 60.

As one who never advances through the study of mathematics to enroll in trigonometry, I am forced to research the three common terms in the title of DeLillo’s story. They provide a certain frame or form, I believe, for this retrospective narrative of a boy, his mother, and his father: sine, cosine, and tangent, respectively. (I could be wrong; I never was any good at math.)

DeLillo is a master in so many ways, a wordsmith whose prose is rather straightforward and simple, except when his character is exploring the meaning of words:

“Once, when they were still married, my father called my mother a fishwife. This may have been a joke, but it sent me to the dictionary to look up the word. ‘Coarse woman, a shrew.’ I had to look up ‘shrew.’ ‘A scold, a nag, from Old English for shrewmouse.’ I had to look up ‘shrewmouse.’ The book sent me back to ‘shrew, sense 1.’ A small insectivorous mammal. I had to look up ‘insectivorous.’ The book said that it meant feeding on insects, from the Latin *insectum*, for ‘insect,’ plus the Latin *vorus*, for ‘vorous.’ I had to look up ‘vorous’” (61).

The narrator thinks in strands of time that seem to wash over one another in waves. He’s thirteen. He’s fourteen. He’s in college. But not necessarily in that order do these events occur.

As a victim of his parents’ divorce, the narrator returns to the triangle again and again: his mother studies Portuguese in high school; it advances her professionally because she is able to communicate with Brazilian clients in her firm. His father, who leaves when the narrator is thirteen, can be seen on national TV and on the cover of *Newsweek* as a wizard of finance. The boy develops a limp when he is fourteen, an affectation that is designed to win him sympathy, but it only sets him farther apart from his peers—which may be his subliminal goal after all.

DeLillo’s wretched yet beautiful mathematical formula is repeated over and over again until one day the narrator calls home, only to be told by a neighbor that his mother has suffered a stroke.

“Ordinary moments make the life. This was what she knew to be trustworthy, and this was what I learned, eventually, from those years we spent together. No leaps or falls. I inhale the little drizzly details of the past, and know who I am. What I failed to know before is clearer now, filtered up through time, an experience belonging to no one else, not remotely, no one, anyone, ever. I watch her use the roller to remove lint from her cloth coat. Define ‘lint,’ I tell myself. Define ‘time,’ define ‘space’” (65).

Sine. Cosine. Tangent.

Luke Mogelson, “Total Solar,” *New Yorker*, February 29, 2016, 58.

This is one of those stories I want both to speed by and yet s-t-r-e-t-c-h, at the same time. ¶ An American in Afghanistan, narrates his tale about time spent there as a journalist. There is so much to be said for authors who travel, particularly expat journalists: they never want for subject matter. Mogelson repeats a number of motifs in this Kabulian stew: brown skies, dogs with tumors the size of cantaloupes, birds, elevated particulates of fecal matter in the air, and people talking on phones about those whom they intend to assassinate. The story has a Paul Bowles feel to it, except that the narrator is nearly suicidal over his *visit* to the region, whereas Bowles is perhaps more sympathetic concerning his Moroccan days (his *The Sheltering Sky* is published in 1949). After all, our narrator *is* in the middle of a

war. He watches as a woman with whom he is acquainted stops to care for a child the narrator knows is faking illness as a lure. She is shot and killed: **“That was the end of Sue Kwan,”** (60), he thinks, quickly distancing himself from the event. He portrays himself as a buffoon, one of his CNN pieces having been YouTubed into oblivion for its comic qualities. Finally, he is injured by gunfire and escapes into the mountains, where the air is much clearer. The man he believes to be offering succor later turns him into *authorities*, who show up to *interrogate* him. The story’s conclusion reprises the telephone motif, as the narrator overhears the planning of someone’s demise:

**“That’s when I saw the man talking on his cell phone.
‘No, no one is with him, I can easily grab him,’ the man was saying.
Or was he? I didn’t know. I still don’t”** (63).

Fiona McFarlane, “Buttony,” *New Yorker*, March 7, 2016, 56.

A teacher of young children, Miss Lewis, engages her pupils in a game of Buttony, and it ends rather badly. ¶ The primary classroom is a universal setting: twenty-one pupils, a youngish female teacher, a simple game played outdoors under a jacaranda tree. *Button, button, who’s got the button?* All must recall having chanted those words during their own tender years. The mustard-yellow button is hidden in one child’s hand by teacher’s pet, Joseph, an adorable youngster, half Vietnamese, half Polish. Even though Miss Lewis admonishes her pupils not to select Joseph a second time, they do, again and again, and Miss Lewis says nothing. Finally, given the button one more time, Joseph stares at Miss Lewis and hides it in his mouth. Her judgment rather clouded by her love for the child, she becomes complicit in executing his practical joke. When after rounding the circle once again and no one apparently has the button, a certain chaos ensues. McFarlane’s deft conclusion is unique, delicious—just what the teacher may deserve.

Ann Beattie, “For the Best,” *New Yorker*, March 14, 2016, 74.

Gerald, a seventy-nine-year-old former model (among other things), attends an early December party in Manhattan, where he knows in advance that his ex-wife may appear. ¶ And she does. Jumping out from behind the Christmas tree in the lobby, she materializes, terribly inebriated, right as Gerald is leaving the building where the party has been held. They stroll up the street to gaze at the newly lit tree at Rockefeller Center, she verbally jabs him a few times, and he puts her in a cab. One finds it difficult to know what this 7,000 word story is about. Beattie references the terrorist attacks in Paris (November 13, 2015) and in San Bernardino (December 2, 2015), more as set design, perhaps, than as authentic threads of the narrative. She goes to great pains to replicate the dialects/manners of three discrete generations. However, the story seems to whiz by as if you’re aboard one of those moving sidewalks at an airport, without really establishing an arc. Why is the couple’s adult son, who lives in Seattle, mentioned at all, except as the couple’s mutual failure? Why the name dropping?

“To his great surprise, he found out that Charlotte and Willers had a psychiatrist in common, a Dr. Frederick Owls, known as the Owl, on Central Park West” (75).

Please. Are we still referencing *Gatsby* (even subliminally), not to mention Hillary Clinton, Yale, and Woody Allen? The climax may well be more of a punch line, which appears in the last three sentences of the story:

“But she’d been delighted that he was rich. It was one of the reasons she’d married him. He shook his head over the illogic of that, unaware that he was doing it until he caught sight of his reflection in the mirrored wall of the elevator, and it was as he’d thought: he’d grown old” (81).

Must Beattie make Gerald’s difficulty with aging explicit? We’ve known it since the first paragraph.

Annie Proulx, “A Resolute Man,” *New Yorker*, March 21, 2016, 76.

As a child James Duke is rejected by his father (because his birth causes his mother’s death) and forced to eke out his own life, but at fifty-one, in the early 1800s, James inherits his father’s considerable fortune. ¶ As is typical of any Proulx story, this one is plump with twists and turns, coincidences that almost seem too good, or too insidious, to be true. The yarn is also plump with details that plop the reader full into early nineteenth-century life in England, Boston, and the high seas in between—from the stink of an untended kitchen to the rot of NYC streets laden with animal shit. But Proulx, as well, showers the reader with sweet smells of food, drink, and love. The narrative could very well have been written by Charles Dickens himself except for one thing. Yes, what sets Proulx’s story apart is its ending: James Duke, most *resolute* in his demeanor, holds a certain power over his new wife, and, in return, the equally resolute Mrs. Duke holds a certain power over him. Uncannily O. Henry in its check-checkmate nature, the conclusion ensures that members of this couple will keep a steadfast eye on each other forever. ¶ One quarrel with Ms. Proulx’s research: pineapples being shipped to NYC from the Bahamas in the early 1800s sounds a bit off, so I look it up (Wikipedia, corroborated by two other online sources). Yes, pineapples are being grown there at this time but not *widely exported* until the 1850s. Does this make me a nitpicker or Proulx a fact stretcher?

Ian McEwan, “My Purple Scented Novel,” *New Yorker*, March 28, 2016, 62.

I love short stories that nonetheless compress decades into a mere 4,337 words. In this case two young writers from the 1970s, great friends, develop parallel albeit unequal careers. The narrator, one Parker Sparrow, unveils their friendship, how his pal Jocelyn Tarbet is awarded the more commercial success, whereas Parker the life of an academic with four hungry children, a faithful and beautiful wife, and four novels that eventually go out of print. At this late-career point in their lives, one of the authors contrives to steal a novel manuscript from the other, and, as can only happen in fiction it is a huge commercial success. One writer (you must read to find out which) ends this purple-scented story by saying,

“Our lives, he says, were always entwined. We talked over everything a thousand times, read the same books, lived through and shared so

much, and in some curious way our thoughts, our imaginations fused to such an extent that we ended up writing the same novel, more or less” (67).

This story might have been written by F. Scott Fitzgerald, even O. Henry, or perhaps John Cheever—fitting quite well into the *New Yorker* schemata of publishing stories blending accessibility with a certain blandness of predictability. All fine writers, McEwan included, are capable of producing such an animal. Question is: should they?

Kevin Canty, “God’s Work,” *New Yorker*, April 4, 2016, 69.

Sixteen-year-old Sander helps his evangelistic mother deliver door-to-door colorful pamphlets about God’s salvation. ¶ Canty’s narrative about the abstractions of religion is rooted in the concrete of our world: hot summer days more like spring because of clear skies and beautiful flowers, the incessant heat, cool creek water in the park where a young girl reveals the flesh of her thigh to Sander. Heat, in particular, Canty emphasizes, especially as poor Sander’s body does what adolescent bodies do best: become tumescent when stimulated. This Sander is fractured into two persons:

“‘I’ll pray on it,’ Sander says and his mother radiates approval, and at that exact moment he splits into two people, the one he has always been and some itchy, wayward newborn” (71).

The former Sander belongs still to his mother, is faithful to all she holds dear. The “newborn” Sander contrives to obtain his mother’s consent to meet alone with Clara, a girl with a very Eve-like snake rising over her shoulder in the form of a tattoo. From here to story’s end, one feels what has been present all along, two invisible but opposing forces fighting for dominion over this lad’s life—most of the conflict beneath the surface of his everyday life. It may be one of the most revealing stories concerning the power of religion that I’ve ever read. Many of us likewise have been split into two personages: one who believes and one who simply cannot.

Sarah Shun-lien Bynum, “The Burglar,” *New Yorker*, April 11, 2016, 66.

Structured in fifty-nine short segments, sometimes only sentence-length, Bynum’s story is about a husband, a wife, and the man who is burglarizing them. ¶ I love stories that make an examination of our lives, or better than that, a distillation, a breaking down of how we live: race issues, working housewives rating or vetting termite killers during half-days off, TV series and their writers who *push the envelope*, jobs that very heavily depend on your performance via viewer ratings, the electronic gadgets which are so expensive at first but wind up being junk by the time a burglar sticks them in an unused bag, and still we won’t let go even if it means getting a bloodied eye. ¶ In her quick-start scenes, Bynum is attempting to tell three stories simultaneously, attempting to put film on paper. And in large part she succeeds. For the traditional reader the ride may be tough going until you pick up the patter or pattern, and by then you’ll be obliged to read at least the beginning again, to see that, as any good story, Bynum has laid out all the clues from sentence one. Now, ready, set, go figure how one of the TV characters becomes the burglar!

Colin Barrett, "Anhedonia, Here I Come," *New Yorker*, April 18, 2016, 66.

Poet Bobby Tallis, twenty-nine-year-old denizen of a "First World Western" country utilizing Euros (answer to the riddle: Ireland), nonetheless supports himself by penning cartoon porn for AllFreeekArt. ¶ Some iteration of this character has emerged in literature before: John Kennedy Toole's Ignatius J. Reilly, Salinger's Holden Caulfield, maybe even Kerouac's Dean Moriarty. However, if Bobby is angry like the first two, he buries it with the help of alcohol and weed. And if he is like Moriarty, he has neither wheels nor the exuberance to see beyond the senior-citizen building in which he lives because it is both cheap and quiet. ¶ I confess that I had to look up a-n-h-e-d-o-n-i-a: *the lack of pleasure or ability to experience it*. It is the key, as any word appearing in the title should be, to understanding this narrative about a failed young poet, who fairly wallows in his obscurity, his quiet life of words, until he learns that his muse-mentor, also a failed poet, has changed his allegiance to a twenty-two-year-old woman who has just won her first publishing contract. Upon learning this, Bobby pounds down five pints and trudges home. Against the fire department's wishes, he enters his gas-laden building and opens a window in his apartment:

"He put the joint in his mouth and brought the lighter to it. Friction: he looked out across the city sky and flicked the lighter's wheel, prepared for the night to go up all around him, but the night, as the night was wont to do, rolled impersonally on. After a while, Bobby began to hear the Dopplered gulling of the sirens as the fire trucks made their approach" (69).

Bobby is about to suffer the ultimate inability to feel or experience pleasure, and I'm not sure I care.

Lara Vapnyar, "Waiting for the Miracle," *New Yorker*, April 25, 2016, 80.

Thirty-year-old Vadik arrives in New York City from Moscow, connects with a Staten Island buddy and wife, and later hooks up with Rachel, a young woman he meets in a diner—all in his first twenty-four hours. ¶ Vapnyar's title, a Leonard Cohen song, is also the story of Vadik's life, and perhaps the lives of all immigrants like his Staten Island friends, Sergey and Vica: a slight disappointment that the big promise of capitalism may have come true for everyone but them. At one point you believe Vadik must marry Rachel:

"Days, week, months, even years later, whenever Vadik thought of their conversation (and he thought of it a lot) he would marvel at how easy it had been" (83).

But no, due to a certain insecurity, the fear of settling down too soon with one woman, he leaves her a note ("You're beautiful.") and disappears while she sleeps. He does try to locate her but never succeeds, and his idealization of her—their comfortable sex and easy conversation—hardens into a graven image. Vapnyar captures an alien sense we all have at times, that no matter what we do, we just may not fit in anywhere on earth.

Alexandra Kleeman, "Choking Victim," *New Yorker*, May 2, 2016, 58.

Karen, thirty-two, is a young urban mother, who leaves her six-month-old infant with a strange but friendly woman, so that Karen can return a few blocks and retrieve an expensive stroller which becomes unnavigable when it loses a wheel. ¶ With short stories, titles mean everything. With regard to "Choking Victim," we sight one immediately, an old man who succumbs to a terrible coughing fit in the apartment next door. He survives. As mother Karen and babe Lila stroll through the city—before the stroller becomes unhinged—one expects the baby to choke somehow. But no. After the accident, Karen and Lila abandon the heavy, expensive pram and alight in a café, where the friendly woman offers to sit with Lila so Karen can return for the stroller. In addition to exploring the issue of trust, this story helps us creep through the suffocating life of a new mother, whose husband is away on business for two weeks.

"She felt as if she were deep underwater, desperately stroking up toward the surface, toward light and air. She had no idea how far away it might be" (65).

Finally, we see that Karen is the choking victim here! When she runs into a college friend in a store where she's buying Band-Aids for her beleaguered feet, the friend's questions remind her that she is a writer with a successful professional life having nothing to do with a babe who isn't even forming words yet. She is so enamored with this man's attentions that she lingers longer than she probably should.

As she returns to the café, we expect something awful to have happened. Kidnapping comes to mind. But no, worse. Blue and red lights of police cars illuminate the face of her baby, who's been abandoned a second time by Linda, the friendly woman. The entire last paragraph moves at glacial speed—and with good reason—because the narrative has entered the mind of the infant, who seems completely unmoved by the event.

John L'Heureux, "Three Short Moments in a Long Life," *New Yorker*, May 9, 2016, 56.

A man gives a first-person account of three significant episodes in his life. ¶ "The Spy" is concerned with the narrator's obsession with Beverly LaPlante, a girl in his second-grade class, who disappears until she reappears in the third grade cussing a blue streak because she knows she will die of polio. In "The Writer," the narrator's ire over being well-published but poorly compensated for it spills into an encounter with a young man resembling Jesus, who appears at his door asking for a donation. He gives. In "The Substance of Things Hoped For," the narrator is reduced to being referred to as a "white male, eighty," by hospital staff when his wife calls 9-1-1. At this point in his life the man has been diagnosed with *Parkinsonism*, not quite the disease, but not quite free of it either. He and his wife conspire together to end his life by not ever calling 9-1-1 again:

"I say, 'I'll miss you when I'm dead.' And in a while there comes the final moment: the earth stops turning and a luminous silence descends. And then, as we draw one last breath together, I snatch

your hand. And hold it. Holding it, and holding it, and still holding it, I breathe out.

Still, I'll miss you when I'm dead" (61).

You can't write more profoundly than that about dying of a dread disease. At least I don't think you can.

Akhil Sharma, "A Life of Adventure and Delight," *New Yorker*, May 16, 2016, 78.

Gautama, a twenty-four-year-old Indian graduate student living in New York City, is arrested for hiring a prostitute. ¶ Gautama feels a certain shame, but because his hormonal drive is strong, he continues to search out women. His sources for shame are many: a sister with epilepsy, a disease that makes her unplaceable as a bride in India. He meets an Indian graduate student, Nirmala, and slowly they become involved, even to the point of having sex. Gautama begins to see her faults, and stories of their relationship filter back to the family—disrupting the custom of arranged marriages, jolting forth yet another layer of shame. A year after his arrest, Gautama procures another prostitute, and even though he is delighted with her, he knows tomorrow he will feel shame.

Lauren Groff, "The Midnight Zone," *New Yorker*, May 23, 2016, 68.

The Florida spring break vacation for a family of four is disrupted when the father is called away, and the mother falls and splits her head open. ¶ At this point the first-person narrative from her point of view becomes even more inward: lantern batteries that burn out, increased rainfall, the night lengthening to an eternity, and scores of other impressions that the woman accumulates flat on her back waiting for her husband to return from what he projects to be a forty-eight-hour trip. It isn't. When he finally does show (a woman has jumped from the building he owns), the mother and two children and the dog are lumped into one bed:

My husband filled the door. He is a man born to fill doors. I shut my eyes. When I opened them, he was enormous above me. In his face was a thing that made me go quiet inside, made a long slow sizzle creep up my arms from the fingertips, because the thing I read in his face was the worst, it was fear, and it was vast, it was elemental, like the wind itself, like the cold sun I would soon feel on the silk of my pelt (73).

Goff's impressionistic writing is rife throughout the 4,250-word story. One wants to underline most of it, to recall its at once soothing yet unsettling lines.

Charles Yu, "Fable," *New Yorker*, May 30, 2016, 58.

Man goes to therapist to "work through some stuff by telling a story about that stuff" (59). ¶ By retelling story of his life several times in one session—often starting over—man relates to reader story of his life: his careers, his wife, their attempts to have baby, then failure to do so, and then finally, against others' warnings, they do conceive and have a son, who never quite grows up inside. Yet child is smart enough to know this is so. But fable seems to end without moral, or if there is one,

it is feeble: “If this is where your story starts, then so be it” (65). ¶ Writing a fable in this exacting but tedious once-upon-a-time format is rather like writing a poem using an equally worn-out form. You can still do it, but probably you shouldn’t.

Zadie Smith, “Two Men Arrive in a Village,” *New Yorker*, June 6 and 13, 2016, 44.

In this story two men enter an African village and commit rape and murder. ¶ Smith’s use of first-person plural allows the reader to peek over the narrator’s shoulder of this devastating scene. She could be one of its courageous women who form a circle around a young girl whom one of the men has targeted to satisfy his lust. The strength of the village women really comes to life, however, at the end when the chief’s wife returns to the village and learns of what has happened:

“But our chief’s wife stood up suddenly, left the room, and walked out into the yard” (47).

The reader has no sympathy for the men who have entered her village uninvited.

Ben Lerner, “The Polish Rider,” *New Yorker*, June 6 and 13, 2016, 50.

Sonia, in the act of retrieving two paintings from her gallery owner so that she can *clean them up* before a show, leaves them behind in an Uber car and spends most of the story attempting to re-retrieve them. ¶ Lerner seems to insert himself as character/narrator of this story: a writer who is attempting to help the polish immigrant Sonia, among other things, navigate the nasty waters of Manhattan Uber riding. Lerner-as-narrator touches a lot of bases to create this breathless narrative: how he and Sonia are the same age, he being from Topeka, she from Krakow; how he is a writer, she a visual artist; how art history informs both their lives; the fact that Sonia’s entire oeuvre is based on the image of the famous kiss between Erich Honecker and Leonid Brezhnev—an image she has created variations of over and over again.

The reader senses they will not locate the lost (stolen?) paintings. What seems most important is how cold, cold, cold life still is (and always will be) for struggling artists, particularly in New York City—and how petty theft and the bureaucratic ineptitude of a fairly recent start-up only exacerbates that cold, cold life.

Langston Hughes, “Seven People Dancing,” *New Yorker*, June 6 and 13, 2016, 60.

Written in 1961 and found among Hughes’s papers at Yale University, this sort of prose poem spins like an LP, the story of an evening at a *faïry’s* apartment. ¶ Marcel rents out his place in Harlem to couples who wish to dance (and apparently more). For a price he provides the music of twelve stacked records plus liquor. The phrase “seven people dancing” becomes a refrain throughout the story, signifying that Marcel, the *faïry*, is always dancing alone. One of the couples is “mixed,” the girl white. When a tall, dark man indicates he doesn’t have the money to take advantage of the use of Marcel’s tastefully decorated bedroom, “the white girl” says, “Oh, but I do.” The next record falls onto the turntable and places the story in a definite era:

“It was a Dizzy Gillespie record, and what it said without words summed up the situation pretty well. It was not that room but the world in that room that was in the record. The music was uranium, and those seven people, had they been super-duper spies, could not have known more about atomic energy—that is, its reason for being a mighty way of dying, “Oh, but I do” being a component” (61).

This piece may once again demonstrate why unpublished works of dead authors should not necessarily be unveiled in this fashion. Did the story receive the same number of cuts or edits that the stories of living authors receive? There may have been a very good reason that Hughes’s story went unpublished until now. Was it because he didn’t wish for people to speculate on his sexuality? Was it because the piece was a work-in-progress? Was it because it somehow lacked the luster of his important works? The editor always must ask herself, “If I could contact the author in the hereafter, would he want this story to appear in *The New Yorker* in 2016?” Of course, there is no definitive answer. The question *is* the answer.

Jonathan Safran Foer, “Maybe It Was the Distance,” *New Yorker*, June 6 and 13, 2016, 62.

Three generations of the Bloch family—Irv, Jacob, and Max—head to Washington’s Reagan airport to meet their Israeli cousins. ¶ The middle cohorts—Jacob and Tamir—are the focus of this story seen through Jacob’s eyes: his struggle as a novelist juxtaposed against Tamir’s arrogance over having accumulated a massive fortune. Jacob recalls for the reader two significant events the cousins share: one in which, as teenagers, in Tamir’s bedroom in Israel, the boys masturbate side-by-side repeatedly (viewing the same pair of breasts via the computer) as if it is a sport; second, an incident which takes place in DC on the eve of Jacob’s bar mitzvah, where, in the middle of the night, Tamir jumps into the lion’s den at the National Zoo and expects Jacob to do the same. The dare to be courageous, the *challenge*, is indicative of the implicit contract in their lives, the American Jew leading a rather easy life compared to the Israeli facing death every day. Following their grandfather’s funeral years later the two have a short exchange, the tenor of which seems to encapsulate their lives:

“‘It was a hard day,’ Tamir said.

‘Yes, but the day has been decades.’

‘But it’s felt like only a few seconds, right?’

‘Whenever someone asks me how I’m doing, I find myself saying, “I’m going through a passage.” Everything is a transition, a stop on the way to the destination, turbulence. But I’ve been saying it for so long I should probably accept that the rest of my life is going to be one long passage: an hourglass with no bulbs.’

Tamir leaned over and in a low voice, almost whispering, said, ‘You are innocent.’

‘What?’ Jacob said.

‘You are innocent.’

‘Thank you.’

He pulled back and said, ‘No, like, too trusting. Too childlike.’” (77).

But the fact that Jacob lives in a country where, in certain respects, he can remain a child, *trusting*, is not insignificant.

Karen Russell, “The Bog Girl,” *New Yorker*, June 20, 2016, 62.

Cillian Eddowis, fifteen-year-old inhabitant of “this green island off the coast of northern Europe,” discovers a young woman his age buried in the bog where he works liberating peat from its natural environment. ¶ That he takes the Bog Girl, this 2,000-year-old body preserved by its acidic past, home with him is bizarre enough, but with the following sentence one is once again in the midst of a Karen Russell story:

“In the living room, roars of studio laughter erupted from the television; Cillian and the Bog Girl were watching a sitcom about a Canadian trailer park” (61).

One has suddenly left every *earthly* story one knows and landed in Russellville—a place where almost everything seems normal about the love affair between a fifteen-year-old and a perfectly preserved (for all one knows) fifteen-year-old who has been *preserved* for 2,000 years. Nearly everything is normal about their budding relationship, except that Bog Girl never speaks. When she finally does, uttering a language that is no longer spoken anywhere on earth, Cillian is frightened back into reality, and their relationship ends like many adolescent relationships do:

“He was not who she’d expected to find when she opened her eyes, either. Now neither teen-ager needed to tell the other that it was over. It simply was—and, without another sound, the Bog Girl let go of Cillian and slipped backward into the bog water” (69).

Russell has prepared the reader for this ending. One finally apprehends the overarching metaphor one might have missed for the forest. *Every* adolescent has experienced this realization about one’s first lover. It’s over. It simply is.

Paul Theroux, “Upside-Down Cake,” *New Yorker*, June 27, 2016, 58.

In this story narrated by a son named Jay, a large family gather to honor their mother on the occasion of her ninetieth birthday. ¶ These seven adult children are welcomed by their mother with about as much zeal as when they are children:

“Child-hating was not a pretense for Mother, the jokey exasperation of a sentimental woman, who spoke of her children insincerely as rug rats and burdens. She had already raised seven of them, plus the ghost of Angela—why more? Children bored her, they irritated her, they were always in the way. Worst of all, they took attention away from her” (62).

The mother’s animosity toward children, including her grandchildren, as one can

imagine, has done little to create seven secure adults—though all seem to be educated and well connected. Sarcasm and dark irony reign supreme at the table in a restaurant called the Happy Clam. The meal limps along until dessert is served:

“Mother smiled at the slumping, soggy cake, topped with eight lurid pineapple slices, most of them with a cherry in the middle, two with candles, and, on the sloping side, “MOTHER” spelled out in shaky worm-cast piping, with scrolls and roses around it.

‘Make a wish, Ma,’ Franny said. ‘Pineapple upside-down cake. Your favorite’” (61).

At this point three more guests enter the room, a grown couple and their child, and all seem to be counting their fingers, to determine who these outsiders are. In a way, it doesn’t matter. This family doesn’t merit the presence of anyone decent, let alone the narrator’s thirty-eight-year-old son he once put up for adoption, his son’s wife, and their young child. Yes, it’s a mean trick for Jay to play on his family but one that they probably deserve.

T. Coraghessan Boyle, “The Fugitive,” *New Yorker*, July 4, 2016, 58.

Twenty-three-year-old Marciano, a gardener’s assistant in southern California, is a multi-drug-resistant tuberculosis patient who refuses to take his meds and rest. ¶ To eke out a living, Marciano must trap varmints for his boss Rudy and drown them while still in their cages. However, because of his lowly status (documented but can’t prove it), Marciano is treated by the state-regulated medical system as a criminal—and because he breaks his agreement to rest by returning to work and by entering public places without wearing his mask. He is caught and returned to the clinic where, by spitting into the faces of the medical workers, he escapes once again. The story closes with Marciano trapped in a grassy corner of a neighbor’s yard, where he intends to rest his head for only a moment:

“He closed his eyes. And when he opened them again all he could see was the glint of a metal trap, bubbles rising in the clear cold water, and the hands of the animal fighting to get out” (59).

This final predicament is like being trapped in one of Rudy’s varmint cages as it is dropped into a garbage can full of water. Only this time the trap is his own ribcage, his own lungs, being drowned by his own poisonous mucus. The metaphor is apt if a bit too obvious. And a better title—“The Weight of It”—might be buried in the author’s text on page 58.

Michael Andreasen, “The King’s Teacup at Rest,” *New Yorker*, July 11 and 18, 2016, 74.

The King of Retired Amusements purchases Liebling’s Sunday Morning Carnival to add to his collection. He is accompanied by his retinue—a steward, a boy scout, and a dancing bear—as they inspect his new acquisition. They begin with the hot dog stand where the king is warned against eating one of the green wieners with rancid relish and mustard. They shift to the Cul-de-sac of Fun, to the Fun House, to the Full Tilt, and finally to the teacups, where the king rests after disgorging his hot dog decision. The story seems to be an intricately constructed mini-allegory, in

which certain abstractions are signified by decaying imagery of abandoned amusement parks. To say any more would spoil your reading fun. Andreason is one of the magazine's few writers with no major book to his credit. Quite a coup to get published by the *New Yorker* without a new title to hawk!

Joy Williams, "Stuff" *New Yorker*, July 25, 2016, 54.

Henry, aged sixty-three and columnist for a newspaper called *Zephyr*, learns from his doctor that he has lung cancer and a short time to live. ¶ Actually, this information comes to him by way of a sour irony when the doctor apparently sees he is staring at the file of a "Henry" who is eighty-five:

"'You have lung cancer as well, a bit more advanced, actually.' The doctor stared at him again. 'Sorry about the mixup'" (55).

The mix-up! Really? Befuddled, Henry buys an enormous Christmas tree, but when he can't get into his assigned parking slot at his condo, he tears off to visit his 100-year-old mother living in a facility he refers to as *Ambiance*. The caregivers there blow off a bit of steam by sticking their heads in a patient's door and asking, "Who's the President? Who's the President?" Williams's characters have a way of saying two things at once:

"'It may be one of those rolling heart attacks. Won't kill you but makes you queasy. But, on a lighter note, here's my question: Do you think there's a moral weight to our actions?'" (59).

The character speaking here, Henry's mother, is most probably not the one asking the question—it is actually author Williams—but because it is attributed to Henry's mother, the question ends up being both profound *and* dull. When Henry says it is time for him to leave, one feels he is not talking about getting in his car with the Xmas tree stuffed in it. Likewise, when his mother asks him if he will be able to find his way out, she is not speaking entirely of the entrance/exit of a place called *Ambiance*.

Joshua Ferris, "The Abandonment," *New Yorker*, August 1, 2016, 54.

A popular television actor believes his wife has left him when she doesn't immediately return to their New York apartment from buying Sunday morning bagels and a newspaper. ¶ Nick spends hours searching for her, even tosses his cell phone in the trash in frustration and then can't recall the correct ashcan when he returns to retrieve it. In the next scene, however, he takes a car to Brooklyn and visits with a married female artist he's met four days earlier at an important opening in midtown. In this tête-à-tête they compare their lives—Ferris makes a point of having them compare the scents of their lives—and they end up making out. When they finally determine that Nick must leave before her husband and family return, he passes by the rowdy bunch on his way to the elevator. Back in Manhattan, Nick's wife has to open the door for him because his key no longer seems to work. The reader now becomes privy to information that Nick has done this before: left *her* momentarily because of *his* abandonment issues. So the reader is left with sort of an O. Henry / F. Scott Fitzgerald magazine-story irony that hinges on one factor.

If this wife of his, Naomi, *had* taken her cell phone with her—even to pick up bagels, this woman who only too well knows what her husband’s abandonment issues are—then there would be no story, no magazine irony. In today’s world no person under forty *abandons* her phone, even for a short errand, especially in Manhattan. *What if Nick should want to change his bagel order or want something else? What if I’m molested?* This point seems to demand a greater than normal suspension of disbelief.

Tessa Hadley, “Dido’s Lament,” *New Yorker*, August 8 and 15, 2016, 62.

On a snowy December day in London, Lynette, an adequate vocalist in her late thirties, is knocked down by a man in a huge, holiday hurry, and when she eventually catches up with him, to reprimand him, discovers that the brute is her ex-husband, Toby. ¶ *Oh, sure*, one thinks, but one must remember that fiction is always filled with coincidences, and Hadley makes this one sound reasonable:

“It wasn’t really so extraordinary that she’d followed him all that way without recognizing him—she’d seen only his back, and the open, flapping coat had obscured his shape, a knitted hat had hidden his hair” (63).

Lynette’s ankle has been sprained in the *mêlée*, but when she sees that the culprit is Toby, she fails to mention it. Instead of going to a bar, they move to his home, where absent are his second wife and two children. He and Lynette visit over expensive white wine—long enough for her to learn that he is a successful TV or film producer—until she decides she must leave. ¶ Hadley is all about magnificent details: clothing textures and smells, rooms entered, weather endured, aromas the world forces upon one racing after a rude man, the life those two once shared before Lynette forced Toby to leave. Yes, she sees that he is prosperous and happy. However, she slips a second time after Toby closes his door, thus intensifying her pain, and, instead of summoning him with a scream, she limps to a local bar. For one scene near the end, the point of view shifts to Toby, who informs the reader that he’s already erased her phone number from the kitchen chalkboard and is so pleased with himself for having revealed to Lynette all that she could have had, though not the fact that he still loves her. Oh, and he suddenly sees her bag with a cheap leopard-skin print top inside that he then stashes in the back of his office closet. Because he has not Lynette’s number, he will never know that she now waits in a bar to receive a text (about her garment) that will never come.

Thomas McGuane, “Papaya,” *New Yorker*, August 22, 2016, 58.

Errol Healy, retired insurance salesman in Key West, recalls a story of his youth in which his boat is stolen, and he becomes beholden to a Bahamian woman named Angela. ¶ In fact, this memory is more vivid to him than anything that has happened to him since. As Angela’s “slave,” Errol works harvesting guano from caves and delivering it to the tree roots of her papaya grove. Because Angela has a big heart, however, she releases him to a series of boat rides back to Florida—where he runs into a Cuban doctor and his wife, whom he’s met earlier—now sort of bound together by what they know about each other. It turns out, nevertheless, to be a good friendship. Errol and his wife wind up with a daughter named *Angela*,

not to mention a doctor who remains his friend for life. Fate does sometimes smile on one, and one must smile back!

Curtis Sittenfeld, "Gender Studies," *New Yorker*, August 29, 2016, 72.

Nell, a professor of gender studies at a university in Wisconsin, lands in Kansas City, and becomes involved with a man in his twenties, when she believes he has her driver's license, which she has lost since leaving the airport. ¶ Yeah, this guy Luke is the driver of the hotel shuttle, and she uses his business card to call and ask him to check out the van for her lost license. At no time does he say he actually has it, but Nell agrees to meet him for a drink to retrieve it, which escalates to more drinks and a trip to her hotel room, where he will finally, she believes, deliver her property to her. Having just been dumped by a man with whom she has lived for eleven years, Nell is intrigued and reaches a certain point in sexual congress, in which she indicates she'll go no farther without her license. When Luke indicates he doesn't have it, she calls him on his *credibility*, his character.

"After a beat, he says, 'Or maybe you didn't really lose it'" (77).

Not until this point has Nell bothered to think of what her call must have looked like to him. After discovering that her license has fallen into the lining of her jacket, she considers apologizing but she fails to do so. This full professor of gender studies, nonetheless, now has a rather indelicate anecdote to share with her students should she ever wish to share it with anyone at all.

Jonathan Lethem, "A Gentleman's Game," *New Yorker*, September 5, 2016, 58.

Two men—one a backgammon expert, one not—travel to Singapore to play. Very very Casino Royale without the . . . royale. ¶ Upon arriving, Bruno, the backgammon player, spots a high school acquaintance from Berkeley. After this astounding coincidence (fiction is full of them), Bruno winds up playing backgammon with his high school friend for \$500 a point, and Edgar, his traveling companion, disappears from the plot. The journey to the game is not without its fun: women, massages, drinks, cocaine—but in the end both the predictable *and* unpredictable happen: Bruno wins most of the games but then for inexplicable reasons chooses to double the stakes, and, oh, guess who has staked all of Bruno's games? Come on, guess!

Robert Coover, "Invasion of the Martians," *New Yorker*, September 12, 2016, 66.

While in the middle of a three-way with a young woman and the female Secretary of the Interior, a US senator from Texas must return home, where Martians have landed their spacecraft. When he attempts a certain diplomacy—never mind that they speak *no* language—they apparently shoot his dick off (a *whooshing* flashlight, very clean, no blood). Perhaps only a man of Coover's age could write such a story, in which the US's best retaliation is to nuke the Martians (voicing fear leftover from the 1950s?). The Senator's younger paramour indiscreetly reveals the Senator's delicate condition [**"Nothing but a pimple!" (68)**] on TV, and he must appear on a late-night show to expose the truth about his *member* (a word used more than once). Perhaps the author's solution to the Senator's problem reflects a subliminal message from his aging libido: what good is it to me now anyway? And perhaps he

is satirizing more fleshly squabbles the US is having over *aliens*, particularly along the Mexican border—where there seems to be no communication and annihilation is threatened.

Rivka Galchen, “How Can I Help?” *New Yorker*, September 19, 2016, 74.

Hayley, twenty-four, works for a call center, and discovers she is pregnant with twins. ¶ The story’s narrator is Hayley’s sister, the youngest of three adult children and yet perhaps the most *mature*; she is also responsible for getting Hayley her job. The narrator claims several times that she is non-judgmental, yet backtracks and admits that she is a bit, attempting to help right Hayley’s ship. She even has the opportunity to transform her judgment into something positive. Earlier Hayley has asked the narrator to adopt one of the twins (after they arrive)—almost as if it were a puppy. At the time the transaction does not seem possible to the narrator until Hayley experiences some alarming symptoms and checks herself into the hospital without the help of her judgmental sister. When she shows up at the hospital to help Hayley, she says:

“I’m here for Hayley Ward,’ I said. ‘I’m the nanny for the Ward twins.’ Though I had made no decision, I felt happy, expectant. I needed a family. And here Hayley was bringing one to me. Love was about practice, the book on happiness had said. Or maybe it hadn’t said that. I think it was that winning at squash was about practice, and then it turned out that victory had been insufficient? I didn’t know. Maybe I could learn on the job”(79).

This quiet “relationship” story is quite satisfying for its full but brief exploration and yet “positive” but unsentimental ending.

Petina Gappah, “A Short History of Zaka the Zulu,” September 26, 2016, 58.

Zaka, a Zimbabwe boy of seventeen, becomes head prefect in a rural boys’ school but later in life is accused and convicted of murdering a former schoolmate. ¶ An intricately compressed tale, this story opens a window onto this Jesuit school located in rural Zimbabwe. The author spends a great deal of time portraying the regimented yet torrid nature of such an institution: middlers, juniors, seniors, and each with his role, demerits, traditions, uniforms, alliances and betrayals. The latter is what ultimately concern this story. What happens when one boy is caught *lying* with another, and all but one of the witnesses agrees to keep his mouth shut? When one party decides to blackmail the two paramours, a boiling pot can only do one thing.

Etgar Keret, “To the Moon and Back,” *New Yorker*, October 3, 2016, 62.

A young Israeli father buys a multicopter drone for his six-year-old son and presents it to him the day *after* his birthday. ¶ Why? Because he’s divorced, and the mother never allows this father to be present *on* the kid’s birthday. On this day after, this father take his kid to the mall to get batteries for the drone remote, and at some point a cash register becomes a point of contention when the boy, Lidor, wants *that* for his birthday present—simply because Daddy has said he can have *anything* in the store as his second present. Later, having given up on the cash

register purchase (offering 2,000 shekels), the father and his son fly the drone at the park. The father cajoles his Lidor:

“Who loves Lidor the most in the world?” I ask, and Lidor answers, “Daddy!”

“And how much does Lidor love Daddy?” I ask while the multicopter drone spins around him, and he yells, “A whole bunch!”

“Up to the sky,” I shout. “Up to the moon and back!” (65).

This story both irritates and delights. You absolutely hate that this father has to perform acrobatics to see his kid and get him to love him, but you love the fact that the father’s willing to perform such acrobatics in order to hear that **“killer laugh of his. There’s nothing nicer in this stinking world than the sound of a kid laughing” (65).**

Kevin Barry, “Deer Season,” *New Yorker*, October 10, 2016, 84.

A seventeen-year-old Irish girl sets her sights on an Englishman in his thirties to aid her in parting with her virginity. ¶ The girl’s seduction succeeds, and all seems well until she returns home not long into her first year at university, when her father has learned of her fling: **“You were seen!”** he explodes. She, in the dark, returns to the man’s leased bungalow, which is now empty, and falls asleep on the kitchen floor. Barry strikes some fine literary tones: a murmuring river, a Roberto Bolaño reference, a coming-of-age theme, and an oblique flirtation with *The Scarlet Letter*. But, in spite of rich physical detail, something about the story seems thin. The only original aspect may be that the girl goes after *him*, but in the grand scheme of things, didn’t also Eve? Didn’t Hester Prynne, just a little?

Cynan Jones, “The Edge of the Shoal,” *New Yorker*, October 17, 2016, 72.

A man gone fishing in a hidden bay, in his kayak, withstands a storm, has his finger stripped by fish while unconscious, and is weathering yet another event as the story ends. He assesses his situation:

“He keeps to hand the thick jumper. Tucks the cagoule in by the seat. Takes a brief inventory of the boat. He does not add: One man. One out of two arms. Four out of ten fingers. No paddle. No torch. One dead phone” (77).

Without said paddle he can only count on what he calls the *rhythm* of the water, perhaps of life—waves and wind that might or might not move him to shore. The more his life is threatened, of course, the more he wants to survive. **“Trust the float now. You have to trust the float” (79).**

Ottessa Moshfegh, “An Honest Woman,” *New Yorker*, October 24, 2016, 62.

Jeb, a man over sixty, acquires a new neighbor, a young woman, and he would like to tickle more than her fancy. ¶ The nameless woman is tough, though, has eyes with two different colors, and says things like **“Shit, don’t cry” (63).** The author

deftly shifts the point of view to the woman on occasion. These clever movements help one to experience her thoughts and feelings so that she isn't merely the sexual object she's become in Jeb's eyes. As she spends a short time drinking with him—like the fly to the spider, in his living room with the front door locked—one senses his continued intent. But she, the *girl*, in his parlance, is not only too smart to succumb to his crude seductions (funny-tasting whisky) but is also fleet of foot. The she-fly escapes with only the scent of danger remaining in Jeb's squalid house. No victim here.

Anne Carson, "Back the Way You Went," *New Yorker*, October 31, 2016, 80.

This sparse story is divided into three parts, each, it would seem, tangentially or even obscurely related to the other. ¶ In "Garland," a woman recovering from loss becomes a bee as her two bee friends, later divorcing, attempt to ease her pain. In "Mexico," a woman and her elderly mother visit her father, an Alzheimer's patient, in the facility she refers to as the Last Lap. "Trouble in Paradise," written in first person from an adult daughter's point of view, highlights a quiet Christmas she spends with her mother-in-law in Ohio. She ends their dishwashing conversation by saying she's brought a recording of Lubitsch, presumably a silent film by the German director, known for his avant-garde style. This reference, like Carson's allusion to Gogol, perfectly suits this story which seems to exist outside of any conventional sense of time.

T. Coraghessan Boyle, "Are We Not Men?" *New Yorker*, November 7, 2016, 56.

This plot-driven story accomplishes what the author intends for it to. When the reader realizes one has entered the future of engineered genetics, of perfect little pigs and docile pit bulls and a statuesque young woman with a high IQ, one realizes that such beings are still capable of harming one another. According to Boyle, fucking with nature in this manner will never be satisfactory, down to grass that glows in the dark, not to mention Greek-chorus crowparrots spitting obscenities at the humans below who've allowed these atrocities to be committed in the first place.

Mohsin Hamid, "Of Windows and Doors," *New Yorker*, November 14, 2016, 70.

Saeed and Nadia, a young unmarried couple, seek to escape their war-torn city. ¶ Hamid's elegant prose and subtle omniscience take the reader inside the war of collateral damage. Both have lost family and friends. As the title suggests, both windows and doors figure importantly. Windows, once broken out by bombs or bullets, are really not capable of being resealed, but people attempt to do so with bookshelves, mattresses, or packaging tape and cardboard.

"A window was the border through which death was possibly likeliest to come. Windows could not stop even the most flagging round of ammunition: any spot indoors with a view of the outside was a spot potentially in the crossfire" (71).

Doors, too, alter in their significance, become a means of escape . . . or doom, life or death:

“Nadia, who had not considered the order of their departure until that moment, and realized that there were risks to each, to going first and to going second, did not argue but approached the door, and drawing close she was struck by its darkness, its opacity, the way that it did not reveal what was on the other side and also did not reflect what was on this side, and so felt equally like a beginning and an end, and she turned to Saeed and found him staring at her, and his face was full of worry and sorrow, and she took his hands in hers and held them tight, and then, releasing them, and without a word, she stepped through” (76-7).

The story limns not only all wars but specifically the war that threatens one the most, the war happening where one lives now.

Lauren Groff, “Flower Hunters,” *New Yorker*, November 21, 2016, 78.

A young Florida mother, on Halloween night, is left alone to dispense candy and reflect on why she has lost her best friend down the street. ¶ This nameless woman is afraid of many things, most of them on behalf of humanity or the animal world. She is heavy into reading early naturalist William Bartram, which may be one source of alienation from Meg down the street, her sons, or even her husband. She perhaps feels too much on behalf of the earth and its dwindling life. When the rain begins to pour, the woman tromps out to the corner of their yard to note that their new sinkhole is *not* filling with water, that the flood is more than likely filling a network of underground limestone canals.

“For a minute, she lets herself imagine the larger sinkhole below the baby one opening very slowly and cupping her and the house and the dog and the piano all the way down to the very black bottom of the limestone hollow and gently depositing them there so far down that nobody could get her out, they could only visit, her family’s heads peering once in a while over the lip, tiny pale bits against the blue sky.

From down there, everyone would seem so happy” (83).

Groff’s story is a subtly moving one about the full range of friendship, perhaps the flower that is most hunted.

Robert Coover, “The Hanging of the Schoolmarm,” *New Yorker*, November 28, 2016, 80.

In some iteration of the Old West, a schoolmarm closes down a saloon by winning it in a card game. ¶ One supposes that this short short story is a satire of our civilization in general. Schoolmarm rules the roost until the sheriff usurps her power and condemns her to hanging. She is a brave one, claiming that self pity “is the lowest state to which a person’s mind can fall” (81). One wonders if schoolmarm isn’t a mouthpiece for Coover:

“A landscape of rocks evokes a time before time, and the end-times as well, forcing us, while contemplating it, to live in all time at once, where words have nothing to attach themselves to” (81).

Is this old man's story deliberately attributed to two-dimensional characters, or is it an example of philosophic sophistication that one admires? The reader must judge the schoolmarm's words:

“That is what rocks express. Though they are otherwise meaningless, they are, in this respect, the most meaningful thing we have, putting us in touch with oblivion. Which is the ineffablest thing of all” (81).

Sam Shepard, “Tiny Man,” *New Yorker*, December 5, 2016, 66.

A man looks back at his life in the distant past when he is a teen, and his father is miniaturized as if appearing in a diorama. ¶ The story seems to center around—in a rather impressionistic manner of dreams and memory—one or two significant events. One, the man's father having sex with a young woman named Felicity; then the teen having sex with Felicity. The rest seems like wallpaper or atmosphere: Shepard is a master at capturing sensory details, but they seem only to serve as a conveyance for readers as they float from one scene to the next. And perhaps this move is Shepard's intent, attempting to create for readers the same jumbled mass of memories, some of which are vivid, the others of which are faint or exaggerated—very Freudian, although the narrator makes light of such an idea:

“No matter. People will talk. It could also be that I'm dreaming him like that—tiny—because it's a way of distancing myself, but that's a bit Freudian, don't you think? As though there were some kind of intelligence driving all this—the subconscious or some bullshit like that. Something I find hard to believe in. Why would I want to be distanced, anyway? There's nothing I'm still afraid of” (73).

So many fathers become tiny—not because they are dead but because they are insignificant and perhaps they always were—and the author brings this idea to life.

Joseph O'Neill, “Pardon Edward Snowden,” *New Yorker*, December 12, 2016, 64.

A young poet pens a poem that petitions President Obama to pardon dissident Edward Snowden. ¶ There is always a difficulty in fictionalizing pop culture or more accurately living history. Snowden's plight has not played out completely. The light shed on Dylan's acceptance of the Nobel Prize for poetry seems to have exploded and dimmed like a nova. O'Neill's story really seems to be about the plight of poets: their anonymity despite a competence *with* and superior understanding *of* language that far surpass those of the most proficient prose writers. The poet Mark McCain, by way of a BCCed e-mail, is solicited by the young on-the-cusp-of-success poet, Merrill Jensen, to sign his petition. This is how the decade-older McCain responds:

“He did not write Merrill back. He did not put his name to the poetition.

As soon as he had not done these things, he rose up from his chair. He went not to the window but to the area between the chair and the sofa. He stood there with hands balled into shaking fists. Silently and exultantly he roared, **Never give in. Never not resist**" (69).

I've never see utter rage portrayed more splendidly—at least as far as a spurned poet is concerned.

Mariana Enríquez, "Spiderweb," *New Yorker*, December 19 and 26, 2016, 106.

An Argentine woman travels from Buenos Aires with her husband, whom she detests, to visit family in Paraguay—a place in the **"humid north"** (107), where the air is difficult to breathe. ¶ This story would have one believe that ghosts appear everywhere, in this land where murders occur often, and unpleasant or even innocent people disappear. The narrator foreshadows a deadly fire when she is on an airplane and *sees* one the pilot claims was never there. Soldiers **"put dead people in the cement"** (112) of a bridge to hide bodies—there a driver has *seen* a woman on the bridge and *hits* her. One is fairly sure the narrator's husband's turn is coming. She's grown to detest Juan Martín and his disagreeable ways. The narrator's cousin Natalia doesn't care for him either. And even though Natalia says, **"Babe, death is the only problem without a solution,"** (109) one feels she is responsible for Juan Martín's disappearance in the end. **"Oh, there was a misunderstanding,"** (113) she declares to the hotel clerk, when Juan fails to appear with them at check-out time.