

THE REDWOOD COAST REVIEW

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MEMOIR

Crime of Passion

Jan Edwards

I wasn't born a thief. Sure, in junior high I pocketed the occasional bottle of polish from the drugstore, but I didn't really want it, didn't even paint my nails. Shoplifting was just a bonding ritual. The same way you had to sip some beer or tok off a joint whether you wanted to or not, you had to boost something if everyone else was doing it. It wasn't optional. You know what I mean.

For some girls shoplifting was fun, but not me. I was always terrified of getting caught. I never did it alone and never took things just because I wanted them. I knew not paying was *wrong*, but I was not really *bad*. My stealing was social, not antisocial. I could still see myself as a good person on the right side of a fine but clear line.

By high school, a spool of thread or card of buttons would sometimes slip into my purse while the clerk was cutting fabric. I figured if I was buying something, taking something of lesser value was only fair. I knew kids who did much worse, my younger brother for example. I was still an okay person—better than most.

But moving out on my own was a financial shock. With barely enough money for food it seemed crazy to waste it on things like toilet paper, especially when rolls were available for free in public restrooms and you could also unscrew a light bulb if you needed one. Burn's Drugs had samples of shampoo sitting right out on the counter and down the street in the lounge at Saks the tampon machine had no lock. It wasn't like I was stealing for kicks or to get frivolous luxuries. It was a matter of survival. I swiped the shakers from the Chicken Pie Shop because I needed salt. It was my Jean Valjean period. Not exactly bread for a starving child, but I was eighteen. Cut me some slack.

Around that time I wiggled my way into a performing arts college downtown. My major was acting, but scholarship students had to take a technical minor. I chose costume design, and as a plus got keys to the laundry room. Of course students were not supposed to use the costume shop washers for their personal laundry, but everyone ignored the sign. I certainly wasn't the only one to take advantage of the free machines. Sometimes there was even a line. But one particular Sunday I had the place all to myself.

I'd just put in a load and had time to kill, so I started thumbing through some costumes hanging on a repair rack. And that's where I found it. Crammed in between a torn rehearsal skirt and some ratty tights was the most fantastic lace blouse. It had this Victorian lady meets flower child look, and was way too delicate for a costume, wouldn't last ten minutes on stage. So why was it left there?

I slid it off the padded hanger and spread it carefully on the folding table for close examination. The crazy patchwork of lace could have been spun by spiders on acid. It was so light I could read my palm through it. Mismatched pearl buttons winked from the bodice. Of course I tried it on.

And Oh My God! The blouse was made for me. Like it completed me in a way, that's how amazing it felt. And fate had brought us together. I was so meant to have it.

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PT NUNN

The Bookworm & the Butterfly *Is the novel doomed for want of future readers?*

E. G. Willy

My students don't read books. No surprise there. Most teenagers don't read. Any parent of a teenager can tell you this. Any teenager can tell you this. They don't read. They avoid it. Like the driver who sees a lump of something threatening on the highway, they swerve, change lanes, slow down, change course, anything to get out of reading a book. I'm in a particularly good position to see this. I am high school teacher. I've been teaching for twenty-five years now and have witnessed a disturbing cultural change in my classroom. The bookworm is dying out. No longer do I catch my wards sneaking a pleasure read in class, their eyes down, their minds lost in the dream of a wonderful novel. This once daily event has turned into a rare spotting. This year I saw exactly two, one a young Russian girl who believes everyone hates her because she is different, the second a junior varsity baseball player who loves novels from the 1970s. I wish I had more bookworms. I will have fewer next year.

I like my bookworms. They are the closet intellectuals of the class. Maybe they don't test the best (they're reading while I'm explaining), but they are the ones whose tests are the easiest to correct. Invariably they have the best creative writing skills, can answer questions in perfectly metered sentences, can look up from their books and pose questions that the rest of the class neither understands nor cares to explore. Many times they avoid the question altogether and go in directions I would never expect. Some write poems or offer mordant asides. Others use their refined senses to scold me. Most people would say the young scholar should be paying attention in class and not wasting time on other things. Why indeed should they be throwing away precious learning time on material not required to further their careers? They need to focus on getting into a "good" college. They need to do well in chemistry and math. They need to have perfect scores all around to compete against other students from other countries.

I am worried about this "college bound at all costs" attitude. I miss the bookish

introvert with the copy of Kafka displayed lovingly on his desk, the jock scholar with an action adventure, the girl with the perfect posture reading fantasy and romance, the geeky boy with the latest science fiction title. I miss their worried faces as they follow their protagonists into yet another life-threatening dilemma. I miss their wondrous expressions as they enter worlds made only for them. I miss their suddenly enlarged vocabularies as they experiment with the words they have found in their books.

Recently I began to wonder what had happened. I had a few clues. As an educator I get a particular insight into the teenage mind that few witness. It can be a very scary and invigorating place. You can imagine. But I am not a mind reader. I needed more information. I hadn't seen any new numbers on declining book readership for several years, so I decided to ascertain the number of my students that didn't read the book assigned in English class by asking them. I don't teach English. I teach French. This made my task easier. Their grades weren't going to be affected by my inquiries. I interviewed sixty-seven students, the population of two of my classes, freshmen and sophomores. I simply said, "Look, I'm not going to tell your English teacher or any adult. If you don't want to participate, not a problem. I just want you to be candid. Out of curiosity, how many of you read

the assigned book?" Their responses were immediate. It was almost as if they'd been waiting to hear this question. I hastily kept track by making hash marks on a piece of printer paper. The results were evenly divided. One third said they read the book. One third said they used Cliff's Notes or SparkNotes. One third said they didn't bother. There were also a few comments like, "Never, ever open the book" and "I just read the cover" and "I read it because I want to know what I'm talking about." As I have already noted, this is nothing new. We've known for years now that students are reading less. There are plenty of studies that show we are losing our literacy at an increasing rate. There are many reasons for that. But here is what bothers me: these are students from one of the top one hundred schools in the nation. And most of those in the two-thirds that didn't read the book are solid A and B students.

Can my numbers be an accurate reflection of the American teen reader? Ninety-nine percent of my students go on to a four-year university. The other 1 percent enters a nursing program or an automotive tech school. These are not your impoverished urban teens or your rural poor. They have money. They have money to buy books. They have parents who pay for tutors and demand good grades. They all read at or above grade level. They all speak perfect English (the non-English speakers are enrolled in another school in the district). They have higher test scores than 99.99 percent of the country. Still, only a third reads the assigned book. If this is the case, what is it like in areas with fewer advantages? Do more of them read the book? I can assure you they don't. I have visited schools in many regions and several countries, have compared teaching experiences with hundreds of teachers. There are not more readers in less-advantaged regions. Young adults are taking tests and writing essays every day on the book they've supposedly read. This means that in any given school week in America 15 million essays are written that have no meaning whatsoever

If you ask my students, you will find that many have never read a newspaper. Some can't read a standard clock with two hands on it. They need the digital model. More than a few can't read cursive.

See **BOOKWORM** page 8

OPINION

Glowing Viral: Faith, Art and the Internet

Noel E. Olson

I wonder if social connectivity and access to online information enhances apathy and feelings of helplessness instead of satisfaction? With answers immediately available, contemplation and original thought are not necessary anymore. Could this be a reason my hard-working neighbors publicly display their happiness by privately committing suicide, tearing their partners into emotional pieces, or by curing themselves alive with alcopop drinks? What is missing now? Or what has been added? Watching fingers tap on a screen vaguely reminds me of people clicking worry beads. We used to rub fetishes and count rosary beads to help receive inner answers to our most sacred and profane questions. A couple of keystrokes and Wiki just doesn't satiate in the same way.

The kind of inner answer I am talking about is not emitted via Bluetooth or Smartphone or Comcast. It is not found while surfing along gratifying hits of information that condition our brain to screen fidelity, or found in lengthy bits of bored conversational detritus. I'm talking about the kind of message that leads to spirit, which is not found while genuflecting to the dogma we obsessively subscribe to while surfing a browser or email.

Could America's disinterest or dislike of fine art also go hand in hand with those who are plugged-in and medicated or depressed? What happened to our culture? Where did the collective's understanding and appreciation of an illuminated manuscript go? Are all writings to be taken literally now? I guess metaphor has been completely lost to those who feel religious writings are not artful. Perhaps people look at paintings for investment purposes only, and don't remember that the language of imagery needs and deserves contemplative thought.

For turning inward and inspecting one's own feelings, where is the non-virtual support today? Surely a twelve-step meeting isn't the only place. I lean heavily on the works of writers and painters and musicians to satisfy my cravings. Museums and libraries feed me. But who else really looks at a van Gogh painting to understand

Evangelism of technical connectivity encourages us to stay online and creates a deep pocket for the corporate hand to pick.

isolation? Does anyone ever listen to music by Hildegard of Bingen to understand a meaning of rapture that has only to do with emotion? Or are we to be left alone with our e-fetishes, ritually ridding ourselves of spam and awaiting the message?

My regular electricity still comes in via overhead lines. For the past month, I have been watching an albino squirrel skitter along the wires. The current zeitgeist suggests I am just like this squirrel, and not just because I dodge Land Rovers while crossing the street. I run suspiciously outside the lines of connectivity by not congregating in a house of worship or chat room, and bypass most social media. I will, however, stand quietly in a museum amongst a congregation of anonymous museum-goers and never have an interaction. I do not want a second-generation interpretation of the art I am relating with either, because I like receiving the message the slow analog way. I get it by thinking and feeling outside the lines all by myself. But this is not okay anymore.

Nina Simon, director of the Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History, says in her August 5, 2012, *San Jose Mercury News* interview with Romain Fongesgrives, "A museum cannot be a place where you stand quietly and carefully walk through an exhibition anymore. We have to be interactive to engage visitors socially with our art." The article further states that "The museum's policy has been shifting toward a more audience-focused approach. The past few months saw the birth of new events such as Third Fridays, featuring art-focused participatory gatherings every third Friday of the month, or the Glow Festival, a lighting

outdoor event that drew 400 people." Simon says, "We've had such growth, it's wild. There's a real sense that people have been seeking something like this and I think we have a lot more room to grow. Just imagine what we could do if we had the money to back up the excitement."

It is a sad truth about me, but when I see words like "socially" and "seeking" and "Glow Festival" I become antisocial. This poor behavior began as a rebuttal against the adventure I once experienced as a contestant in the weeklong Miss California State Beauty Pageant. I was unable to conform to the unwritten contestant guidelines that suggested that an evangelistic approach was what would win the trophy and the money. I simply could not fake my way through as a pious ambassadress spreading a message. My secular upbringing and big boobs made me aware that my more literal and earthy approach to comportment was the only truth I was capable of sharing socially at the time. I did not want to bask in any group-mind-melding, and so finished dead last.

But I digress. The message I know as an artist has been and will always be about creating discourse that is personal and not always verbal. The language a fine artist creates is supposed to mean something and not always look nice. But this is going against the current trend of marketing. The zealous propagandizing of interconnectivity that art, culture and spirituality supposedly needs is a very old idea. It's called evangelism, too, but now it has a twist.

Evangelism of the necessity of technical connectivity encourages us to stay online all the time, and it also creates a deep pocket for the corporate hand to pick. But what is really being said in the messages we receive? Constant virtual information is replacing our connection to spirit with the underlying theme that learned helplessness is desirable.

Eventually, if we all have the same intermediary device that speaks the same language and spews the same words and we all buy the same things and wear the same clothes and sing the same songs and look

at the same pictures and educate everyone the same way, there will be no individual anything anywhere, just critical mass. And through all of this, do we really expect to connect with each other better? Will enlightenment come only after we have bought and paid for one mass language that nobody even speaks anymore?

Evangelism Museums for the Masses are trending right now. They are the architectural masterpieces in your town where corporate banners snap in the wind above neon yellow arches sporting lots of little charging docks. Their virtual flying buttresses emit free Wi-Fi, so that everyone can worship at easy-to-read installations. And our linked little electronic boxes glow like a million lit Zippos held up high at a revival Glow Festival where revelers enjoy faith and art and culture rolled up into one noxiously neat little corporate package. Hallelujah.

Noel E. Olson is an artist and writer living in San Rafael.

The Pleasure Pit

The pleasure pit is where one goes to avoid work. My students refuse to believe there is such a place. They insist Facebook and YouTube are not sources of pleasure, so my question is, if it is not thrilling in the pleasure pit why are they there so often?

In meeting with kids and their parents, I often gently ask, "Do you not complete your work because you cannot or because you will not?"

It is difficult to answer. They don't want to say. But to solve the problem, they must decide. If the answer is cannot, they have to admit a deficit of capacity. If the answer is will not, they have to admit they prefer to be in the pleasure pit. They then must concede they enjoy idly roaming the Internet more than tending to their responsibilities.

A difficult admission. Because the activities that replace homework or cleaning their rooms are inconsequential: watching YouTube or lurking on Facebook. It is demeaning to confess that commenting on photos of friends drinking beer out of belly-buttons is worth more than a life of purpose. Telling the truth—that such trivial and banal activities offer more pleasure than success—is very sad.

The Internet time that replaces essay writing, reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*, throwing a pot, or even daydreaming provides a subtle bonus: the avoidance of failure. If they do not try, they will not fail. No doubt the virtual connection also provides a chemical gratification—a tiny splash of cerebral serotonin—which simulates analog social interactions.

I know from my experiences as a teacher that many of my students who avoid responsibilities find it impossible to accept that 1) they shirk not due to a lack of ability, but rather for a lack of desire, and 2) avoidance of work provides a kind of buzz. They get off on it.

It is hard to admit the control pleasure exerts over our lives. It's a challenge to identify the moment when a little, gratifying jolt modifies behavior. It is easier to say homework is boring or the teacher doesn't like me. But I have been in meetings with students who are failing, everyone is frustrated, the parents are blaming me, and I ask that simple question which boils down to can't or won't. When the student says it: "I won't. I won't do the work. I can, but I don't want to," that is the moment when the climate changes, and there is a chance for a solution.

—DION OREILLY

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EDITOR'S NOTE

SUMMER TRAVELERS

On the coast road, where crews are fixing the bridges and perpetually patching the pavement, there are one-lane stretches where pilot cars lead one-way traffic north and south, the summer travelers idling with their motors running en route to the next little town or inn whose economy hangs on their dollars, the dinners bought, festivals attended, souvenirs picked up in the gift shops, crafty handmade artifacts, even the scenic photographs clicked from a car window—all keep the countryside humming with commerce that keeps the innkeepers in business and the locals employed. Along the rivers and inland creeks the wineries are alive, vineyards climbing the hills in rigorous rows and the tasting rooms full of sippers and designated drivers who imbibe anyway, summer is only for now and these are the pleasures of the getaway, tomorrow we may die so one must get drunk, as Baudelaire demanded, and find in the hot valleys sensations absent back where work awaits. Joy is your job this time of year in the window between then and whenever, and the days take on a transience heightened and held still by the sun, whose light is made more mild by these cool drinks and savory views and plates of local food. We are in California and even the antiques are like new with a patina of time that refreshes in its memory, its historic evidence rubbed deep by hands that touch nothing now but whose unseen traces give value to objects otherwise taken for junk. Nothing is wasted on you, even the miles that led here, to the roadside emporium, the pottery studio, the café on the plaza where a pretty waitress brings your Arnold Palmer with a smile summery in its warmth, and a sharp reminder of smiles gone by. What will we find to hold in the tired mind growing more autumnal by the hour, fog banks closing in on the cliffs and darkness seeping up from the ocean floor at dusk—only the fleeting sweetness of long afternoons that led to a bed somewhere and a leisurely embrace with your love in a rented room.

—STEPHEN KESSLER

FICTION



THE CONFESSION

by Wilfredo Q. Castaño

He went into the cathedral to get out of the rain.

It was early fall in Salamanca and somehow the idea of sitting in the huge vacuum of the cathedral walls pulled him in. It was cold and there were tourists wandering around.

Some appeared to be lost; others acted like real Catholics and they crossed themselves when passing in front of the altar. Some crossed themselves by dipping their fingers in the holy water kept in large self-standing marble dishes. They had always appeared too big to him. They looked like Greek columns with inverted umbrellas. The cathedral was cold and he could hear the rain and wind tapping and poking thousands of taps and pokes against the outside.

It was cold not warm like inside a café with a brandy and a coffee and a beautiful woman or more walking by the windows to stir up memories of a time when it mattered. But here it was cold, gray, yet beautiful, sculptured, overdecorated, Baroque, Gothic, 500 years old, cavernous, with many little chapels, and statues of all the saints. Jesus, Mary, all of them, the whole crew, looking uncomfortable, well crafted, long suffering; some of the paintings even looked, well, well painted. He sat down and noticed the piped-in choir music reverberating off the walls, making a contrast of sound with the now whacking, tapping sound of wind and rain hitting every inch of the outside of the cathedral.

It reminded him of automatic weapons fire in the distance, maybe 750 meters? It sounded like the rapid clatter

He wanted to believe in the Catholic Gods, but Vietnam, the sick suffering people, murder, rape, H-bombs, bad weather...

of an AK-47 followed by the the stern hollow chatter of an M-60. Then he stopped.

He had to learn to stop that. He had to learn to stop flinching at loud unannounced sounds, car backfires, slamming doors, children at play screaming. He had to control it. Then was then; now is now.

It had been fine lately. He almost had enough of his old innocent young self back, enough to go to a fireworks show without wanting to lay flat under the bleachers, heart thumping, flinching at the orange flashes and sulphur gun-powder smell, and the horrible fear of having no weapon.

So he stopped going to fireworks shows. When he saw them in the distance he pretended to ooohh and aahhhh with everyone else while his memory searched the sky for the sound of a chopper or a scream or the silence that somehow made more noise.

As he sat there in the ancient wooden pews about sixty-one Spanish tourists with a guide came and sat around him. They were all over 55. Just like me, he thought. The guide told them who, what, when, where, and why the cathedral was built. She told them that the poor people sat in back; royals, nobles, bishops, cardinals and popes sat in front on red-cushioned seats.

The wind and rain increased in intensity and it sounded like a freight train grating against the cathedral walls at 80 miles per hour, then, suddenly, it slowed again. For a second or two he almost felt like believing in God again. And for a few seconds he did believe, and he felt the comfort of the cold cavernous church wrap around his shoulders like a cape made of swords. Old swords and sharp, like the Crusaders used, tons of them, sewn together in a cape around his

shoulders. He shuddered and instantly went back to being a pagan. He wanted to believe in the Catholic Gods, but Vietnam, the sick suffering people, the families with nine kids waiting for help, death, murder, rape of innocence, bad weather, H-Bombs, the broken bloody mouth of a friend mouthing, "I'm alright. I'm alright," as he passed out, or died. He was passed back to an LZ and we never knew what happened to him.

God helps some help themselves better. Figure it out and move on it. Or shut up. Help yourself the best you can. The sixty-one Spanish tourists all rose at once and they all followed their guide as she was explaining more about the gold (Inca, Aztec, Maya) -coated chalices and vestments and statues. She did not mention much about the poor now. Just the glory and the beauty and the genius and the billions of pesetas used to build it. The canned organ music with choir annoyed him. He preferred the snapping, popping, crackling of rifle fire, or maybe just hot buttered popcorn. He chuckled at his own cleverness. Yeah, rifle fire or popcorn, more honest, and you can eat the popcorn.

A priest emerged from somewhere

with a tri-tipped black hat and a purple holy strap around his priest clothes. He was young. His clean white pink face made him appear truly clean, holy, innocent yet powerful somehow in all that godliness. The priest opened the door to the 500-year-old ornate wooden Neo-Gothic Baroque confessional; and he walked in. A line of working-class-looking locals had invisibly and quietly formed a line outside. He felt tempted to get in the line. But then, what would he confess? He had been so so good all these years. What would he say, "Forgive me father for I have sinned"? It has been fifty-three years since my last confession and I am not sorry for anything. Except maybe sleeping with my ex-best friend's ex-wife. "How many times, my son?" would say the priest. Six or seven, he would respond, but then it was an act of mercy, and lust, and I was so young, and they were broken up, and I was on my way back to Vietnam, and told myself it was okay because I could get killed or have my penis shot off. She continued ever so briefly flashing panty at me in her too-short miniskirt at that boring party where she played the hip, hep, pink hippie Barbie. I might never get laid again, and I could get killed in so many ways and still not die, or get killed and then *BLAM* dark nothing. No, not dark, just nothing. So I asked her over to her place, to see her stamp collection—she laughed and her tongue gently licked my upper lip, and, well, God. You know the rest. I am only sorry I lost my friendship with Henry, a best friend at the time. I regret nothing else. "Yes father, about twice a day for two or three days." Then back to RVN. You don't have to forgive me; I'm not sorry. I'm sorry he found out.

The piped-in organ music in the cathedral in Salamanca stopped. Now it was only the tap, tap, tap, of a slowing rain. He felt cold and tired and hungry. The students had left. He felt closer to God when in the beauty of nature; or when he saw his second son being born all purple and bloody.

He looked up and checked out again the man-made godly charm of the 500-year-old cathedral, and stood up. He walked to the old wooden door, opened it, and the rain stopped. At that instant the bell in the tower rang and a beam of yellow light from the rain-drenched sun hit his face and made it warm. He stepped outside and thought of Hemingway.

Wilfredo Castaño is a poet and photographer living in Soquel. This is his first writing in the RCR.

Four Poems

by Richard O. Moore

GRACIOUS SAKES ALIVE

A new and out-of-balance world arrived with rules and signs impossible to read. Astonishment was the first response, later, under the shadow of the brain's distress, a search for home ground and familiar faces ended in exile from the everyday. Eyesight, at one time commonplace as breath, has met an early, unexpected death.

So live with it. Lament the insubstantial edges of the visible, the nothingness that lack of vision brings to view, reach to whatever can be done with whatever's left to do or say—when I was four or five my Grandmother's oath—"Gracious sakes alive!"

GET USED TO IT

You'll get used to it. No, I won't. This was all I could think of while passing through a well remembered door (it opens *in* not *out*, there is no sill), a detail now wrapped in layers of gauze plus endless other unrealities. This has become the order of the day and every day now on against my will.

To have it otherwise would now be called an optical illusion. You can pass through a solid wall, it takes a single door. A negotiation with reality is to ride the in-breath into death, blind I long for that other-sighted world still.

DISTANCES

It sounds ridiculous and it is: my eyes are small fists that grasp but cannot catch the passing light. Clenched tight and aching from the effort to hold on, they cannot open to receive the tumultuous multi-colored world just out of reach, but that much is just enough to leave it out of reach forever.

There are infinite distances in what Life leaves behind. Tight-fisted nature has left me mostly blind and wondering. There is nothing moral in this event except my own behavior as a case against the world. And that world is the self-same world I've lost.

HASTEN SUNDOWN

Draw back the curtains and reveal the day. A sudden inflow of the sun repels at first, but softens lacking all detail. I undertake a morning ritual of reconciliation with a world gone forever, absent without leave. "O lost and by the wind grieved," these words stay with me as my vision fails.

I could close the curtains and restore the dark but that would only hasten sundown and the abandonment of light. Face up to it there are no choices to be made, only a wide and existential field of play tentatively offered day after fading day.

Richard O. Moore is the author of Writing the Silences (California). He lives in Mill Valley.

WRITERS & WRITING

WOMEN
IN CHARGE

Jonah Raskin

Ever since her days as a teen, Ali Liebegott has known that she wanted to be a writer and be true, too, to her own self. “I’m queer in more ways than one,” she tells me at Canessa Gallery in San Francisco’s North Beach, where writers and artists congregate, create and agitate. Liebegott, 42, might pass for 22. She’s wearing a Toronto Blue Jays cap, a white t-shirt and red sneakers. Her hair is a buzz cut. Emily Dickinson’s likeness is tattooed on her arm along with the poet’s words, “‘Hope’ is the thing with feathers.” A poster girl for queer writers and a creative writing teacher at Mills, the all-women’s school, Liebegott is published by City Lights where Elaine Katzenberger sits in the editor’s chair formerly occupied by Lawrence Ferlinghetti, 94. Under her reign, City Lights—now 60 years in business—has published more books by and about women than ever before.

More American women write and publish than ever before and more women buy and read books than men. They belong to more salons, take more writing classes and go to more book events. But the stories women writers tell aren’t always narratives of success and fame. Of course, success and fame are fickle no matter what one’s sex, gender and geographical co-ordinates. Still, many women writers say there’s “gender profiling” in the book industry or the equivalent of the corporate world’s glass ceiling.

Women feel they’re filtered out of the industry before they can get a foot in the door, especially at major houses in New York. In a recent piece in *The Nation* headlined “My So-Called ‘Post-Feminist’ Life in Arts and Letters,” author Deborah Copaken Kogan slammed the New York literary patriarchy and offered to establish a prize to create “gender parity in the arts.” There’s bravado and there’s also a genuine sense of literary injustice.

I’ve known women authors—Christina Stead, Doris Lessing and Marge Piercy—since the Golden Age of women’s liberation when Gloria Steinem and Robin Morgan created magazines like *Ms.* to provide space for marginalized voices. I’ve watched publishing doors open to women and close and open again. For decades I’ve profiled female writers identified with California: Amy Tan, Joan Didion and Anne Lamott, all of them published by major New York houses. I’ve also known dozens of self-published women writers. For the last forty years or so, I’ve lived in the Bay Area, where writers almost automatically adopt an adversarial stance toward New York, and where there’s a built-in sense of living on the margins of literary respectability. Female fiction writers—I’m talking here principally about novelists not poets—see themselves as doubly and even triply outcast. Some are too polite or too shy to voice their concerns. Complaining might offend Big Daddy and hurt their careers.

College educated, often college teachers, many the daughters of boomers and feminists, they turn to smaller, independent houses such as City Lights and Graywolf, and to online publishing and ebooks. Penguin Random House, Simon & Schuster and HarperCollins ignore them, but that doesn’t stop them from writing about the everyday, ordinary things that happen to women, usually without waving feminist flags. They aren’t asking men to lend a hand; they certainly haven’t asked me for assistance, though over the last few months I’ve interviewed two dozen women writers, editors, agents, reviewers and publishers.

“Publishing books is like throwing darts,” Katzenberger tells me. “You don’t know what’s going to hit and what’s going to miss.” Changing metaphors, she adds, “If you’re going to succeed as a writer you have to win the equivalent of the Triple Crown in horse racing.” City Lights has had major successes and some failures, too. North Beach, once the home of the Beats—the

HABITAT

Meeting Father Coyote

George Keithley



RICHARD CAMPBELL

Hiking here in eastern Nevada on a narrow strip of ground at the base of the Ruby Mountains—where the most moisture is available—you’ll find sage and a finer grass, and both are an unusually vivid green. Ravines create bays of shadow. I return to my car and drive on. Farther out the restless grass is pale and dry. It’s good country for jackrabbits—they bound out of the brush—and for coyotes, which are more discreet and shrewd, but just as furtive. Overlooking their territory, the Ruby range is a handsome formation; a dry rib of rock bearing a thin white crust of snow.

A cool breeze blows during daylight hours but the sun burns the brown grass, a more normal sight, over most of this ground. No clouds today; a clear sky over the neighboring mountains where explosions of color flash across the base.

When their leaves change color the aspen glow as if with their own light.

Over the brilliant white bark of a beech tree hundreds of yellow-gold leaves shine like hammered coins.

Above these trees mountain sheep crop the grass; antelope hold to the higher meadows and the slopes rising over them.

The Overland Pass cutting westward through this range is part of the Hastings Cutoff. In my small car I found it rough driving. Much of it is badly broken roadbed; hard-rutted, with many rocks. One

I was half-asleep when I heard something and sat up startled, shaken, as if waking from a nightmare. A breeze broke into the clearing and everywhere red leaves rustled down, flickering over the ground. This was what had alarmed me; the shower of leaves over the dry earth made the crisp sound of a grass fire.

solid jolt knocked a hubcap loose—it clattered down a ravine and out of sight.

Late in the day I followed a jeep and a green pickup toward the tents of some campers in a tight ravine; laundry was drying on a rope stretched between two aspen. I went west of the campers and turned off the stony route. I was very tired. I left the

car and lay down nearby on the cool ground, wrapped in a blanket.

I was half-asleep when I heard something and sat up startled by the noise; shaken, as if waking from a nightmare. A breeze broke into the clearing and everywhere red leaves rustled down, flickering over the ground. This was what had alarmed me; the shower of leaves over the dry earth made the crisp sound of a grass fire. It was a sound I remembered from my childhood in Illinois, before the end of World War II, when much of the land around our wooden house was still a prairie. I was shaken by the fear of a prairie fire but it was only the rustle of many falling leaves.

Do you think the mind surprises us like this to gain our attention? Or to shift it elsewhere? Often by association, by a flexible turning of events in a story or a dream, awake or asleep, it moves not step-by-step, as when we walk along a narrow footpath, but with the fluid darting motion of a fish in water. I’m glamorizing this incident. But why? It was not part of a dream interrupted. Nor a fragment of a story. Dreaming, like storytelling, is always worthwhile. It’s the soul making something happen. But the result of this brief scene that I misread was just the raw fear that shook me awake.

A poor road runs south of Robinson Summit. Then west past Little Antelope Summit, where there was once a Pony Express station. Then north toward Elko while the Ruby Mountains, which had been a wall on the west, now rise along the east.

A hairpin route, it’s far from the quickest way to Elko, but it was the route of the Donner Party and other emigrants following inadequate maps. They came up against the Ruby range not knowing they were near the northern spur of the mountains, so they struck off south along the accessible valley floor, adding an unnecessary 150 miles of travel with their weary animals and depleted supplies of food and fresh water.

The next day I followed the South Fork of the Humboldt River northward, heading for Elko. Leaving the car, I walked into a small meadow where the wind stirs the grasses without ceasing. Though there are days of absolute stillness, the wind is almost constant in this Basin and Range region, a presence like the row of aspen shimmering in the sun—quaking aspen, yes; sunlight leaping and flashing as the leaves tremble in the flow of the wind. Or like the lone coyote trotting across an arid stretch of land to the shallow stream bordered by the trees.

Though coyotes often mate for life, it’s not surprising to see a male by itself like this. Several Indian tribes call the full-grown male Father Coyote. He hunts to feed his family—creeps silently through the grass to catch a ground squirrel; the long snout browsing the ground, picking up a scent. His pointed ears alertly turned forward. If he finds a lame jackrabbit or sheep he’ll kill it and devour all that he can before he moves on. If he kills a smaller prey he’ll sink his teeth into the carcass and carry it to his family in their den. When his young are small he’ll chew the kill—squirrels or mice—and swallow it. Then he regurgitates it for them.

This one must be full-grown, a mate and father. He’s about two feet high at the shoulders. His coat is rust-colored, with swatches of dark gray that look like pockets of shadow as he moves. He hasn’t taken my scent because the air is dry and I’m downwind of him.

No longer hunting, he moves with a purposeful gait, ears erect, head straightforward, the wind rippling over him. In their den hidden by the wind-blown grasses a hungry family, the mother and her pups, wait for his return.

EARLY MORNING IN NOVEMBER

You woke to this inward silence
and song that seek each other
without words—

No sound of your neighbor’s axe
in the wet woods.

Shivering you hike across
a swale of coarse grass.

Here beside the shore
where a willow’s

leaves turn
blue-brown

before falling
a chill light

shelters in
the lean branches.

In the mist over the lake
one black-billed swan
whistles to another.

—GEORGE KEITHLEY

George Keithley is the author of Night’s Body, The Starry Messenger, The Donner Party and other books. He lives in Chico.

MUSIC

Ugly Beauty

How Arnold Schoenberg reinvented music

Marc Hofstadter

Twentieth- and twenty-first-century classical music is hardly popular with the masses, or even with elites, in our day. Those who go to major symphony concerts usually want to hear music composed before the twentieth century—Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, Bruckner—music whose beautiful melodies and consonant harmonies give them pleasure. How many people have even heard of some of the leading classical composers of the past one hundred and ten years: Anton Webern, Edgar Varèse, Alfred Schnittke, Sofia Gubaidulina, Luigi Nono, Elliott Carter, Charles Wuorinen? However, the most high-profile symphony orchestras do perform modern music to a degree, programming it along with great works of the previous centuries so as to render it more palatable. Certain modern composers, particularly from the first half of the century, are frequently played by orchestras: Stravinsky, Bartok, Shostakovich, Prokofiev. People listen to and debate the merits of *The Rite of Spring* or the Shostakovich symphonies with a lively interest, though for many such works are still unappealingly dissonant. The music establishment, though, has by now entirely accepted such composers as major ones. Every year most prime symphonies program at least one Stravinsky and one Bartok piece.

However, a portion of that establishment—an elite within an elite, so to speak—for many years touted the significance of “atonal” music, admiring Stravinsky and Bartok but mainly claiming greatness for Arnold Schoenberg and his followers—especially Anton Webern and Alban Berg, and later Pierre Boulez, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Milton Babbitt and a number of others. Schoenberg’s “method”—composition in which each of the twelve tones of the whole tone scale is given equal weight, a result being non-harmonic dissonance—was dominant in Europe and the United States from 1945 until 1975 or so. Dominant, that is, among composers and people who listened to the newest music. There were, to be sure, composers and critics who praised music that adhered to the old melodic, tonal system: the music of Samuel Barber, Aaron Copland (who was often, though not always tonal), Leonard Bernstein. But the period was called the “Age of Webern,” because most composers were following Schoenberg’s pupil with slavish devotion.

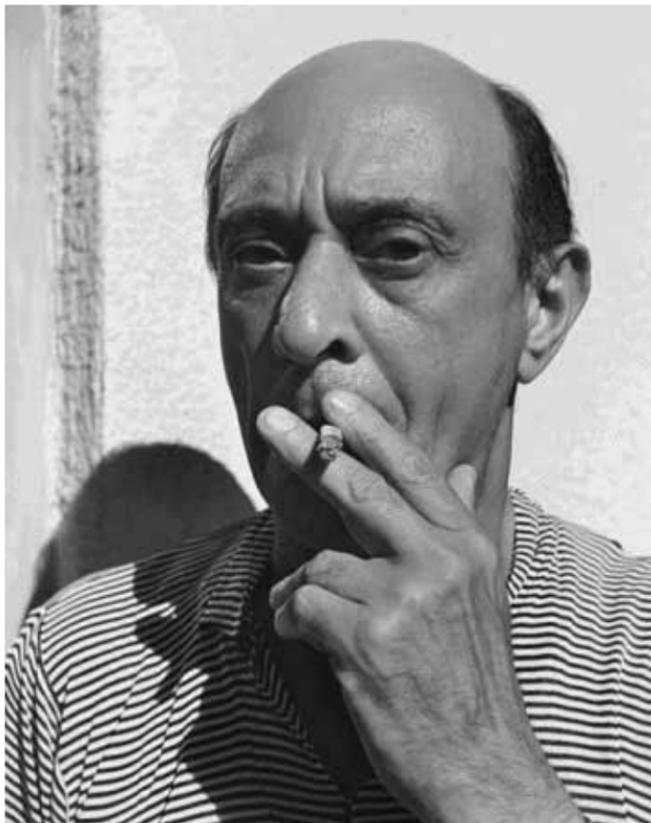
(It has to be said that, of course, there were many twentieth-century composers who not only did not adhere to the twelve-tone system nor to dissonance of any kind yet who produced great works: Fauré, Ravel, Sibelius, Nielsen, Rachmaninoff, Elgar, Delius, Vaughan-Williams. Few would denigrate the greatness of such artists.)

A backlash against Schoenberg and his followers occurred somewhere around 1975. Atonal music began to be considered “academic,” “dogmatic,” even “totalitarian,” and young composers returned to tonal methods and models in creating new music. Stravinsky, Bartok and Shostakovich were considered greater than Schoenberg, who was seen as a substantial influence but not a great composer. Such thinking continues to this day. The most popular modern American composers, notably John Adams, Philip Glass and Steve Reich, have embraced, to a large extent, tonality and harmonic melody, and mostly eschew dissonance and unpleasant sounds.

While affirming the importance of Adams, Glass and Reich, I would like to suggest that it’s time that we viewed the music of Schoenberg, Berg, Webern and their descendants again as great music, and try to integrate into a new classical music a combination of the happy consonances of present-day composers with the difficult discoveries of the atonalists. Central to such a suggestion is the idea that Arnold Schoenberg was the greatest twentieth-century composer, and therefore well worth listening to and learning from. The music on these two new boxed sets of Schoenberg recordings, part of an ongoing complete Schoenberg cycle being recorded by eminent conductor and critic Robert Craft, are an excellent means of exposing oneself to, and understanding, Schoenberg.

Arnold Schoenberg was born in Vienna in 1874. His beginnings as a composer were as a Romantic—a descendent of Wagner, Mahler and Richard Strauss. He composed some very successful Romantic works, including the beautiful string sextet *Transfigured Night* and the massive, moving oratorio *Gurre-lieder*. These works extend the chromatic writing of Wagner, in which tonality is stretched almost to its breaking point: harmonies frequently approach dissonance, yet draw back into tonality at the last moment. But in the early 1910s Schoenberg made the decision to embrace non-tonal music. For ten years or so, he wrote dissonantly, producing masterpieces such as the soprano-

and-chamber-ensemble work *Pierrot Lunaire*, the overheated First Chamber Symphony, the powerful Five Orchestral Pieces, the hysterical opera *Erwartung* and the darkly beautiful Second String Quartet. These works emphasize strangeness, distortion, melancholy and, even, grotesqueness: what has become to be known as “Expressionism” in music. But he found it difficult to *structure* such dissonance, to keep it from sounding arbitrary and chaotic. Then, in his Piano Suite, he came up with a discovery: instead of basing a work on a particular key (C major or D minor or G-sharp major), he would base it on a particular ordering of the twelve tones of the scale (A through G sharp)—what he called a “tone row.” Each musical work would be based on its own tone row. Unlike traditional works, in which there is a certain pitch that is more central than any other (e.g., the note C in a C major piece), all twelve pitches have an equal importance. In order to reinforce this equality, Schoenberg decided that no one of the twelve tones could be repeated until all the tones before it had been played (though any of these tones could be inserted vertically, as part of chords, as well as



Arnold Schoenberg

Expressionism was characterized by extremes of feeling, by grotesquerie, by great contrasts of color or language or sound, and by a perception of life as strange, mysterious and violent. Such qualities animate Schoenberg’s scores.

horizontally, as part of melodies). Also, he added structure by encouraging the playing of a tone row *backwards, upside-down, or even upside-down and backwards*. A 12-tone, or “atonal,” work typically has a rich, complex form in which a particular ordering of the pitches is developed in many different directions.

Schoenberg composed many wonderful atonal works, including the Variations for Orchestra, Violin Concerto, Piano Concerto, Third and Fourth String Quartets, the opera *Moses and Aaron*, and the String Trio. However, these pieces don’t constitute his only achievements. For Schoenberg became the most influential composer in the world. His students Berg and Webern extended Schoenberg’s innovations. The great Stravinsky, with whom Schoenberg had a chilly relationship, after Schoenberg’s death abandoned Neo-Classicism and began composing twelve-tone music. Finally, most composers in the world turned into atonalists, from Boulez in France to Stockhausen in Germany to Nono and Luciano Berio in Italy to Gyorgy Ligeti in Hungary to Babbitt in the United States. From 1940 until 1975, the twelve-tone system dominated the classical music world.

Schoenberg is hardly an easy composer to get to know—until, at least, one is used to his idiom. There are melodies

in his music but they are not tuneful like those of Bach, Mozart, Schubert, they are contorted and strained. His chords do not adhere to the niceties of tonal music, they are spiky and jarring. His music is exceedingly complex. One has to listen to a piece of his many more times than a piece by Mozart to absorb it. However, this can be seen as a strength: one can listen to a Schoenberg work more often than a Mozart or Schubert one before becoming tired with it.

One aspect of Schoenberg’s music that is sometimes overlooked is that it seeks to insert itself into the tradition of Western music, not to reject it. While dissonant, his music is usually contained within conventional structures. For example, he composed chamber symphonies, concertos, string quartets, a wind quintet, and a string sextet—forms typical of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century music. As another example, his string quartets consist of four movements (like traditional quartets), the first movement composed in “sonata form” (again following the tradition), the second movement slow (ditto), the third movement a scherzo, the fourth a rondo. In commenting on his music, Schoenberg emphasized that it was influenced more by the models of Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, Wagner and Mahler than by those of his contemporaries. He very consciously incorporated lessons he had learned from these composers into his works.

Another aspect of his work is its difficulty, yet this is partly a matter of lack of exposure to it. When I began listening to Schoenberg’s music when I was in my twenties, it seemed entirely foreign to me: an almost random collection of dissonances and infelicities that made no musical sense. Almost fifty years later, after much exposure, his music is as easy for me to listen to as Haydn or Verdi. Our culture in general hasn’t brought up its young people on atonal music, so of course it’s easier for them to assimilate a work of John Adams or Philip Glass than one by Schoenberg. Our cultural institutions haven’t helped change this situation. When they program modern music, it is usually by great composers who aren’t so difficult as Schoenberg and his lot: Stravinsky, Bartok, Messiaen, Lutoslawski—and, of course, the twentieth-century composers mentioned above who totally eschewed modernity. How will the public ever learn to love Schoenberg unless it is exposed more to his music?

Schoenberg is often thought of as a “cerebral” composer, I suppose because his melodies and chordal structures don’t have an immediate impact when heard for the first time. However, such a viewpoint is completely false. His music is full of feeling. Schoenberg was active in Vienna in the period from the eighteen-nineties to 1933, when he fled (he was Jewish) to the United States, a period dominated by Expressionism. This style, which was common in Austrian and German art (Kirchner, Franz Marc, Nolde, Kokoschka, Kandinsky, Munch), drama (We- dekind, Kaiser, Toller), and poetry (Dehmel, Trakl, Benn, Altenberg), carried over into music. It was characterized by extremes of feeling, by grotesquerie, by great contrasts of color or language or sound, and by a perception of life as strange, mysterious and violent. Such qualities animate Schoenberg’s scores. Far from being a composer without emotions, he was actually one with vivid, extreme emotions.

Schoenberg’s music—full of feeling, partaking of the tradition, complex and rich, sometimes strange or violent—can stand up favorably, I believe, with that of any other twentieth-century composer. His Second, Third and Fourth String Quartets are the equal of Bartok’s six great quartets, or of Carter’s five. His violin and piano concertos are among the great examples of those genres in the century, as worthy as those of Bartok, Stravinsky, Carter or Ligeti. His Five Pieces for Orchestra, Variations for Orchestra, and *Pierrot Lunaire* are deserving of recognition alongside Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*, *Petrushka* and *Firebird* and Bartok’s Concerto for Orchestra and Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta. Indeed, while Stravinsky (often considered the greatest composer of the century) declined from these three early works into a “Neo-Classical” moderation and restraint that while charming lacked depth and passion, Schoenberg continued to create powerful music right up to his death in 1951. Far from being merely an influence on other composers, as he is sometimes seen, he wrote many of the masterpieces of the century.

The measure of a composer, of course, lies in one’s subjective experience of his music. The best way to explore Schoenberg’s music would be to listen to the eleven discs of it thus far released by Robert Craft on the discount label Naxos. Perhaps you would agree with me that Schoenberg stands over the twentieth century like a colossus.

Marc Hofstadter, a poet and critic residing in Walnut Creek, is a regular contributor to the RCR. Healing the Split is the title of his collected essays.

THE WORKS OF ARNOLD SCHOENBERG: THE ROBERT CRAFT EDITION. Volume 1 (5 CDs), Naxos 8.505223, 2009, \$32.98 list price; and Volume 2 (6 CDs), Naxos 8.506023, 2010, \$49.99 list price. Both boxed sets are available from www.arkivmusic.com (Volume 1 at the discount price of \$29.99).

READERS' LETTERS

Taksel caught the essence of a place

I used to read this publication when living up in Boonville, always good stuff. Now, here in Santa Cruz, I picked up the Summer issue and must comment on the essay by Rebecca Taksel ("My Heart a Dancer"). In the middle of sorting things on my cluttered desk the art work caught my eye and here I sat having to read this essay RIGHT NOW!

I lived for almost a decade in Michigan, part of that time in a rural area, and we traveled all around the lakes at drivable times of the year, and she not only wrote in a most interesting style (I read zillions of short stories, essays) but captured the essence of "place" totally.

Not just topography but the earnest hard-working quality of the folks that live there, their authenticity in manner, not needing to please others, but to do the right thing, work on their land, help others in need, not much in the way of "putting on airs" no matter the wealth accrued by the land holdings. The land was there to be worked, whether soybeans or corn or dairy cows, not to impress others.

Hope you can pass this on to her, I so enjoyed this story, and I hope to see many more from her.

Thank you for sustaining such a consistently excellent literary publication.

NANCY KAEL
SANTA CRUZ

Great histories and classic roots

I really liked your article "Native Tongues, or How I Became Hispanic" (Editor's Note, Summer 2013). I certainly tip my hat to your sentiments there. When I married my

wife back in 1975, I became a member of two Hispanic families, Lopez and Rivera, that both have great histories and classic roots going back to Mexico and on into Salinas, Gilroy, Aromas and San José. At first I think they all were surprised that Suzanne had married a "hippie," but before too long I fit right in with everybody.

My father-in-law is a great historian, and at 83, the last one left on the Lopez side. We still marvel sitting around our kitchen table when he remembers stories his parents told him about the old days in Mexico. I realize how much I'm a part of both of these clans whenever we visit the old Catholic cemetery in Santa Clara and I sigh to see how many gravestones there are of people that I so much appreciated through the years.

I love your Joni Mitchell quote from "A Case of You," so true!

RUSSELL HALL
CAMPBELL

Cultural context eclipses politics

I read with great appreciation your Editor's Note on how you became Hispanic. You bring out so many good points, like how sometimes we focus on politics so much we forget the cultural context, as Ishmael Reed reminded you long ago. The photos of the Hispanic authors drew me in—they look so savvy, sage and thoughtful. Your idea of how our cultures mingle in California (after all, the Mexicans were here before we were) left a memorable aftertaste I am enjoying still. Border walls and fences against culture are ludicrous and a dreadful embarrassment to this state's sense of place.

Your infusion with and love for Spanish, Hispanic literature and at least one Mexican woman is admirable, and I can tell you feel satisfied to have had a good teacher and been rewarded for your continuous efforts to learn

the language well. I am sending the article to a friend of mine who is learning Spanish.

WENDY BERTRAND
SAN FRANCISCO

The whole truth and nothing but

I gave your Spring 2013 issue to an old pal who actually knew Jack Kerouac, whose response to "Pull Over, Jack" was "Oh gawd, now they're gonna hear from Gerald Nicosia, who seems to think he and he alone owns the truth and the whole truth about Jack." I've never met Nicosia, but from his letter in your Summer edition, that does seem to be the case.

STEVE HEILIG
SAN FRANCISCO

Real thoughtful people at the RCR Café

The Redwood Coast Review arrived, and so it was time to drop everything and read, just for the pleasure of reading interesting, well-written articles about the lives of real people, thoughtful people, people who think, reflect, pause and record what interests them. What a pleasure!

It would be great to share a cup of coffee with one of your authors, or even dessert and coffee with a glass or two of Fra Angelico, and talk as the moon sets over the water and the night birds call.

That's not going to happen, but that's okay, because the pleasure is all in the mind, anyway.

CHRISTINE WARREN
ORLANDO, FLORIDA

**A VALLEY OAK
IN EARLY SPRING**

In the blue twilight
of the open woods

this corpse of raw wrists
whose bones are sticks

this blood brother
of birds and stones

listens to the pulse
in its limbs

a quiet voice
singing above the slim

apron of pollen scum
on the pond's rim.

—GEORGE KEITHLEY

CORRECTION Due to a technical error in the print edition of our Summer issue, all words in italics on page 9 vanished. The correct version of that page can be found online at stephenkessler.com/rcr.html.

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.

BIBLIOTECA

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

PRESIDENT'S DESK

More than Just Friends

Alix Levine

Here I am, once again President of Friends of Coast Community Library (FoCCL), an all-volunteer nonprofit with a mission to maintain and enhance our library as a vibrant resource responsive to the needs of our community.

Friends of the Library groups generally help support their libraries financially with gifts and program offerings, book sales and the like. A few years ago when finances were dire in the Mendocino County Library system the Friends of the various branches even chipped in cash to help pay for services that the budget couldn't cover. Friends of the Library groups were very active in getting Measure A passed to provide a tiny sales-tax increase in the county to be used solely for our libraries, and paying for the restoration of services, hours and staff lost in years of budget cuts.

Our library could not operate as successfully as it does without volunteers supporting our small County-paid staff (one full-time librarian, one day a week a children's librarian down from Fort Bragg, and 20 hours a week of extra staff) with all the work that might loosely be categorized as "housekeeping" requiring regular upkeep to keep the library in good order. That includes such things as shelving books, doing shelf-reading, which involves checking that items are shelved in the proper place by Dewey decimal, alphabetically by author's name, DVDs by title, etc. Let's face it, people browsing don't always replace books in the right place on the shelf, so daily shelf-reading keeps items from being "lost" because they can't be found where they belong due to mis-shelving. Volunteers also take on the task of covering and mending and labeling books, cleaning DVDs and CDs, sorting through donated materials, pulling requested items for transit to other libraries, doing searches for items on the trace list, working at the circulation desk and more.

FoCCL volunteers also put on educational and entertaining programs, facilitate classes, bake cookies and whip up treats for events with refreshments, and maintain the building, which FoCCL owns and is responsible for keeping in good order.

FoCCL had a volunteer appreciation barbecue and potluck on October 6 to thank our hard-working volunteers and recognize those who are retiring from service after many years.

Volunteers move away, develop health problems, take on responsibilities which no longer allow them to volunteer, so replacements are needed. Recently, Jeff Watts, our Buildings and Grounds chair resigned after years of sterling service keeping our facility in good shape. We are seeking someone to take over the job he's been doing, and you don't even need to be an engineer like Jeff, who has created a schedule to pass on to his successor. We have a need for a new volunteer coordinator as well. We'd love to recruit some new volunteers who can give a few hours a week to help keep the library going strong.

So if you are a parent who has some free time while the kids are in school, are retired or a part-time worker with some free hours in your day that you'd like to spend helping out your local library, we invite you to come in and fill out a volunteer application and we will explore the possibilities of volunteer work you can take pleasure in doing.



Carolyn Cooke

Reckless Pleasures

Rebecca Taksel

AMOR AND PSYCHO
by Carolyn Cooke
Knopf (2013), 192 pages

Reading *Amor and Psycho* is like walking on a swaying bridge over a shifting landscape: It feels thrilling, giddy and dangerous. Carolyn Cooke, author of the 2011 novel *Daughters of the Revolution* and the prizewinning collection *The Bostons*, has no difficulty balancing every sort of literary contradiction in these eleven stories: She performs a high-wire act between pure form and narrative, between intimacy and coolness, distance and passion, sensual attraction and repulsion, comedy and pathos.

The atmosphere she creates out of all of this is hallucinatory. In "The Snake," the protagonist dreams that she goes to "a stony island where underground birds made their nests in underground trees." There, she eats, "with pleasure, in the company of worms." The waking settings are often just as dreamlike. "The Anti-Heroes" takes place in a nameless institute of unspecified good works, where the employees, without direction or pay, stay on in a state of self-imposed siege. Here, the "corridor of power" is a literal one, a red-carpeted stretch between the office of a "ghost president" who refuses to leave and the "executive toilet." This is Kafka by way of Buñuel, but in the optimistic voice of its narrator entirely American, and very funny.

In "The Boundary," a newly-separated woman is working with students from an Indian reservation to create a mural. She is ready for what Cooke calls "reckless pleasures," and she gives free rein to her feelings for one of her students: "Scarface was obnoxious," she tells us, "but he had charisma." That's all she needs to set off on a mad adventure with him.

Boundaries, indeed. Several of the stories have unusual structures that set up actual boundaries to be crossed at the peril of the protagonist, like board games with

These remarkable stories would be far less valuable if we didn't sense a genuine desire to convey the emotional wellsprings of behavior, the human suffering under the craziness.

arbitrary rules. There is the dog house in "She Bites," the house of the narrator's boyfriend and his family in "Aesthetic Discipline," the yurt in "Opal is Evidence," the New York mansion in "Francis Bacon." In the title story, the boundary explored most scarily and poignantly is the one between life and death itself, as one character deals with chemotherapy and another inflicts fatal harm on himself.

Animals are everywhere in these stories, crawling, pacing, slithering in and out of the lives of humans. In "Francis Bacon," at the mansion of porn king Bob, Rhodesian ridgebacks compete for bits of raw meat uncomfortably close to one of the artist's canvases. In "Amor and Psycho," at the memorial service for a teenage suicide, the food table includes "salads of baby lettuce with bright orange nasturtium petals and blue borage flowers out of which earwigs and small spiders crawled." Also on the table is a roasted pig, "and the locavores formed an important knot around the fire to discuss its provenance." There is the eponymous snake of freewheeling Dr. Dreda, who, unlike its owner, does not move blithely on to a new life. Most horribly and hilariously, there is the raccoon in "Swing," who, having killed the narrator's dog, brazenly invades her kitchen compost bin and, when she tries to chase him, throws an apple at her.

Most of the stories are short. Cooke can set a stage, capture an action or a state of mind with dazzling speed because of the economy and elegance of her language. She gives us a moon "still hanging above the ocean, as if someone had forgotten to put it away." In the light of that moon, owls fly through the air "like thrown bricks."

In the crumbling institute of "The Anti-heroes," "hostility and desperation became particulate in the air, like sugar in the atmosphere of a doughnut shop." In "The Snake," the therapist's adolescent patients are compared to her pet reptile: "The children Dr. Dreda saw had clouded over. Their eyes had a milky bluish cast, like Herpatia's eyes before she shed her skin. Some had damaged their surfaces—cut them, or stuffed or shrunk them."

Cancer wends its way through the collection, notably in "Amor and Psycho" as well as "Isle of Wigs" and "Opal is Evidence." In "Opal is Evidence" the sick girl's mother wonders what to blame for her daughter's tumor: "Apple juice, cell phones, aluminum cookware, flouridated water, formaldehyde carpets, lead toys, lead fish . . . Opal poisoned before she was conceived. What more evidence do we need? Opal is evidence. But who do I kill? You know what I mean? America?"

Whether she is writing about physical disease or mental and emotional disturbances, Cooke can create effects of surprise and shock within a paragraph, even a sentence. All through "Francis Bacon" we are invited to share the narrator's sense of superiority to the Bob (Guccione?) character, his house, his girlfriend, and the hapless young women whose bodies and fake stories are the reason for the magazine's existence. But after the narrator spends an alcohol-fueled evening with Laya, the current young star, she says, "Sometime later, a dry finger touched my face with the slightest threat of a fingernail, as if I'd been chosen at random to play some brutal, competitive sport."

Like most of the stories, "Francis Bacon" is funny, with a humor that, like Laya's fingernail, can wound. The most relentlessly comedic of the collection is "Among the Mezima-Wa." Here again we meet an ingenuous (or faux-ingenuous) first-person narrator, an earnest Santa Cruz woman whose son Sam brings home a fiancée from the country of the title. Except that Natalie is no more a product of tribal culture than Sam is, having been raised by prosperous parents in St. Louis. Natalie and her parents move in and subject Sam and his mother to a month-long series of Mezima-Wa wedding rituals, many embarrassing and uncomfortable, a few downright disgusting. The narrator goes along with it all, even going

LIBRARY LINES

Doris Day's [CENSORED] Secrets

Julia Larke

Join the Banned, Ban No More, Dare to Read a Banned Book, these are all slogans from Banned Books Week, a national and international campaign celebrating the freedom to read and freedom of expression. Mendocino County Library joined in the September celebration with various banned books displays and programs. At Coast Branch, we offered an interactive exhibit where banned books were covered with brown paper bags with the reasons why they were challenged or banned written on the outside. People try to guess the titles and are often quite surprised at the sometimes alarming reasons why books have been banned. The display instigated conversations about censorship and the need to remain vigilant about our First Amendment rights.

Banned Books Week is a censorship awareness campaign that was inspired by a display at the 1982 convention of the American Booksellers Association (ABA), which featured the banned works of Maya Angelou, Anne Frank and Doris Day in small cages. Angelou's book *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* has been in the top ten of the 100 Most Challenged Books of the decade since ALA began keeping lists in 1990. *The Diary of Anne Frank* was rejected by the Alabama State Textbook Committee because it was "a real downer." And, *Doris Day: Her Own Story* was removed in two high school libraries because of its "shocking" contents "in light of Miss Day's All-American image."

As a result of interest in the display, Banned Books Week was formed over thirty years ago by a coalition of librarians, authors, booksellers and publishers: the American Library Association (ALA), the American Society of Journalists and Authors, the American Booksellers Association, and the Association of American Publishers. Judith Krug (1940-2009), an advocate for First Amendment freedoms and a Director of ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF) became the main spokesperson for Banned Books Week and it is the ALA OIF that tracks challenges. See the article by Robert P. Doyle at <http://atyourlibrary.org/culture/defending-freedom-read-history-banned-books-week>.

There were 464 US challenges reported to the ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom in 2012, and many more that were not reported. The majority of challenges come from parents and schools. <http://www.ala.org/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/top10>. The 10 most challenged titles of 2012 were:

Captain Underpants (series) by Dav Pilkey. Reason: offensive language, unsuited for age group. Juvenile fiction (J)

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian by Sherman Alexie. Reason: offensive language, racism, sexually explicit, unsuited for age group. Young Adult fiction (YA)

Thirteen Reasons Why by Jay Asher. Reason: drugs/alcohol/smoking, sexually explicit, suicide, unsuited for age group. (YA)

Fifty Shades of Grey by E. L. James. Reason: offensive language, sexually explicit. Adult fiction (AF)

And Tango Makes Three by Peter Parnell and Justin Richardson. For: homosexuality, unsuited for age group. Children's easy picture book (E)

VOLUNTEER
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PLEASURES from page 7

“to some effort (williams-sonoma.com) to procure the specific seedpod, called *gamm*, grown on the northern plains of the peninsula and now threatened with extinction because of the loss of the *oruna*, a native songbird.”

That “williams-sonoma.com,” tucked in its parentheses! What more perfect example of detail, and of irony, could any creative writing teacher hope to find? And what about those seeds? They conjure a kind of ontological unease about reading the story form at all: I resist the urge to look up Mezima-Wa on Wikipedia.

These remarkable and virtuosic and funny stories, for all their evocative qualities of language, setting, and dryly observed behavior, would be far less valuable and interesting if we didn’t sense a genuine desire to convey the emotional wellsprings of that behavior, the human suffering under the craziness. Describing the compulsion of young suicide Harald’s mother Babe to gather stones each evening and bring them inside, Cooke observes, “Sometimes she felt ashamed. She carried stones into her house the way people drank or did junk. She thought about not doing it . . . But then the day darkened and she went outside . . . Just the weight of the stones in her hands, in her house, comforted her. From the void of black space where she lived (in her body), they brought her, even, to the edge of bliss.”

For such moments of beautifully rendered feeling, for the sheer gorgeousness of language, for the sharp wit and unstinting exploration of contemporary women’s lives, this is writing that reminds us of what “reckless pleasures” there are to be found in reading.

Rebecca Taksel, a contributing editor of the RCR, lives in Pittsburgh and writes both fiction and nonfiction.

PASSION from page 1

I loved this blouse with a jealous passion I had never felt for a piece of clothing. Unlike the thoughtless jerk who had abandoned it here, I could see its true value. I had to rescue it from certain death at the hands of careless actresses. So when my laundry was done I hid the blouse in my duffel and hurried home. I did not feel guilty; I felt elated.

The fabulous lace blouse and I might have lived happily ever after if I had just kept my cool. But no, I couldn’t wait to show it off. So that very night I put on the blouse with my tightest bell bottoms and wore it to a cast party. Most of the school was there. For some reason it never crossed my mind that this was incredibly stupid until the head of the costume shop backed me into a corner.

“Nice chemise,” she said smiling.

“Thanks,” I stumbled.

“It’s always been one of my favorites.”

Shit. My vision tunneled.

“A designer friend at the LA Opera made it for my birthday. He pieced it all by hand. Notice it has no side seams.”

“I noticed.” Mouth dry; palms wet.

“As you know, constructing a garment without seams is very difficult, not to mention collecting all the antique lace. This

rosette here,” her finger poked at my heart, “actually came from my grandmother’s wedding gown.”

“I’m really, really sorry.” The lace was burning a pattern into my chest. “I had no idea it was yours. I’d give it back to you right now but I don’t have anything else to wear.”

“No, you keep it. It looks better on you.” She turned and walked away.

I almost died right there. Instead I ran home and threw up. After a horrible, sleepless night I was ready to take the damn thing back. No kidding, it was wrapped up and ready to go.

Then I thought, “What the hell, she *did* say I should keep it.” So I did.

But now the spell had been shattered and the lace blouse turned against me, sending nasty vibes through the closet door. I never wore it again, but the bitter taste of that night still burned my throat. And I couldn’t liberate a single thing for over two years.

Jan Edwards lives near Point Arena. “Crime of Passion” took first place in the 2013 Gualala Arts Creative Writing Contest.

LIBRARY from page 7

The Kite Runner by Khaled Hosseini. Reason: homosexuality, offensive language, religious viewpoint, sexually explicit. (AF)

Looking for Alaska by John Green. Reason: offensive language, sexually explicit, unsuited for age group. (YA)

Scary Stories (series) by Alvin Schwartz. Reason: unsuited for age group, violence. (J)

The Glass Castle by Jeanette Walls. Reason: offensive language, sexually explicit. Biography (B)

Beloved by Toni Morrison. Reason: sexually explicit, religious viewpoint, violence. (AF)

Recommended Reading:
Banned Books: Challenging Our Freedom to Read by Robert P. Doyle. This is the most recent edition of Doyle’s excellent resource guide to banned book challenges. <http://www.ala.org/bbooks/100-most-frequently-challenged-books-1990%E2%80%931999>
<http://www.ala.org/bbooks/top-100-bannedchallenged-books-2000-2009>
<http://www.bannedbooksweek.org/>

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

Bohjalian, Chris. *The light in the ruin*
Bova, Ben. *New Earth*
Box, C. J. *The highway*
Burke, James Lee. *Light of the world*
Child, Lee. *Never go back: a Jack Reacher novel*
Doig, Ivan. *Sweet thunder*
Fossum, Karin. *Eva’s eye*
Kellerman, Faye. *The beast: a Decker/Lazarus novel*
Mankell, Henning. *A treacherous paradise*
Pattison, Eliot. *Original death: a mystery of colonial America*
Penny, Louise. *How the light gets in*
Pronzini, Bill. *Nemesis*
Reichs, Kathy. *Bones of the lost*
Rosenfelt, David. *Unleashed*
Sedley, Kate. *The Christmas wassail*
Silva, Daniel. *The English girl*
Slaughter, Karin. *Unseen*

NONFICTION

Bone, Eugenia. *Mycophilia: revelations from the weird world of mushrooms*
Buhner, Stephen Harrod. *Sacred plant medicine: the wisdom in Native*

American herbalism

Cain, Susan. *Quiet: the power of introverts in a world that can’t stop talking*
Craughwell, Thomas J. *The cat in the dryer and 222 other urban legends*
Dammann, April. *Exhibitionist: Earl Stendahl, art dealer as impresario*
Enslar, Eve. *In the body of the world: a memoir*
Fagan, Brian M. *The attacking ocean: the past, present, and future of rising sea levels*
Frank, Richard C. *Fighting cancer with knowledge & hope: a guide for patients, families and health care providers*
Fuse, Tomoko. *Fabulous origami boxes*
Hackett, Jolinda. *The everything vegan cookbook*
Hee-Chorley, Lorraine. *Chinese in Mendocino County*
Hewitt, Jema. *Steampunk emporium: creating fantastical jewelry, devices and oddments...*
Kessler, Stephen. *Scratch Pegasus*
Kurlansky, Mark. *The Basque history of the world*
Macdougall, J. D. *Why geology matters: decoding the past, anticipating the future*
Mithen, Steven J. *The singing neanderthals: the origins of music, language, mind, and body*
Quammen, David. *Spillover: animal infections and the next human pandemic*
Russo, Ron. *Field guide to plant galls of California and other Western states*
Sacks, Oliver W. *Hallucinations*
Sheff, Nic. *Tweak: (growing up on methamphetamine)*
Tate, Nicholas. *Obamacare survival guide*
Wade, Alex. *Amazing surfing stories*
Woginrich, Jenna. *Chick days: an absolute beginner’s guide to raising chickens*

ADULT GRAPHIC NOVELS

Gaiman, Neil. *The Sandman. Vols. 1-10*
Sadamoto, Yoshiyuki. *Neon genesis Evan-*

gelion

Simone, Gail. *Batgirl. Vol 1, The darkest reflection*
Takahashi, Rumiko. *Maison Ikkoku Vols. 7, 9-14*
Tobe, Keiko. *With the light. 1: raising an autistic child*
Tomine, Adrian. *Shortcomings*
Unita, Yumi. *Bunny drop. Vols. 1-9*

BIOGRAPHY

Cepeda, Raquel. *Bird of paradise: how I became Latina*
Harjo, Joy. *Crazy brave: a memoir*
Mirabella, Grace. *In and out of Vogue*
Proulx, Annie. *Bird Cloud: a memoir*
Sotomayor, Sonia. *My beloved world*

DVDs

Bend it like Beckham
Coming to America
Da Vinci’s inquest
Flight of the Concord
Frozen planet
Garrow’s law
Inspector Lewis
John Carpenter’s Escape from New York
Kings of pastry
Once upon a time in the West
Run Lola run
Salmon fishing in The Yemen
Shaun of the dead
Slings & arrows
The ride: back to the soul of surfing

YOUNG ADULT (YA) ITEMS

YA FICTION
Carriger, Gail. *Etiquette & espionage*
Dennard, Susan. *A darkness strange and lovely*
Doller, Trish. *Something like normal*
Fishera, Catherine. *The obsidian mirror*
Myo, Simon. *Itch: the explosive adventures of an element hunter*
Pitcher, Annabel. *My sister lives on the mantelpiece*

BOOKWORM from page 1

to the teacher, the student or the writer of the novel. Fifteen million pens to defiled paper. Fifteen million theses that prove nothing but the fact that the student knows the name of the book and a few of the characters. Fifteen million fake opinions on *The Odyssey*, on *To Kill a Mockingbird*, on *Huckleberry Finn*, on *The Great Gatsby*. Fifteen million prevarications justified by the teenage mindset that you just have to “survive this class.” Fifteen million repetitions of what the teacher said was important to remember. Fifteen million fresh ideas downloaded to smartphones and PCs that guarantee results from guys named Spark and Cliff.

It would be easy to blame the teacher. They are the monitors, after all, of this massive fraud. That would be the easy route. How can they know who reads or does not read the novel? There are no systems that prove reading takes place. The brain of the teenage offender can’t be dissected to see if the words entered therein. There are no tracking devices (though I suspect there will be when books are all digital). There are no foolproof reading logs. There are few parents who check every ten minutes or so to see if their children are reading or pretend reading so they can get back to their latest online post. No, blaming the teacher is not the answer. Indeed, they are the only ones requiring that the book be read. And one-third of my students do read it from cover to cover while their peers pull off yet another scholastic con job.

Perhaps we should blame the book itself. There are certainly enough books on reading lists in this country that don’t appeal to teenagers. I’ve seen a few. Some are horrid. Many aren’t destined to last as fine literature. I wouldn’t want to start my journey as a lifelong reader with what is assigned. Perhaps we could say the teacher chooses the books for the class, gives students material that just isn’t “sexy”

Rossetti, Rinsai. *The girl with borrowed wings*
Zhang, Kat. *What’s left of me: the hybrid chronicles*
YA GRAPHIC NOVELS
Aoyama, Goshō. *Case closed. Vols. 2, 17*
Komura, Ayumi. *Mixed vegetables, Vols. 2-3, 5-8*
Moore, Terry. *Runaways. Vol. 9, Rock zombies; Vol. 10, Dead wrong*
Takaya, Natsuki. *Fruits basket. Vols. 4-11*
Vaughan, Brian K. *Runaways. Vol. 2, Teenage wasteland*
Whedon, Joss. *Runaways. Vol. 8, Dead end kids*

JUVENILE ITEMS

EASY BOOKS
Bingham, Kelly L. *Z is for Moose*
Daywalt, Drew. *The day the crayons quit*
Reynolds, Aaron. *Creepy carrots!*
Talbot, Hudson. *It’s all about me-ow: a young cat’s guide to the good life*
Wardlaw, Lee. *Won-Ton: a cat tale told in haiku*
JUVENILE
Angleberger, Tom. *The surprise attack of Jabba the Puppet: an Origami Yoda book*
Barrows, Annie. *Ivy + Bean make the rules*
Pastis, Stephan. *Mistakes were made*
Peirce, Lincoln. *Big Nate: in a class by himself*
JUVENILE NONFICTION
Beery, Barbara. *Fairies cookbook*
DeCristofano, Carolyn. *A black hole is not a hole*
Murawski, Darlyne. *Face to face with caterpillars*
Ruddell, Deborah. *A whiff of pine, a hint of skunk: a forest of poems*
Tunnell, Michael O. *Candy bomber: the story of the Berlin Airlift’s “Chocolate Pilot”*

LIBRARY HOURS

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THURSDAY 12 noon - 8 pm
FRIDAY 12 noon - 6 pm
SATURDAY 12 noon - 3 pm

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PT. NUNN

enough or “engaging” enough or “age appropriate.” But teachers don’t choose the books. School boards choose them. Special interests choose them. People in education offices in state capitals choose them. Scholastic publishers holding copyrights of works in the public domain push a product that is not connected in any way with the young adult reader. Academic bureaucrats dictate what teenagers should be reading. They create lists of books young minds must read before they get to college, as if these lists in any way appealed to the teenage reader. Indeed, if a public high school teacher were to pick a book that wasn’t on an approved list, there would be repercussions. Picking an engaging book can mean your name in the local newspaper and quite possibly the end of a career. It is best to go with the list knowing that at least some of the students are reading something.

Technology and rapid changes in our culture are the easier culprits to identify. Young people sit in front of glowing screens hours and hours each day. Indeed, technology is everywhere in their culture. It is part of them. They carry smartphones everywhere. They send texts and tweets. They Facebook. They YouTube videos. They Snapchat. They play games and participate in endless varieties of social media. I have students who send up to 5000 texts a month, who share thousands of Instagrams, who play countless hours of video games per year, who watch innumerable weeks of television. They are the digital generation and they are entirely addicted to their devices. If you try to take these things away from them, they rise from their passivity and grow quickly angry and querulous. Be aware this is not easy. Taking a smartphone from an unengaged teen can at times be dangerous. Some will even become violent. If you ask my students, you will find that many have never read a newspaper. Some can’t read a standard clock with two hands on it. They need the digital model. More than a few can’t read cursive. Texting while driving is not a morally questionable activity to them, it is a reality. No wonder they don’t read for pleasure or school. They are bombarded with imagery at rates hundreds of thousands of times faster than any other generation. Reading is just too slow, just too uncool. Besides, why read when you have billions of flashy images to look at?

Just as much culpability lies with Sparknotes and Cliff’s Notes. These are, after all, the primary cheating models for one-third of my students. They are the GMOs of literature, carefully crafted essays and explanations that tell teenagers exactly what they have supposedly been reading. Without them I suspect more of my students would read, but when faced with a few distilled concepts over reading an entire novel, the temptation is easy to succumb to. These publications are the bone piles of our greatest writers broken down and examined by hack essayists and out-of-work academics. They are the perfect cheating device. They are easy to download to the smartphone. The analog form fits nicely in a lap. And the results are invariably positive. This isn’t even the equivalent of what one of my rather candid students told me when she said, “I don’t read the book, I watch the movie.” At least the movie gives them a sense of imagery and wonder and forces some kind of participation. Perhaps it even approximates what the novelist was trying to tell us. But Spark and Cliff are on a different mission. They wish to kill the fictional dream. They desire to turn the novel into bits of analysis. They pollute the fecund mind of the young reader. They debase the rhythm and flow of the novel to a syncopated pop of worn

platitudes and glib explanations. They are the writers of the anti-novel, the golems of our greatest literature. They guarantee the lazy student will pass the essay with a minimal amount of reading. More time for Facebook and online games. More time for the pixelated world of digital dreams.

There is still another factor in the demise of the bookworm that few like to address. It is us. We are the hidden actors in this new generation of nonreaders, the so-called “reasonable” adults. We too are reading less. We too are stuck to our smartphones. We too have given up on our newspapers. We too see the movie, skip the novel entirely. Like them we reduce ourselves to digital

There are no systems that prove reading takes place. There are no tracking devices (though I suspect there will be when books are all digital).

moments, to sound bites, to YouTube clips. While many of us complain bitterly about technology, we are the ones who have the ultimate control in its use. We pay the cable bills. We provide the wherewithal for the Sparks and Cliffs of this world. We buy the digital devices. How can our children be punished for behavior we manifest daily? We are the promulgators of the new world doctrine by virtue of the fact that we are their role models. If teenagers don’t see us reading, how can we expect them to read? How can we ask for books to be assigned when we assign ourselves nothing? True, we sometimes download from Amazon and Barnes & Noble. There are a few of us who can be found perusing novels in the disappearing bookstores of the country. But our numbers are limited. We too are disappearing.

Let’s look at the next shareholders in our American culture, the publishers and distributors of the novel, the sellers of the product. It is no secret that the publishing industry is reeling from successive blows to the head, some of them self-inflicted. It is a moribund business model. Indeed, we have a group of individuals that unilaterally declared the novella dead overnight. Once one of the greatest forms of American literature, it was excised from all catalogs, became another “I remember when” *objet perdu*. It just wasn’t commercial enough. This notion quickly spread so that any writer attempting to create a novella is considered a monster, a throwback to ancient times. Yep, the industry made a big mistake there. By declaring a literary form dead (much like the death of the long poem in the 1930s), they declared themselves dead. But it was not all their fault. Throw in the revenue laws passed by Congress in the 1980s that taxed publishers on inventory instead of sales, and you see where this is going. Publishers were no longer allowed to warehouse books. They were taxed on something that hadn’t even hit the market. Books were forced “out of print” even though the publishers still had copies. Many were destroyed. Others remained. Overnight this business-unfriendly vision of publishing forced buyouts, stifled competition, and rang the death knell for independent publishers everywhere. Add to this state education departments that vigorously peddle the idea that teens should take four years of basic English with a limited

national reading list. From this “education first” model we see the demise of creative writing courses, literature seminars, and reading courses in American high schools. Toss in a university-driven curriculum that emphasizes critical thinking and essay writing over reading (the grade is based on the essay, not the fact the student read and enjoyed the work) and we have a business-educational model that is anti-literature.

If we as a culture profess that we love American literature, we must admit we are lying to ourselves. How can we love something that we neglect? Sure, we can say that Harry Potter brought the joy of reading to millions of young Americans and that currently the young adult book market is showing some new life. But we also must allow that Harry Potter would have never made it in the American publishing world. It had to come from outside of our country. Who wants kids reading about magic and wizards? Certainly many of my students who used to read say that it was because of the Harry Potter series. But here is the rub, the statistic that I have been holding until last. I did a previous study of my students’ reading habits. I interviewed those students I caught in class reading for pleasure. As you know already, of the sixty-seven students in my survey I only witnessed two who read for pleasure. Here is the other result of my primary interviews that took place over the course of a year: Seven professed that they enjoyed reading but didn’t have the time because of homework and other pressures. So 10 percent of my students like to read books but don’t have time. What will happen when that dips to 9 percent? What will happen when they become adults? Will they read more or less? How will industry respond? Will they kill off another literary form? Will the printed book die? Will the digital book die too because this looks like a niche market? Will books go underground, be passed from one book lover to the next?

I have not lost faith completely, though my surveys and interviews reveal that we are certainly at a crossroads. It is easy for me to be cynical. I still hold out hope for our bookworms. I witnessed a wonderful incident recently in a bookstore in Kailua, Hawaii. The store is called BookEnds. It is located in the business center of this small town, a holdout, a special place where books still live. There aren’t many around nowadays. Entire cities in America can boast they don’t have a single bookstore. Like the bookworm, they are close to extinction. When I see a bookstore, I make an effort to find something to buy. And so I entered. BookEnds had the smell of old books mixed with new, the hint of a freshly brewed cup

of coffee. I spied the aging clerk behind the counter who was giving advice to a woman on what to read. Stacked on the floor in front of loaded shelves were used and new books. Customers wandered about the aisles, reflecting on what to purchase. After a few minutes I saw a teenage girl floating from section to section. In her hands was an assortment of fantasy, science fiction, and new literature. She was at the stage of still appreciating books for young adults and looking for something more “grownup” to read. I recognized her type right away. She was about to enter her metamorphosis, when the bookworm weaves her cocoon and becomes a butterfly. Her mother played the role of the distant adviser. She didn’t tell her daughter what to read, just handed her a few things to consider. There on the counter stood a stack of five or six books. I saw the look of supreme satisfaction of the young reader who loves books, her gentle smile as she appraised the treasure before her. For a moment I thought of saying something, of telling her how wonderful she was, of pointing out what a magnificent mother she had. Instead I watched as her mother fished out a credit card and paid. They left the store together, the daughter clutching her bag of treasures.

No, the young adult reader hasn’t disappeared. There are a few out there. I still feel hope for the next generation of readers. They are, after all, our future novelists, our future essayists, our future chroniclers, our future journalists, our future butterflies. I wish them the best, as we race as a people towards limited literacy. I hope and worry. As more bookstores fade into memory and the world becomes digital, will we make the transition well? Will our children and grandchildren know the joy of sustained reading? Will they feel the intense pleasure of sifting through books in the corner bookstore and finding a copy of something that will change their lives? Will they thrill at the discovery of a new author? Will they be transported through time and space to places they never dreamed of? Will they experience the sudden jolt of catharsis as they finish the work of a great writer? Will they have that “I see it now” moment? Will this young woman in the bookstore have children and guide them through this same exercise, this same life-changing activity? Or will this joy end with her?

E. G. Willy lives in Walnut Creek. This is his first appearance in the RCR.

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WOMEN from page 4

“boy gang” as Allen Ginsberg called it—has seen brighter literary days. Katzenberger suggests that Brooklyn might be America’s newest literary destination. “You can’t walk down a street there and not meet a writer,” she says. But much the same might be said about Berkeley, Oakland and San Francisco.

For years, Liebegott called Brooklyn home. She casts a backward glance at the borough in *Cha-Ching!* (2013), an autobiographical novel in the spirit of Kerouac’s *On the Road* that belongs to City Lights’ “Sister Spit” series created by Michelle Tea, who means to recognize underappreciated authors. The one other Sister Spit book so far is Beth Lisick’s *Yokohama Threeway* (2013), a collection of vignettes drawn from her own life. The author of a *New York Times* bestseller, *Everybody into the Pool* (2005), Lisick, 42, lives in Brooklyn most of the time, though I met her in North Beach on a summer day.

She doesn’t know anyone in Brooklyn, she says, except her husband and son, and she’s no longer a slave to her car, as she was in Berkeley. With more time to write and travel, she and Liebegott perform on both coasts, as befitting their bicoastal careers.

Like the Brooklyn literati, Bay Area authors come from everywhere. Jack Boulware, the co-founder with Jane Ganahl of Litquake—the annual writers’ festival—hails from Montana. The African-American novelist Ishmael Reed—raised in Buffalo and an Oakland resident—calls himself “a writer in exile.” He’s not alone. Inundated by exiles from Buffalo, Brooklyn, Boston and elsewhere, San Francisco sees itself as a nurturing community that provides exiles with a platform and an audience. That’s what Laura Cogan, the editor of *Zyzzva*, tells me. A Northern California native, she studied literature at New York University then came home and joined the magazine’s staff when Howard Junker ran the show. The magazine’s latest issue highlights bicoastal writers. “Going back and forth is how we live today,” Cogan tells me.

Sandra Dijkstra, the Del Mar-based agent who represents Amy Tan and Maxine Hong Kingston, sees the city from the outside. “I love the Bay Area,” she tells me on a Friday afternoon from her weekend retreat in the mountains of Southern California. “To think that it’s a literary utopia without jealousy, competition, backbiting and sabotage is unreal and fits in with the unreality of so much of California.”

For many Bay Area women writers, however, the reality isn’t jealousy and backbiting, but the fact that literary magazines publish far more male than female writers. Susan Steinberg, 46, keeps track of the gender imbalance. A professor at San Francisco State University and the author of *Spec-tacle* (2013), she says that she was shocked by the statistics. “The odds are against women writers,” she says. “That’s the reality we’re up against and that’s why San Francisco’s supportive community is so necessary for survival.” *Vida*.web.org provides the numbers. In 2011, for example, *The Atlantic* offered work by 91 females and 235 males. At *Harper’s*, 42 females and 141 males. Books by men are reviewed more often, too.

Sadly, the literary sisters often don’t know of, or remember, Alice Adams, Tillie Olsen and Gina Berriault, to mention a few nationally acclaimed Bay Area writers. They don’t remember Molly Giles, 70, unable to find a publisher for a novel and a short story collection she’s written, though she’s published several works of fiction. Since the 1980s, she’s worked with Amy Tan as an editor and as her “birthing coach” for the forthcoming novel *The Valley of Amazement*. For the past fourteen years, Giles has taught at the University of Arkansas, where there’s a lively writers’ community. Her age, she tells me, might be a barrier that prevents her from finding a publisher.

Litquake’s Jack Boulware thinks of San Francisco as a nurturing metropolis populated by budding writers—without the driving ambitions inbred in Manhattan. In fact, San Francisco provides a nest for writers from Asia, the Middle East, Central America and Eastern Europe, though national origin usually isn’t the critical factor for creativity. Micheline Marcom, 45, an experimental fiction writer, doesn’t flaunt her ethnic past. Born in Saudi Arabia to an American father and an Armenian-Lebanese mother, she lives in Berkeley, teaches at Mills, and shies away from literary dustups. The author of *A Brief History of Yes* (2013) and several unpublished books, she tells me, “I’ve had difficulty finding publishers, but why that is I’m not sure. I think it’s complicated.



Angie Chau

When I publish a book, there’s usually silence; I’d rather not complain. I go to my basement and go on writing.”

Helene Wecker, 37, is among the newer and younger members of the local literary sisterhood. Careerwise, she followed a traditional literary trajectory: graduate school, networking, an agent, and a catchy line for her manuscript. Wecker’s individual case suggests there’s no gender profiling, but she’s probably the exception that proves the rule. The author of *The Golem and the Jinni* (2013)—a HarperCollins book favorably reviewed in *The New York Times*—Wecker tells me she knew from the start that she wanted “to write a book that people would go into stores to buy.” She met her agent at a mixer on the campus of Columbia University, where she earned an MFA.

“It’s easier to get published if you’re in New York than on the West Coast,” she tells me. Originally cast as a realistic love story, *The Golem and the Jinni* turned it into a fantastical tale in which Arab and Jewish mythologies clash and connect. Wecker pitched the novel in just eleven words: “A female golem and a male jinni meet in 1899 Manhattan.” Bingo! In an email she explains, “I had better luck than my friends who said, for example, ‘My book is a coming-of-age story, about a boy growing up in the Midwest.’”

Wecker, who recently moved with her husband to the East Bay, now thinks about alternatives to New York publishers, including self-publishing, which she thinks is “more viable than it used to be.” Wecker knows she could turn to San Francisco’s McSweeney’s, founded by Dave Eggers, and to *The Believer*, the magazine he created that’s edited by Heidi Julavits, Andrew Leland and his wife, Vendela Vida.

In Berkeley, British-born Alison Mudditt directs the University of California Press, one of the largest academic presses in the world. Elaine Petrocelli at Book Passage showcases women writers almost every day of the year. Joan Jasper spearheads the SF Public Library’s lecture series. Wendy Lesser provides space for fiction and nonfiction at

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The Threepenny Review, a Berkeley-based cultural landmark since 1980, and Catherine Segurson publishes art, poetry, essays and stories in *Catamaran*, which she launched in Santa Cruz in 2012. Jane Ciabattari, longtime president of the National Book Critics Circle and one of the most prolific book reviewers in America today, makes her home in the North Bay after decades in Manhattan. Dzanc Books has just republished, as an ebook, her collection of stories, *Stealing the Fire* (2013). She’s stoked about West Coast innovations.

“Silicon Valley is a huge influence on publishing,” Ciabattari explained to me in an email. “Authors here seem much more comfortable about ebooks and algorithms and they’re more entrepreneurial than on the East Coast.”

Face-to-face connections take place in the classroom, where women—Nina Schuyler, Noelle Oxenhandler, Maxine Chernoff and others—teach creative writing. Schuyler, 50, author of *The Translator* (2013), holds down a job at the University of San Francisco where, she says, 75 percent of the students in her classes are female. Born in Tacoma, Washington, she learned the craft of writing from Catherine Brady and Toni Mirosevich at San Francisco State. With her husband and two sons, Schuyler lives in Fairfax. To get mentally fit she rides her bicycle 45 minutes a day and goes into nature. Moreover, she belongs to Word-of-Mouth-Bay Area, a supportive organization of 150 or so women writers. “In the Bay Area there’s less pressure to conform to social norms and more tolerance for experimentation,” Schuyler tells me. “You can become someone or something other than who you were where you started from.”

Do the sisters belong to one tribe, or to rival clans of mandarins, Luddites, techies, cowgirls and sexual outlaws? Yes and no. And, to paraphrase George Orwell’s paramount question in *Animal Farm*, are some sisters more equal than others? “Not all writing by men or women in San Francisco is equally good,” Jack Boulware tells me. “The point, however, is that people are excited about writing. They go to a reading. They hear an author. They say, ‘I can do that.’ And then they go home and write a novel.” Still, even the egalitarian Boulware has his “A” list of writers—Nina Serrano, Mary Gaitskill, Anne Perry, Delia Ephron (Nora’s sister) and Jane Hirshfield—along with T. C. Boyle and Alan Weisman.

According to Liebegott, who lives with her girlfriend, two cats and a dog in a tiny apartment, and who works at a grocery to help pay the rent, queer writers are marginalized. As a scholar of Emily Dickinson’s poetry, she knows that extraordinarily creative American writers have long been unpublished and unrecognized. “Today, the



Ali Liebegott

publishing industry is afraid,” she tells me. “I think that much good work never sees the light of day because of sexism and racism.” Still, with Dickinson’s words—“‘Hope’ is the thing with feathers”—tattooed on her arm, she can’t not hope.

Her “Spit Sister” Beth Lisick tried to sell *Yokohama Threeway* in New York. Editors wanted her to rewrite; she refused. “It’s important for me to do what I want to do, not what someone else has in mind for me,” she says. “I feel fortunate that I heard Ginsberg and Diane di Prima perform their work. They

gave me permission to speak out and not feel constrained by the academy.”

Sherril Jaffe, 67, a retired creative writing teacher, lives in a spacious house in San Francisco’s Richmond District with views on nearly every floor. A native of LA and the author of ten books, including *Scars Make Your Body More Interesting*, *The Unexamined Wife*, and the co-author (with her late husband, Alan Lew) of *One God Clapping*, she has written in the East, the West, at the MacDowell Writer’s Colony in New Hampshire, and almost everywhere she’s lived except Nebraska.

“Writing is a dangerous activity,” she tells me. Like Liebegott, who creates “psychic space,” Jaffe cultivates an “inner landscape” which is more nurturing, she says, than geography or the weather, especially in San Francisco where it’s “either earthquake or suicide weather much of the time.”

Originally published by Black Sparrow Press, the pioneering independent California publishing house, and by Kodansha, the prestigious Japanese house, Jaffe thinks of New York as provincial. “The idea of going to Manhattan to become a writer sounds like an old-fashioned romantic notion,” she tells me. “It’s said that if you make it in New York you can make it anywhere, but it’s also true that if you make it in Salinas or Bakersfield you can make it anywhere.”

Ashley Cardiff, 27, grew up in Sebastopol, an hour north of San Francisco. After classes at the junior college and Saint John’s, she moved to Brooklyn and found work in publishing. “Everyone told me that if I wanted to be a writer, I had to go to New York,” she tells me from her apartment not far from the setting for the hit HBO show *Girls*. Penguin has just published a collection of her personal essays, *Night Terrors: Sex, Dating, Puberty, and Other Alarming Things*, which she pitched to editors, she tells me, as an “anti-sex book.” Cardiff describes herself as a “misanthrope.” Not surprisingly, she’s not planning to barnstorm her hometown. “New York spoils you relentlessly,” she says. “When you leave you miss everything about it.”

Like Cardiff, Angie Chau, 39, grew up in the North Bay, and like Cardiff, she took classes at the junior college in Santa Rosa, though she was born in Vietnam and arrived in California at the age of three with her parents—“refugees,” not immigrants, she says. After reading Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises*, she settled in Spain and wrote Hemingwayesque stories. It wasn’t until she took June Jordan’s UC Berkeley course Poetry for the People that she realized she could write in her own voice and with her own style. “Jordan’s class was literature as social activism and it had a big impact on me,” she says. “As a part of the curriculum, I taught writing to prostitutes and drug addicts at Glide Memorial Church. Helping to empower them, I empowered myself.” Her first book, *Quiet as They Come*, a collection of short stories, follows the lives of Vietnamese refugees in San Francisco.

Like Liebegott, Lisick, Marcom, Wecker and their literary sisters, Chau belongs to a generation of women who teach, write, raise families, flex their literary muscles and trust in the force of the imagination. For all their cross-continental journeys and bicoastal personae, they’re rooted in the Bay Area. At the same time, like Amy Tan and Maxine Hong Kingston, they’re global and multicultural. To paraphrase *Zyzzva*’s Cogan, moving about the globe is what we do now.

Living and writing in Berkeley, which she has come to love, Chau recently started a novel set in Vietnam. “I thought about moving there and decided not to,” she says. “I need to be among friends with whom I can dialogue and rub up against. My fiction needs the kind of friction that only the Bay Area can provide. This place, with all its richness and diversity, is ripe now like no other place on the face of the earth.”

Jonah Raskin, an RCR contributing editor, is the author of *Rock ’n’ Roll Women: Portraits of a Generation, among other books. He lives in Santa Rosa.*