

THE REDWOOD COAST REVIEW

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BOOKS

Green Acres

Daniel Barth

MARIJUANALAND: DISPATCHES FROM
AN AMERICAN WAR

by Jonah Raskin

High Times Books (2011), 154 pages

In the summer of 2010 the buzz in Northern California was about Prop. 19, a ballot initiative to “regulate, control and tax cannabis”—in other words, legalize marijuana. I remember driving from Mendocino County to Humboldt County and hearing a show on KMUD radio about the upcoming vote. Longtime local residents and growers talked about positioning themselves and their community to take advantage of changes that would be brought about if the measure passed. But it was also made clear that many growers opposed the initiative because it could very well take the big profits out of their business, despite reducing the risks.

Jonah Raskin, communication studies professor at Sonoma State University and author of books on Abbie Hoffman and Allen Ginsberg, seized the moment and the opportunity to make an extended trip into the Emerald Triangle—Mendocino, Humboldt and Trinity Counties. He traveled to Boonville and interviewed controversial *Anderson Valley Advertiser* editor Bruce Anderson, to Ukiah for an extended sit-down with Mendocino County Sheriff Tom Allman, and on to the heart of “marijuanaland” where he talked with writers, editors and lawyers, worked and smoked with growers, and spent more time with law enforcement professionals. The resulting book is a multifaceted look at marijuana cultivation and use in Northern California.

Early on Raskin makes the historical connection between the ongoing marijuana prohibition and the prohibition of alcoholic beverages in the 1920s and 30s. The failure of both is a theme that runs throughout the book. Other historical connections are pointed out as well: 1972 and 1975 California votes on marijuana laws, and the 1996 passage of Prop. 215, which legalized medical marijuana, leading to the situation as we now know it—quasi-legal growing and using with a medical marijuana card, marijuana dispensaries licensed under a variety of state, county and local laws, and still plenty of illegal growing and dealing.

But Prop. 19 would change all that. Raskin writes: “As the political season gained momentum, and as the media focused major attention on Prop. 19, the growing season for marijuana rolled along, but it was a different season than it ever had been before. Prop. 19 forced almost everyone in the state to look at and to think about marijuana in all its guises: marijuana and money, marijuana and the Drug Enforcement Administration, marijuana and the beleaguered California state budget; as well as marijuana and the Kafkaesque criminal justice system. There wasn’t an aspect of California culture and agriculture that wasn’t illuminated by Prop. 19.”

Marijuanaland makes a handy guide to this complex mix and does its own job of shining light into corners as well as onto the big picture. As one informant tells Raskin, “No one will tell you the whole story, and everyone will tell a different story.” By taking this to heart and giving

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Evans residence, Los Angeles, midcentury modern remodel by Bittoni Design Studio

THE PERFECT HOUSE

An interactive multimedia quiz

Rebecca Taksel

How to define it, attain it, express it, in your dress, your food, your house. Words like “ineffable” and “*je ne sais quoi*” are common in these articles. This quiz cuts through the fancy language and allows you to find your style in choosing and decorating your home by answering just four basic questions. The first two help you choose which house to buy. The last two help you decorate it. Couldn’t be simpler. Let’s get started.

QUESTION 1. Do you prefer a big house or a little house?

Big houses require lots of furniture. Big rooms in big houses require lots of big furniture. I remember in particular an enormous, expensive new house with great, lofty rooms. The man of the house was big, too, well over six feet; but his wife was a little under average height. We sat in a room with oversized furniture. The wife sat on, or rather in, a great, puffy sofa. She had long blond hair, and the effect was exactly of Alice after she’s been shrunk.

Some big houses have a lot of rooms rather than rooms of enormous size. (At the height of the last building boom both options were exercised.) Such houses, built by “architect builders,” had to come up with rooms that would fill floor plans of several thousand square feet. So we now have houses for the middle class that feature butler’s pantries with no butler, and libraries with no books, or very few books, certainly not books numerous enough or distinguished enough to constitute a “library.”

One solution to decorating the butler’s pantry is to make it look like the stem-and-barware department of a home goods store; another is to jam a computer and a lot of papers and files into it and unofficially rechristen it a home office. Solutions to the book problem are of the sort that have given interior decoration a bad

name for a long time. Back in 1930 Emily Post, in *The Personality of a House*, suggested obliterating the personalities of individual books by covering them all in nice, uniform blue paper jackets. She didn’t further suggest taking up calligraphy so that you could write the authors’ names and the titles on the spine in nice uniform script. Presumably it didn’t matter what was under the blue paper. Today’s decorators, professional or amateur, sometimes suggest stacking books in interesting ways—some horizontally, some vertically—or using shelves of books as a backdrop for small works of art, these to be propped on the lips of the shelves. These methods presume you will not attempt actually to remove a book from the bookcase. Another method is to mix piles of books artfully with bric-à-brac. Or you can banish the books entirely from the “library” shelves, install lights in the bookcases and feature collections of

Today’s decorators sometimes suggest stacking books—some horizontally, some vertically—or using shelves of books as a backdrop for small works of art to be propped on the lips of the shelves. These methods presume you will not attempt actually to remove a book from the bookcase.

figurines or crystal or family photographs or sports memorabilia.

MULTIMEDIA FOR QUESTION 1, “The Big House”: *Citizen Kane*, 1941, Orson Welles, director.

Small houses offer a reverse chic, especially to the environmentally aware and the politically left-of-center. Echoes of the Bolsheviks running through mansions and yelling “Enough space here to house twenty-eight families!” A-list Hollywood is presumably the exception to the small-is-better rule in this crowd. We expect that Barbra Streisand, Sean Penn, George Clooney and Robert Redford will be spectacularly domiciled in (probably more than one) very large houses. Still, there is a trend towards “the smaller house.”

Note the qualifying suffix there. There are limits. Some architecturally sophisticated people have gone pretty small. Thus we have the container type of modular house, which consists of one or a few very attractive prefabricated modules. We can go smaller still, to the mini-house. This is usually shown set in a wonderful meadow and painted in aubergine, ochre and muted turquoise. It is often a second house, a weekend retreat, but still . . .

Smaller, to a gypsy caravan of the type still sometimes found in Britain, but think Django Reinhardt, who actually was a gypsy and did live in one of these in France. This accommodation is definitely “raffish” and must be painted in colors livelier than those chosen for the mini-house. Again, a meadow is nice for the setting.

We’ve approached the frontier of smallness. A Ford Econoline van may have just about the same amount of space as the gypsy caravan, but you’re crossing a line, and if you go over that line and live in your car, you’re just plain homeless.

MULTIMEDIA FOR QUESTION 1, “The Small House”: *Walden, or, Life in the Woods*, by Henry David Thoreau, 1854. I don’t know if books count as multimedia, but you could read it on Kindle.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

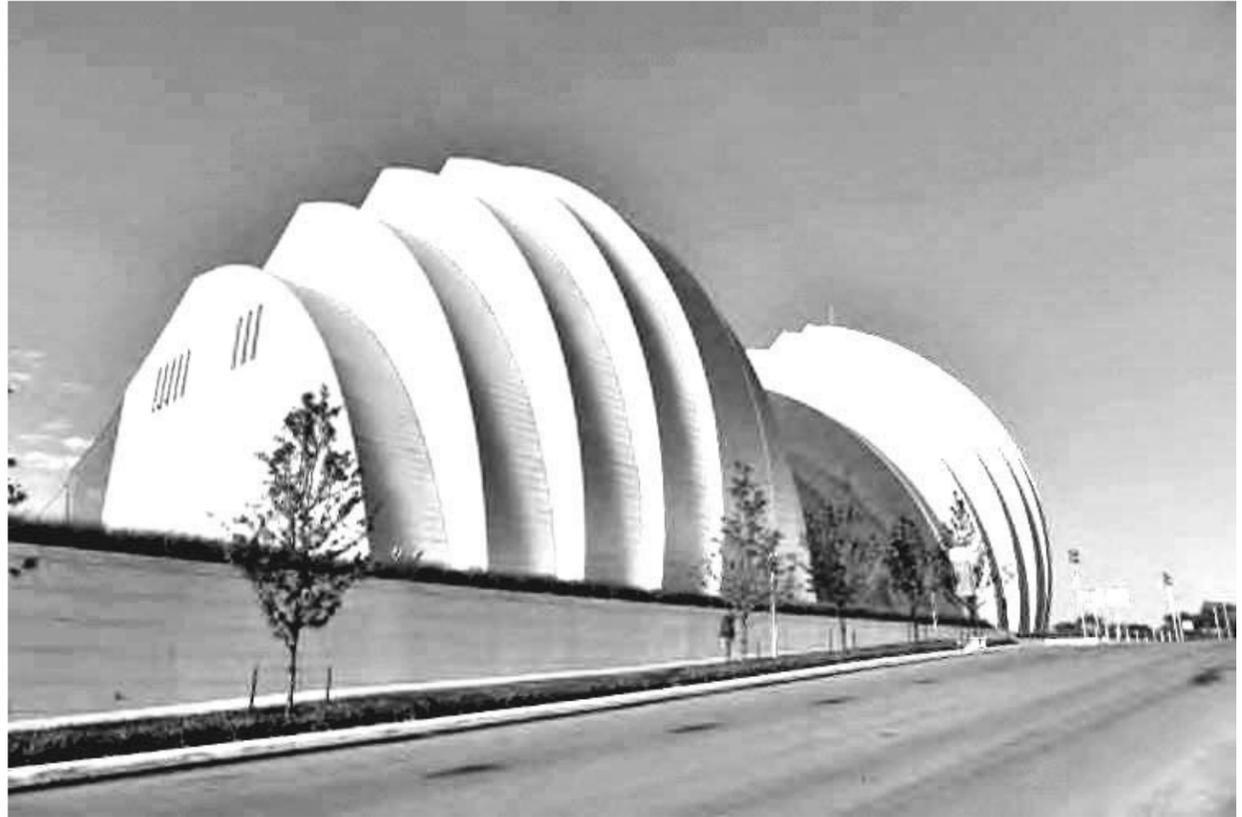
Translator-tricksters take Kansas City with sauce

Stephen Kessler

On the drive in from Kansas City International Airport, to your left as you approach downtown is a large anomalous building in the shape of a monstrous yet elegantly sculpted sea shell that rises up out of the landscape like a hallucination. It is the Kauffman Center for the Performing Arts, the city's new opera house and symphony hall, designed by architect Moshe Safdie. Coming toward the building from the other direction you see its soaring glass façade and can't help marveling at this extraordinary example of urban design and engineering. This could replace those "crazy little women" of the Leiber and Stoller song as the signature attraction of this heartland metropolis.

I'm in town for the annual conference of the American Literary Translators Association, a meeting of several hundred translators held each year in a different part of the country. ALTA is a very congenial organization, and most unusual for a congregation of writers in that virtually every member, even those with their own careers of original writing, is devoted more to serving literature than to advancing his or her personal ambition. Other writers' conferences I've attended tend to be crawling with people either trying to hustle a book project or attempting to get close to some renowned author or, in the case of such famed literati, basking in the adulation of their admirers. The collegial fellow-feeling and mutual respect of ALTA members are a refreshing antidote to such power-strivings and social-climbings.

Margaret Sayers Peden, Willis Barnstone, Bill Johnston, Marian Schwartz, Alexis Levitin, Geoffrey Brock, Katherine Silver, Esther Allen, Jonathan Cohen and Roger Greenwald may not be household names, but they and others like them are instrumental in bringing foreign literature into English for the benefit of readers who would otherwise have no access. Spanish, Greek, Latvian, Estonian, Chinese, Persian, Danish, Norwegian, Arabic, Portuguese, Polish, Serbian, Turkish, French and Rus-



Kauffman Center for the Performing Arts, Kansas City, Missouri

sian writers, among others, can be read in versions so artfully wrought you scarcely realize they are not originals, thanks to the tireless efforts of these obscure workers who toil on the margins of literary celebrity but play a central role in bringing novels and stories and poems and plays from other languages into the lives of those of us who still read books.

Also, and very encouragingly for a grizzled veteran like me, there are two or three generations of younger translators coming up the line behind us, so that however dubious the future of literature in these increasingly digitized times, interesting writings from other cultures will continue to be turned into works in English, in one medium or another, and cross-fertilization will go on among the world's writers and readers, as minute a minority as we may be.

It's a curious subculture, this world of literary translators, and surely its eccentric position in the larger culture is part of what makes for such camaraderie among its members. In Kansas City there was plenty of shop talk—about certain technical and stylistic issues, questions of publishing and politics, theory and practice—but for me the most interesting part of the conference is always the social connections, the extracurricular conversations and friendships formed or refreshed at night in the hotel bar, or during coffee breaks between sessions, or at lunch or dinner in neighborhood restaurants.

I met a young Iranian-American poet who drove up from Arkansas for the occasion and whose intense *passion* for poetry reminded me why I got into this game in the first place—for love of the words and the music and the inspiration and consolation of dynamic language dancing on the page. There was a young Israeli fiction writer attending the conference for the first time who told me what a great experience it was for her to meet all these other dedicated people and hear what they had to say. I encountered people I see just once a year, if that, whose projects—translating huge novels, editing anthologies, writing original books—somehow spur me on in my own endeavors in a spirit of encouragement and friendly rivalry.

Yelling over the loudness of the live music in the hotel lounge on a weekend night when other conventions are also in town and the conventioners and other guests are determined to have a good time and making no secret of it, your annoyance with the cacophony of competing noises is somehow overcome by a sense of being alive to the chaotic drama and absurdity all

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around, even the hotel staff confused by the swirling intensity of interactions, the clusters of friends gabbing and drinking, the strangers getting acquainted over cocktails, the scholars getting loose under the influence of booze and shmoozing, the traveling salesmen on the make.

You get a wonderful feeling of anonymity staying in a big hotel, yet paradoxically at a conference like this you're constantly bumping into people you know, and this contradiction makes you feel oddly at home and in an exotic realm at the same time. Like the low-ceilinged rooms where most of the sessions and readings are held, this whole scene seems an unlikely place for any kind of esthetic experience—it is much too unnatural and commercial, claustrophobic, with bad acoustics—how could one begin to appreciate a poem or consider an idea or engage in a private dialogue in such a setting? And yet, again and again, something said in a panel discussion or read in one of the bilingual readings or confessed by a friend over a drink or a meal touches me in unanticipated ways, so that by the time I return home several days later I feel recharged and ready to proceed with work that often seems gratuitous, a pointless exercise in creating something beautiful or revelatory or profound or moving or provocative that hardly anyone will notice.

The art of translation, like any other art created in the solitude of one's study or studio, or even in the collective setting of a stage or bandstand, is an act of faith, a leap in the dark, a long-shot bet that what you are doing serves something beyond your own amusement—or, more likely, obsessive compulsions—something that others somewhere, sometime, eventually will recognize and be grateful for, something that speaks to and possibly for their own experience or spirit. Those strangers, even if as yet unborn, are no more strange than

the ones you see at Fiorella's Jack Stack Barbecue chomping on their spareribs slathered in the restaurant's signature sauce, or the gangs of schoolkids running through the Nelson-Atkins Museum past the imposing Henry Moore sculptures, or the blond-haired black-clad cocktail waitresses dodging the drunks in the hotel lounge while carrying trays of iced beverages over their heads without spilling a drop. These might as well be the people we are writing for, oblivious as they are, because we madly trust that somehow one day someone may open one of our books and be astonished by what they discover.

How strange that in the middle of a country whose religion is football a performing arts center can spring up like a lovely mushroom and be sustainable, and that an otherwise ordinary hotel can host a gathering of oddball intellectuals who temporarily turn it into a hotbed of highbrow culture, as if they were really an association of magicians dedicated to the creation of completely convincing illusions. For translators are tricksters, shape-shifting smoke-and-mirrorists, sleight-of-hand card-shufflers playing with unmarked decks that nevertheless turn up full houses in the form of stacked pages that read as if they'd been dealt that way by luck of the draw, when in fact those unfolded hands are mirages fashioned from alien tongues whose mysterious messages are patiently transformed by multilingual literary gamblers who often feel more like monks.

These usually invisible illusionists are an unusual breed indeed, working more for the sake of some obscure honor than for any sort of worldly glory, and for the pleasures and satisfactions of making something out of something else. More than the blues and the barbecue sauce, more than the sexy curves of the opera house, more than the bends in the Missouri River reflecting the heartland light, a renewed belief in the art of translation and the half-crazy people who do it is what I brought home from Kansas City just in time for Thanksgiving.

Stephen Kessler is the translator of Desolation of the Chimera by Luis Cernuda (White Pine Press) and more than a dozen other books. He is the editor of The Sonnets by Jorge Luis Borges (Penguin). His latest volume of original writing is The Tolstoy of the Zulus: On Culture, Arts & Letters (essays, El León Literary Arts).

THE REDWOOD COAST REVIEW

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CULTURAL STUDIES

Joiners and Haters

Inside the tragedy at Penn State

Elizabeth Kadetsky

My first day teaching at Penn State, two years ago, I walk into my advanced fiction seminar and encounter a sea of college sweats: fifteen students, twelve in sweats—five Penn State hoodies and t-shirts, a Phillies hoodie, a Happy Valley hoodie, a Pittsburgh Steelers t-shirt, a Mickey Mouse sweatshirt, a Kenyon tee. I ask myself, What's this about product labeling?

In the coming days, I notice sweats, sweats everywhere, collegiate apparel lining shop windows in stores up and down College Avenue, sweats a uniform to such degree that I see a kid dressed in sweats top to bottom plus a tie, worn with no apparent irony. In context of what everyone around him is wearing, he looks perfectly suited for a job interview. I speculate that perhaps this susceptibility for uniform has something to do with the strength of the church in these parts—this is Amish country, after all. There is perhaps a culture of uniformity, a place for sports to easily fill in for Sunday tradition.

As the semester moves along, though, I discover that the base gear of sweats does not preclude outlandish fashion choices. The Kenyon tee kid also often wears a frog knitted cap with eyes protruding from the top, and someone else has a lip ring and fire tattoo flames licking up her arm. The students turn out to be the kind of motley collection of misfits that congregate to the sidelines of academic culture at any university. They are learning to construct their identities. There is a poet, a manic depressive, a gay guy with an aggressive lisp, another guy who turns out to be also gay, but in the closet.

I come to think of these students as the contingent on campus who are not the joiners, but the opposite of joiners. Joiners and haters, my friends and I used to divide the world when I was in high school—the irony not lost on us that to be a hater you had to join something too. The world seemed divided, though, between Us and not-Us, those of us who would rather not join even if we were drawn to others who also didn't want to join.

Like many people in my profession, I always considered myself among the “not-Us.” This probably happened because I was bad at sports. I never got picked for the team—something about my astigmatism. In a primal sort of way, isn't it just sports that designates a life among either the joiners or the haters? Picked for the team: joiners. Not picked: haters.

Was, then, Penn State, because of sports, a place where an inordinate percentage of joiners congregated? Among a culture of joiners, could there still be haters?

One day the poet looks up at me from an article we are discussing in *Poets & Writers* magazine about MFA creative writing programs and their rankings. She says, “It just really bothers me that Michigan's program is ranked higher than Penn State's.”

I look at her. I think I follow her reasoning. She's a poet, not a joiner, and therefore I believe that we implicitly understand each other in all matters. “Well,” I say, in my most patient, instructive tone, “Michigan has always been a top-five MFA program.”

“No,” she says, “I just hate that it's *Michigan*.”

“But Michigan has always been a top MFA program,” I repeat. I don't get it, I realize as I say this.

“But it's *Michigan* . . .”

The students are looking at me as if I'm dumb, and then I do get it. At Penn State even the non-joiners are joining. But aren't we all really joiners of something—MFA culture, poetry, whatever it is that we're not against. The lines are blurry between joining and not joining. Identity construction is about being a joiner and a hater at the same time: I am *this*; I am not *that*.

The terms *us* and *we* have often genuinely confounded me. The first time I hear it in the context of Us, and not-Us, is in 1975. My mother is driving our clunky 1964 Volvo, which is now horribly out of fashion, which I know because kids at my school tease me about it. She'll ditch it within the year and move us to the city. She explains to me that “we” are in Vietnam.

“No we're not. We're in the Volvo,” I say back. Who is *us*? The kids teasing me at school? It's an early outsider moment for me.

More recently, a friend says to me, “I just don't want a mechanic in Nebraska losing his job to someone in China. Our jobs are fleeing overseas.”

“Why should I care more about the mechanic in Nebraska than the guy in China?” I retort. “I'm a New Yorker. I grew up around more Chinese people than Midwestern white guys.”

“Because he's part of our economy.”

“So's the guy in China.”

This is an especially confusing conversation for me because this friend happens to be Chinese-American. “How's the guy in Nebraska more ‘you’ than the guy in China?” I ask him.

“He is,” he says. “He's American.”

Last Tuesday night, I walk by Old Main, the historic center of the campus. There is a rally on the steps. Everyone is wearing blue and white. A few have a new t-shirt manufactured for the game this coming Saturday, which Joe Paterno will not be coaching, for the first time in 46 seasons. It says “Indiana: Blue Out.”

My first season here, I had to Google the term “White Out” during my first month and, two weeks later, “Tie-Dye

**Picked for the team: joiners.
Not picked: haters. Was Penn State, because of sports, a place where an inordinate percentage of joiners congregated?**



Vigil at Penn State, November 11, 2011

Monday” to discover that these referred to a team pep tradition. Everyone rooting for Penn State gets dressed up in the same clothes, sort of like the Ronettes.

After a while I started to understand the impetus a little better. When I went to the gym late at night on a weekend, the locker-desk attendant often handed out free blue-and-white t-shirts with sports visuals reading *WHITE BUILDING LATE NIGHT*—the name of the gym. There was a solidarity in being such a loser that you had nothing better to do on a weekend night than skulk around the Nautilus equipment sculpting your abs. If during the week, at a more opportune time to visit the gym, you saw someone else wearing the same t-shirt, you felt a little buoyed. You win together, you lose together. The joining makes the losing a little less bad. Was that an “us” moment I was having? Probably.

At the rally, it is raining, and it has been rumored that Paterno will be fired. University President Graham Spanier will be fired tomorrow night. There is a pall on campus. The recent scandal has depressed an already low-to-the-ground mood—it's the twelfth week of a sixteen-week semester. Midterms have come and gone, with barely a pause leading into finals and the upcoming too-short Thanksgiving break, which we all know is really just a moment to take stock of how badly we have fallen behind. Fall is paradoxically the time that everything starts and that Next Year looms large. The beginning is just the beginning of the end. You start to die the day you're born, I have been thinking.

Students are applying to grad school, profs are writing letters of recommendation. People go on the job market. The semester's emotional metabolism—binge, cram, study, burn out—affects professors and students alike. The more they hand in, the more we have to grade. Also, as of last spring our Republican governor is threatening to scale back funding to the liberal arts, and we have had near-weekly faculty meetings all semester to deal with the demoralizing fallout. There have been prickly emails and people lashing out.

We're all tired. This semester we have also logged three times the normal amount of rainfall—30 inches between August and October. There have been three major weather

events. I'm so sick of rain. A tree in my neighborhood has crashed down.

I think of my first year here—the Friday before Thanksgiving week, when I left campus for the break with my rolling suitcase, headed straight to the train. There was an atmosphere on campus. We all seemed to share in something. We were going home. We were leaving. We knew that the place we left behind would be quiet while we were gone, because we were all operating on the exact same schedule, on the rhythm of the college semester, not unlike the rhythm of a religious year with its holidays, its candles lit, and then its trees and ceremonial foliage later dismantled. It felt good, to be in this together like that.

I am not sure exactly what to expect of this rally. Is it Pro Joe, or Anti Joe? It's early enough into the scandal fallout that we really don't know which way things will turn. A patriarch has fallen. Will his sons defend him or betray him? Is it a campus of Brutuses or Marc Antonys? I stand at the back of the crowd, of about a hundred students, and overhear whimpers of contempt and outrage—Marc Antonys. “Do you want to sign a petition to bring back Joe?” someone mutters. “I already did,” someone responds. Someone says “Uh huh” every time the word Penn State is uttered. Up on the steps, students are handing off the mic to one another: “We are—Penn State!” and “We'll always be Penn State” and “They can't take Penn State away from us—we still have our identity.”

I can't find any substance in what they are saying, and this further lowers my mood. It takes me a while to understand the magnitude of what is being communicated here. A girl on the steps takes the microphone and says, “We don't care about the lives of eight people. We are Penn State!” The crowd shouts back the call-and-response team cheer. *We are...! Penn State...!*

It's an irrational, contentless bleat of confusion. I hate that girl in that moment, and I think that she is young. But she is something else, someone lost, a joiner whose net has just been torn open, who is floating armless in a sea of unmapped water.

When I get home I email back and forth with a colleague, who writes in despair about “the jingoistic allegiance to some *feeling* they have about the cult of Paterno, and the cult of football.” She likens the protest to a Nazi Youth march. The next night will be the riot, and I will visit, and I will notice more inchoate rumbling and confused rage.

It's two years since my first fall semester, and I am teaching the same course, advanced fiction, to the same type of motley collection of misfits who dress in college gear embellished with a quirky overlay of non-joiner fashion paraphernalia. I notice an argyle sweater, a Boy George cap, a shaved nape.

A student is helping organize a candlelight vigil to call attention to child abuse. A student has written in her blog: *I feel anger, fatigue, dismissal, denial, distancing, horror, sadness, numbness, interest, boredom, pissed off, stunned, unaware, over aware, defensive, humbled, betrayed . . . [I] am grieving.*

The students say they are pissed off that the pro-Joe contingent is getting so much press. “There was a vigil—but it's the loud obnoxious thing that makes the news,” says one. “Eight people's lives are destroyed and we're still worried about our identity?” says another. “I watched the riot on CNN in disbelief,” says another. “They can't get camera crews into our apartments showing us doing nothing.” Says one student: “Why did they decide 10pm at night was the best time to fire the president of the university? The mind of the enemy mob doesn't work that well under pressure.”

Living in Happy Valley has given me a taste of what feels so good about joining, what we haters have been missing all our lives. I am in fact appalled that anyone could think that a perceived attack on their ill-defined identity could be more important than a ghoulish crime perpetrated against eight innocent children. *The Onion* got it best, early on in the scandal: “Describing the downfall of Paterno as ‘clearly the most devastating thing to come out of the sex scandal,’ outlets from ESPN to *USA Today* asked Sandusky's victims if, while being forced to engage in oral and anal sex with a man 40 to 50 years their senior, their primary fear was for Paterno's reputation . . .”

I think I also understand, though, a little better than I would have two years ago, the mixed emotions that could lead the non-thinking Pro Joe-ers and even the thinking non-joiners to feel vulnerable after having given in to the womblike warmth of being a part of a thing. As my student wrote, all the contradictory emotions—anger, denial, horror, sadness, betrayal, defensiveness—coalesce into an inarticulate grief, an inability to understand mixed with a desire to do so, mixed with a childlike wish that the stunning, difficult reality could be simply subsumed into an amniotic bubble. Otherwise, one must see that the thing is not at all the kind of reliable safe zone it once seemed to be.

Elizabeth Kadetsky is the author of First There Is a Mountain: a Yoga Romance and other works of fiction and nonfiction. A version of this essay appeared online in Guernica.

MOVIES & FOOD

The Trip: Midlife Crisis and Modernist Cuisine

Judith Newton

In an act of utter haplessness last weekend I scratched my cornea with the tip of an agave and had to lie in a darkened room—which is how I ended up watching Michael Winterbottom's *The Trip* three separate times—twice with an eye patch and once without. (It was better without the patch.) The film, once a BBC2 TV miniseries, stars Steve Coogan and Rob Brydon, two British comedians, playing hyped-up versions of themselves, who spend much of the movie doing competing impressions of Michael Caine, Sean Connery, Anthony Hopkins and Hugh Grant with a little Dustin Hoffman, Al Pacino and Woody Allen thrown in. The film is hilarious, but it has a depth that surprises you. I watched it the first time for the comedy, the second for the depth, and the third time because I'm a food writer and it is also about food.

The formal reason for "the trip" is that a British Sunday newspaper has commissioned Coogan to do a celebrity guest piece on fine dining in Northern England, specifically in Yorkshire and the Lakes. I say "fine dining" but much of the cuisine might be called "Modernist," a form of cooking that combines science and artistry with high inventiveness, an obsession with novelty, and a good deal of precision and control. (*Modernist Cuisine: The Art and Science of Cooking*, a six-volume, 2,438-page production, "destined to reinvent cooking," came out in March of 2011.) Modernist chefs are given to slow-cooking foods "in their own juices" by enclosing shellfish, say, in a vacuum sealed bag. They are fond of combining discordant ingredients into dishes such as "duck fat lollipops with nuts," an appetizer on which our heroes also dine. They have been known to convert your vodka aperitif into a frozen meringue (using liquid nitrogen) right at your table, and they are prone to turning the most humble of vegetables like celery and beets into exotic foams. (I ate a tiny dish of celery foam in Barcelona once, where Modernist cooking reigns supreme. It was delicious, and it was also the tamest dish on the tasting menu. Think Gaudí architecture with its wild and playful fusion of sea shells, mushrooms and melting curves and then think "food.")

Running joke is that neither Coogan nor Brydon knows or cares much about food. It was Coogan's American girlfriend who chose the itinerary for what was to have been a romantic food adventure rather than mere research. But the girlfriend dumps Coogan before the trip begins and leaves for New York to become a "hot" writer—or so she hopes. Coogan asks Brydon, both friend and rival, to go in her place, being careful to explain, since Coogan seems wary of close connections, that everyone else he

Life itself cannot be perfect, but small perfections may be achieved. Haplessness can be cordoned off—at least at dinner, and with eight, twelve or twenty dishes, dinner can last a very long time. There is an existential comfort, a "tranquil restoration," to be had in small perfections that is very real.

asked had been "too busy" to go. Each day of the six-day journey features a visit to a famous restaurant with multiple shots of the kitchen, the servers and the food. And it's all about art, precision and performance. We see the staff turning out roast cod, truffled ravioli and spiced cauliflower with split-second timing; we watch them decorating plates with precise dots of horseradish cream and parsnip coulis; and we hear them wishing for tweezers to better arrange slivers of whatever it is (faux twigs?) that are standing on end in the duck foie mousse with shredded radishes and smoked kale. This high-wire cuisine elicits some lowbrow comments from our heroes. Coogan finds a tomato soup "quite tomato-y" and "soupy"; Brydon tries for sophistication by observing that a foamy green aperitif (mallow leaves, ginger beer, tea and whiskey) "tastes of a childhood garden" but Coogan quickly points out that the consistency is "a bit like snot" though "it tastes great."

Coogan is far more concerned about losing his girlfriend, seducing female receptionists and photographers, and becoming "hot" in his movie career, especially in the US. Brydon, more settled in his work, warns "never be hot; always be warm" because when you're in a "supernova" moment, where do you go from there? But neither man, each in his forties, has come to terms with the haplessness of life, with how it often fails to turn out quite the way you'd wanted, with how you occasionally poke your eye with an agave. Brydon may be more reconciled than Coogan to his "warm"

Steve Coogan (left) and Rob Brydon in *The Trip*

career—but he slides through social situations by doing nonstop impressions and has a compulsive need to imitate Hugh Grant when trying to romance his wife. Like Coogan, Brydon has not yet achieved a solid sense of self, which is why both men engage in a continuous and sometimes companionable competition over who does the best impression of James Bond ("When I kill, I kill for Queen and country"), over whose singing voice has the widest range, and who is really the least capable of confronting "reality." Brydon compares the woman-chasing Coogan to Coleridge who, as his creativity declined, took refuge in stimulants like opium. Coogan, pretending to deliver a eulogy at Brydon's future funeral, claims that behind every joke Brydon ever told, lay "a cry for help."

Hovering over their midlife angst is Wordsworth, the great British poet who had his own anxieties about growing up. In "Tintern Abbey" Wordsworth mourns the loss of those "aching joys" and "dizzy raptures" that marked his youthful encounters with the natural world. But he also claims that the "beauteous forms" of nature return to him amid the unprofitable stir and fever of the world—bringing him "tranquil restoration," prompting acts "of kindness and of love," allowing him at times to become "a living soul" and "see into the life of things." More than Michael Caine or Sean Connery, Wordsworth is a hard act to follow. Both Coogan and Brydon occasionally pause to take in the beauties of the landscape and Brydon even recites a bit of "Tintern Abbey" in the wild terrain of the Yorkshire Dales. But Brydon can't resist spoiling the moment, as Coogan points out, by repeating the most moving lines in a funny voice. Meanwhile, Coogan's relation to nature is most often suggested by the many scenes in which we see him displayed against the backdrop of a majestic lake or hill trying to get a connection on his cell phone. He calls his ex-girlfriend, whom he helplessly insults, his troubled son, Joe, whom he does seem to miss, and his agent, Max, who finally offers him an HBO pilot in the States.

And then it's on to the next meal, which brings us back to food. What is Modernist Cuisine doing in a movie about competitive male bonding and midlife angst? From one perspective Modernist food, and writing about Modernist food, could stand for something "hot." And since neither hero knows or cares much about the food, this could enforce a sense that both lead rather tepid lives. But the film's take on Modernist Cuisine, and life, is more complex than that. Brydon reads a review of a restaurant they have just visited which claims that, despite all the talk of invention and variety, the food

was as "formulaic as McDonald's." Oh, ouch. Is Modernist Cuisine meant to suggest how what is "hot" can quickly become "warm," and then, well, room temperature? Is writing about Modernist Cuisine becoming lukewarm as well—like the article Coogan's ex plans to write for *Esquire* magazine on how Las Vegas prostitutes are "good girls gone bad"? Hasn't that been overdone? Maybe being "hot" is not all that it's cracked up to be, at least not as your primary life goal.

So is the film's Modernist Cuisine Coleridge at his height or Coleridge in decline and living "on the sound of his own voice"? Perhaps both. But there's another way to see fine dining in this movie and in life. Early in the film Coogan compares the duck fat lollipops to his career: "it's just like my comedy. It's familiar but [there's] something different about it." Both cuisine and comedy are performance, and in this film they're as skillfully managed as a well done London show. Perhaps Modernist Cuisine, and finely tuned impressions, may be seen as manageable perfections. Life itself cannot be perfect, but small perfections may be achieved. Haplessness can be cordoned off—at least at dinner, and with eight, twelve or twenty dishes, dinner can last a very long time. There is an existential comfort, a "tranquil restoration," to be had in small perfections that is very real.

The last day of the journey, however, finds Coogan and Brydon sitting outside on a "sunny day in England" exclaiming "ummm" and "this is glorious" over a traditional "fried breakfast" consisting of scrambled eggs, sausage, bacon, tomatoes and blood pudding. And it is then we know that more-lasting and more-ordinary pleasures have won out. Brydon goes home to his wife and child, still imitating Hugh Grant, but happily dandling the baby. And Coogan goes home to an empty apartment with a smashing view of London from above. He opens the window, appears to reflect, and then leaves a cell phone message for his agent. He will not do the HBO pilot. "I'm not spending seven years in the US," he says. "I've got kids." Connection, especially family connection, is what matters most in the end, along with rediscovering the charms of what is ordinary, familiar, communal, British and widely shared: a heightened sensitivity to nature, "a sunny day in England," and "a fried breakfast," English comfort food.

Judith Newton lives in Berkeley. This is her first appearance in the RCR.

SIMYLUS

A MIDDLE COMEDY PLAYWRIGHT, FLOURISHED 355 BC

Art without Nature?
Nature without Art?
Neither one will get you anywhere.
And even when you bring the two together
you still need
a performance space,
rehearsal time,
a chorus,
an opening night,
and a critic who knows what you're talking about.
If any of these elements is missing,
you've got what we call in this business
a box-office flop.

—WALTER MARTIN

POETS & POETRY

Man of All Seasons

The durable voice and vision of George Keithley

Zara Raab

Poems appear daily on the sufferings of war, famine and disaster. What is unusual in George Keithley's work is his attention to less spectacular patterns of sanctimony and cruelty in rural communities of the Midwest, of injustice deeply embedded in institutions like the church, of life-denial in the attitudes of the intolerant and rigidly respectable. "We have to turn to poetry," Matthew Arnold wrote at the dawn of the godless Modern era, "to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us." Sensitive to natural and human surroundings, Keithley's poems offer the consolation of the earth's natural rhythms and life-affirming human community. He is a thoughtful poet, a poet of precise, delicate metaphor and elusive rhyme put to the service of his deep understanding of American history, landscape (both inner and outer), and humanity. Like the wise William Carlos Williams, or perhaps more aptly like Wendell Berry, Keithley's touch is tender, his mood reflective. Empathy adds pleasure to literary values.

The title of Keithley's *Song in a Strange Land* (George Braziller, 1974), presaging his later poem sequence on Galileo, evokes the biblical phrase from Exodus, and also Robert Heinlein's novel, *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961), the story of a human who comes to Earth after being born on the planet Mars and raised by Martians. Keithley's *Song*, with its lovers in an abandoned boxcar, a dead war pilot's heartbreak, and Civil War dead, recalls an earlier America. Keithley writes movingly about death at Antietam, his dead not the soldiers so often remembered, but the pitiful cavalry- and pack-horses:

*Late September down the valley
the wind smolders the sweet greasy smoke
of the torched horses,
the wind black, the gristle popping.*

Song in a Strange Land includes poems on Martin Luther King, Abraham Lincoln, Black Hawk, Crazy Horse and Buster Keaton. It's natural that Keithley, who often ignores the attention-getting, idiosyncratic voices in post-WWII America, as if *The Waste Land* were written yesterday, should honor T. S. Eliot, as "the turning of a cold year / lulls and waits now / lost London inters him in her winter spirit" ("Lines on Eliot's Death").

When *Song* appeared, Keithley had already dedicated a year to retracing the path of the ill-fated Donner Party and composing his verse epic *The Donner Party* (Braziller, 1972) in the voice of a pioneer: "I am George Donner a dirt farmer / who left the snowy fields / around Springfield, Illinois / in the fullness of my life." Twenty years passed before he published *Earth's Eye* (Story Line Press, 1994), establishing Keithley as the master of the craft to which he was apprentice in *The Donner Party*. Drawing its title from Thoreau, *Earth's Eye* is set near Rock Lake, its "bold, blue / eye open," in rural Illinois at the end of the 19th century and much of the 20th. A young child named Julia stands beside the priest as her uncle is lynched at dawn for a crime of passion—a grange hall theft—by the townspeople. She sees her uncle "fling // his long legs, swimming / in the green air."

*I saw the fierce man hanging
silent among the boughs
like the moon in early morning
that pales before it falls.*

In a series of powerful dramatic monologues, Keithley tells the story of the aftermath of shame and denial in the ongoing lives of the family, especially Julia. A portrait of mid-century rural American life emerges in the sly rhymes and rhythmic lines. The town's shame is partly redeemed by a flood: the townspeople must pull together to build a levee, their "shoulders sagging, / hips and numb legs nudging, / boots sunk into the muck." The grace of this communal work "outlasts hope, this pain— / It holds us to our work, we hardly feel / the gale fall away . . . / At rest we turn / downriver where the wind has run, / and all our faces share the rain." As Keithley will write in a later book, *The Starry Messenger*, "This is how we find our way / in the world men have made / as if we were gods."

Earth's Eye and *Song in a Strange Land* are bound to the place Keithley knows best, the way an animal has special knowledge of the pasture or woodland where it was born. Keithley's characteristic and special relationship to the earth shines forth in poems like "November as the New Moon," from *Song in a Strange Land*, about a chance encounter at dusk with deer veering "across a breast of the stiff meadow":

*They pull the whole hill around into the trees.
When they go there's no feeling of balance,
no sense of focus once you lie down alone*

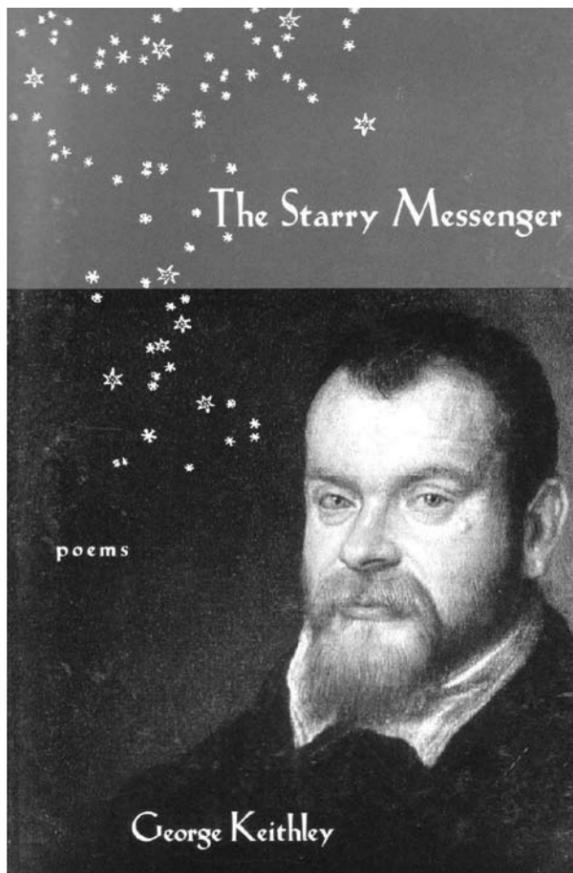
*like a boy basking on a raft who sees
the sky spin as he floats
around a pond.*

"When they go there's no feeling of balance." Later, in *Night's Body*, Keithley wonders again what will happen when more wild creatures leave the planet. Lying in an open field, the poet makes a connection to the spinning sky above, knowing himself to be part of both.

About the time of *Earth's Eye*, Keithley also published *The Starry Messenger* (Pittsburgh, 1994), a sequence of dramatic monologues about the astronomer Galileo. After more than 20 years in the Sierra, Keithley's strong connection to the Great Plains had ebbed, but not his interest in lives harassed and shamed by sanctimonious and respectable elders. Galileo, like the central characters in *Earth's Eye*, has drunk "each cup / of his disgrace."

In his new book, *Night's Body* (Word Tech, 2011), the poet returns to the night sky in a poem called "Tree House," where the constellations form "A tree of stars / where our children stir and dream." But for the most part Keithley, unlike Galileo, seems to accept that Earth—with its wild horses, sudden storms in the Sierra, and human love—"yields marvels enough." And toward the end of his life, Keithley, now in his seventies, returns to the creature of the

His poems hold the reader's attention on the natural world and its beauties and on the reflections and sensations of the inner world.



poem written close to the beginning (though not published in *Earth's Eye* till much later) and quoted above. When deer come down, in the poem of that title, to drink at Mill Creek "from the parched mountain meadow pale as a hayfield," the poet concludes, "Yes, this is the other world—when we die we come here." Poet melds ecstatically with his subject, ceasing to differentiate self and deer. As he ages, Keithley's sense of a place beyond earth seems to begin supplanting his earthly place.

Keithley's metaphors are striking and original, but subtle, not spectacular, never quirky or oddball. In "Chiaroscuro," a woman listens "to the sonorous rain of the guitar." In "Warm Rain," trees are "washing / their hair in the high wind." The coats of wolves glow "like wood smoke in the moonlight" in "The Kill." How can it be spring, the poet wonders, without the wild "Kee-ear, kee-ear!" of the fierce-faced hawks with "the shadows of their wings" making "dark knives" in the sunlight? Language sometimes fails Keithley: his tombstones are gray, his light mottled, his elk great, his foals frolicking. The masterful storyteller here allows the mechanics of what happened to occasionally stall his lyrics. In *Night's Body* the poems move at a slower, more ambling pace, as perhaps suits a septuagenarian, than in earlier books.

Keithley does not intend to move or jar his audience, just as he does not ask for applause. Rather, his new poems turn and hold the reader's attention alternately on the natural

world and its beauties and on the reflections and sensations of the inner world. He sometimes succeeds in making "more vivid the imagined life," as Keithley writes in his notes to his verse play, *The Best Blood of the Country*, where he acknowledges the risk inherit in artistic expression. "The alternative is silence or sameness," he writes, "in ourselves and in our art."

Back in 1974, Dick Allen praised *The Donner Party* in *Poetry* magazine as "one of the three or four finest book-length American poems ever written." Over the next forty years, Keithley continued to earn accolades: For Joyce Carol Oates, he possessed "Whitman's visionary imagination"; to Al Young he is "one of North America's most soulful writers" and "exquisitely imaginative"; Marvin Bell described Keithley's as "a poetry of lyrical beauty, historical awareness, philosophical nuance, and serene clarity." His vision, Bell wrote, was "uncommonly humane." He published poems in *The Iowa Review*, *Harper's*, *The New York Times* and other prestigious journals.

But when the California literary scene in the second half of the 20th century was documented this year by Jack Foley in his two-volume compendium, *Visions & Affiliations: A California Literary Time Line* (Pantograph Press), George Keithley was not even mentioned. His work is rarely anthologized and several of his books are out of print.

What happened?

In one sense, of course, nothing happened. Keithley found a place in the literary world as a teacher and he continued to write and publish, to be admired, respected and read.

In another sense, the Sixties happened. In the mobility typical of the period, Keithley took a teaching position at a small state college in California, far from his native Illinois (unlike a similarly "regional" poet, Wendell Berry, who returned to his native Kentucky). American culture changed. Readers began to expect the spectacular even in their poetry, while Keithley continued to write about more ordinary people and events in modulated, quiet tones. As reflected in Donald Allen's 1960 anthology, *The New American Poetry*, new voices opened the American chorus to ethnic, cultural, and esthetic variety. When James Dickey, writing about *The Donner Party* in the *New York Times*, disparaged Keithley's poetic craft, his criticisms were, ironically, fast becoming moot in the new poetry of the Left Coast, intent as it was in throwing out New Criticism ideas of the well-crafted poem.

While Keithley was honing his craft in the poems finally published in *Earth's Eye*, the poets in Jack Foley's *Visions* carried on their poetic projects, expressing their provocative social and political agendas for peace, sexual equality, socialism, gay rights, or ecology, often in more spacious poetic forms, and with a more exuberant style of presentation. While Keithley was ensconced in out-of-the-way Chico State, Robert Duncan, Gary Snyder, and their descendants, later joined by the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets and poets of the New York School, were performing in cafés, bookstores, libraries and restaurants from San Francisco to Los Angeles.

The poet Marvin Bell remarked, "Keithley's poetry possesses a quality one can neither teach nor purchase: that of grace." Times and styles change. Literary journals nowadays often (though not always) look for experimental, edgy, surprising, inventive poems—qualities not found in Keithley's work. But Keithley's attention to forms of cruelty and injustice and the possibilities of redemption, deserves consideration. With serenity and skill, Keithley's poems offer consolation in the natural rhythms of human life and the earth itself. His deep perception of landscape and of the timeless features of our humanity and his understanding of history make for artifacts of value, poems worth saving.

Keithley's elegy for John F. Kennedy, for example, is singular. Apart from William Everson's *Tongs of Jeopardy*, a meditation on Kennedy written after the assassination and for the most part not available in print, and the aging W. H. Auden's short elegy set to music by Stravinsky, I know of few others.

*Long lines of mourners murmur and turn back.
St. John's belfry wheel winds . . . and unreels its chimes
. . .
Grief goes open in the street
. . .
November carries cold across the land*

If I overestimate Keithley's achievement in poems like his remembrance of President Kennedy, his portraits of austere rural life on the prairie, his invocations of compassion for the individual, and his honed expression of love's values, then, to borrow a wager from Pascal, we have only a pitance to lose by publishing a volume of Keithley's Collected Poems. Otherwise, we gain a treasure.

Zara Raab's new book of poems is *Swimming the Eel* (David Robert Books). She grew up on the rural coast of Northern California and now lives in Berkeley.

HABITAT

Close Call

Bruce Patterson

The buck deer swept by so close I could've counted coup on him had I been thinking quickly enough. My body had leapt sideways on its own, shot airborne by the shock of our sudden coming together, and I'd raised my arm over his rack of horns as they passed my ribcage, my eyes searching his for the hint of a hooking head and dipping horn, and then he was behind me, gaining speed now that he was up out of the canyon and galloping along the ridgetop fire road, his neck stretched, head low and legs pounding swirling curls of dust. He dove into a hole in the tanoak forest that carpeted the opposite canyon, his body frozen like a ski jumper's, and then he vanished, his bounding hoofbeats dropping down through the dry leaves sounding like descending piano notes. He slowed to a trot, came to a halt—I imagined him looking around with his ears searching—and then I listened as he moseyed along like he'd been doing before I'd accidentally jumped into his face and scared the bejesus out of him.

I cringed, my fingers and toes tingling. Had that buck deer chosen to gore me, and had he gotten a horn in under my ribs, I might've bled out up here. I'd been hiking alone with my shovel and mattock shouldered, my lunchbox swinging in my hand, and then I'd sat down for lunch. I'd left my pickup truck a good half mile behind and, even if I got there and then sped back down the mountain, it'd be the better part of an hour before I reached a spot of civilization—plenty of time for a gutted body to bleed out. My head filled with memories of the bleached corpses of soldiers and, after shaking them like water off a dog, I squinted at the high heavens and laughed at



KATHRYN DARLING

my good fortune, my damned hair-trigger, jungle-bunny nerves having paid off again; that plus the way lucky goes along with stupid. Like I forget to watch where I put my feet, tumble down a canyon side, plunk into the creek all bumped, bruised and contused, and then I thank God no harm's been done.

The nip of winter was riding the autumn breeze, and my boss had sent me up here into the wild green yonder to open ditches and clear culverts along the fire road that runs the warbled razorback between Yorkville's Kristell's Peak and the summit of Big Foot Mountain. It was a once-a-year sort of ranch chore, but this was my first time and I was glad my boss had picked me. I was born puppy-dog shiftless and coyote curious, and I'd always loved getting off alone and exploring someplace new, following my nose and, when the need arose, pissing on shrubs or tree trunks to give them a little health drink. If I'd put down my scent atop the Warner Mountains and the 7 Devils,

the Rubies and Snakes, it was because, the way one creek leads to another and keeps doing so until it pools into a lake, joins the ocean or sinks into the sand, one mountain range, even one as luminous as the Sierra Nevada, always led to another.

I wondered if my powerful appreciation of deer as kindred spirits had kept me from getting gored. An animal with so much speed, agility and grace was a fit spiritual friend and ally for somebody taking his living from the steep and slippery. Once, after a season spent going out of my way to

avoid crushing redwood stump-shoots while I was felling timber, one of them skinny standers saved my life by keeping a rolling log from smashing me and it felt like more than a just a coincidence. At one time or another, I'd gently and patiently herded deer out of orchards and vineyards, and once a partner and I freed a yearling spiked buck who'd gotten the cloven hoof of a hind leg snagged by a nasty barb of barbed wire topping a sheep fence. It took all of my strength to keep a hold of his spikes while my partner freed his bloody hoof, so maybe this here buck deciding to spare me had been cosmic karma. Yet, while my long years working out in nature had put a fair bit of the pagan into my bones—even logic has magic—it didn't make me stupid; just the opposite, I'd venture. Anyway, if one thing was karma, everything was karma and that didn't make any sense. Like, what if the buck had gored me? Where'd be the karma in that? If bad karma was out to get me, it

wouldn't come in the form of a buck and, if it did, he'd've gored me.

After wondering if somehow our catching eyes had saved me, I dismissed the notion because all I'd seen was his eyes locked on mine. What if I'd been slower to react? Would he have veered around me, or dropped his head and plowed right over the top of me? Can a buck deer make moral decisions; decide to gore or not to gore? Or had he, like me, been acting on pure instinct?

Once I'd locked eyes with a mountain lion and, the instant I did, he was gone. He was gone the same as now the buck deer was gone. I'd been sitting cross-legged on the fire road eating my lunch when I heard the buck moseying up out of the canyon. I froze into silence and he appeared in front of me, holding aloft this ancient and magnificent rack of horns. Then he spotted me and bolted backward into the canyon. I jumped up, ran to the lip of the road to get a better look at his retreating rack of horns and, him having been turned back by the canopy of a windfall tree, we'd come face-to-face.

Like the mountain lion, maybe the buck hadn't been as much terrorized as just playing it safe. Maybe he'd once been shot at and missed, or possibly he'd never seen a gangly, hairy-headed biped before, and certainly not one eyeball-to-eyeball. So I decided it was my jumping back that'd saved me. The buck hadn't gored me because he'd neither the need nor desire. Like a courteous driver, I'd yielded to him the right-of-way and, like a courteous driver, he'd taken it.

Bruce Patterson is the author of Walking Tractor and Turned Round in My Boots (Heyday). He lives in Anderson Valley.

BIBLIOTECA

News, Views, Notes, Reviews, Reports and Exhortations from Friends of Coast Community Library

PRESIDENT'S DESK

Heroes Behind the Scenes

Alix Levine

There's good news at the library. Measure A passed resoundingly, providing a funding base for our library system for the next 16 years. Our county's voters showed how much they value our libraries by voting in a tiny sales tax, which by law is devoted solely to the benefit of libraries. The funds won't be available until July 2012, but the planning for restoration and improvement of library services is in place.

Here at Coast Community Library because we have only 32 hours per week of professional county library staff, we have developed a cadre of volunteers who allow us to be open six days a week, working at the circulation desk and shelving and related tasks. Although our librarian, Julia Larke, will go up to 40 hours per week come July, we will still need to staff the circulation desk for many hours with volunteers. These are the ones the public sees.

Behind the scenes, valuable service is provided by unsung heroes. I'd like to acknowledge some of them here:

Judy Hardy has been working on collection development for many years. She has weeded our shelves, determined new additions, catalogued, and shared her expertise as a retired librarian, spending many hours in the back room at the computer. Now we say goodbye, as she and her husband move back to Cleveland. We give heartfelt thanks to Judy, and we will miss her.

Roger Jones has quietly and efficiently created special shelving to display brand-new just-published books in the front of the library, fixed up Children's Room shelving, and took on the task of modifying our recently purchased rolling bookshelves to fit through our doorways when we roll them out for our monthly book sales, which will resume in January 2012. He also "remodeled" our bookroom where donations are sorted and stored for sale to allow the storage of the big new rolling shelves. When a job needs doing he figures out how to do it well.

Jeff Watts has made sure our building stays in good shape, even personally clearing ditches, as well as making sure repairs get made. We rest secure knowing Jeff is overseeing our building's maintenance.

Ruth Cady is the expert on books of extra value, researching donations to determine whether some books are of special worth, and higher price. She is another retired librarian spending hours at a computer in the back room making sure donations provide the most benefit when sold.

Book covering and labeling and related preparation of materials are done in the workroom by **Donna Casterson** and **Shirley Arora**, so that books and DVDs and such can go out onto our shelves after they're acquired. Quiet work, and oh so necessary.

Another retired librarian, **Marilyn Alderson**, is in charge of our children's and young adult collections, making sure we have wonderful selections, and also does Storytime for toddlers on Tuesdays, and works on the Summer Reading Program each year.

Carole Ostrander is the coordinator of desk volunteers, and has not only created a training program, but also manages the schedule to be sure volunteers are covering every shift at the front desk, a vital job.

Our unseen helpers have made big contributions to making Coast Community Library flourish, and we thank them.



Arthur Winfield Knight

HAVE PEN, WILL TRAVEL

Christopher Byck

Arthur Winfield Knight collected a pair of degrees from San Francisco State University in the early 1960s and landed a professorship at California University of Pennsylvania in 1966. He was probably the first academic to teach Beat writing in an American literature class. Teaching Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac at the university level, or any level, was progressive, to say the least. Today, they have made their way into many curricula throughout higher education, although there are still debates about the academic merit of Beat writers.

Knight later published many of the Beats in his journal *Unspeakable Visions of the Individual*. In addition to publishing and teaching, he wrote critically about the Beat Movement, providing analysis and creating dialogue on the literary merits of their collective work.

Beyond his keen interest in the Beats, Knight adores western movies, in particular the works of Sam Peckinpah. Peckinpah remains a hotly debated and controversial director nearly 30 years after his death. His movies are, in the opinion of some, bloody, sexist and vulgar. However, they capture much of the rugged landscape of the Old West. The imagery in his movies is, to some critics, their only redeeming value. The director created some iconic images of the brutality of the West. Knight, similarly, incorporates the West into the storyline of his Sam Bonner trilogy.

The Sam Bonner trilogy is comprised of *Blue Skies Falling*, *Blue Moon Rising* and *Final Cut*.

Blue Skies Falling (Forge Books) mirrors an episode in Knight's own life, the death of his third wife, Glee. The book begins with the understanding that Sara, Bonner's wife, is dying and the two set out across the wide expanse of the West. The trip is punctuated with visits to the graves of western bandits and other colorful figures of the distant past. The love shared by the two characters is evident, as is Sara's impending death. Readers know that she will not survive the novel. Knight captures the emotional journey, one part morbid road trip and one part crash course in western aura. The book weaves through the characters' lives and pasts, and the past of the region as well.

Blue Moon Rising (Sabellapress) finds Bonner mourning the loss of his wife while falling in love with Kathleen, a married woman. The second book in the trilogy focuses more on Sam's past as a movie director; loosely basing his narrative on Peckinpah's directorial career, Knight provides ample background on some of Peckinpah's more controversial films, while chronicling the affair between Sam and Kathleen. The book ends with a climactic scene involving Kathleen's distraught family and the police.

Final Cut (Milverstead Publishing) picks up the story of the love between Sam and Kathleen. It is peppered with additional trivia and road anecdotes from the West and western movies.

Perhaps Sam Bonner's life does not reflect that of Arthur Winfield Knight. Perhaps the protagonist is merely an example of a man left with his own demons, faults, failures and successes. Larger-than-life, uninhibited men make good protagonists. The Spartan style and rich use of imagery, coupled with homage to the Beats and the western frontier remain hallmarks of Knight's writing—as they were evident in both Kerouac and Peckinpah, whose influence is evident in these novels.

I was sitting in Salt Lake City, waiting for a bus to take me to a rental car, and reading page after page of the trilogy. My anticipation at heading west from Salt Lake, through the Salt Flats and on into barren northern Nevada was heightened by the experience of Knight's books. He captures the West, the joy of seeing and experiencing the West with an unadulterated sense of self. Knight paints the western landscape in contrasting shades—he uses it to represent death, love and life. Peckinpah and Kerouac, similarly, though each in his own way, saw these same aspects of the American West, using the open canvas to create mental images and emotions, both metaphysical and temporal.

Christopher Byck is editor and publisher of 48th Street Press in Caracas, Venezuela.

LIBRARY LINES

Julia's Hot Tips for Winter

Julia Larke

Thanks to library supporters in Mendocino County, Measure A passed with flying colors! And, thanks to members of the Yes on Libraries campaign who wholeheartedly donated their time and energy to encourage people to get out and vote, money raised from the one-eighth of a cent increase in county sales tax will provide Mendocino County Public Libraries with dedicated funding for the next 16 years.

With a secure library budget for the near future, the County and the Friends of Coast Community Library can continue to carry out (with a lot less stress!) the mission "to enrich the life of the local community through learning, information services, life-long education and the exchange of ideas."

Some titles in the library catalog that I recommend:

Four Fish: The Future of the Last Wild Food by Paul Greenberg, 2010. Greenberg talks about a GMO registered trademark species, AquAdvantage® salmon, that might contaminate the few, if any, remaining wild salmon. Tuna, the last truly wild industrial food fish, he calls a "stateless" fish, which therefore suffers from exploitation on the high seas. As wild fisheries decline, sustainably farmed fish are a crucial source of food, but Greenberg questions current fish-farming methods. The danger of monocultures, the risk of genetic contamination, and the potential damage to the environment from large-scale aquaculture suggest the need for an even greater worldwide effort to protect wild fisheries.

The Disappearing Spoon: And Other True Tales of Madness, Love, and the History of the World from the Periodic Table of the Elements by Sam Kean, 2010. Kean's book of science stories about the elements is hard to put down. Learn how Scott and his men at the South Pole were victims of the periodic table; they did not know then the effects of extreme cold on tin. And, how is it that a spoon can disappear?

The 2011 debut novel **South of Superior** by Eileen Airgood is a story of a woman who steps away from a planned city life with a sense of relief and returns, with some reservations, to her small-town Lake Superior roots. Characters in the book are genuine and appealing, and community members look out for each other. Airgood writes with a clear vision and no frills. She understands humans and nature and kindness and love.

DVDs: **Exploring Our Roots with Henry Louis Gates Jr.** Genealogy, oral history, and DNA analysis are used to trace American lineages back to their African origins. Some unexpected shared ancestral connections are revealed. **Detective Montalbano**, a very good Sicilian TV series based on the mystery stories of Andrea Camillari. Italian is so expressive! The series is well worth watching (and hearing) and the subtitles are easy to read.

Come visit the library, it's a treasure trove. We offer public computers as well as wi-fi access. The Origins of the Human Mind and The Music of Wagner are the current continuing-education Great Courses. Storytime is Tuesday at 11am. Internet Basics was a 4-week course in October that we hope to repeat in the spring. Finally, Learning to Knit is a new class and Tai Chi is ongoing. It's all free!

THALES

Thales said, and indeed, believed
That an eclipse would occur on May 28, 585 BC,
Which came as a bit of a shock to me.

But the Lydians and Medes were pleased as punch
Because they were at war and this gave them both
An excuse for a cease-fire, and a break for lunch.

He also was a great drinker and endorser of water,
So, though he himself was proud to be a Milesian,
His wells were Artesian.

P.S. In addition, and against all odds,
He thought all things
Are full of gods.

—WALTER MARTIN

GREEN from page 1

voice to diverse points of view, he provides a healthy view of the whole. In particular he shows how the marijuana prohibition goes hand in hand with problems in health care, law enforcement, prisons, civil rights and federal vs. states' rights.

I love this book's array of literary and film references: Hunter Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*; Andrew Weil's excellent *From Chocolate to Morphine*; Alexander von Humboldt's *Kosmos*; Elia Kazan's *Viva Zapata!*; Nicholas Ray's *Johnny Guitar* and many others. Like the historical documentation already mentioned, they enrich the context and raise this book to a higher level than the bright marijuana bud on the cover might lead one to expect. The publisher is, after all, High Times, which no doubt knows its target audience. The book has enough color pictures of awesome plants and buds to make any stoner drool, but it has enough real substance to make it a valuable contribution to drug literature.

As a resident of Raskin's "marijuana-land," I take issue with some statements and representations in the book. Readers are likely to come away with the idea that virtually everyone in Northern California is involved in the marijuana industry. For most people I know, this is simply not the case. They are too busy with families, jobs and various recreational, creative and volunteer endeavors to give much thought to pot. Northern California is a very diverse place, with a natural and cultural mix that many places would envy. To stereotype



Jonah Raskin

it in any way is an injustice. Marijuana is undoubtedly here a dominant cash crop, like grapes, but it's not the be-all and end-all of existence.

Raskin deserves credit for coming clean about his own marijuana use. (He has recently announced his retirement from SSU.) It would be nice if everyone could be as aboveboard. Many in my generation hid their pot smoking from their parents and their children, and continue to hide it from employers and co-workers. It seems silly, but if one can be fired or lose credibility for preferring weed to alcohol or caffeine, it makes sense to be discreet.

Of course Prop. 19 did not pass. The vote was 53.5 percent NO to 46.5 percent YES, with strange bedfellows all around. Election day found Raskin at Oakland University in Oakland, helping to get out the vote. "During the last two hours that I worked the phone, I told potential voters: 'If you haven't cast your ballot for marijuana this year, I hope you'll consider voting for legalization next time.' There would certainly be a next time—I was as sure about that as I was that weed would not be legalized

The book has enough color pictures of awesome plants and buds to make any stoner drool, but it has enough real substance to make it a valuable contribution to drug literature.

this time. But marijuana wasn't going to go away, and neither would pot smokers, growers and advocates."

As of this writing, US Attorneys in California have initiated another offensive in the War on Drugs, busting dispensaries that were operating legally under state and local laws, and sending letters of warning to landlords of others, warning them that their property will be confiscated if they continue to rent to dispensaries. Back to the atavistic status quo.

The solution? I'm with Raskin all the way on this—end the prohibition; change state and federal laws. If that takes big profits away from growers along with cops, lawyers and prison administrators, so be it. Greedheads of all stripes should be discouraged. An end to the prohibition would help do that, and give law enforcement more time and resources to focus on serious problems like methamphetamine and alcohol abuse. It might also give residents of Northern California greater hope for a sustainable agrarian way of life.

RCR contributing editor Daniel Barth lives, writes and teaches near Ukiah.

RIGHT ANGLE

Posts hold up anything if aligned with weighted strings attracted unerringly to the exact pit of the earth. Erect two or three or twenty posts of exactly equal height and lay a beam on top. The elbows made by the horizontal and the vertical each measure ninety degrees, one quarter of the three-hundred-and-sixty degree circle—right angles, correct angles, that is. Beams that try to fall to the ground find themselves pushing against the vast earth through the straight posts—in other words, find they have already fallen.

The right angle is a hooked weapon against implacable circles and spheres—the suns, planets, orbits, the cycle of light and darkness, the circle of seed and harvest, and the death that encircles all of it. We break into this indifferent perfection and tear out the precise piece that will hold up roofs against the stars and the echoless spaces between them. We place plumbed posts on the ground topped by beams. We raise a second set of these and a third and a fourth, all joined together at their ends at right angles to form four walls, the four corners adding up to the number of degrees contained in a circle, but a circle beaten into a rectangle. Sometimes in this manner we build temples to placate the very forces against which we swing our hammers, out here on the wrong side of the gates of Eden.

—DANIEL RICHMAN

WRITE TO US

The RCR welcomes your letters. Write to the Editor, RCR c/o ICO, P.O. Box 1200, Gualala, CA 95445 or by email to skrcr@stephenkessler.com.

Some Recent Arrivals @ Coast Community Library**FICTION**

Adler-Olsen, Jussi. *The keeper of lost causes*
 Arnaldur Indriðason. *Operation Napoleon*
 Blake, Sarah. *The postmistress*
 Bradley, C. Alan. *I am half-sick of shadows*
 Caldwell, Bo. *City of tranquil light*
 Coelho, Paulo. *Aleph*
 Cooke, Carolyn. *Daughters of the revolution*
 Delinsky, Barbara. *Escape*
 Deveraux, Jude. *The scent of Jasmine*
 Eugenides, Jeffrey. *The marriage plot*
 French, Tana. *Faithful place*
 Harrison, Jim. *The great leader*
 Jin, Ha. *Nanjing requiem*
 La Plante, Lynda. *Blind fury*
 Leon, Donna. *Drawing conclusions*
 Maron, Margaret. *Three-day town*
 McLain, Paula. *The Paris wife: a novel*
 Mengiste, Maaza. *Beneath the lion's gaze*
 Mina, Denise. *The end of the wasp season*
 Muller, Marcia. *City of whispers*
 Ondaatje, Michael. *The cat's table*
 Patchett, Ann. *State of wonder*
 Paterson, James. *The Christmas wedding*
 Pratchett, Terry. *Snuff: a novel of Disc-world*

Roza, S.J. *Ghost hero*

See, Lisa. *Dreams of Joy*

Smith, Martin Cruz. *Three stations: an Arkady Renko novel*

Sparks, Nicholas. *The rescue*

Todd, Charles. *A bitter truth*

Wolff, Isabel. *The very picture of you*

NONFICTION

Allen, Sarah G. and Joe Mortenson. *Field guide to marine mammals of the Pacific Coast: Baja, California, Oregon, Washington, British Columbia*

Ghaemi, S. Nassir. *A first-rate madness: uncovering the links between leadership and mental illness*

Greenberg, Paul. *Four fish: the future of the last wild food*

James, Ronnie K. *Touching wings, touching wild: true stories of rescue and return to the wild*

Kahn, Lloyd. *Builders of the Pacific Coast*
 Kean, Sam. *The disappearing spoon: and other true tales of madness, love, and the history of the world from the periodic table of the elements*

Keator, Glenn and Alrie Middlebrook. *Designing California native gardens: the plant community approach to artful, ecological gardens*

Lanier, Pamela. *Bed and breakfast getaways of the West Coast*

Lipkowitz, Ina. *Words to eat by: five foods and the culinary history of the English language*

Montgomery, Sy. *Birdology: adventures with a pack of hens, a peck of pigeons, cantankerous crows, fierce falcons, hip hop parrots, baby hummingbirds, and one murderously big living dinosaur*

Nugood, Ali. *I am Nugood, age 10 and divorced*

Owings, Alison. *Indian voices: listening to Native Americans*

Weiss, Miranda. *Tide, feather, snow: a life in Alaska*

Woodward, Bob. *Obama's wars*

BIOGRAPHY

Caine, Michael. *The elephant to Hollywood*

Dugard, Jaycee. *A stolen life: a memoir*

Gill, Michael. *How Starbucks saved my life: a son of privilege learns to live like everyone else*

Grealy, Lucy. *Autobiography of a face*

James, Etta. *Rage to survive: the Etta James story*

Lauck, Jennifer. *Blackbird: a childhood lost and found*

Malcolm, Janet. *Two lives: Gertrude and Alice*

Vidal, Gore. *Palimpsest*

BOOKS ON CD

Walls, Jeannette. *Glass castle*

DVDs

Big man Japan

Firewall

Frida

Gotti: the rise and fall of a real life Mafia Don

Letters to Juliet

Love comes softly

Message in a bottle

Prime

Roving Mars

Tron: the original classic

CDs

Beatles. *Revolver*

The big chill: music from the original motion picture soundtrack

YOUNG ADULT FICTION

Avi. *Nothing but the truth: a documentary novel*

Bray, Libba. *Beauty queens*

Clare, Cassandra. *City of fallen angels*

Kate, Lauren. *Passion*

Lindner, April. *Jane*

Lore, Pitticus. *The power of six*

Patterson, James. *Angel*

Wynne-Jones, Tim. *Blink & Caution*

JUVENILE ITEMS

• EASY BOOKS

Arnosky, Jim. *Grandfather Buffalo*
 Bently, Peter. *King Jack and the dragon*
 Carle, Eric. *The artist who painted a blue horse*

Christelow, Eileen. *Five little monkeys reading in bed*

Dewdney, Anna. *Llama Llama home with mama*

Hines, Anna G. *I am a Tyrannosaurus*

Lichtenheld, Tom. *Clouette*

Parish, Herman. *Amelia Bedelia's first field trip*

• JUVENILE FICTION

Angleberger, Tom. *Darth Paper strikes back: an Origami Yoda book*

Patterson, James and Chris Tebbets. *Middle school, the worst years of my life*

Renier, Aaron. *The unsinkable Walter Bean*

Selznick, Brian. *Wonderstruck: a novel in words and pictures*

Smith, Cleve B. *Aliens on vacation*

Wood, Audrey. *La casa adormecida*

• JUVENILE NONFICTION

Guinness world records 2012

Silverstein, Shel. *Every thing on it: poems and drawings*

• JBOCD

Stewart, Trenton. *The mysterious Benedict Society*

• JDVD

Two brothers: the tigers Kumai and Sangha

• JCD

Downing, Johnette. *Fins and grins*

Hot Peas 'n Butter (music group). *Hot Peas 'n Butter. Volume 1, A few new friends*

Manners, Beth. *Beth Manners' magic Spanish for kids*

Peace is the world smiling (various artists)

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BOOKS

Devil's Advocate

Jonah Raskin

**THE DEVIL'S DICTIONARY, TALES,
& MEMOIRS**

 by Ambrose Bierce
 edited by S. T. Joshi
 Library of America (2011), 880 pages

CIVIL WAR STORIES

 by Ambrose Bierce
 paintings by Chester Arnold
 Kelly's Cove Press (2011), 87 pages

THE BEST OF THE DEVIL'S DICTIONARY

 edited by Bart Schneider
 Kelly's Cove Press (2011), 85 pages

Ambrose Bierce—America's most poetic war writer—belongs to the age of the telegraph and the telegram, those two infernal 19th-century technologies that transformed war reporting and connected distant individuals almost as efficiently as cell phones and text messaging. A master of brevity, Bierce excelled at the short story and at concise definitions for the common words that fill *The Devil's Dictionary*, his one universally accepted work of genius that retains its sparkling wit and biting satire 130 years after it was first published in 1881. Moreover, though he mastered weapons of war and deftly operated printing presses during peacetime, he wasn't simply a child of the machine age. The title of an early short story, "A Psychological Shipwreck," suggests Bierce's preoccupation with the strange and wonderful workings of the human mind.

Fascinated by dreams, nightmares and hallucinations, he mapped haunted landscapes and portrayed haunted people. The term magical realism might apply to his writing, except that it has been overused and has lost much of its initial force. Perhaps surrealism is more appropriate, though sarcasm is the word that best conveys the tone of *The Devil's Dictionary*. The combination of magical realism, sarcasm and a staccato prose made Bierce well suited to write about the American Civil War and the corruptions of the Gilded Age that followed it. On nearly every page of his diabolical lexicon, he pokes fun at and exposes the madness and the absurdity of American politics, economics and culture. Indeed, long before Occupy Wall Street, he lampooned banks and bankers and didn't stop there.

An "immigrant," he wrote in his *Dictionary* was "An unenlightened person who thinks one country better than another." An "Un-American" was "Wicked, intolerable, heathenish." In stark contrast to the optimists of the day, he took on the persona of the crafty disciple of the devil and redefined "Americanism," as H. L. Mencken would call it, and rewrote the meanings of sacrosanct literary terms. The imagination, he wrote, was "A warehouse of facts, with poet and liar in joint ownerships." Of all the gifts of the writer, the imagination loomed larger than any other in his storehouse of literary weapons, and so, predictably, he also extolled the romance as a genre and denigrated the novel. In *The Devil's Dictionary*, he explains that, "In the novel the writer's thought is tethered to probability, as a domestic horse to the hitching post, but in romance it ranges at will over the entire region of the imagination—free, lawless, immune to bit and reign."

Unwilling to fit in, Bierce nonetheless became a kind of institution in San Francisco at the end of the 19th century, where he met Bret Harte, along with many other luminaries of the day, then skewered them and their publication, *The Overland Monthly*, as "The warmed-Overland Monthly." Born in Ohio in 1842—two years before Morse invented the telegraph—he fought for the Union Army during the Civil War, from 1861 until 1865, and engaged in the savage spectacle of slaughter that he would later revisit and reinvent in a series of short stories published in 1891 under the title *In the Midst of Life: Tales of Soldiers and Civilians*. Wounded in the head, hospitalized, furloughed and then returned to war again,

Bierce knew how it felt to lose consciousness and then regain it. As a writer, he would wander in and out of the consciousness and the conscience of many of his characters, such as Peyton Fahrquhar, the Confederate soldier who is hanged by Union troops on a bridge that spans Owl Creek in northern Alabama, and who imagines, in the last desperate moments before he dies, his return to his plantation and wife.

"Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge"—Bierce's best-known and most frequently anthologized short story—is collected in *Bierce: The Devil's Dictionary, Tales, & Memoirs*, an 880-page tome from the Library of America that includes a chronology of the author's life as a soldier and a



Ambrose Bierce, 1842-1914 (?)

The combination of magical realism, sarcasm and a staccato prose made Bierce well suited to write about the American Civil War and the corruptions of the Gilded Age that followed it.

civilian, plus detailed notes on the text by S. T. Joshi, a Bierce expert. "Occurrence" is also published in *Civil War Stories*, an 87-page paperback from Kelly's Cove Press in San Francisco, that contains 24 unsettling paintings by the renowned California artist Chester Arnold that complement Bierce's gruesome text. Moreover, Kelly's Cove has reprinted what the editor, Bart Schneider, calls *The Best of the Devil's Dictionary*. Schneider omits some words—immigrant, for example—but includes Un-American and imagination. In an email to me he said that he thinks of Ambrose Bierce as the "Lenny Bruce of the 19th century" and "perhaps better suited to our times than his own." He added that Bierce's Civil War stories "constituted great antiwar literature that was basically unknown and ripe for reprinting."

Bierce wrote about Confederate and Union soldiers with equal helpings of compassion and indifference, though in "Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" he derives a perverse sense of satisfaction in describing the hanging of Peyton Fahrquhar, the wealthy Southern planter who is tricked by a crafty Federal scout and then easily captured and executed by Federal troops before he can carry out acts of sabotage. Bierce creates the setting of the story in meticulous detail. He describes the rope that hangs Fahrquhar, the military hierarchy in the Union army, the trees in the surrounding woods that look like "black bodies," and the stars in the sky that are "grouped in strange

constellations." Moreover, Bierce moves masterfully from an outer to an inner landscape in which "Death is a dignitary."

As in a Faulkner novel—*The Sound and the Fury*, for example—time becomes his subject. Before he dies, Fahrquhar hears the "ticking of his watch" and notices ominously the "intervals of silence." Like Faulkner, who told the first part of *The Sound and the Fury* from the perspective of the idiot Benjy, Bierce experimented with points of view and stream-of-consciousness writing. In the short story "Chickamauga," which follows immediately after "An Occurrence" in the collection *In the Midst of Life*, war comes to the reader through the eyes of a child who can neither hear nor speak, though it's not until the next-to-last sentence that the author explains, "The child was a deaf mute." In "A Son of the Gods," the very next story, which is subtitled "A Study in the Present Tense," Bierce avoids past and future and remains in the here and the now to capture what he calls "the Poetry of War."

Some of Bierce's post-Civil War tales are set in San Francisco. Others take place in Napa and Sonoma, a landscape of fog and rolling hills he knew nearly as well as the landscape of battle and bloodshed. In the story "Can Such Things Be?" he tells the riveting tale of a Southerner, Halpin Frayser, who enjoys sleeping on the ground in the dark forests near St. Helena and who sees apparitions in the "haunted wood."

It was the Civil War, however, not northern California that went on haunting Bierce his entire life, and so he returned to it in his essays decades after the combat officially ended. Several of them, including "What I Saw of Shiloh" (1881) and "A Little of Chickamauga" (1891) are collected in the new Library of America edition of his work. Bierce commanded a regiment in the battle of Shiloh in 1862, and for bravery in action was promoted to lieutenant. In 1863 he fought in the battle of Chickamauga, and

with his men, many of them wounded, many others left to die, he retreated from Confederate troops to the relative safety of Tennessee. Then, in 1864, under the command of William Tecumseh Sherman—who noted famously that "war is hell" and who brought it to Southerners all across Georgia—Bierce discovered the hell of war for himself when a bullet pierced his head, which was, in his own words, "broken like a walnut."

"What I Saw of Shiloh" offers a first-person, eyewitness account of the horrific carnage. Like the best American war reporters, such as his near contemporary Stephen Crane, author of *The Red Badge of Courage*, Bierce moves from historical fact to subjective experience. The Confederate soldiers look like "figures of demons in old allegorical prints of hell." War exudes a "wild intoxication" and death sounds a "monstrous inharmony." At the conclusion of the article "What I Saw of Shiloh," written 20 years after the battle, Bierce confesses that he feels nostalgic for his days as a young soldier surrounded by the "horrors of the time." In hindsight, the Civil War comes to seem "gracious and picturesque" while the present looks "dull," "drear" and "somber." Obsessed with war and addicted to writing about it, he found nothing else as horrible and as gracious.

That he disappeared without a trace in Mexico in December 1913 seems in keeping with his life as a writer who capitalized on the invisible, the unreal and the surreal. Before he crossed the border into Mexico, Bierce revisited the battlefields he had known as a young man at Chickamauga and Shiloh. In New Orleans, he paused long enough to sit down with a reporter and say, "I'm on my way to Mexico because I like the game. I like the fighting; I want to see it." In his very last letter from Chihuahua, Mexico, on the day after Christmas 1913, he wrote, as though beginning a short story in which he would be the narrator, "I leave here tomorrow for an unknown destination."

Jonah Raskin is a contributing editor for the RCR and the author of *Marijuanaland: Dispatches from an American War* (*High Times*) among other books.

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HOUSE from page 1



Thoreau's cabin at Walden Pond

Thoreau's cabin at Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts, is still the model for the life lived in the almost-forgotten democratic American ideal of plainness, unpretentiousness and efficiency. A log cabin fitted out with the essentials and no more is a beautiful thing.

2. Do you prefer an old house or a new house?

My choice for examples of old houses is Tudor. The sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries in Britain mark the advent of the private house as a work of architecture. It is the first time houses compete with churches in architectural importance. Even the great Tudor houses are beautiful in a human-scaled way. Chastleton House in Oxfordshire has a long gallery whose barrel-vaulted ceiling is a bower of carved roses, the Tudor rose being a ubiquitous design element of the period. Smaller Tudor houses are also charming, with their sometimes madly whimsical half-timbering on the outside and the warmth of oak floors and paneling on the inside.

The imitation Tudor house remains popular not only as a badge of modest success, as in the "stockbroker Tudor" of the first half of the twentieth century, but also because it is pleasant to live in when it isn't too dark, with rooms of good proportions and nice details like sunken living rooms and casement windows with window seats.

MULTIMEDIA FOR QUESTION 2, "Old House": Pick your movie about the Tudors. I still like Glenda Jackson's 1971 *Elizabeth R* best of all, but any of them—choose Charles Laughton or Richard Burton or Cate Blanchett or Jonathan Rhys-Meyers—will have nice shots of the carved Tudor roses on paneling, and people will look out over deep windowsills through diamond-shaped panes.

I can't imagine having a quarrel with anyone who prefers the family dwellings of another period or place to my Tudor examples: the Georgian crescents of Bath, the houses of Beacon Hill in Boston, the painted ladies of San Francisco, the ancient pueblos high on mesas in New Mexico and Colorado, the eerily preserved houses of Pompeii. But when we get to new houses, I find that my bias is showing. The term "modern," which in the first half of the twentieth century was synonymous with "contemporary," has come to denote a period in architecture and furnishings and other arts, too, like dance. Once we're past that period, domestic architecture has very little to say for itself other than "Here I am, take it or leave it," except that you can't leave a street full of plastic-clad houses or slabs of apartments or "communities" of mushroom-shaped townhomes in the same way you can a painting or an *objet d'art*. You, we, the environment, everybody, has to take them.

As far as I can tell from the architecture and interior design magazines, serious individual architect-designed houses for rich people are still ringing changes on midcentury modern. (See Question 3, "The Empty House," below.) New houses for the rest of us are a tossed salad of previous periods and fantasies of previous periods. This is sometimes called postmodern, sometimes McMansion.

MULTIMEDIA FOR QUESTION 2, "The New House": Any recent Hollywood comedy or drama about "ordinary people" will provide glimpses into the contemporary new house. For the higher end, try something with Diane Keaton; for the middle-middle, Hope Davis; for the lower middle, Michelle Williams. An iconic new house, fitted out with lots of previous-period details, is the one in *The Blind Side* (2009, John Lee Hancock, director). Sandra Bullock plays an interior designer in the South, and her house seems to be a pretty accurate representation of an upmarket, "updated" conservative ideal.

There is a case to be made for the empty house. Some of the loveliest empty houses are in California. In these houses, it is space itself that stars, space enclosed delicately, fluidly, by walls of glass and hewn stone, beams of steel.

3. Do you prefer a full house or an empty house?

The fullest house I know of is the apartment of Herb and Dorothy Vogel. Their full house—straight flush house, five-of-a-kind house!—was filled with art of the 1960s and on. The "house" was just a tiny rent-controlled apartment in Manhattan, into which the Vogels crammed over four thousand works of conceptual, minimalist, and other contemporary art. When they gave their collection to the National Gallery in Washington, it took at least five semi trucks to cart the packaged works away.

Do not confuse this abundance with the madness of hoarding. Herb and Dorothy weren't hoarders. Quite the opposite: they gave everything away, gave it to the people of the United States, having collected the art in the first place by means of their very modest salaries as government employees (postal worker, librarian). Hoarders collect empty Cheetos bags, daily newspapers, small machine parts, large machines, Christmas wrap. They usually insist these will come in handy some day—that deadly phrase, the watchword of the hoarder. Never believe it.

MULTIMEDIA FOR QUESTION 3, "Full House": *Herb and Dorothy*, 2008, Megumi Sasaki, director.

Empty spaces are sometimes associated with intimidation. Think of long, echoing throne rooms, with red carpets that weren't about celebrity but about real power, and the long walk that was one of supplication, for something to be granted—land, a share of the power, mercy. Think about lofts, too. Lofts as residences are often depicted as *jai alai* courts for great, rebounding egos.

But there is a case to be made for the empty house. Some of the loveliest empty houses are in Southern California, especially Los Angeles and Palm Springs. In these houses, it is space itself that stars, space enclosed delicately, fluidly, by walls of glass and hewn stone, beams of steel. Furnishings are low, unobtrusive and sparse. These are houses born of a European esthetic brought to the deserts and cliffs of

A SPANISH MANSION

The Zen master was staying in the empty mansion that belonged to the precocious entrepreneur, and my ex and her partner were staying in the guest house (the Zen master was their teacher too) and she was having a psychotic break, which they were treating there with a circle of friends instead of sending her to the hospital. I was living with my love in New York but we happened to be traveling in California, and my ex called my best friend in San Francisco looking for me, so I got the message and called back and we drove down the Peninsula that afternoon and found the beautiful empty Spanish mansion, its huge rooms echoing with the silence of the tiles and the big beams and the wrought iron and the dark wood floor, one armchair with a floor lamp where the owner read, but he was nowhere to be seen. (I didn't know then that he would become a legend and that his business vision would change the world.) My ex was in the garden naked reading Walt Whitman and started reciting "Song of Myself" when she saw me coming, and my newer love was waiting in the car, I guess the situation was just too strange, she didn't understand that I could ever have loved anyone else, and maybe she was afraid of catching the madness. My ex was suffering, I could see that, she was agitated and misquoting Whitman, but all I could do was listen, be cool, try not to get infected with her mania. I went inside to ask the Zen master how he thought she was doing, but his redheaded wife protected him from having to deal with a stranger. I could see his back at the kitchen sink, but he never turned around. Perhaps the psychosis had freaked *him* out and the teacher had retreated into himself. It was a gorgeous house that has since been torn down to make way for something no doubt more monstrous, and some years later the Zen master drowned, and now the young man whose home it was is also gone.

—STEPHEN KESSLER

California by architects like Rudolph Schindler and Richard Neutra. That minimalist esthetic flourished under their American followers and became "midcentury modern."

Because these houses are in California, we often see them in movies. My own favorite use of the modern house is in *The Limey*, a suspense film made in 1999. There is a spectacular small house whose terrace and pool teeter on the edge of a cliff. Then there is Terence Stamp, always interesting to look at, especially in a clip incorporated into the film from one of his early movies, when he was young and beautiful. Peter Fonda and former Warhol superstar Joe Dallesandro are also on hand, and the precarious sanity of the characters portrayed by these eccentric actors perfectly matches the crazy balancing act of the house and pool.

MULTIMEDIA FOR QUESTION 3, "Empty House":

The Limey, 1991, Steven Soderbergh, director.

Any episode of "Selling New York," on HGTV.

Cléo de 5 à 7, 1961, Agnès Varda, director. Cléo lives in a very large, very charming loft-like space, photographed in crisp black and white. Is Cléo a bit pretentious? *Peut-être*, at first, but her room is a far cry from the sleek brick and cement and glass of the Soho loft.

4. Do you prefer a formal house or a casual house?

The large Victorian house, with its turrets and porches, is probably considered by most Americans today to be a formal house. In fact, these houses were regarded by the people who built them and the people who lived in them as quite informal. The idea of a porch or veranda facing the street, for instance, was revolutionary. Before the nineteenth century people of the middle and upper classes kept themselves to themselves and life was lived behind flat façades or high gates. This is still true in many parts of the world.

Today, the only permissible use of the word "formal" in most American houses is in the phrases "formal living room" and "formal dining room," which in real estate parlance denote spaces, however cramped, that are set off by partial or full walls from adjacent rooms. The formal living room is understood to be a walk-by. It may as well have a velvet rope across it. Formal dining rooms in smaller houses are generally not used for dining. They often end up as home offices (see Question 1, above, the butler's pantry), homework stations, and storage spaces.

The word "formal" is often used as an antonym for "comfortable." And the word "comfortable" has slid down the slippery slope into "sloppy" and even "dirty," especially in dress and manners, but also in interior (non-) decoration style. The idea of having a room in a house where beauty is preserved and sticky hands forbidden, a room where a busy mother can retreat to enjoy the serenity that order and symmetry bring, is disappearing. Unlike the "formal living room," this room has comfortable seating and is meant to be used by adults for reading and for conversation. It doesn't have a television set, and children entering it are expected to play by grown-up rules.

MULTIMEDIA FOR QUESTION 4, "Formal House": *Rebecca*, 1939, Alfred Hitchcock, director. Manderley, the beautiful house on the Cornish coast, is a leading character in this wonderfully realized romantic suspense movie. Hitchcock transforms a potboiler into art.

MULTIMEDIA FOR QUESTION 4, "Informal House": Any episode of any number of TV sitcoms, beginning with *Roseanne*. There are certainly more upmarket casual houses, though. By the time Heathcliff is in charge of Wuthering Heights in the eponymous novel, it's gone a fair way down the slippery slope, into downright decrepitude. In the twentieth century, there's *Grey Gardens*, the famous Maysles brothers documentary film about Jackie Kennedy's relatives, Edith Bouvier Beale and her daughter Little Edie, in their falling-down cat-filled mansion in the Hamptons.

There you have it, then. Just four simple questions.

You can explore the permutations on your own: small, old, full and informal, like the Vogels, or big, new, empty and formal (that is, with "formal living room" and "formal dining room") like a lot of tract houses whose owners blew everything on the down payment and mortgage and have nothing left for furnishings. You may not resolve your questions about which sort of house is right for you, but you'll see some terrific movies and read a couple of very good books.

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The Jackling House, Woodside, California