

Alcott, Louisa May. *Little Women*. Racine: Whitman, 1955.

I've had this book since I was a child. It has traveled with me from place to place, but until now I had not read it, thinking, ew, a girls' book. I was watching a Book-TV feature that included coverage of Alcott's Orchard House in Concord, Massachusetts—a living monument to where Alcott lived and worked—and realized I must, at last, read this novel. It is *not* primarily for girls; it is for anyone who would find a place for it in his or her heart.

Although Alcott's prose, at times, seems clunky, the latter part of her novel is more sophisticated than the beginning. If one has not been close to one's family members, as the Marches are, one can become suspicious of such sentiment. But as the book progresses, the relationships deepen. One would not only wish to be that close to one's siblings and parents, but one would want to try harder to make it so. The sisters do quarrel, but always they seem to come through for each other.

Alexie, Sherman. *Indian Killer*. New York: Atlantic Monthly, 1996.

I read this book, at first anyway, as one would a whodunit, quickly turning the pages. Yet I found myself savoring, if that is the right word, the timeless qualities Alexie brings to the pages: what seems like the endless and ageless fight between the white man and anyone of color, but in particular the American Indian. The physical and spiritual purgatory in which these people of many tribes must dwell; the author brings such a place alive with a bitter sword and yet a wit that cuts just as sharply. Twenty years after this book was published, things do not seem much better, and so *Indian Killer* stands as a testament to its message. See the cover flap for plot. It is only the beginning.

Andreas, Peter. *Rebel Mother: My Childhood Chasing the Revolution*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017.

This book is one of those that drew me in and would not let me go until I had finished it. I made not a single annotation or underline because the narrative was so compelling that I didn't wish to stop and write.

Carol Andreas is raised as a Mennonite in North Newton, Kansas, and in the 1950s she marries another Mennonite seven years her elder. From this marriage she gives birth to three sons, one of whom is author, Peter Andreas, the youngest. As the Andreas family lives in suburban Detroit, Michigan, Carol eventually earns a PhD and radicalizes her political thinking. Against her husband's wishes (he refuses to grant her a divorce), she packs up all three sons and moves to Berkeley, California, the epicenter of 1960s and 1970s radical politics. As part of her radicalization, Carol Andreas abdicates her traditional role as mother and allows her three sons to make many of their own decisions, for example, whether they want to attend school on a particular day. However, when she decides to move to South America to aid the *revolution* there, she takes eight-year-old Peter with her—partly to spite her husband, partly because the child is too young to care for himself, but mostly so

that she can mold his socio-political views. The other two sons prefer to remain in California and reside in the commune where they've all been living.

The heart of the book is about the years that Carol and Peter spend in three different South American countries. Instead of the warmth of a middle-class Michigan home, Peter lives a rather deprived life. He is subject to the harshest living conditions as his mother does what is necessary to aid others in their political goals. He witnesses her many different boyfriends, sometimes having to sleep in the same room with them as they make love. In one situation, his hair is infested with head lice. Worst, he is often placed in adult situations, "assignments" he accepts because they make him feel grown up. He even participates in his own kidnappings from Michigan schools, after his father has been awarded custody so that he can live with his mother in South America. His allegiances to each parent are probably stretched even tighter than most children of divorce, because his parents are from two different extremes and because both are set on having their way.

However, the narrative illustrates the strength of a love that can develop between a parent and child. Carol Andreas probably makes many mistakes, yet even so, son Peter never stops loving his mother. At one point, as he reaches college age, he does realize he will never be like his mother, nor exactly like his father. He must become his own person, and he informs each parent of his desires. If Peter has learned anything from his mother it is that he is responsible for his own life, his own happiness, and as he matures he begins to pursue the one he wants. Today, he is the author of ten books and is the John Hay Professor of International Studies at Brown University.

Bosworth, Patricia. *The Men in My Life: A Memoir of Love and Art in 1950s Manhattan*. New York: HarperCollins, 2017.

For the same reasons I enjoyed reading her biography *Montgomery Clift* years ago, I sucked down Patricia Bosworth's memoir of her own life. She is not afraid to search out and write the truth of any situation and do it with dignity and empathy for involved parties. Because for about a decade she is an actor, she becomes acquainted with Montgomery Clift personally, and she approaches her subject with honesty and a certain kindness. The same can be said for her book: all of the members of her family are loved ones, but they are also, at times, bad actors who undermine her life. Her father is a narcissistic alcoholic attorney, a closeted homosexual (according to her mother) whose love is not entirely unconditional; he profoundly affects Patricia's life when he commits suicide. Her mother is a published novelist (*Strumpet Wind*) whose career stalls and becomes an ambitious stage mother who plays on all Patricia's insecurities: Patricia's actions and achievements are never good enough. The relationship that affects Bosworth the most, perhaps, is her brother, Bart.

When they are young they establish a special bond, with even their own form of Pig Latin which their parents cannot understand; they share that language for many years until Bart ceases to think it appropriate. A particularly effective tool peppered throughout the book are her continued conversations with Bart's ghost. Eerie how

she makes it seem as if he's still alive as he *advises* her. In his teens, her brother is attracted to males and has sex with a couple of them, including a friend at an exclusive boys' boarding school. There, after they are discovered together, the friend commits suicide, an act from which Bart never recovers. He, too, eventually kills himself before reaching the age of twenty-one. Bosworth's father and brother are not the only men she writes about in her page-turner; she outlines in detail her love (and sexual) relationships with several different men, including two husbands.

She reminisces about her acting career in which she appears on Broadway with the likes of Daniel Massey and Elaine Stritch. The highlight of this period may be when she appears with Audrey Hepburn in a film, *The Nun's Story*. Nonetheless, in spite of Bosworth's success on the stage, she comes to the realization that she can no longer bare her soul in that manner but must establish a writing career instead. And glad we are that she does. Bosworth's book—taken from her diaries, her notes, but most of all her remembrances—is a stunning read.

[I'm still amazed in this day and age how a book produced by one of the top companies in the country can make it through all that scrutiny with a typo:

"I was able to slip into the wings just as Bobby begain [sic] belting out 'I Believe in You,' the signature number" (350).

How many copyeditors overlooked this error and how many times? How many times did the author or her staff herself read the galleys? Amazing.]

Burnett, Carol. *In such Good Company: Eleven Years of Laughter, Mayhem, and Fun in the Sandbox*. New York: Crown, 2016.

I've loved comedian Carol Burnett since I was twelve and would watch her on *The Garry Moore Show* when I was supposed to be in bed, so I had to read this book about Burnett's variety show that lasted eleven seasons and could have gone on if she herself hadn't drawn a line in the sand said, "Let's leave while we're on top."

Her show may have been the last vestige of vaudeville, in which each production featured sketch comedy, solo singers, and large production numbers with twelve dancers and an orchestra of twenty-four musicians. In this book Burnett reminisces about the personalities she employed, both regular and guest stars. She speaks of the many friendships that these eleven years engendered. She was forty-five when the show ended in 1978, and she knew that perhaps it was the pinnacle of her career. Of course, she went on to do film, live theater, even other TV projects, but what she will always be known for are these 276 shows, which are so full of her vivacity, her wit, her creativity, and most of all her kindness. Few people can hope to leave this kind of legacy. I LOVE YOU!

Caldwell, Laura, and Leslie S. Klinger, editors. *Anatomy of Innocence: Testimonies of the Wrongfully Convicted*. New York: Liveright, 2017.

Each and every one of these testimonies is heart wrenching, and no one is immune: men, women, white, though most victims are people of color. Justice in this country evidently goes only to the rich. If you're poor and must depend on a public defender, look out. As the editors say in the foreword:

"Rather, the stories told here acknowledge that as with all human endeavors, the operators of the machinery of justice have flaws and weaknesses. Police and prosecutors make mistakes, focusing on the wrong person out of a sincere desire to protect society. Evidence is mishandled or misinterpreted by experts. Defense attorneys fail to provide effective counsel because of overstretched resources or inadequate training. Juries are swayed by emotions, stoked by the horrific nature of the crimes or the atmosphere of panic and fear. In short, honest members of the community make errors for understandable, even justifiable reasons. Nonetheless, untangling the mistakes can be elusive and very complicated" (xxxi-ii).

Each of the testimonies is rather brief. You don't need to read too much to see what these victims have in common. They are misidentified by an unreliable source under the worst conditions. Or they are accused before DNA exists as a form of proof or exoneration. In each case there is sloppy work on the part of police and prosecutors. There are stubborn judges who can't admit they may have made a mistake. All compound in what amounts to decades that each person must serve in prison. The editors make clear that even though the sixth amendment of the Bill of Rights provides for the right to counsel,

"Congress has not created either a national standard for the quality of the defense provided nor funding, leaving many states with inadequate, underfunded systems. As a result, many defendants find incompetent defense lawyers, with little or no funding available for proper defense investigation" (207). "More than one-fifth of the exonerations recorded in the National Registry of Exonerations included 'inadequate legal defense' as a basis for overturning the conviction" (209).

The fact that this could happen to any one of us is horrifying, and society should take steps to see that the number of the wrongfully convicted is reduced to zero at some point in the very near future. Just think: What if it were to happen to me?

Chomsky, Noam. *Requiem for the American Dream: The 10 Principles of Concentration of Wealth & Power*. New York: Seven Stories, 2017.

Cunningham, Michael. *The Snow Queen: A Novel*. New York: Farrar, 2014.

Not Cunningham's best outing, although, as a fan, I don't think he could write badly, ever. This novel just seems to echo motifs in other novels he's written: two men, one woman in an odd sort of triangle, this time brothers, one straight, one gay, and the straight one's wife, who is dying of cancer. Yet, I've noticed, as often happens with writers who work autobiographically, a writer might not be "finished" with a certain motif after using it once. In *The Hours* Cunningham also repeats the motif of a mother baking a child's birthday cake; however, its usage seems more significant in *The Hours*. Cunningham's writing always seems so facile, that is, he so easily appears to articulate exactly what he wants to say; it seems, however, that this time his verbiage is more powerful than his story.

e-book typos:

“Nor is he ~~is~~ a pedant” (110).

“~~It~~ [Is] that it? Does she do things because Liz would do them?” (176).

[Why are these important? I’m not sure. Is the text copyedited by the same person who copyedits the print copy? If so, are these errors also present in the print copy? If not, why would there apparently be two different copyeditors for different versions of the same text? And why in this day and age, after thirty years of computerized printing, should there be even one typo in a published book? Just asking.]

Deitcher, David. *Dear Friends: American Photographs of Men Together, 1840-1918*. New York: Abrams, 2001.

A number of years ago I bought a box of notecards entitled *Dear Friends*, featuring fifteen cards of five different subjects: pairs of nineteenth-century men photographed in intimate poses. Recently I became aware that these photographs were featured in a book by the same title. Deitcher, art historian and critic, has put forth a large collection of such photographs and makes speculative commentary about his subjects. He explores if men of the nineteenth century were less concerned about how they were viewed than men in the ensuing centuries seemed to have been. Are these heterosexual men holding hands, with arms around each other, brothers of one brand or another? Indeed, did people even use terms like hetero- and homosexual? They did not, not until Freud and his ilk contrived them.

Among many interesting observations the author brings to the reader’s attention is the idea that men’s work was largely artisanal, that a teen would live under the same roof under the direction of an older man for several years, to learn a trade before venturing out on his own. In his town my own grandfather (born 1894) lived with a man old enough to be his grandfather and learned the harness-making trade. With advent of the industrial age this kind of relationship faded away. Men became isolated in their work, and competitive, though ironically they worked elbow-to-elbow in factories. It is lovely to think that men of varying sexualities might have felt comfortable in their skins enough to express physical affection that might or might not have been sexual. After all, I believe prepubescent boys find a certain strength by being physically close to their fathers. *I too one day will have a strong body like this one. I too will father children. I too will be strong.* On TV the other night the camera panned over a major league baseball game crowd, and an older boy was standing behind one would presume his father, with his arms loosely around the man’s neck. The father, perhaps born in the seventies, was okay with it, kind of like a lion would withstand the affections of a cub. It was a touching sight, one seldom seen when I was that age. Deitcher seems to echo my feelings:

“My initial enthusiasm on seeing this photograph was soon tempered by recognizing their mutual resemblance. Could they be father and son? The collector

also enclosed a copy of documentation that had accompanied the photograph when he bought it. In part, the documentation read: ‘A piece of paper behind the image has the names Henbraon Van Pelt and Ed Thomas.’ So, I concluded, they are not father and son” (132).

I believe Deitcher may be as intrigued with the idea that men in the same family could be close physically, that in that earlier time men of our frontier were not as concerned with appearances as they have become in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Deitcher ends the book with this thought, one I find endemic to his project:

“We are left, then, with uncertainty, with that blend of desire and doubt that transports the observer to conduct research that itself leads back to uncertainty. In their elusiveness, their resistance to naming and categorization, such photographs become their own poetic evidence of the fluidity that marked the relations they reveal yet cannot prove” (150).

Alas, the bite of it: the observer perceives the truth of a certain reality, feels it in his bones as he views these affectionate men, but in the end the observer cannot bring forth the proofs needed to record it as history.

Evans, Harold. *Do I Make Myself Clear? Why Writing Well Matters*. New York, Little, Brown, 2017.

The field of English grammar can be a pedant’s paradise (or nightmare), what with Twitter and texting divining their own rules, and for over 400 pages noted wordsmith Evans sounds off about his favorite peeves. He also, if readers take away nothing else, reminds us that the passive voice (not tense) can bloat a sentence, whereas active voice (subject+verb+object) allows for clearer and briefer writing. Evans takes governmental babble and rewrites it so that one can understand it:

White House:

“Despite these opportunities and multiple intelligence products that noted the threat AQAP could pose to the Homeland, the different pieces of the puzzle were never brought together in this case[,] the dots were never connected, and, as a result steps to disrupt the plot involving Mr. Abdulmutallab were not taken prior to his boarding of the airplane with an explosive device and attempting to detonate it in-flight” (374). [passages written in passive voice appear in bold font]

Evans’s rewrite:

“CT staff never connected the dots, so no one attempted to prevent Mr. Abdulmutallab boarding the plane with an explosive device” (375).

The author reduces the passage’s bloat from 68 words to 46, without reducing its meaning; in fact, he **clarifies** its meaning. And this goal becomes his overarching purpose. As a journalist Evans hasn’t much use for other inflated language, including what he calls flesh-eaters. One should, for example, use “although” instead of the flesh-eating “despite the fact that” or “like” instead of “along the lines

of.” He reiterates what every good eighth-grade English teacher tries to teach: “Don’t pad your writing.” He might have followed his own advice when explaining “flesh-eating” by reducing his verbiage from half a page (plus a photograph of *Zoophagus insidians*) to a sentence or two. His metaphor is self-explanatory.

Overall, Mr. Evans provides a fine review for persons who write or wish to. He directs his writing to the journalist, who is attempting to reach as many readers as possible, but his “Ten Shortcuts to Making Yourself Clear” (Chapter Five) alone are worth the price of the book, and could assist all writers in making themselves clearer, regardless of the genre. Kudos to this wordsmith.

Ford, Ford Madox. *Parade’s End*. With an introduction by Robie Macauley. New York: Vintage, 1979.

A tetralogy:

Some Do Not . . . 1924 [Finished reading 10/31/17]

No More Parades 1925

A Man Could Stand Up 1926

The Last Post 1928

Ford, Richard. *Between Them: Remembering My Parents*. New York: HarperCollins, 2017.

As always, Ford’s writing is engaging, but he seems to take the easy way out in the way in which he depicts his parents. First, he does a mash-up of a memoir written a long time ago of one parent with one he writes much more recently. Next, he relies solely on his memory and many times says he simply does not know such and such fact or facts. Still, from his recollections he does manage to produce this interesting portrait of his parents, each extraordinary in the way ordinary people can be extraordinary when difficult conditions require them to cope. The result is a child, Ford, who is given much freedom to become what he wants in life. We all should receive such a great gift from our parents.

Frank, Barney. *Frank: A Life in Politics from the Great Society to Same-Sex Marriage*. New York: Farrar, 2015.

In this tersely written memoir (though verbose in places), Frank memorializes his forty years of public service. Though I find the word “service” can have a false ring with people in Congress who, over time, increase their wealth considerably, such a word rings strong and true with regard to Barney Frank. For four decades he serves, in one capacity or another, the people of Boston, Massachusetts—but also many citizens from coast to coast. During his tenure as congress member, he evolves into an ace legislator who is instrumental in getting landmark legislation through Congress: undoing Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, strengthening laws that govern Wall Street (Dodd-Frank) after 2008, and any number of LGBTQ issues. He has a way of stating the truth that only stings if you are the guilty party:

“If every issue is always on the active agenda, if an issue that was already disposed of

by a majority can be reopened whenever the side that lost regains an advantage, instability infects not just the body that made that decision but also the society that it is governed by. It is the explicit rejection of that principle by the Tea Party Republicans that contributes heavily to political gridlock. A representative or senator's effectiveness thus is based on his or her ability to deal with a very wide range of issues, with never enough time, and with little guidance from others" (73).

Frank is able to articulate the why and wherefores of legislation and government, as in this statement justifying taxation:

"In a civilized society that needs a profit-driven private sector and a tax-funded public sector, it is *all* the people's money. The task facing sensible people is to distinguish between the personal or family needs and wants best fulfilled by individual spending choices and those societal goals that can be achieved only if we pool our resources to buy collective goods" (171-2).

Frank speaks to how our country can dovetail capitalism with democracy:

"Representative government in a capitalist society involves the coexistence of two systems—an economic one, in which a person's influence necessarily increases with his or her wealth, and a political one, in which every citizen is supposed to have an equal say. If the mechanisms of the free market are going to work, that is, if they are going to increase productivity through incentives and allocate resources efficiently, money must drive decisions. For democracy to fulfill its moral promise, everyone's vote should have the same weight in making the rules by which we govern ourselves" (183). Hallelujah, he should be teaching civics in high school!

Frank is blunt about the issues that Democrats face:

"Democrats will regain a fighting chance to win majority support among working- and middle-class white men only when we demonstrate the will—and capacity—to respond to the economic distress inflicted on them" (187).

"The NRA does what I have long begged my LGBT allies to do, at first with mixed results, and more recently with much greater success. They urge all of their adherents to get on the voting rolls. They are diligent to the point of obsession in making sure that elected officials hear from everyone in their constituencies who opposes any limits on guns, especially when a relevant measure is being considered, and they then do an extraordinary job of informing their supporters of how those officials cast their votes" (203).

One only hopes that new Democrats now filling slots in Congress are half as dedicated, knowledgeable, honest, and generous as Barney Frank. In the coming months and years we're going to need such people to face the issues that plague citizens across this country.

After reading Christopher Isherwood's entire oeuvre in 2015-6 and seeing what an influence Forster had been on the man, I felt compelled to read this Forster biography, as well. Isherwood credits Forster with, among other things, providing him with a creative mantra: *Get on with your own work; behave as if you were immortal*. Isherwood reminds himself, page after page in his journals, that he must remain industrious. Since Furbank does not provide a complete list of Forster's titles but offers them up in the narrative instead, it is difficult to realize that Forster, too, produced a broad variety of works, well over twenty. So, a generation apart, Forster provides the model for Isherwood's ethic. They seem to share similar ideas on literary quality, standards, a certain fussiness in regard to everything. Yet there exist differences between the two men born a generation apart.

Forster, though he does write about sex between men, does not allow it to be seen, particularly *Maurice* (which is written in 1913-4 but published posthumously in 1971 and made into an Ivory-Merchant film, in 1987) until after his death. Though he becomes sexually active with men at one point, it is not to the degree, I believe, that Isherwood does, the latter claiming to have had over four hundred partners, and yet sharing his last thirty-three years with one man. Forster is never able to find that one man, though I believe he would have liked to. He did have close emotional relationships with other men, but they were mostly married, and in no way did he wish to interfere with those, or gay friends to whom he was not physically attracted, such as his peer, J. R. Ackerley. Isherwood made a break with British culture by making his home in America in 1938-9. Though well-traveled throughout the world, and though he empathized with a great many others, Forster's being was too deeply rooted in Britain ever to leave. Just the story of the home he lived in with his mother for so many years is enough to complete this picture. When finally vacating West Hackhurst, a rather large estate, it takes the man many months to categorize all the collections of things that had come down to him, and, that as an only child, he now must be rid of: decades, if not centuries, of useless family letters and documents, furniture, clothing, carpets, dishes, art.

Nuggets:

Personal writing of Forster, in which he goads himself to improve his lot:

(1) Get up earlier, out of bed by 9 (2) Smoke in public: it gives a reason for you & you can observe unchallenged (3) try to plan out work, at least by the week (4) more exercise: keep the brutes quiet (5) don't ever shrink from self-analysis, but don't keep on it too long (6) get a less superficial idea of women (7) don't be so afraid of going into strange places or company, & be a fool more frequently (8) keep accounts (122).

A different kind of difficulty was that he had come to feel bored with orthodox fictional form. He told Dickinson (8 May 1922) that he was tired of the convention that one must view the action through the mind of one of the characters. *If you can pretend you can get inside one character, why not pretend it about all the characters? I see why. The illusion of life may vanish, and the creator degenerate into the showman. Yet some change of the sort must be made. The studied*

ignorance of novelists grows wearisome (II, 106).

Furbank's biography combines two volumes with different pagination, totaling over six hundred pages, a slog of a reading but well worth the time if one is interested in how a particular author writes, his opinions, his family, his friends and lovers. If one is searching for, as Isherwood does, a literary hero, E. M. Forster possesses a generosity of spirit that, dead or alive, is difficult for one to reject.

Hijuelos, Oscar. *Thoughts Without Cigarettes: A Memoir*. New York: Gotham, 2011.

I made few annotations in this book largely because I found it so engrossing I didn't want to stop to write a note. I'll do that another time. Mr. Hijuelos is a unique character among writers, among human beings. He is a Cuban-American who suffers a disease in childhood that takes him away from his family for such a long period that he forgets much of the Spanish he's learned. He suffers his entire life because he cannot fully communicate with his own mother whose English is poor. He suffers from his own self-deprecation, turning down Donald Barthelme's offer to help Hijuelos enter the graduate writing program at Iowa University. He is also stunned when he later wins highly touted awards, among them the Pulitzer Prize for his novel, *Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*. Hijuelos shares all the pain and sorrow that other writers may suffer: loss of his father, the slings and arrows of racism (in a very odd twist because of his blond hair and light skin, not being dark enough for some, too Latino for others), initial failures as a fledgling writer. But if he suffers, he also experiences particular joys: being told by those who should know that he has a unique talent, a two-year grant that allows him to live and write in Rome, serious relationships with three different women. Perhaps the title, *Thoughts Without Cigarettes*, is prescient of his death in 2013. His father died in his mid-fifties of an apparent heart attack. At the age of sixty-two, Hijuelos would drop dead from the same while playing tennis. If he quit smoking the series of cigarettes he'd begun to consume in his youth, it probably did not help him. Sad. It seems that he was a writer's writer in that he never wrote for fame, often lived from hand to mouth for his art, was not even that impressed with the accolades once the initial euphoria passed because he knew deep down that he once again had to sit his ass in a chair and write, not to make a living, but to make sense of his life.

Huffington, Arianna. *The Sleep Revolution: Transforming Your Life, One Night at a Time*. New York: Harmony, 2016.

I'm not sure why I stayed through to the end on this one. Huffington does provide interesting anecdotes as well as convincing arguments as to why contemporary life (with at least a hundred-year history) does not allow for good sleep habits—including the introduction of *devices* into our lives. Yet when one reads through her bibliographic notes, one sees many of the sources are more popular-culture in nature rather than hard science. Or if she does cite a strong source, she fails to build a case for its importance. When speaking of dreams, for example, she quotes from an e-mail she's received from Mary Hulnick, **“chief creative officer of the University of Santa Monica, who teaches dream incubation” as part of a “Spiritual Psychology course” (159)**. Hmmm. Even so, the book managed to hold my attention to what I believe the climax of the book may be, which is Huffington's

discussion of how lack of sleep affects athletic performance. She uses a number of top professional athletes, among scientific sources, to build her case. The rest of the book is a quiet recap of what has come before: sleep is right up there with diet and exercise. In fact, Huffington asserts, the other two don't mean a thing unless you get the zzzzzs as well, and I would tend to agree with her.

Jones, Teddy. *Nowhere Near*. New York: Midtown, 2017.

This collection of stories about contemporary West Texas has its high and low points. The high points first. Jones seems to cover the map from north of Amarillo to south of Lubbock, that rectangular shape a little larger than West Virginia, calling out even the smallest of towns by name instead of contriving something like Bootstrap or Honeylick. Jones seems to capture the cadence of West Texanese not only in dialogue but by way of the narrative's very fabric—an economy of words packed with quiet intelligence. In fact, the more tersely a character speaks or thinks the smarter he or she may be. The author doesn't dwell much in the past but brings to life contemporary stories of aging boomers in a variety of situations: serving as caregivers for their parents, those still helping their adult children to grow up, as well as people still attempting to achieve a comfort level with their own lives.

The low points are few. Only three of the ten stories have been published previously, and only two of those are among what I would consider the top three. After I read the first one, "Clean Getaway," I was impressed with Jones's facile creation of character:

"Rip usually sits there, so I can keep an eye on him. He's shifty. No one's figured out how he nearly always manages to draw something he can set for a spinner right off. Could be these dominoes are marked.' I laughed like that might be a joke. After shoving the dominoes around a little to mix them up, my version of shuffling, I said, 'He hasn't turned up, wasn't here yesterday. So I guess you can take his chair'" (2).

I thought the remaining stories would all be that way. Nope. Jones's biggest sin may be in telling too much, not trusting her readers to understand the clues she has peppered throughout a story. In "Missing," Jones tells of two women—one a doctor and the other her head nurse—both struggling to understand how mothers and daughters relate, or don't, one of them as a daughter, the other as a mother. The nurse, Fern, says to her boss, Kellen:

"It's not my place to say this, but I will, I know you're wrong about your mother. She's proud of you. Always has been" (163).

What the author should NOT include is the segment that follows:

"Kellen was standing at the window again, staring out. Fern wondered if all mothers and daughters misunderstood each other, and ended up at odds until it was too late" (163).

Right! This is the story's theme, the very thing that Jones has beautifully portrayed; she does not need to include this tidy little bow of explanation. The reader gets it, does not want to be hit over the head.

My other beef with Jones's prose is a certain lack of sensory awareness. This is West Texas! If you step outside (a preponderance of her scenes take place indoors) the weather should be hot or cold. The air should be some variance of dry, or the character should be doing a dance because it's raining. The wind should be still or roaring in your ears. The place should smell of methane if the weather is from the southeast. It could smell of hogs or chickens. The soil could smell one of a dozen ways. She doesn't once mention the azure blue skies found out here, a stunning sunset. Absolute silence when you're located miles from the closest highway. The rustle of leaves or how the wind whistles through bare branches in winter or how they tap like fingernails against windows. How a cotton boll feels when you pick it, the prick of a cactus. How a chicken fried steak can melt in your mouth if it's dipped in the right batter and deep-fried for the exact number of seconds. This collection is Jones's opportunity to make West Texas light up like the Ferris wheel at South Plains Panhandle Fair in September, and she fails, I believe, to make that happen.

One final thought. Books coming out of today's publishing houses contain far too many typos, and this book, with at least a half a dozen, is no exception. A skillful copyeditor would have detected the following errors and corrected them:

"Kent sounded as if **he** needed a drink" (28). ["he" is missing]

"In purple ink, he wrote on his paper that he had done all the research for the assignment and had it **on** stored on a flash drive" (50). [too many "on"s]

". . . then focused on the wrought iron bars cover the window. To repel invaders?" (66). [period missing]

". . . the only one that took note of *Brown v. Board of Education* and admitted a black student . . ." (73). [name of legal case should be in italics and period is missing after "v"]

"Then one morning, we already had our hotel reservations, **one morning** I got up and found him dead in his recliner" (118). [phrase repeated needlessly]

"**The**n she said . . ." (174). ["n" missing]

I never set out to find such errors; I set out, instead, to enjoy a book. Yet such errors seem to pop out at me, and I make note of them, referencing *The Chicago Manual of Style* as I do. In any case, word processing, computerized printing, and a knowledgeable copyeditor should make all of these errors disappear before copies ever reach the shelves or one's e-reader. In spite of the collection's shortcomings, Jones is an accomplished writer, and her stories attest to that fact.

Keene, Jennifer D. *World War I: The American Soldier Experience*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska, 2011.

I was drawn to this book by way of C-SPAN's Book-TV, when I viewed the author's presentation. At the time I was writing a piece about my grandfather who served in World War I. He'd left behind a number of letters and other documents about his experiences, but he talked little about what happened in battle, even when asked during interviews. I sought out this source to see if Keene might fill in some blanks for me and was not disappointed.

At the beginning she offers a fine Timeline of WW I events from 1914 to 1936, when Congress finally votes to award the veterans their war "bonuses." (The problem of post-war care for veterans has reemerged for those returning from the current wars in the Middle East.) She offers a map so one can see how European boundaries are drawn at the time. Among other topics, Keene covers the role the United States plays in the First World War, that it does not enter until 1918. She discusses the role of conscription and how that first draft operates. She also covers the role government plays in attempting to influence soldiers' morals and boost their morale. She sheds light on the role that women, African-Americans, and foreign-born citizens play in the war—how they are mistreated and not always recognized for their important roles. She discusses the wounds of war, not just from the American point of view, but with regard to the French, Germans, the Russians, and others. And finally, the author covers the delays in troops returning to the U.S. once peace has been brokered. The army sets up huge embarkation centers in France to make sure, among other things, that the troops are healthy, have been deloused, and been given new uniforms for their transatlantic sailing before returning to a New York harbor.

Throughout the book Keene traces the effects of two important decisions President Wilson makes at the time. One, he determines that the U.S. shall send a large conscripted group of soldiers to Europe. The fact that the French have been fighting for over four years means that they need reinforcements that will last. And two, Wilson instructs General Pershing to keep the US Army separate from the French and British troops. Wilson doesn't like the idea of the Americans being subsumed by the other forces, and his demand may help to win the war, because Pershing brings several innovations to combat, including the idea of "open" warfare, driving the enemy out into the open, where soldiers meet in the arena between both armies.

I am bothered, however, by a number of troublesome errors in the text. One wonders if these errors appear in the original Greenwood Press edition or if only in the University of Nebraska edition. Some of these amount to more than mere spelling typos; there are poor word choices, additional words inserted where they do not belong, sloppy copyediting, particularly for an academic press:

"The anger that British propagandists **formented** in the United States against Germany . . ." (8). [**Fomented** is the word the author probably intended to use.]

“In either case, the ability to effectively ~~to~~ move goods and men overseas was critical . . .” (9).

“Over the next few weeks, recruits lined up for the rest of their standard army ~~entire~~ attire, including olive drab wool pants and jacket” (45).

“Lack of sympathy between black troops and their white officers was a ~~reoccurring~~ recurring problem throughout the war . . .” (96) [“Reoccurring” is not a word.]

“Black officers only served in combatant units, where they faced constant charges of cowardice and ~~ineptness~~” (97) [~~Ineptitude~~ is probably a better choice here.]

“Sometimes a soldier did not know that he had been exposed to mustard gas until it was too late and he ~~became~~ began vomiting . . .”

“There was some evidence that the stress of war caused the return of a previous mental ~~ailment~~ ailment in a grotesquely exaggerated way” (170).

“In veterans’ hospitals, men learned to use prosthetic limbs, underwent reconstructive surgery, and received care for ~~reoccurring~~ recurring respiratory ailments” (177).

“The American Legion ~~was~~ formed to help men with some of these endeavors . . .” (182). [“Was” is not necessarily needed, and it makes a passive construction, but it also makes the sentence easier to understand.]

The fact that so many errors appear in a document issued by an academic press seems inexcusable. If it is part of a trend, rather than anomaly, I think it would tend to weaken the reputation of the press.

Mallon, Thomas. *Henry and Clara: A Novel*. New York: Vintage, 1994.

At times, reading historical fiction seems much like painting by numbers. The skeletal outline is there; you merely select the *correct* colors and recreate a picture as it should be. With regard to the novel, the historical outline is there; you can’t deviate much from the actual timeline. But you can focus on characters who perhaps have been lost to history, in this case, Henry Rathbone and Clara Harris, who are in the box with Abraham Lincoln when he is assassinated by John Wilkes Booth, in 1865. The novel focuses on these step-siblings who grow up in the same house when one’s widowed father marries the other’s widowed mother. They fall in love, and in due time, get married, when both are in their thirties. Mallon bases his novel on a myriad of research about these two historical figures—turning Lincoln’s life and death into a mere backdrop for this story.

The only aspect of the novel I don’t care for is Mallon’s occasional peek at the future, when the characters of 1875 would have no such knowledge:

“If only men might devise some way of preserving sound, so their voices might be

kept with photographs and engravings, not just sent out from the body to die upon the air” (261).

Yes, yes, I know, Mallon makes a good case by comparing such a desire to the already invented photograph, but still, it seems unnecessary to include such an idea in the character’s inner thoughts. Why can’t Clara lament the loss of her father’s speech without this glance to the future?

Otherwise, the novel is impeccably written, and, though the pace may seem slow, one’s reward for finishing it is to experience a climax that is both shocking and yet a surprise for which one has been well prepared.

Noah, Trevor. *Born a Crime: Stories from a South African Childhood*. New York: Spiegel, 2016.

Noah, host of Comedy Central’s *Daily Show*, has written a touching and transformational memoir. In writing honestly of his metamorphosis through the years, he thus transforms the reader. Most Americans, myself included, probably have only a vague idea of what South Africa’s apartheid was really like. Noah makes it crystal clear: blacks, whites, coloreds, the latter having a different definition than it had in the US. Noah was colored: half white and half black. Under the first nine years of his life, his birth was illegal, according to apartheid; his life with his black mother and his white father was *illegal*. But it wasn’t nonexistent.

This joyful book reveals the ways in which he and his mother negotiate their way around Noah’s lack of existence. He tells tales of attending church on Sunday, his mother seeing that he always makes it to three services in three different churches. Noah divulges tales of *naughty* behavior when he is in his teens and twenties. He even does a short stint in jail but avoids a long prison sentence, all for illegal sales of pirated audio material. But though he is enterprising and makes a good living for the ‘hood, he realizes he will never do any better than that if he doesn’t get out. The book’s climax takes place when a near-fatal fit of violence occurs between his stepfather and mother, itself a miracle of survival. I had hoped to read of Noah’s continuing education, as he becomes a comedian, and now host of an incredibly important source of satire and news. But we will have to wait for his next book, when he will hopefully be as generous as he is in the first and share once again his miraculous story. Can’t wait.

Orwell, George. *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*. New York: Harcourt, 1949.

For summer reading in 1966, I was required to peruse *Nineteen Eighty-Four* for my first college humanities class, along with Huxley’s *Brave New World* and Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye*. Sometimes a book begs to be re-read because it whispers to you. Yes, as I pass by my bookshelf words like HATE WEEK (two minutes of hate is rather like 140 characters of venom) and BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU speak to me, as if for the first time making sense. Other Orwellian terms coming out of this novel: WAR IS PEACE, FREEDOM IS SLAVERY, IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH, a language called NEWSPEAK in which words are deliberately

manipulated by the government to control people's thoughts. When I first read this book at eighteen, I did not stop to realize that the character Winston Smith, by Orwell's own calendar, was born in 1945, a few years before me, his girlfriend Julia, in 1957. At the time, 1984 didn't seem like eighteen years away; it seemed like FOREVER.

Now one has to wonder. Like citizens of Orwell's London with telescreens in every room (two-way cameras), we can be hunted down at any moment by way of our cell phones, the GPS systems in our cars, the fact that a certain G entity has photographed every one of our houses and connected them to our addresses so that anyone in the world—whether a relative or an assassin—can locate us within minutes. That the government can record our telephone calls at will or monitor our Internet use are ubiquitous realities that have become invisible to us. And how much does Orwell's term DOUBLETHINK smack of 45's ALTERNATE FACTS, DUCKSPEAK OF #TRUMPSPEAK?

“In the end the Party would announce that two and two made five, and you would have to believe it. It was inevitable that they should make that claim sooner or later: the logic of their position demanded it. Not merely the validity of experience, but the very existence of external reality was tacitly denied by their philosophy” (80).

And how is this for Orwell's prescient definition of DOUBLETHINK: **“the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them”?** (214).

“It need hardly be said that the subtlest practitioners of *doublethink* are those who invented *doublethink* and know that it is a vast system of mental cheating. In our society, those who have the best knowledge of what is happening are also those who are furthest from seeing the world as it is” (215).

Upon my first reading years ago, I rather shrugged off Orwell's dystopian depiction of life in the future. I wasn't overly upset by Winston Smith's treatment in the end, where he is severely punished physically and mentally for not believing in Big Brother because, to him, it was all make believe. Yet, in spite of the novel's ugliness, Orwell does manage to limn the purity of human love, how Winston and Julia fall for one another but must hide their love, how the glass paperweight with a colorful piece of coral embedded inside is an extended metaphor for their hidden relationship, how in the end the paperweight is shattered like their love is shattered once they are discovered. In spite of the State's efforts to “change” the two individuals, to erase their thoughts and make them party members, the State really doesn't quite succeed, for in the end Winston sheds tears of love for who else, but Big Brother himself.

I purposely omit the plot because many of you will already have read the novel, and if you haven't I wouldn't want to spoil it for you. It would *not* be a waste of time to work it into your schedule at some point. If around today, characters Winston and Julia would be about seventy-one and sixty, yet it's hard to believe, given their plight in the novel, that they would be much more than folds of skin with hair.

Plimpton, George. *Truman Capote: In Which Various Friends, Enemies, Acquaintances, and Detractors Recall His Turbulent Career*. New York: Doubleday, 1997.

As in Plimpton's biography of Edie Sedgwick, *Edie: American Girl*, he weaves together the opinions, the diary entries, the essays, and reflections of those who knew Truman Capote. An interesting concept, because some writers contradict others concerning the same topic, and the reader must discern who is *right*, or else abandon such an idea and just enjoy the nature of this biography. At times his story gossipy, at other times, heart-wrenching as Capote's friends share their witnessing of his slow demise due to alcoholism and drug addiction, the utter waste that seems to occur after his huge success with *In Cold Blood*.

Remarque, Erich Maria. *All Quiet on the Western Front*. New York: Fawcett, 1967.

The following passage may sum up the purpose of this German's fictional account of World War I:

"A man cannot realize that above such shattered bodies there are still human faces in which life goes its daily round. And this is only one hospital, one single station; there are hundreds of thousands in Germany, hundreds of thousands in France, hundreds of thousands in Russia. How senseless is everything that can ever be written, done, or thought, when such things are possible. It must all be lies and of no account when the culture of a thousand years could not prevent this stream of blood being poured out, these torture-chambers in their hundreds of thousands. A hospital alone shows what war is" (160).

Most people read this book in high school or college; this is my first time, at age sixty-nine, but is perhaps more powerful than if I had read it when young.

Smith, Chris. *The Daily Show (The Book): An Oral History As Told by Jon Stewart, the Correspondents, Staff and Guests*. With a foreword by Jon Stewart. New York: Grand Central, 2016.

For those who watched Comedy Central's *Daily Show* for many years, this book is a joy to read. It allows one to revel in its hallmark moments, following the script as you remember watching it. As the title suggests, a panoply of people, in short bursts, tell this story. Smith has done an admirable job (à la George Plimpton in his biographies of Edie Sedgwick and Truman Capote) of threading together this massive narrative by way of individual recollections, sometimes contradicting or engaging one another, as one might do at a table reading of a script. Below I list but a few nuggets gleaned from the text.

Rory Albanese (executive producer):

"The root of every *Daily Show* script, like the root of any good sitcom script or any story, is a narrative arc. This is another Jon Stewart-ism: "The jokes are easy. We've got a lot of funny people. We'll get the jokes. You know what's hard? Why the fuck are we talking about this, and what are we saying about it? What's the arc? What is the essay that we're structuring?" (59).

Jon Stewart (star of *Daily Show*):

“Can I tell you the craziest thing? Tracey and I were walking that afternoon of 9/11, or it might have been the next day, in just the quiet of it. We didn’t really know where we were going, just walking, and we walked by a building and there was a little street mouse, I don’t even think it was a rat, a little street mouse. All of a sudden a dude—I guess it was the super in the building, we hadn’t seen him—fucking clubbed it right in front of us. I remember us just both bursting into tears, and we just kind of like . . . I just remember us bursting into tears on a constant basis, as everybody was. The smell is the things that I’ll never forget, just that was . . .” (72).

James Dixon (Stewart’s manager):

“Jon Always said, ‘I don’t need to be on a broadcast network to validate myself. I’ll do what I do for basic cable, and if I do it well it won’t matter where I do it from. That will be my legacy’” (85).

Ben Karlin (head writer and executive producer):

“It felt like we were crazy. How could we be the only people who were recognizing this ridiculous disparity? It became one of the signature things for the show to find these quotes and have people contradicting their own words, but in the early stages it felt pretty novel to do something like that so vividly with one person” (109).

Rakesh Agrawal (founder, *SnapStream*):

“What we invented was a unit that connects to a company’s computer server. One of them can record up to ten television shows at a time. The recordings you make can be watched on the network, from any desktop inside an organization, by multiple people at the same time. But for *The Daily Show*, the point is not really about watching TV. We translated the TV audio into text, and made it possible to search inside shows” (259).

“The original notion was to stage dueling rallies, with [Stephen] Colbert leading ‘The March to Keep Fear Alive.’ Instead it was merged into a single event, ‘The Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear.’ What never changed was the intention that Stewart announced on The Daily Show, to put on a pageant for noncrazy, non-book-and-flag-burning, nonscreaming America: ‘Not so much the Silent Majority as the Busy Majority.’ In other words, a plea for rationality in an increasingly irrational political and media landscape, a reminder that there’s a distinction between ‘political’ and ‘partisan.’ Plus Colbert in an Evel Knievel jumpsuit” (261).

Jessica Williams (correspondent, 2012-2016):

“But the first few months were really tough. *The Daily Show*, it had been on for a while, and I think people can be very possessive of the show. When I first started, I got . . . you know just . . . you know the negative racial comments in my inbox. You do anything that ruffles a few feathers on the show, there’s always going to be some racist dude ready to like call you a nigger, you know? I think a lot of it has to do with people just being really stupid At that time, it really bothered me a lot. Now, either I get it less or I just don’t give a shit anymore” (324).

“[Lewis] Black’s segments could still be wildly funny tangents about, say, artisanal crystal meth or the need for a Trump 2012 presidential campaign (“This is what I’ve been waiting for my whole life, a president who’s not afraid to tell the truth about being a lying asshole!”), but over the years many of Black’s rants were vein-bulging exclamation points to The Daily Show’s main themes” (329).

Jon Stewart:

“So we also did a longer piece partly about how Fox [Network] was ‘outraged’ that Ferguson [Missouri] was being cast in racial terms. And I talked about how we’d recently sent a producer, Stu Miller, who was dressed like a homeless elf with a week’s worth of five o’clock shadow, and a correspondent, Michael Che, dressed in a tailored suit, out to do an interview—and how it was Che who got stopped by security. The point being, here’s how ubiquitous racism and indignity is. To Michael, this wasn’t ‘You’re not going to fucking believe what happened.’ It came up in the course of the conversation about other things. That’s what I meant in the piece when I said, ‘You’re tired of hearing about racism? Imagine how fucking exhausting it is living it’ (351).

Ramin Hedayati (studio production, field producer):

“It became the first of the three big pizza rants—the other two were about Chicago deep dish, and then Mayor [Bill] de Blasio eating pizza with a fork. And they were funny and really silly. But they were also great illustrations of the show’s process.

Jon was all about the passion. He always said, ‘We need to make sure we’re channeling our emotions. What do we find joyous? What makes us have a strong emotional reaction? If something makes you angry, why? Bring that to the idea. If something’s just purely fun, let’s just have fun with it.’ He wants us to be writing to, and pitching to, that strong feeling. Plenty of times it’s outrage about something serious. But we don’t need to do the congressional takedown every night” (381).

Jon Stewart:

“And this, this, is their genius. Conservatives are not looking to make education more rigorous and informative, or science more empirical or verifiable, or voting more representative, or the government more efficient or effective. They just want all those things to reinforce their partisan, ideological, conservative viewpoint” (383).

The Daily Show, of course, continues under the leadership of comedian, Trevor Noah. Ratings have drooped some, but Jon Stewart started something that, as long as our country remains in flux, tugging against itself, will charge on into the future. It must.

Strout, Elizabeth. *My Name is Lucy Barton*. New York: Random 2016.

Taibbi, Matt, with illustrations by Molly Crabapple. *Divide: American Injustice in the Age of the Wealth Gap*. New York: Spiegel, 2014.

Once again I discover a writer well-known to others by way of C-SPAN's Book-TV. On June 4, 2017, Matt Taibbi appeared on *In Depth*, a three-hour interview conducted by Peter Slen, and there Mr. Taibbi discusses his entire oeuvre, eight books written since 2000. When Slen asks Taibbi which of his books he would urge readers to tackle first, he says *Divide*, and so that is where I begin.

Taibbi, contributor to *The Rolling Stone*, is adept at taking complex concepts and distilling them into words the common person can understand. The Bard College-educated man wants the reader to grasp how justice serves as a divide in this country, how, if you're poor but especially if you're poor and a person of color, you are subject to one form of justice, likely to spend a disproportionate time behind bars for a nonviolent crime whereas white-collar criminals (à la 2008 financial fraud cases) spend precisely no time in prison though their crimes harm millions of people and not merely in this country but around the world. Early in the book he breaks it down this way:

“We’re creating a dystopia, where the mania of the state isn’t secrecy or censorship but unfairness. Obsessed with success and wealth and despising failure and poverty, our society is systematically dividing the population into winners and losers, using institutions like the courts to speed the process. Winners get rich and get off. Losers go broke and go to jail. It isn’t just that some clever crook on Wall Street can steal a billion dollars and never see the inside of a courtroom; it’s that, *plus* the fact that some black teenager a few miles away can go to jail just for standing on a street corner, that makes the whole picture complete” (13).

Taibbi profiles at least a half a dozen cases on both sides of the divide and presents the details in a manner that is both intellectually honest and exhaustive. Not only that, but he writes in a way that is engaging, well-crafted, yet easy to understand for people unfamiliar with legalese or the argot of the financial world. I am looking forward to reading his most recent book, *Insane Clown President*.

Whitehead, Colson. *The Underground Railroad*. New York: Doubleday, 2016.

The tight structure of this novel is based on twelve chapters—six named for characters and six named for states or regions in the US. Each one shifts readers to where they need to be to follow the life of a runaway slave, Cora, in the pre-Civil War South. Cora's grandmother, Ajarry, was a slave, and so was her mother, Mabel, who abandons Cora when she's eleven. Rage governs Cora's life, fuels her temper and her senses, both of which serve to save her life as she shapeshifts to fit varying situations above ground. The unsuspecting reader who learned in elementary school that Harriet Tubman's underground railroad was not literal is in for a fantastical ride as Whitehead brings it alive, with stations and steam engines and schedules, even a pump handcar that serves as Cora's final vehicle of escape. The author's grasp of history, his simple yet elegant prose, and his understanding of the complex humanity of master and slave serve to create a novel that is worthy of all the praise and accolades it has received.

[Each year I peruse every short story in the magazine and post brief profiles for the excellent one 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 form. Read one, if you're not afraid.]

Rating the Story

***—Excellent

** —Above Average

* —Average

- ** Camille Bordas, "Most Die Young," *New Yorker*, January 2, 2017: Julie, a thirty-eight-year-old journalist living in Paris, lives through a terrorist attack, a separation from her husband, and the death of a dog her vet sister is treating.
- ** Yiyun Li, "On the Street Where You Live," *New Yorker*, January 9, 2017: Becky and Max's son, Jude, is diagnosed as a victim of monophobia—a six-year-old who is afraid of being alone.
- ** Thomas Pierce, "Chairman Spaceman," *New Yorker*, January 16, 2017: Dom Whipple, forty-five, surrenders his considerable wealth to join GPS—God's Plan for Space—so the group can establish a colony on a distant planet that has been deemed habitable.
- *** Elif Batuman, "Constructed Worlds," *New Yorker*, January 23, 2017, 56.
Selin, an eighteen-year-old Turkish-American, reveals her life as she enters university in the mid-1990s. ¶ I love this story, if for no other reason than the author captures a character's freshman year at a prestigious university. And, of course, the magic is all in the details, beginning with the fact that Selin's frosh year is concurrent with the emergence of e-mail, over twenty years ago. Each section of the story, for a while, anyway, chronicles her five classes, one of which is an art class called Constructed Worlds, in which an embittered male professor talks about the phoniness of museums. Ah, the true semester (eighteen weeks), when finals **"were after the [Christmas] vacation instead of before" (65)**. The story ends subtly—there is no traditional arc, much like many semesters—with Selin's train ride back to Harvard from New Jersey, seeing a friend on the train, and her frenetic studying for finals in the university library:
- "At two in the morning, the library closed and I walked home through the fresh snow. The clouds had cleared, revealing the stars. Light from even a nearby star was four years old by the time it reached your eyes. Where would I be in four years? I thought about it for a long time, but somehow I couldn't picture it. I couldn't picture any part of it at all" (65).**
- Selin, in spite of all her brilliance, is a typical freshman, with one eye on the present but one eye on the future. *Where is all this hard work taking me?*⁹
- ** Alix Ohlin, "Quarantine," *New Yorker*, January 30, 2017: In her youth Bridget, a

Canadian woman, befriends Angela, whom she many years later nurses when the woman insists she has an incurable disease.

*** David Gilbert, "Underground," *New Yorker*, February 6, 2017, 60.

Forty-seven-year-old Michael Salter, divorced father of two daughters, meets his mother and brother at a fashionable Manhattan restaurant for lunch and then is confronted with the imminent threat of his own death. This crisis, however (no spoiler here), is only a metaphor that has unfolded throughout the story: his new ami whom he meets through Grindr, a young man with **"tens of thousands of followers"** (61), the loss of his father as well as a childhood friend, the fact that as a poster dealer his bank account is shrinking daily, an ex-wife reminding him of the monthly check he owes her. His entire life is a crisis and yet at story's end, where he has the opportunity, faced with a *real* life-or-death situation to save someone else, his own *crises* take on a different patina.

"But at least he was doing something, something bigger than himself and full of possible meaning, courageous—right, this was courageous, rather than stupid, a sign that he was special, or, at a minimum, useful" (69).

A very nuanced story in which a gay man happens to be the protagonist instead of the *subject* of a story. Normalcy may just have arrived at last. Gilbert is the author of "Member/Guest," one of my all-time favorites of recent *New Yorker* stories.

*** Curtis Sittenfeld, "The Prairie Wife," *New Yorker*, February 13 and 20, 2017, 76.

A married woman with two sons becomes jealous of the success of a woman she once knew when both were young. ¶ What a perfect Valentine's story! Yes, Kirsten is jealous of someone she once worked with at a kids' camp when she was nineteen. Now the woman, Lucy Headrick, has an insanely successful career as "The Prairie Housewife," a *Christian* persona that is a far cry from the less-than-angelic girl Kirsten knew in 1994. For a number of spoilerish reasons, I will only say that her jealousy forces her to recall her past and reevaluate her marriage to her spouse, Casey. This story is cleverly devised, written à la the following riddle:

A father and son are in a horrible car crash that kills the dad. The son is rushed to the hospital; just as he's about to go under the knife, the surgeon says, "I can't operate—that boy is my son!"

Figure this out and you'll have a leg up on Sittenfeld's story, which you should read now and enjoy!

** Lore Segal, "Ladies' Lunch," *New Yorker*, February 27, 2017.

Five elderly Manhattan women—Lotte, Ruth, Bridget, Farah, and Bessie—meet for lunch every other month for over thirty years until Lotte's health fails, and then the others fall away, too; Segal relates this old story in a way that is fresh.

** Zadie Smith, "Crazy They Call Me," *New Yorker*, March 6, 2017, 68.

Billie Holiday addresses herself, *Lady Day*, in essence making the reader privy to a two-page biography of a woman who is still larger than life though gone for nearly sixty years.

** Enright Anne, “Solstice,” *New Yorker*, March 13, 2017.

A man in contemporary Dublin, Ireland, drives home on December 21, 2016—a dark and dreary day—and stares with his ordinary wife and children at a long trajectory toward the summer solstice. Enright’s novel, *The Green Road*, was published last May.

** F. Scott Fitzgerald, “The I.O.U.,” *New Yorker*, March 20, 2017.

In this story set about a hundred years ago, a New York company publishes the long-awaited book of an author who writes of his *astrological* connection with a nephew having died in World War I. ¶ On the Contributor’s Page of this issue, one learns that this story was to have appeared in *Harper’s Bazaar* in 1920 but never did. One must wonder . . . could it have been because largely it is a plot-driven narrative with a clever trick ending? Who wouldn’t want to read that in 2017? I would imagine that the *New Yorker* turns down thousands of such stories a year but makes this one exception merely because it is written by FSF. Now, I’m a fan of his—I taught *and* annually re-read *The Great Gatsby* for a decade—but I believe he would now rise from his grave and shake a fist at us knowing that this story, not nearly as developed as “Bernice Bobs Her Hair” or “The Curious Case of Benjamin Button,” has made it into print at long last.

*** Victor Lodato, “Herman Melville, Volume I,” *New Yorker*, March 27, 2017, 56.

A young homeless woman is abandoned by Evan, her fellow-traveler boyfriend, and she must depend on the charity of others to survive. ¶ Because Evan has left behind a backpack with all his belongings, the twenty-year-old doesn’t at first realize her predicament until she comes to understand that he has also absconded with a substantial roll of money she has earned by playing an inherited banjo, for mere coins tossed into its leather case. Among Evan’s effects is a biography of Herman Melville, one must assume Hershel Parker’s Volume I of nearly a thousand pages. Its two pounds become a metaphor for her own weighty biography in which she’s left Tucson, her home, in part, because of her father’s violent death. This story is one of those in which you experience a tingle because you haven’t had the misfortune of living like this unnamed woman, and yet receive a jolt because for less than an hour you are bestowed the privilege of doing exactly that—feeding on a small sliver of her life, one that is equally as significant as a traveler called Ishmael.

** John Lanchester, “Signal,” *New Yorker*, April 3, 2017, 78.

A London couple and their two young children are invited to the country-house of a longtime friend for a weekend party and witness events that rather disturb them.

** Emma Cline, “Northeast Regional,” *New Yorker*, April 10, 2017, 56.

A fifty-one-year-old man cuts short a weekend with his mistress, a younger, married woman, to handle a crisis created by his only son at an exclusive northeastern prep school, from which he is being expelled.

- ** Akhil Sharma, “Are You Happy?” *New Yorker*, April 17, 2017, 58.
In a story told largely without dialogue, Lakshman, an Indian-American teen watches as his mother plunges into the depths of alcoholism.
- ** Lara Vapnyar, “Deaf and Blind,” *New Yorker*, April 24, 2017, 82.
Two Russian women become friends, and one of them falls for a blind and deaf man who teaches both something about the vibrant yet soundless power of love.
- ** May 1, 2017, David Means, “Two Ruminations on a Homeless Brother,” *New Yorker*, 56.
In this mesmerizing story of the homeless, one ragged man is viewed first from afar by way of one long sentence; in the second half, another man is viewed by his own brother who visits him in a mental hospital.
- ** May 8, 2017, Yiyun Li, “A Small Flame,” *New Yorker*, 54.
A Chinese-American woman reviews her would be match-girl world in which adults consistently betray children.
- ** May 15, 2017, Etgar Keret, “Fly Already,” *New Yorker*, 76.
A man out with his five-year-old son attempts to talk a man out of jumping from a building while his son, believing the man can fly, encourages him to do so. Which one wins in this very short but significant story?
- ** May 22, 2017, Samantha Hunt, “A Love Story,” *New Yorker*, 70.
A northern California mother of three in her forties takes the reader on an almost surreal journey in which she tries to reconcile her roles as mother and wife with society’s perceptions.
- *** May 29, 2017, Samanta Schweblin, “The Size of Things,” *New Yorker*, 56.
Enrique, a wealthy young man who lives with his mother, is abruptly cast aside and begins to live in a toy shop he often patronizes. ¶ For his keep he reorganizes the store for the owner, arranging toys by color instead of type. Business booms! The author seems to withhold as much as she reveals about Enrique. Why has he been kicked out by his mother? Why is he so child-like? Why are his unconventional methods so successful? Readers only know what the store owner knows, and though an omission of detail would normally be a storytelling sin, it seems to work here. It allows me to fill in the blanks.
- ** June 5 and 12, 2017, Sherman Alexie, “Clean, Cleaner, Cleanest,” *New Yorker*, 48.
In this compressed story, a pious woman named Marie works as a motel maid for many decades of her sixty-two years.
- *** June 5 and 12, 2017, Will Mackin, “Crossing the River No Name,” *New Yorker*, 62.
Some Navy SEALs in Afghanistan, in 2009, set out to ambush a group of Taliban. ¶ In this rich story the narrator relates two flashbacks, one rather lengthy, which seamlessly portray the complexities of wars and those intrepid souls who fight them. The author creates character more by *interior shots* and with zingy names such as

Hugs and Cooker than by things visual. He creates character when the narrator encounters a vision of the Virgin Mary in a near-drowning situation. The narrative's climax may occur when Hal, the Big Kahuna, disappears beneath the surface of a river that appears on no map, that virtually disappears in different seasons. Is Hal alive or not? The narrator apparently does not know because even though Hal is his best pal, he must carry out a mission of war. This story—with its rich imagery and figurative language—is the sort I love most, one that carries me into a world I would never encounter first-hand, nor want to, but with great skill Mr. Mackin snatches me up and returns me safely to my seat when he has finished with me. If I were awarding four stars it would receive five.

***June 5 and 12, 2017, Curtis Sittenfeld, “Show Don’t Tell,” *New Yorker*, 62.

Ruth Flaherty, early forties, graduate of a writing MFA program at a prestigious Midwestern university, narrates this engaging story. ¶ Sittenfeld captures perfectly the ambiance of what it is like to be accepted into a graduate department of writers, only a fraction of whom are *better* than the rest: both the cattiness and genuineness of typewritten crits; food that is either hoarded or wasted; competition for fellowships not quite generous enough to live on, only enough to keep from starving as you teach undergrads (ugh) how to write fiction. As Ruth, the only person remaining sober at an after-party thrown for a famous grad of their program, drives this man to the airport following his reading, he apprises her of the “narcissism of small differences”:

“Freud stole the concept from an English anthropologist named Ernest Crawley. It explains the infighting among groups whose members have far more in common than not. I’ve always thought that if any two students in the program were co-workers at a big company, they’d become close friends. They’d be thrilled to find another person who cares about what they care about, who thinks about things instead of just sleepwalking. But when you’re in the program there’s such an abundance of kindred spirits to choose from that those same two people might be mortal enemies” (70).

When Ruth finally arrives home she learns that she has won one of the four coveted fellowships that will finance her second year—\$8,800 (1998)—and at one in the morning she screams near her open mailbox. The only person to share Ruth’s joy is a woman she hates, a fifty-five-year-old Lorraine, who, very mother-like, emerges from her door, and gives Ruth a hug. If you’ve been thrown in with writers anywhere, you’ve perhaps lived this story. If you’re only thinking of doing so, then this story may just convince you that every minute spent would be worth your time.

***June 19, 2017, Andrew Sean Greer, “It’s a Summer Day,” *New Yorker*, 54.

Arthur Less, a middle-aged American novelist, is flown to Turin, Italy, by the committee of a literary award, to attend the ceremony where he will or will not be awarded the top prize. ¶ Greer’s character, Less, is more by way of his burning wit (too many brilliant examples, like emeralds, to list here). The story is about an underrated writer (by himself as much as critics) who is only attending this ceremony to avoid the wedding of his former lover, Freddy. The story is peppered with bits of backstory about an earlier partner who has won a Pulitzer. Less seems

to be among the right crowd, all right, but his ego is not quite buying it, when he delivers credit to his novel's translator:

“Less begins to imagine (as the mayor doodles on in Italian) that he has been mistranslated. Or, what is the word? Supertranslated? His novel given to an unacknowledged genius of a poet (Giuliana Senino is her name) who worked his mediocre English into breathtaking Italian. His book was ignored in America, barely reviewed, without a single interview request by a journalist (his publicist said, ‘Autumn is a bad time’), but, here in Italy, he understands he is taken seriously. In autumn, no less” (60).

What any fine story does, by way of the specific, is to universalize the world, helping fellow human beings understand what it is like to have any part of us, but artistic endeavor in particular, held up to scrutiny by our peers.

- * * June 26, 2017, William Trevor, “The Piano Teacher’s Pupil,” *New Yorker*, 56.
Compression is the primary gift of this story in which a woman, Elizabeth Nightingale, takes on a new young pupil whose genius she detects immediately. ¶ Soon after, following each boy’s lesson, Nightingale notices that little items begin to disappear: a snuff box, a porcelain swan, an earring, among a host of others. The thefts compel her to recall others more significant: the sixteen years she has given to a lover who would not leave his wife, the life she sacrifices for her father because he has given his to her. A master can break all the rules—no dialogue, perhaps too much exposition or *telling*—but Trevor does so with impeccable taste and grace. By story’s end we both adore *and* pity Miss Nightingale.
- * * Italo Calvino, “The Adventure of a Skier,” *New Yorker*, July 3, 2017, 58.
An Italian boy follows a Swiss girl up a ski slope, climbing past the end of the lift, to a rarified world of white hares and partridges.
- * * Hye-young Pyun, “Caring for Plants,” *New Yorker*, July 10 and 17, 2017, 64.
A man survives a car accident that his wife does not, and his mother-in-law moves in to care for him in a rather bizarre manner.
- * * * Cristina Henriquez, “Everything Is Far from Here,” *New Yorker*, July 24, 2017, 52.
A woman crossing over the border from Mexico into Texas is separated from her five-year-old son by the coyotes responsible. ¶ Fiction or not, this account is the most realistic, it would seem, that I have ever read: mothers waiting for children in the American detention center and not always being reunited, sickening food and water, other disenfranchised who are even more callous than the attendants, more abuse: **“To throw up is to disobey orders” (54)**. Hope, like new skin, regenerates itself each day, yet it can be dashed abruptly:

“And then one day there are leaves on the trees, and wild magnolia blossoms on the branches, bobbing gently in the breeze. She will stay in this place, she tells herself, until he comes. Through the window in the dayroom, she watches the white petals tremble, and, in a gust, a single blossom is torn off a branch. The petals blow apart, swirling, and drift to the ground” (55).

Every American should have to spend a day in the protagonist's shoes if for no other reason than to see what some must undergo to seek the privileges others more than likely take for granted.

"It's easy to let that happen, so much easier to give in, to be who they want you to be: a thing that flares apart in the tumult, a thing that surrenders to the wind" (55).

A sad truth.

- ** Kirsten Valdez Quade, "Christina the Astonishing (1150-1224)," *New Yorker*, July 31, 2017, 56.

In this first-person account of a true story the eldest sister of three recalls the narrative of her troubled sister, Christina.

- *** Don DeLillo, "The Itch," *New Yorker*, August 7 and 14, 2017, 58.

Robert T. Waldron, forty-four, possesses a body that itches symmetrically (both thighs) and when he takes his shirt off. ¶ Of course, his problem is more complex than that. Robert has itched with his former wife and now with Ana, a new lover. He sees three different seemingly eccentric dermatologists, each prescribing different yet ineffective remedies. One even asserts that the itch will always be with him. Just a gut feeling, but I believe Robert's itch is a metaphor for his desires. What desires? Any and all of them. All persons itch for something or someone their entire lives. Though this story is not entirely appealing it is one I do admire, carried off with great aplomb by a skilled fiction technician.

- *** Garth Greenwell, "An Evening Out," *New Yorker*, August 21, 2017, 62.

A man celebrates the end of his seven-year teaching career in Bulgaria through a drunken night out in Sofia with two former students, both male. ¶ Perhaps the nameless narrator (except for *Gospodinu*, male teacher), Z., and N. are emblematic of the shame the story engenders when, in an unseemly display, he gropes and ogles one of the men on the dance floor of a noisy night club. Perhaps the excessive noise, the excessive liquor, the excessive jubilation numb *Gospodinu*'s shame, but in the soberness of morning he is positive it will overwhelm him. Yet as he staggers toward his campus apartment, Mama Dog, a mascot, approaches him and becomes symbolic of a subtle change about to take place in *Gospodinu*'s life. This story achieves what most writers of gay stories would kill to achieve: both a specificity and universality that arrive in harmony on the page.

- *** Lauren Groff, "Dogs Go Wolf," *New Yorker*, August 28, 2017, 68.

Two unnamed girls, ages four and seven, are abandoned at a fish camp on a Florida island and must fend for themselves. ¶ This story unfolds as any living nightmare might, with the consciousness of the two girls running wild like the story's dog which keeps returning to camp then running into the woods: revealing their squalid nomadic past, the unmurturing nature of their mother and all her friends, the everyday search for food when sources run out, boiling stagnant pond water to stay

hydrated until they run out of charcoal and must gather wood. The abuse of abandonment multiples tenfold each hour they are without loving, adult care. When other people arrive on the island—after what must be weeks—the girls don their mother’s shifts and apply lipstick to greet them. The older girl

“put the lipstick back into her pocket. She would keep the gold cartridge of it long after the makeup inside was gone and only a sweet waxy smell of her mother remained” (74).

Haunting, yes, haunting that a child would still think fondly of a parent after being treated so harshly, but that’s exactly what many of us do, find it in our hearts to forgive.

* * Miranda July, “The Metal Bowl,” *New Yorker*, September 4, 2017, 72.

A young woman makes a single but popular pornographic video, a momentous event that continues to influence her life seventeen years later.

September 11, 2017 [Out of town. Did not read.]

* * Edwidge Danticat, “Sunrise, Sunset,” *New Yorker*, September 18, 56.

A Miami Haitian family must accept that their aging mother is suffering from dementia and her daughter from postpartum depression.

* * Jonas Hassen Khemiri, “As You Should Have Told It to Me (Sort Of) If We Had Known Each Other Before You Died” *New Yorker*, September 25, 2017, 86.

When a group of police storm the door of a man, he, as narrator, assumes that his friends have designed an elaborate practical joke in lieu of bachelor party.

* * Ben Marcus, “Blueprints for St. Louis,” *New Yorker*, October 2, 2017, 56.

Roy and Ida, architects designing a memorial for victims of a mass bombing, differ on how to achieve their goal—just as they differ on how to live as a married couple.

* * Sarah Shun-lien Bynum, “Likes,” *New Yorker*, October 9, 2017, 58.

With the 2016 election and a twelve-year-old ballerina’s social media posts as background, a father attempts to cope with his daughter’s puzzling leap into adulthood.

* * Tessa Hadley, “Funny Little Snake,” *New Yorker*, October 16, 2017, 66.

A nine-year-old girl in 1960s London goes to visit her father and young stepmother who at first does not want the child around.

* * Denis Johnson, “Strangler Bob,” *New Yorker*, October 23, 2017, 82.

In 1967, eighteen-year-old Dink lands in jail for car theft along with a cast of characters with names like B.D., Dundun, and Strangler Bob.

* * * Joseph O’Neill, “The Sinking of the Houston,” *New Yorker*, October 30, 2017, 60.

A Manhattanite father of three teens sets out to retrieve his mugged son’s phone. ¶ This story which strikes one note at the beginning—FATHERHOOD—quickly veers

and intersects a larger history. In his high-tech fashion—monitoring son’s mugger by way of a track-your-child app on his own phone—Dad looks to rectify this wrong. After weeks of surveillance, he sallies forth in what looks like will be a kill and in the elevator encounters an old-man neighbor who soon reveals that when he was a teen he’d survived the sinking of the *Houston* in his engagement with the Bay of Pigs invasion in 1962. The reader never learns whether Dad locates the mugger, but this chance meeting with a former teen does seem to change the context of his mission.

* * Anne Enright, “The Hotel,” *New Yorker*, November 6, 2017, 58.

A woman flies from Dublin to New York then to Milan and finally to a German-speaking one she cannot identify.

* * * Thomas McGuane, “Riddle,” *New Yorker*, November 13, 2017, 66.

On a dark night, what does the architect narrator have in common with a crippled old man named Jack and his urchin buddy, an ER physician named Karen, and a felonious couple who rob the architect of his car? A Thomas McGuane short story, that’s what. A master of the genre, he weaves this rich, nuanced, and detailed narrative in a mere three pages, a distance the lesser writer might utilize for exposition. In the following passage behold McGuane’s magic as he deftly weaves these elements together:

“It was thus that I observed my car drive away, two little red tail-lights, and this threw me into a strange reflective state, in which my dissolute night at the Wrangler and my ensuing exhaustion, the cowboy and the boy, the two crooks who had just stolen my car, my remote house and its unconquered air of vacancy, all seemed to have equal value—that is, no value” (68).

One must sigh at his majesty. One must just sigh.

* * David Gilbert, “The Sightseers,” *New Yorker*, November 20, 2017, 74.

Robert and Paulette, residents of a newish high rise overlooking Central Park, prepare for and attend a party given by another couple in their social circle.

* * Will Mackin, “The Lost Troop,” *New Yorker*, November 27, 2017, 56.

The narrator unravels an episodic tale of American soldiers in Afghanistan, 2008, involving themselves in a series of very unwarlike events.

* * J. M. Coetzee, “The Dog,” *New Yorker*, December 4, 2017, 60.

A young woman who passes by the yard of a vicious guard dog each day confronts the owners about *introducing* her to the dog.

* * Kristen Roupenian, “Cat Person,” *New Yorker*, December 11, 2017, 65.

Margot, a twenty-year-old college student who works at a movie theatre begins texting a young man who turns out to be thirty-four.

* * Zadie Smith, “The Lazy River,” *New Yorker*, December 18, and 25, 2017, 94.

A British family vacations on the *metaphorical* Lazy River in Almería, Spain.