

# THE REDWOOD COAST REVIEW

Volume 16, Number 3

Summer 2014

*A Publication of Friends of Coast Community Library in Cooperation with the Independent Coast Observer*

## FICTION

### NOTHING MUCH HAPPENS THERE

Pamela Powell

#### i Antrim

A thousand other towns in Midwestern farm country look like Antrim, right down to the petunias planted in the triangle where two secondary roads meander across each other. Those other towns have similar choirs raggedly singing the same brave hymns. The weekly newspaper chronicles the same predictable events.

Even the houses are much the same. The houses are suited to the prairie: square and low. They face the tar and gravel street, which gets hot enough in August to burn children's bare feet. Each house has a front porch and one tree to the left and one to the right. The sidewalks are broken and stained with mulberry. The only difference between the houses in town and those on the farms is that the farmhouses have bigger yards and rustier cars.

The few people who drive through Antrim think that nothing much happens there. The few people who live there think pretty much the same.

#### ii Hazel

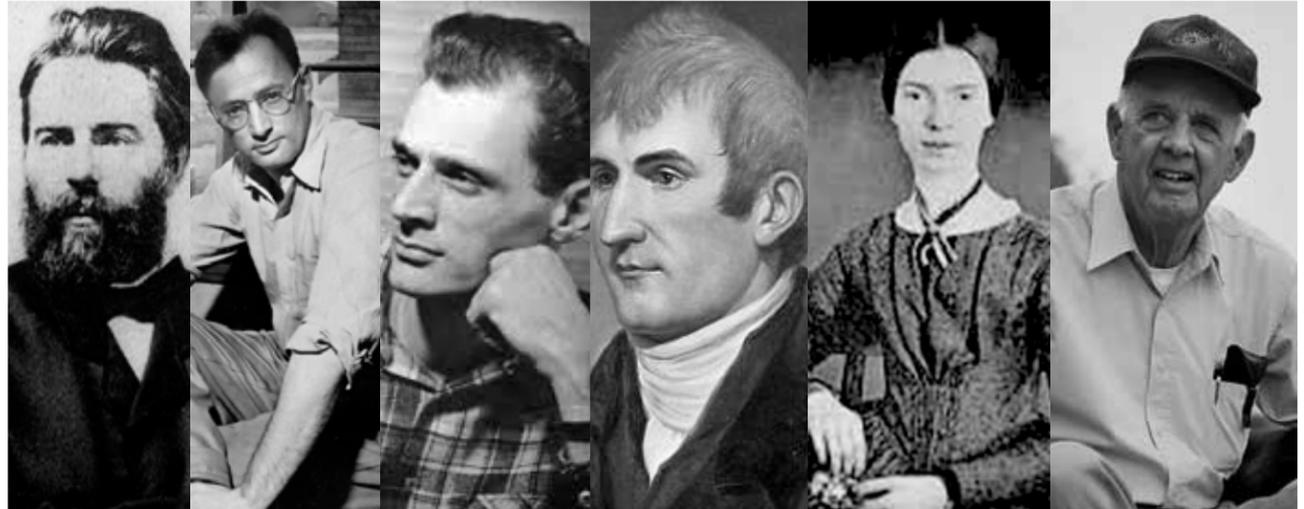
Anyone living in Antrim knew that Hazel was a Hoffman. She not only signed the name for seventy-six years, she looked the part. Tall and spare, she carried herself straight as a silo. Her cheeks were prominent and her nose was bigger than it needed to be. Usually, she looked severe, but kept a twinkle in her eye in some secret place, ready in case she needed it.

In fact, she looked like an old maid country schoolteacher, which was exactly what she was. Before the county adopted the fad of graded classes, she ruled over a series of one-room schools. She grew up on a farm with nine brothers and sisters, so knew all the tricks her students learned growing up on their own farms. The only things that made her different from the students was a knowledge of spelling and punctuation, a memory for literature, a mastery of the intricacies of geometry, and the ability to pronounce the names of faraway places.

When Hazel wasn't in school, she was usually on the farm. She kept house for her bachelor brothers, who farmed the Hoffman place, and read every word in the weekly *Advocate*. After retiring, Hazel started feeding songbirds and growing sunflowers that she admired greatly. She drove the three miles into town on Thursdays for groceries and the post office and on Sundays for church.

Sometimes, her nieces and nephews brought their little ones to sit on her knee and stare solemnly at her rather pointed chin. The little ones were well acquainted with the twinkle that so eluded her students. Whenever one of the little ones said something especially clever, her mouth would move from strictly horizontal to slightly crooked at the edges and the lines around her eyes would deepen slightly. That twinkle never lasted long, but it was there in those years.

After the bachelor brothers and all the sisters died, the nieces and nephews came



From left: Herman Melville, Nelson Algren, Arthur Miller, Meriwether Lewis, Emily Dickinson, Wendell Berry

## Scribes Gone Wild *American writers and wilderness*

Jonah Raskin

Not long ago, I left home with a suitcase crammed with paperbacks and not much else and drove to Siskiyou County about six hours from home. I had read many of the books in high school, college and as a teacher of American literature. Now, I wanted to reread them away from civilization. Two Chicago friends offered their rustic cabin in the "wilderness," as they called it, and I accepted. I'd have the place to myself and that suited me. When I arrived, however, I couldn't find it. Sorely puzzled, I stopped the car, got out, walked into the hills—and still no cabin.

After talking with a year-round resident who lived at the foot of the dirt road and who gave me sorely needed directions, I realized that my Chicago friends didn't share my idea of a cabin or the wilderness, either. The cabin turned out to be a two-story structure with modern conveniences. When neighbors asked why I was in their neck of the woods, I told them I wanted to be in the wilderness and read and write in solitude. "You mean the wilderness of the mind?" one cheeky fellow asked and promptly sold me a quart of goat's milk.

The wilderness, I explained, was the quintessential American space more than the city, country, farm or garden and perhaps the most troublesome of American spaces, too. The French don't have a word for it; the closest they come is *la forêt sauvage*, which isn't the same thing. A mirror of the American mind, a trope and a narrative, too, the wilderness has never stopped morphing even as forests have disappeared from swaths of the continent. One fictional wilderness—Puritan, transcendentalist, modern, post-apocalyptic and more—piled on top of another to form an archeology of the wild.

For centuries, Americans have liked to think of themselves as a people who go into the wilderness to convert, conquer, find God, beat the Devil. They have often neglected to see that we have also come out of the wilderness. While American writers have mapped the wild, the wild has also mapped them. An ecosystem unto itself, wilderness has usually been viewed as the antithesis of civilization. To understand it means juggling words like "savage" and "barbarian." Settling the wilderness meant exterminating "savages," a horrific enterprise that prompted both Herman Melville and Mark Twain to think of civilized folk as barbarians in trousers and silk shirts.

My newfound neighbors in Siskiyou were happy to hear my views, but they told me that I was in the wrong place if I wanted wilderness. A luxury home with a well-manicured lawn didn't qualify as wild. A herd of tame goats didn't fit the traditional wilderness paradigm, either. Conversations with the Indians, ranchers and environmentalists reminded me that wilderness is in the eyes of the beholder, that it has always been contested territory and that nothing takes hold of the American imagination more than it does. Going into woods and forests—pioneering—has meant going forward in space and backward in time. Leaving woods and forests has often meant leaving one's youth behind and accepting aging and death.

The wilderness of the imagination still thrives in American literature, as in the lyrical writings of the Kentucky farmer, fiction writer and essayist Wendell Berry, who argues in *The Unsettling of America* (1977) that we must have wilderness as a "standard of civilization." In much the same way that Germans wax mystical about ancestral forests, Berry waxes romantic about the wilderness of myth and legend. After ordeals in the wilds, Berry argues, Americans—he means men—go home to farms, families and wives. For Berry, *The Odyssey* is the great wilderness book with the sea serving as the quintessential untamed place.

My Siskiyou neighbors belonged to a small community in which everyone clamored for a piece of the wild, a part of the river and a corner of the forest. A feisty young environmentalist—the River Keeper—kept a close watch on the flow of

water in the Klamath, on the fish population and the greedy farmers who pumped the river dry to raise four crops of alfalfa a year. I grew to like her and the place I was living. Before long, I felt an emotional attachment to it. Whatever it was—a frontier, perhaps, or the remnants of a wilderness—it rubbed off on me.

I liked the cabin and the trees that put me in the frame of mind to reread the classics of American literature. I knew from an 1850 essay that Herman Melville wrote that the woods of New England enabled him to appreciate Nathaniel Hawthorne's short stories. Throughout the nineteenth-century, readers like Melville, Emerson and Thoreau felt that the literature of the United States was nurtured by the continent of North America itself and especially by its wildness. Creativity seemed to spring from the woods; images sprouted from trees.

Growing up on Long Island, I walked its length and breadth, from Brooklyn to Montauk, imprinting the landscape in my mind. The local poet, Walt Whitman, wasn't accepted by townspeople, but that only pushed me to read all of *Leaves of Grass* and to make a pilgrimage to his birthplace not far from my home.

In college, I became a student of American literature, listened to lectures and realized that professors played favorites. We read Emerson but not Thoreau; not a word was said about nature unless one took a class on the Romantic poets who were out of favor just because they were romantic and loved Nature. During my junior year, I discovered D. H. Lawrence's *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923), still among the best books on the subject.

Lawrence made the study of American literature fun and deadly serious, too, as when he complained that American tourists did "more to kill the sacredness of old European beauty and aspiration than multitudes of bombs would have done." Perhaps only an outsider could write so insightfully about American literature, though in the 1920s American critics such as William Carlos Williams and Lewis Mumford also wrote brilliantly about the fiction and the poetry of their own country.

Lawrence's book showed me that the critic had permission to say almost anything even if it was only tangentially connected to a text. "Men are free when they belong to a living organic, believe-

***Melville, Emerson and Thoreau felt that the literature of the United States was nurtured by the continent of North America itself and especially by its wildness. Creativity seemed to spring from the woods; images sprouted from trees.***

See **NOTHING** page 6

See **WILD** page 4

## EDITOR'S NOTE

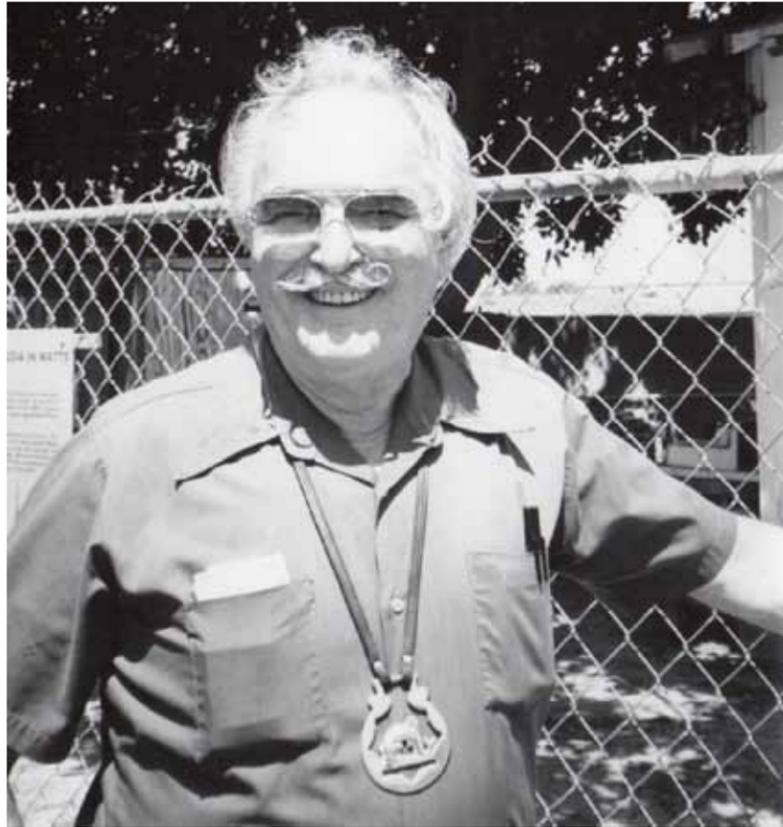
## So Long, Mr. Chips: Democracy, elitism and the arts

Stephen Kessler

One of the best things to happen to me when I was in graduate school, way back at the dark end of the 1960s, was meeting Norman Harms. I had been exiled by the literature faculty at UC Santa Cruz, due to bad behavior in seminars on critical theory, to a TAship in the core course of College Five (now Porter College), whose emphasis was the arts. I was to assist the newly hired Harms, an artist from Berkeley, in his woodscrap sculpture workshop both by participating in “the activity,” as he called it, and by assigning arts-related readings to the undergraduates enrolled. I would help the students with their reading and writing, and Norman would guide them in the art of woodscrap sculpture.

The only problem with the class, apart from Norman's utter unsuitability to an academic environment—even one as relatively freewheeling as UCSC in 1969—was that woodscrap sculpture, by design, was not a “fine” art and did not require instruction. The whole point of the activity, which Norman may not have invented (Louise Nevelson was a master of this medium) but did attempt to popularize, was to prove to people, or give them permission to prove to themselves, that they did not need to consider themselves artists in order to discover the artist within. By taking variously shaped scraps of wood that had been reclaimed from furniture factories and pattern shops in deepest industrial Los Angeles, and gluing them together with Elmer's glue, anyone could create their own piece of improvisational sculpture. Art, for the evangelical Mr. Chips (Norman's *nom de guerre*), was not those paintings on the wall but the creativity in everyone. Because everyone, as far as Chips was concerned, was an artist.

Norman had come of age in the heyday of Abstract Expressionism, had trained as a fresco painter with Hans Hoffmann, and was a very accomplished abstract painter himself. A big silvery-blond man with a well-waxed handlebar mustache, of Nordic ancestry from Wisconsin, Norman was large in gesture, loud in voice, vehement



Norman Harms, early 1970s, at the Watts Towers

**Mr. Chips's project was to turn people on to their own creative potential and encourage them to do their thing in their own way with the most elementary materials: wood and white glue.**

in his convictions, on fire with ideas and practically exploding with revolutionary enthusiasm. He told me that the Abstract Expressionists had thought of themselves as revolutionaries, radical overthrowers of the status quo, but had been turned by the art establishment into commodities. Wild geniuses like Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko had painted themselves into a commercial corner, and their only escape was self-destruction—which only increased the market value of their art.

For less gifted and visionary artists, the great masters like Leonardo and Michelangelo and Rembrandt were tyrannical overlords, hanging judges, elitist icons, overbearing role models, totalitarian taskmasters brutal enough to intimidate anyone.

Mr. Chips's project was to turn people on to their own creative potential and encourage them to do their thing in their own way with the most elementary materials: wood and white glue. He staged “glue-ins”—where anyone and everyone was invited to participate—at Ghirardelli Square in San Francisco, in public parks around the Bay Area, and in front of Bookshop Santa Cruz on what was then the Pacific Garden Mall. It was there, I believe, that some adventurous UCSC faculty recruiter discovered him and offered him a job. Chips's inability to adapt to the culture of even such a seemingly progressive ivory tower (or “City on a Hill,” as the campus was called) was only a foreshadowing of the university's gradual eradication of the experimental humanistic vision on which it had been founded. Universities are corporations, corporations run on money, and the big money is in the sciences, not the arts.

Chips lasted but a single quarter because his insurgent fervor was not confined to art. When the rolling meadow to the west of

College Five was to be carved into lots for student family housing, Norman was one of the leaders of the protests against such land-mutilating construction. He wrote inflammatory pamphlets and printed and distributed them (a great American tradition dating back to the Founders). He angered black students by distributing a screed called “The Student as Nigger,” which encouraged undergraduates to revolt against the oppressive corporate regime that was reducing them to powerless slaves.

Needless to say, his contract was not renewed.

But our one quarter together, before the gates of academe were slammed shut behind both of us on our way out, was the start of a twenty-year friendship that had a tremendous impact on me and my ideas about art. Norman was then the closest thing I had ever had to a mentor, and he was eager to impart his wisdom. His ideal work of art was the Watts Towers, Sam Rodia's sculptural-architectural creation in South LA, composed of bits and pieces of discarded, abandoned and found materials: scrap iron, glass fragments, broken tiles, wire, pottery shards, rusty tools, auto parts, junkyard crap of no useful purpose, constructed by Rodia, a tile setter by trade, into a monumental work of urban “folk” art. Chips took me there for the first time and gave me a major lecture on its importance. Rodia had demonstrated that people who make no claim to be artists, who don't turn their talent into inevitably corrupt careers, can be the greatest artists of all.

I believed it, having escaped a very Yale-centric literature program where hierarchy of accomplishment, whether in poetry, criticism or the academic pecking order, was paramount. The professors I hated most were the authoritarian know-it-alls who attempted to impose their intellectual vision on uppity hippie poets like me; I felt a stronger connection with the redwood groves than with their whiteman's curriculum. So I was ready to hear Norman's eloquent rants about the art police and the need to reclaim authority for the creative spirit of free imagination. Though I had been initiated into poetry the old-school way, by reading rhymed and metered English poems, and writing my own pale imitations of them, I had finally come around to “free verse” in the effort to expunge my inner conservative.

Forty-five years later, having survived the sixties and managed to spend my adult life doing what I like, which is writing and engaging in cultural intercourse with my community, I confess to being a bit nostalgic for the discredited notion of “elitism,” which to me implies not an artistic

priesthood or privileged class of tastemakers but an aspiration toward excellence: the effort to create, in whatever medium, not necessarily a “masterpiece” but as strong a manifestation of your talent and your vision as you can achieve, using the old masters not as slavemasters but as examples. W. H. Auden, the English-turned-American poet, as an undergraduate at Oxford, was reportedly queried by a snooty don, “So I understand you want to be a poet.” “No,” Auden replied, “I want to be a great poet.”

I guess it is greatness that I miss in the leveling of the playing field where everybody's a poet or artist of some kind, all people are creatively equal, art is reduced to therapy and mediocrity prevails. Mediocrity is mathematical—the law of average-ness demands it—but that doesn't mean that excellence should be ignored, or worse, scorned. Some of the most inspiring work may be what we do as amateurs to show ourselves we can do it—for me, domestic pleasures like cooking or gardening—but I am most inspired by things I know I could never do so well, like Vivian Maier's street photography (the work of an amateur), or Paul Cézanne's oil painting (definitely professional), or the poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke (an elitist for sure). Witnessing greatness makes me want to improve my own game, even if I can never hope to play in the same league as Emerson, Yeats or Kafka.

One of those bossy professors I had in grad school told me that he had wanted to be a writer but when he read Dostoyevsky he realized he could never be that great so he quit his own literary ambitions. What an idiot, I thought at the time; he should have taken Dosty as a role model and written novels of his own instead of promulgating the latest French metaliterary-critical-theoretical fashion.

Another legendary UCSC professor, the art historian and painter Mary Holmes (whom I met only long after I had dropped out), once told me that she taught art history instead of painting because she didn't want to have to look at students' work all day; she wanted to keep her eye on the highest standard, so that she would absorb those values into her own work. “Bad images drive out good,” she said. Mary was the warmest person imaginable, and was supportive of anyone who felt called to become an artist, but when it came to “art appreciation” she wanted to look at, and talk about, only the best—not just the latest but the best of all time.

Whose work that is determined to be, and who decides, are political questions, but also personal ones. If we can't discriminate enough to establish our own personal canon or pantheon, how will we ever accomplish anything? How will we know who we want to hang with in eternity? How will we know who to imitate in order to learn the tricks of the trade, develop our chops, sharpen our artistic wits? While I still appreciate Mr. Chips and his populist creativity crusade, as I age I crave more and more to invest my time and attention in the enjoyment and appreciation of excellence, because being around works I most admire makes me want to join them with something of mine, and this desire stimulates my imagination.

Access to such models of accomplishment is not exclusive. Everyone these days has access to pretty much everything, at least in virtual form, and that is paradoxically part of the problem. Like one of those 12-page deli menus that turns ordering lunch into an existential crisis, the proliferation of cultural artifacts (and arty fictions) at our fingertips is surely more than anyone needs or can consume. But if in the cacophony we can find what has proved enduring, we can tap into some of that staying power and use it to fuel our own creative enterprise. This has nothing to do with self-expression or self-esteem—though both may be side effects of plugging into such energy and doing something with it—and everything to do with serving your muse as truly and devotedly as you can.

## THE REDWOOD COAST REVIEW

STEPHEN KESSLER  
Editor

DANIEL BARTH  
ZARA RAAB  
JONAH RASKIN  
REBECCA TAKSEL  
Contributing Editors

LINDA BENNETT  
Production Director

THE REDWOOD COAST REVIEW is published quarterly (January, April, July and October) by Friends of Coast Community Library in cooperation with the *Independent Coast Observer*. The opinions expressed in these pages are those of the individual writers and do not necessarily reflect the views of FoCCL, the ICO or the advertisers. Contents copyright © 2014 THE REDWOOD COAST REVIEW. All rights revert to authors and artists on publication.

We welcome your submissions. Please send essays, reviews, fiction, poetry and letters to the Editor, THE REDWOOD COAST REVIEW, c/o ICO, PO Box 1200, Gualala, CA 95445. Manuscripts should be typed, double-spaced, with the author's name, address, phone, email and word count at the top of the first page. Postal mail only. A self-addressed, stamped envelope is required for our reply.

On the Web: [stephenkessler.com/rcr.html](http://stephenkessler.com/rcr.html)  
Friends of Coast Community Library is a nonprofit, tax-exempt 501(c)(3) organization. Tax-deductible donations may be sent to Coast Community Library, PO Box 808, Point Arena, CA 95468. The library is located at 225 Main Street in Point Arena. Telephone 707.882.3114.

Thank you for your support!

## CULTURE &amp; MEMORY

# Famous and Forgotten

Thomas Fuchs

“You know,” I said to Nicky, my grandson, who was born in 2003, “that guy used to be a very famous actor. He didn’t just own a food company.” I was pointing to the picture of Paul Newman on the label of a bottle of Newman’s Own Ranch Dressing. The lad nodded in response, that nod which is somehow simultaneously polite and dismissive, employed by him when Grandpa once again dispenses useless information.

I don’t brood over little Nicky’s opinions, but this particular instance caused an idea to crystalize which had been rattling around in my brain for a few years. Now that the blasting roar of the twentieth century is receding to the point where one can think about those years rather than just respond to them, I sometimes find myself wondering, of all the thousands who became famous in that time, who will be remembered as the new century absorbs our attention?

The phenomenon I’m talking about certainly occurred during the twentieth century with respect to the nineteenth. That hundred years was filled with titanic events and saw changes which have had lasting impact, but for most people, only a few famous names endure from the nineteenth other than, say, Napoleon and Abraham Lincoln.

So, who will endure from my time, my century? I call it my century because I was born in 1942. Indeed, thinking about it, I’m startled to realize that I lived through more than half the twentieth century.

Has Harry Truman, for example, already lost the status of general, instant recognition? He is the first President I remember. In my mind’s eye, I can still see my parents sitting before the radio, their excitement growing as the votes came in and it became apparent that Truman, despite predictions, was going to win a second term in 1948. In a few years, I would feel a personal connection with him, when I had to start wearing glasses. My father, who felt far worse about this than I did, consoled me by pointing out that the president, too, wore glasses.

But the memories of a generation end with that generation, and even people who had enormous impact in their time become mere figures in history. Or so it has always been. My century differs from all those preceding it in that it produced a super-abundance of images. Photography was invented in the nineteenth century but the mass reproduction of photos in newspapers and magazines didn’t become commonplace until the twentieth, soon followed by cinematography and then, television. Surely, my century produced more people who will remain famous than the centuries preceding it.

Maybe not. I’ve recently become fascinated with clips I’ve found on YouTube from *What’s My Line?*, a 1950s television game show I sometimes watched. I have no interest in the major portion of the show, in which a panel tries to

*The memories of a generation end with that generation, and even people who had enormous impact in their time become mere figures in history.*

guess the occupation of a guest—a female judo instructor, a diaper salesman, an industrial chemist whose duties include testing the effectiveness of underarm deodorants. No, what intrigues me are the Mystery Guests, people so famous that the panel must be blindfolded for their appearance.

What has begun to catch at me is how obscure almost all these celebrities have become. Many are actors, singers, comedians; some, outstanding figures from other fields. Anyone near my age will recognize just about all of them, but when, at a recent family gathering, I ran clips from the show for my children, both of whom are intelligent, well-educated and under thirty-five, I got admissions of ignorance for, among others, Gary Cooper, Edmund Hillary, Everett Dirksen, Jack Benny, Ava Gardner, Rosalind Russell, Jac-



Clockwise from top left: Jack Benny, Harry Truman, Edmund Hillary, Althea Gibson

queline Susann, Althea Gibson, Louella Parsons and Hedda Hopper.

The failure of young people to recognize figures we older folks know so well is no reflection on them. They have their own concerns, their own history to live through, their own figures to admire or despise.

In sports, I think the name and image of Babe Ruth will remain iconic among Americans for a long time to come, but to any younger person without a particular interest in the subject, how long will it be before Muhammad Ali is as obscure as Joe Louis? In other fields of human achievement—Charles Lindberg, maybe, but Richard Byrd? How about Sergeant York or Audie Murphy?

Of course there is the odious Hitler, so famous that even actors with no resemblance to him are understood to be portraying him if they slap on the mustache. His Fascist contemporaries have faded from the general consciousness, except perhaps in their own countries—Mussolini, Franco, Tojo. Outside of the former Soviet Union and China, do people recognize Lenin? Mao’s image may endure for some time. He is still promoted in China, and for some reason, perhaps having to do with that Warhol portrait, his image is sometimes used in Western ads, though what’s chic about a man who caused the deaths of millions escapes me.

Churchill’s image will endure, certainly in the Western world, but it’s sobering to consider that the only reason he is famous is because of his opponent.

Closer to home, what about American presidents as global iconic figures? JFK comes to mind, and maybe FDR (though a surprising number of people seem to have him confused with the Roosevelt on Mt. Rushmore). And that is an instructive pairing. FDR led the nation through more than a decade of particularly turbulent history, much of which he himself made, while JFK was, tragically, unable to accomplish much, and almost none of that survives. The kind of fame I’m talking about isn’t something that occurs for concrete, predictable reasons.

Ronald Reagan may fare well for some years, and it’s too soon to tell about Clinton, but most of the others, including Nixon and Johnson, seem destined for the obscurity that has already enveloped Wilson, Taft, Hoover and the rest.

I’m not talking about the most influential people of the twentieth. A great many people, particularly in science, technology, and medicine, made contributions that changed the way we live, but even Edison’s image isn’t particularly well known today. Henry Ford? Didn’t he invent the automobile or something? Alexander Fleming? Jonas Salk?

Certainly, Albert Einstein will retain his fame even though most of us, including me, don’t really understand Relativity. In fact, Einstein’s fame is now established in law. A US District ruling in a case about the use of his likeness found that Einstein “is the symbol and embodiment of genius. His persona has become thoroughly ingrained in our cultural heritage.”

Other than Hitler and Einstein, the question of just who will retain the status of instant recognition a hundred years from now is a matter for highly subjective speculation. Everyone will have his/her nominations. Gandhi? Picasso? Martin Luther King? Elvis comes to mind. I don’t know of any Court ruling confirming his fame, but the fact that no one reading this will think, “Elvis who?” suggests his identity will endure. The Beatles? If you’re anywhere near my age, you remember the tremendous excitement they generated. Who could have imagined they would begin to fade within a generation?

Others? Maybe Humphrey Bogart because of that picture of him in his white *Casablanca* dinner jacket. Possibly the Little Tramp, although only hard-core movie fans sit through Chaplin’s films, even the shorts. John Wayne, but then he was so much more than an actor. On some half-conscious, irrational level, people seem to believe that he really did win the West and World II, in both cases many times. Marilyn Monroe may have made it into the global gestalt, though it’s not clear whether as a symbol of sexiness or as a parody of it. And if fame is nothing more, finally, than a cosmic joke, the proof would be Lucy and Desi. *I Love Lucy* has been in continuous, global television syndication for over fifty years. By report, the daffy redhead and her exasperated husband are known by people just about everywhere in the world, with, I suppose, the likely exception of North Korea.

All in all, it’s really enough to give one pause and perspective. With very few exceptions, nothing and no one lasts for long. The turbulence of the twentieth century was absorbing, frequently horrifying and sometimes hilarious, but recognition of the transience of all things has its consolations, particularly as one grows old.

Maybe I’ll put a copy of this essay in an envelope and give it to little Nicky’s parents to give him when he goes off to college, with instructions not to open it until he turns fifty or maybe sixty. It will be about time by then for him to hear from Grandpa again. Of course, by then he’ll know a lot of things Grandpa didn’t, including who remains famous from that long-ago time, the twentieth century.

## ALEPPO WINTER

Barrel-bombs and indiscriminate slaughter.  
Mid-winter. Refugees fleeing across borders.  
Nothing but gnawing hunger anymore.

Horses in rank stalls families hide in  
Feed on more  
Than their children will,

And homesickness worsens horror  
Of the present to yearning for their past  
Apprehension but less terror.

I remember my mother saying, for her as a girl  
Aleppo winters were like being caught in a  
river  
Rising and night growing cold as marble

Freezing you in place,  
And every place in you was everywhere  
Ice. She liked her talk like her cooking spiced.

When I once asked why she always expected  
The worst. “I don’t expect the worst,”  
She said, “I expect the expected.”

Memory’s meat  
We eat and keep  
Repeating.

Decades later, reading in Malaparte’s *Kaputt*  
Of a winter night in farthest Finland,  
The Germans’ shelling sent a mass flight

Into the lake, the heavy guns driving them on  
The very night the lake freezes over.  
Soon all fixed in place, a thousand

Frozen faces as if sliced cleanly by an ax  
Caught in last living grimaces of terror and  
torment—  
On Lake Laduga’s vast sheet of white marble  
rested

A thousand cavalry horses’  
Heads stuck out of the crust  
Of ice.

—JACK MARSHALL

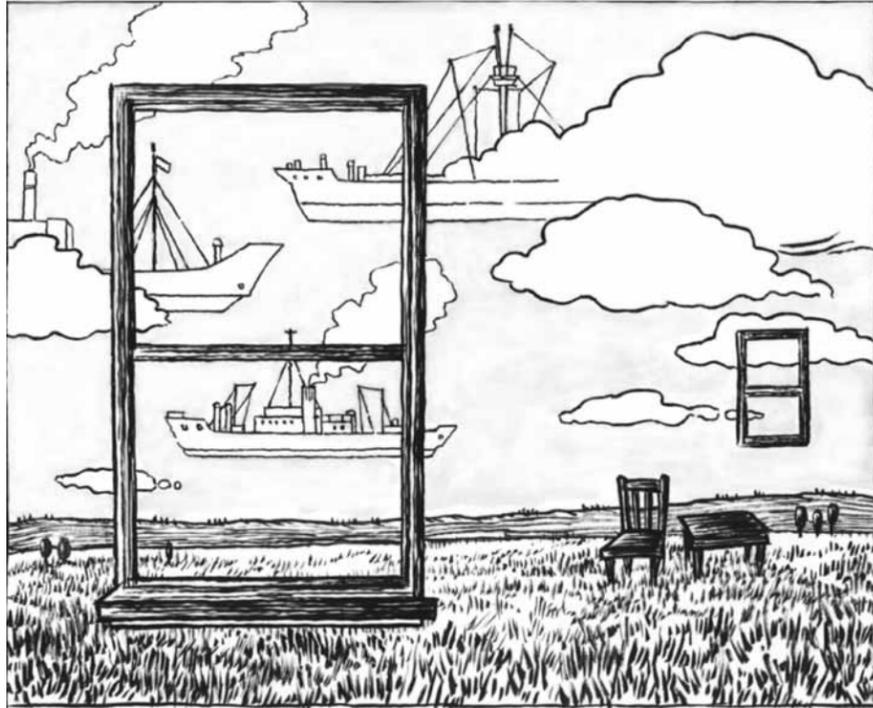
## MEMOIR

# Waiting for the Muse

Marguerite Guzmán Bouvard

**O**f primary importance is the land. It is so still that at first it seems like background. Gradually, however, it takes hold. Like low music, it insinuates itself into my subconscious, moving through me like the deep notes of the bass viol. In the distance are the Blue Ridge Mountains, but they do not hold the quality of distance. They are incandescent above rows of dark evergreens. Heavy clouds emanate from their peaks and surge across the fields towards my studio. Outside my window, a hawk rises and falls in stately undulations and the fields circle below, wrapped in their yellows and browns. The land has its lights and the supplicant winter shadows are like Giacometti figures. The earth breathes and turns before me, exhaling patience. This quiet has its own immensity, greater than the Atlantic boiling along the coast, vaster than the night sky. The land streams by carrying our lives to the sea like the Zambezi. It fills my silences, knocks against my breast like words struggling to emerge.

I arrived in my studio carrying my life like a sack of boulders. It weighs me down until I can no longer see beyond it. But now I long for chores just so I can escape this alienation from self. There are no obligations waiting for me here, just a room with



two windows, a table, a bed and a bookshelf. It's anonymous as a blank canvas. How can I fill this space? I am new to the world of artists' colonies.

The first day I panic. I try to read, but the words dance before me as something apart. I cannot take them in the way I take in the land. I read one of my favorite poets. She is such a crafted writer, so strong and assured that I begin to feel incompetent. I turn from one book to another, then pick up William Gass's *In the Heart of the Heart of the Country*. He knows how to take one in with

stealth as the land does. As he describes his house, the sparrows on the telephone lines, I feel myself beginning to open up. I drop the book, pull my chair close to the window, perch my feet on the desk and stare out the window at the clouds.

**A**fternoons I take walks down the road behind the barn. I pass small jerry-built houses with dogs barking and howling in front of them as if they were guarding palaces. They leap around me trying out their ferocity on the all-too-rare passerby. Then

## WILD from page 1

ing community," he wrote. "Not when they are escaping to some wild west." Lawrence understood before anyone else the pivotal place of the wild and the wilderness in Whitman, Cooper and Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, the Frenchman who noted that "the American" was a "New Man" born of the wilderness.

In the century after Lawrence wrote *Studies*, the study of American literature turned into an industry with hefty textbooks that contained more pages, more writers and more cultural diversity, too, but fewer insights, it seemed to me, into what made American literature distinctly *American*. By the twenty-first, Americans had largely lost touch with their own literary heritage. Hawthorne, Poe, Dickinson and Melville had become aliens for a generation raised on Facebook and Twitter.

That summer along the river and in the wilds of Northern California, I reexamined the books that seduced me when I was nineteen. More than half a century later, I talked back to Lawrence and used his adages to amplify writers he never considered: the Puritan heretic, Roger Williams; the flaneur of the prairies, Washington Irving; the sassy daughter of the bourgeoisie, Emily Dickinson; and the darkly satirical Mark Twain who raged against the machines of his day—and invented a few, too. I collected and sorted wilderness tropes: the "howling wilderness" of the Puritans; the "dreary wilderness" of Meriwether Lewis; the "peopled wilderness" of Cooper; the "moral wilderness" of Hawthorne; and the "neon wilderness" of Nelson Algren. As a metaphor, the wilderness went wild in America.

At the public library—which Thoreau called a "wilderness of books"—I found more wildernesses than I anticipated. Curiously, the word wilderness appears just once in Eugene O'Neill's 1932 romantic comedy, *Ah, Wilderness*, where's there no real wilderness, only an unspoken nostalgia for it. One character recites the famous lines from the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*:

*A Book of Verses underneath the Bough,  
A Jug of Wine, a Loaf of Bread—and  
Thou  
Beside me singing in the Wilderness.*

Leap ahead to Arthur Miller's moral melodrama *The Crucible*, set in seventeenth-century Massachusetts, where the wilderness howls and where Puritans run

## Settling the wilderness was an enterprise that prompted Melville and Twain to think of civilized folk as barbarians.

amok. In 1956, when he was married to Marilyn Monroe, Miller was investigated as a subversive, found guilty of contempt of Congress and sentenced to prison. The verdict was reversed and yet Miller was deeply hurt. "I was out of sync with the whole country," he explained. He added that he had written himself "into the wilderness."

**A**merican playwrights, novelists and poets—Melville, Dickinson, Zora Neale Hurston and Richard Wright—have habitually written themselves into the wilderness. As British short story writer and literary critic V. S. Pritchett noted, when an American resisted the "totalitarian" regime of the Puritans he "found himself alone in a wilderness." One Puritan regime followed another, as H. L. Mencken pointed out in the 1920s as a generation of writers rebelled against Puritan traditions and yet couldn't entirely shake the Puritan legacy.

From the earliest days of the United States, the American wilderness was about the "Other" and about chaos and order. It was political territory for Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Paine and Thoreau, who urged the creation of public parks. In the midst of the Civil War, an event as destructive to the environment as any in American history, President Lincoln set aside a majestic parcel of land in California that became Yosemite National Park. Later, Theodore Roosevelt, John Muir and Aldo Leopold posited the wilderness as a kind of sacred space that would, they insisted, miraculously save civilization from itself.

In fact, the 1964 Wilderness Act protected pockets of the American landscape from destruction. For Stewart Udall, then Secretary of the Interior, the United States needed wilderness to counterbalance "vanishing beauty." Parks proliferated along with armed rangers and yet the environment wasn't immune from the ills of civilization. Citizens celebrated Earth Day and watched the Earth take a terrible beating. Tankers spilled oil. Rivers burst into flames and the

quest for resources ripped apart the natural world. Between 1964 and 2014, Americans increasingly lost touch with the rugged he-man wilderness of Roosevelt and Muir. For the most part, families wanted the wild to be tame and much closer to home than Yellowstone or Yosemite. Moreover, ersatz wilds replaced genuine wilderness. If backpackers and hikers went into the desert or the mountains it was often to recharge batteries and heal psychic wounds.

At nineteen, I turned not to wilderness but to American literature as a kind of religion, and pledged allegiance to the members of the Beat Generation who traced their roots to Whitman and Melville. Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg were literary older brothers whose books dared me to cut loose. In 1952, after eating peyote, smoking marijuana and listening to Charlie Parker, Kerouac explained to his friend John Clellon Holmes to say that he was going to write a novel in the manner of Fyodor Dostoyevsky. The form of the book was as important to him as the content. It had to keep pace with the beat of his "wild heart" and it also had to have "wild form, man, wild form."

Kerouac's "wild form" can rarely be glimpsed in the pages of English literature. Only an obtuse Englishman like Matthew Arnold could say that Americans "were the English on the other side of the Atlantic" and that "we are all contributors to one great literature—English Literature." Not surprisingly, uncouth Mark Twain declared his cultural independence from Arnold and the English, though he also traveled to Oxford to receive an honorary degree. Like Twain, Americans have long refused attempts to "sivilize" them, even as they cannot resist the temptations and snares of "sniviliation"—as Herman Melville called it—whether at Oxford, in the towns along the banks of the Mississippi or the thickly settled hills of San Francisco. Like Huck Finn, we snivel at civilization and enjoy the comforts of a cabin in the woods or a raft floating down a mighty river.

*Jonah Raskin, an RCR contributing editor, will teach a workshop in creative nonfiction at the Catamaran Writing Conference, to be held in Pebble Beach, August 13-17. For more information see <http://catamaranliteraryreader.com/nonfiction-with-jonah-raskin/>*

*Alone in this room  
with my poems, the  
table, my computer,  
chair and bed, I am  
trying to exorcise  
fear. I am uncertain  
about my writing.  
Perhaps it is that the  
poetry lies in the self  
without work or fam-  
ily, age or country.*

the houses thin out and farms open their pages. A blue line of mountains rises above the fields. The road closes in once more with oaks, honey locust and elms enmeshed in shrouds of jasmine and kudzu. The wind blows and blows sending a swirl of light and shadow around me. There is no one on the road, but a pair of bluebirds flits among the branches. I am still waiting for the words to spring out of the brush the way they did a few years ago when I brought back the poems the way I brought back the leaves and twigs clinging to my shoes and coat and the wind tangling my hair.

I have hung a pastel painting of a forest on my studio wall and a delicate ink drawing of two weeping trees and a man and woman embracing. Blanche Dombek lent them to me for my stay here because I fell in love with them when she was showing me her latest work. "How do you do it?" I asked when I first saw her forest exhaling humidity and sound, the light falling among the trees like copper blades. "It's automatic drawing," she replied. Her hands build up the colors in layers until the form emerges. She doesn't stew over things the way I do, has learned to let the art take her where it will. This forest on my wall, with the earth-colored trees, its pungent lime greens, its rods of light, is presence.

So is the wind blowing heavy clouds across the mountain tops over the fields and the studio. It wrestles against my studio door as I open it to head for the kitchen. It pushes the door against my hands as I struggle back inside. It blows the clouds across the sun so that light and shade alternate in rapid succession above the fields like slides in a dissolve show. I remember the dining table in a brigantine sloop I once sailed. The table remained level with the horizon while the boat moved around it and our chairs rose and fell above the table. My studio is level while the clouds sail up and over. It seems as if I am underwater while giant freighters, aircraft carriers and cargo ships scud overhead.

My dreams come in with me this morning. Always when I am away for a period of solitude, I dream of my parents. They loom above me in fragments or we come together for half-finished scenarios. Last night my father was reading aloud and I was sitting very close to him, my shoulder at right angles with the letter he held before him. He was absorbed in his letter, reading aloud in a language I couldn't understand. Then I was in a room with my mother, amazed to be with her since in the dream, I knew she had died and I was aware of her fragility. The room was filled with other people. Then it emptied out all of a sudden, the wind that blows some flames in, others out.

Alone in this room with my poems, the table, my computer, chair and bed, I am trying to exorcise fear. I am uncertain about my writing. Perhaps it is the nakedness that troubles me: the poetry lies in the self without work or family, age or country. The fields outside my window need no justification. They journey beneath clouds and red-tailed hawks. The mountains know their height because of them. Birds plunge among the stubble. But poetry must continually reinvent itself. I begin to strip myself down shred by shred, let go of all my moorings until there is no line between inner and outer, until I begin to really see.

*Marguerite Guzmán Bouvard is a poet and author living in Wellesley, Massachusetts.*

## WRITERS &amp; WRITING

# Gatekeepers

## Secrets of the Iowa Writers Workshop

Cecile Lusby

As one who has attended writing workshops for more than eight years, I respect Iowa's role in making rules to produce a climate for creativity. The Iowa Writers Workshop process is democratic in the best American tradition. Everyone gets a copy of the work, the writer reads aloud, while the other participants listen and read along before writing a response. Finally the writer of the piece listens quietly to reader comments. I value this *give and take* aspect of Iowa's training, and so does essayist Eric Bennett.

In February 2014 I read Bennett's long piece in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, "How Iowa Flattened Literature," which examines the intellectual underpinnings of the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop, the nation's foremost writing program. He also names the CIA as providing that program's original funding. The workshop's founders had hoped their students' stories would present an alternative to the Marxist point of view during the Cold War. To pursue this goal, Iowa made a decision to back away from both the edgy and the eggheaded. To describe this standard, Bennett asserts, "The Iowa Writers' Workshop's aversion to novels and stories of full throttle experience, erudition, and cognition—the unspoken proscription against attempting to write them—was the narrowness I sensed and hated. The question I wanted to answer, as I faced down my dissertation, was whether this aversion was an accidental feature of Iowa during my time or if it reflected something more."

Bennett wonders if he just imagines Iowa's aversion, or if it is the heart of the matter.

I survey my bookshelves to see if my books offer "erudition and cognition," and see that they do. I still have Doris Lessing's *Four-Gated City* and *The Golden Notebook*, E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* and *The Book of Daniel*, and John Irving's *A Prayer For Owen Meany*. All are concept or character-driven works. The idea behind *The Four Gated City* was that the violence of war has diminished us. *The Golden Notebook* showed the inadequacy of the novel form to represent modern life. Doctorow in both books describes the US as an empire builder, limiting freedom along the way. John Irving's work shows two remarkable characters, Johnny and Owen, from childhood to the day they face the draft in the Vietnam War. Each makes his own decision (one goes to war and the other escapes to Canada) but the reader sees both sides of the issue. I believe a concept- or character-driven book helps us understand life in a moral universe and see characters evolve. Iowa disagrees.

With the exception of John Irving, the authors in my library did not study at Iowa. Marilyn Robinson, whose books I've read only recently, taught at Iowa and is one author Bennett mentions as a good writer who works within the Workshop's guidelines. Surely Robinson in her novel *Gilead* is a writer of spiritual and "eggheaded" matters.

What Eric Bennett objects to about the Iowa Writers Workshop is:

1. The lack of transparency about Iowa receiving CIA funding.

2. The power Iowa has over writers to limit topics and treatments and worldview.

The CIA spent its money to buy that influence.

Iowa's leaders, first Paul Engle and then Frank Conroy, had a way of representing what aspects of literature were most important in every work and in what proportions.

Picture a pyramid. At the broad base, we show the syntax and grammar of language as the bulk of the text. Next up in importance we have concrete details for the reader's comprehension and delight. Near the top we show character, indicating a minor portion of the text, and last we show

metaphor, which Conroy advises to use seldom, if at all. Bennett doubts whether we should give that much emphasis to grammar and syntax. Those of us who like to read novels about character wish we could upset Iowa's ideal pyramid, or stand it on its head, so to speak, so that character or metaphor is the major driving feature, the main substance, not the sugar sprinkles on the top.

Now picture an inverted pyramid. Here we have the renegade "character-driven" model, with character the broad base at the top, and syntax and grammar at the bottom, showing its lesser importance. Bennett reports that Iowa directs its students to write with and inhabit a small voice and not to aspire to a novel of ideas or erudition or "full throttle experience." Neither Engle nor Conroy believed in abstractions, thinking maybe if you started out with one or two abstract ideas, who knows what readers will be clamoring for next?

From all parts of the country MFA programs state similar beliefs. Bennett cites Wallace Stegner, who directed the influential Stanford creative writing program, as one who thought that a true writer was "an incorrigible lover of concrete things . . . an artist not ordinarily or ideally a general-

**Among the topics covered is the surprising story of how the CIA came to set up and finance the Iowa Writers Workshop; the agency wanted Iowa to influence American culture to prevent the spread of communism.**

izer, nor a dealer in concepts." I read *Angle of Repose* and found Stegner's saga of a pioneer family boggy with details of moving west and taming the wilderness. I much preferred John Steinbeck's *East of Eden*, also a family saga, but one that questions human nature and our capacity for evil. The character Lee, a Chinese immigrant outsider, works as a caregiver to orphaned twins and probes the depths of scripture in his time off, questioning a word in Genesis: *Timschel* (thou mayest), a term outlining the human capacity to make moral choices. Surely this is an abstract concept, and I prefer Steinbeck's approach in *East of Eden* to Stegner's in the handling of serious ideas.

Among the topics covered in Eric Bennett's essay is the surprising story of how the CIA came to set up and finance the Iowa Writers Workshop, noting that the agency wanted Iowa to influence American culture to prevent the spread of communism. Bennett discusses the various schools of American literature since World War II, tracking trends in the last half of the twentieth century as an outgrowth of Iowa's role as gatekeeper. The Post-WWII categories the workshop recognizes as worthwhile are:

1. Modernists like Alice Munro and Denis Johnson.
2. Warmer, chattier (sic) writers like John Irving and Marilyn Robinson.
3. Magical realists like Paul Harding in *Tinkers*.

The category *not* accepted by Iowa is:

4. Postmodernist work or everything else outside the three categories above. Here one might find feminist or multicultural books. Bennett places his writing in this fourth category, claiming to have added his controversial material on the CIA as a ploy to get attention to work that Iowa would otherwise have ignored.

The essayist describes both his own frustrations with this new path to publication and the tale of the CIA's role in establishing the funding and the philosophy for Iowa. In 1967 Paul Engle took seed money, about \$10,000, from a CIA front called Farfield Foundation to start a program to attract would-be writers at home and abroad. More money flowed from the Asia Foundation, another front, as well as the State Department. Engle got involved in the O. Henry Prize contest and soon became its judge, further shaping literary standards.

Bennett will publish another series of essays this year titled *NYC vs. MFA* to show the shifting influence and evolution of styles, from the New York City-based publishing world of the last century to the new push and pull of the numerous MFA programs designed to relieve students of their money and deliver them to a changed literary landscape of content providers and unpaid internships. So we have a transformation from urban intellectuals writing gritty survival stories to the young millennial generation describing their reduced circumstances.

Bennett's discussion of post-World War II novels brings back memories of my parents, long divorced by 1950. My mother had been my guide in my early years, a heroine with a book in her hand whenever she had a



Frank Conroy

moment to herself. When I was twelve I began reading all her books, starting with *The City and the Pillar* and *The Well of Loneliness*, decoding but not understanding the homoerotic references. I read *Archie and Mehitabel* along with *Studs Lonigan* and felt those texts were clearer. I did not stick with L. Ron Hubbard's *Dianetics*.

By age eighteen, I began to visit my father in Berkeley, a union man and working-class intellectual who spent his evenings reading, drinking, and hacking away at his typewriter. He had quit high school in his freshman year to be a bike messenger for Dupont and earn money to help out the family. At eighteen he found a job at Robelen Music as a sales clerk and music teacher, having learned to play trombone and trumpet at St. Ann's in Wilmington. You may wonder what his story has to do with *NYC vs. MFA*.

My father discovered art, music, and literature on his own, without college. His reading patterns reflected an openness to new ideas. When I think of my father's bookshelves in Berkeley in 1960, I remember a stack of *New Yorkers*, John Hersey, Konrad Lorenz, and D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in the Grove Press *unexpurgated* edition. His literary idols were Norman Mailer, James Baldwin, William Styron and Gore Vidal, then appearing on late night TV to promote themselves. The common topic here was American experience, life and politics without reference to an alma mater. The nation's center of intellectual life was New York City. My father, a Chevron electrician, wrote every night after work and sent his manuscripts to NYC publishing houses. He showed me his rejection slips, just as his friend Philip K. Dick had shown him his in the 1950s. When Phil, a UC dropout, found success, my father felt a ray of hope.

Vince Lusby never expressed regret for missing out on college; he maintained his own rigorous reading schedule. So when Bennett writes about Iowa or MFA programs posing barriers to publishing or limiting the worldview of writers, I hold up my unpublished father's memory as a wound. I see him as an alien outside the gates of the city.

My father never had the benefit of a writer's workshop. His generation believed in the magic of the first draft. You typed away, and *voila!*: it was perfect the first time or you had no gift. I am grateful to have found good writing teachers in Sonoma County: Robin Beeman, Mimi Albert and Susan Bono. I have made a little money and been published occasionally in North Bay papers, but mostly I enjoy the back and forth of reading, reflecting, writing, getting feedback and reading the critiques. I relish the process and feel I am somehow extending a family tradition: my mother's lively reading habit, my father's writing.

It was curious to read stories about how Paul Engle and his successor, Frank Conroy, directed writing styles that have come and gone. To get published in New York today, writers go to MFA programs, getting a master's degree to learn and be prepped, and so Bennett presents his notion of the distorted influence of MFA programs on current American writing. There are online opportunities, but they are often unpaid. Ironically, Eric Bennett is now doing rather well. His manuscript has just been published by the University of Iowa Press.

Cecile Lusby lives in Santa Rosa.

**VOLUNTEER at  
Coast Community Library  
707.882.3114**



Paul Engle

**NOTHING** from page 1

to the farm less often, for shorter visits and without the little ones (who had grown into rather pimply and silent creatures). Most of her students led solitary lives on scattered farms or had abandoned the county for better jobs. The farm became quieter and Hazel seemed to somehow shrink.

**iii**  
**Abel**

Abel Gruber lived on the corner now, in his square house. After his sons moved away to Chicago and St. Louis and his wife died, Abel surprised no one when he sold the old farm and moved to town. He learned to tend a small garden and kept chickens. To his secret embarrassment, Abel talked to the chickens and thought they were better company than most people he knew. In the morning, he listened to the farm report and to Paul Harvey. Of an evening, he listened to the ballgame and shouted at the umpires. Sometimes, he worked crossword puzzles long into the night. Abel went to Chicago for Christmas and St. Louis for Easter. He looked forward to the trips, but found his daughters-in-law oddly distant and the grandchildren baffling.

Abel walked to the post office twice a week to collect circulars and seed catalogs. Once a month, he went to the bank. He always shaved on post office and bank days, and on Sunday before church. His beard didn't grow much anymore, but the nicks on Abel's face were a sure sign of Monday, Thursday, Sunday, and the first of the month. Other than those days, there just weren't that many occasions that called for a shave.

**iv**  
**Hazel and Abel**

Antrim was the sort of town where friendships lasted for generations and people



said "How do?" at the post office and after church. Naturally, these two knew each other. Even in a town like Antrim, two old neighbors could pass the time of day at the post office without raising anyone's eyebrows. As time went on, their simple "How do?" became surprisingly important to each of them. Later still, they compared songbirds and chickens, sunflowers and vegetables, and unsatisfactory grandnieces, grandnephews, and grandchildren. Abel started coming to Hazel's for Sunday dinner, and they were not unhappy in each other's quiet company.

One Saturday, Abel shaved and walked the few blocks into town. That same day, Hazel picked a bouquet of sunflowers, then drove herself to town. As agreed, they met at the parsonage, married, and went home to Abel's house. In the morning, the preacher caused quite a stir when he announced their marriage to the suddenly attentive congregation.

Antrim suddenly had a new and fascinating subject for conversation. The men wondered how Abel fared with his old maid bride. The women wondered if Hazel had

***Antrim was the sort of town where people said "How do?" Naturally, these two knew each other. Even in a town like Antrim, two old neighbors could pass the time of day at the post office without raising anyone's eyebrows.***

gone mad from the farm's solitude. But the jokes and winks eventually subsided. Abel began to shave every day, and Hazel's twinkle became not quite so rare.

And seasons changed, and time passed.

**v**  
**Hazel**

The pain came fiercely. Hazel gasped before dropping onto the couch in the front room of Abel's house. When he came in from the yard, Abel simply sat next to her body until almost dark.

The *Advocate* printed a nice obituary for Hazel, complete with high praise and grammatical errors. The guest book at the funeral home was filled with the names of her former students. The nieces and nephews were there, wondering what would happen to the farm. Abel was nowhere to be seen.

**vi**  
**Abel**

Abel moved from his house on the corner to Hazel's farm, living his last years with her songbirds and sunflowers. When he came to town, he rarely spoke. He stopped shaving on Monday, Thursday, and Sunday. Then he stopped shaving altogether. When he died a few years later, his snowy beard reached the third button on his faded shirt.

The *Advocate* printed a nice obituary for Abel, complete with the names of his two wives and the (sometimes misspelled) names of his sons and grandchildren. Everybody wondered what would happen to the farm.

**vii**  
**Antrim**

The Hoffman land went to the town for the new graded school.

Nothing much happens there in Antrim.

---

*Pam Powell is a retired safety educator and technical writer and editor living in Anchor Bay. This story took first place in the adult division of the 2014 Gualala Arts Creative Writing Contest.*

## PRESIDENT'S DESK

## 10 Years On

Alix Levine

In November, the Friends of Coast Community Library (FoCCL) will be celebrating the tenth anniversary of the move to our building in the heart of Point Arena after many years of fundraising to buy the historic old Gillmore's general store, and many hours of volunteer labor and materials donations to remodel the space into a welcoming and light-filled library and community gathering place.

Much has been done since then to improve the setting and services of Coast Community Library.

In the Children's Room, FoCCL has built additional shelving, obtained a grant from the Community Foundation of Mendocino County for an AWE Learning Station computer for youngsters and added books, DVDs and audiobooks for children regularly. Dedicated volunteer and retired children's librarian Marilyn Alderson continues her wildly popular Storytime for preschoolers with adults. Songs, puppets, finger play and other activities enliven the participants' enjoyment. Just recently added is a ceiling fan to cool the room when summer sun blazes through the big front window. Just this year FoCCL won another grant from the Community Foundation to help with the purchase of an Afterschool Edge computer for older children, which will be going into the main library as part of a homework/study area with some craft space for projects and creative activities.

In the main library the Friends have added shelving for display of new books, and have funded the purchase of many new books, DVDs and CDs, as well as purchasing and building of suitable shelving and display for their easy access for the public.

A teen corner has been set up, filled with the latest Young Adult materials, including graphic novels, as well as classic favorites. A selection of magazines of teen interests has been provided, and on the other side of the magazine shelves FoCCL has provided a selection of magazines for the general public. The seating area by the magazines has recently been enlivened by the purchase of snazzy new leather armchairs to replace the original furniture, which had become worn and grungy. A new coffee table came from a volunteer.

The Community Room has been upgraded with a big whiteboard, a screen, audiovisual equipment, and further improvements are in the works. FoCCL has sponsored continuing education programs, using DVD instruction by respected teachers and facilitated by local volunteers in subjects both scientific and artistic. Sundays at the Library has become a favorite institution for presentation of programs of a wide variety of interest to our community. This year, as usual, the Summer Reading Program, sponsored by the Friends in conjunction with the County Library system, will offer fun, learning, crafts, and snacks for children and newly added Summer Reading activities for grownups.

FoCCL has added a non-voting youth representative to our Board, Garrett Gunheim, whose input resulted in the offering of an SAT prep course.

Book sales have become more accessible and orderly with the purchase some years ago of rolling bookshelves to stock and display our wares for the regular weekend book sales every other month. A large collection of "special price" books has acquired shelving near the public access computers. This enables the sale of donated books of more than average value as part of FoCCL's fundraising efforts.

At this time FoCCL is working on developing of a literacy program to enable adults to learn to read or to improve their reading abilities.

And, of course, FoCCL volunteers continue to work at the circulation desk, shelving, mending and covering books, cleaning CDs and DVDs, maintaining the building, setting up programs, bringing refreshments to events, and all the myriad tasks that keep Coast Community Library in the heart of our community.

## BIBLIOTECA

News and Reviews from Friends of Coast Community Library



Tai Moses

## In Their Backyard

Rebecca Taksel

ZOOBURBIA: MEDITATIONS ON THE WILD

ANIMALS AMONG US

by Tai Moses

illustrated by Dave Buchen

Parallax Press (2014), 272 pages

Observation, properly done, with our full attention, is a meditation. Observation rendered clearly into writing is in turn a meditation for readers. Tai Moses's lovely book *Zooburbia* is aptly subtitled *Meditations on the Wild Animals Among Us*. To pick up the book and read any of its brief chapters, beautifully illustrated with Dave Buchen's block prints of animals, is to be invited into a moment of meditation on nature and art.

"Zooburbia is what I call the extraordinary, unruly, half-wild realm where human and animal lives overlap," Moses explains. A journalist and editor who has also worked as a veterinary assistant, Moses has been widely published in the independent press. She lives in Oakland, "at the end of a dead-end street in a woody ravine less than five miles from downtown."

Her house borders an expanse of dry eucalyptus- and tree-studded brush. In this landscape she has managed a genuine, subtle fusion of global thinking and local action. The animals and plants she lives with and near, the ones whose habitat she maintains and encourages, are indisputably individuals, sources of wonder and amusement and love. When she talks about particular creatures or plants, Moses is a miniaturist; but her little stories have a way of opening out into a larger narrative stream and touching on matters of universal resonance. For example, the idea of planting exotic, non-native plants bordering water-hungry but ecologically and esthetically arid lawns seems just plain crazy when Moses points out that a particular animal, bird, or insect is chased away thereby.

In one charming passage, Moses observes the squirrel she calls Rufus meticulously planting seeds with "her little hands splayed flat," and then goes on to remind us that squirrels plant seeds too heavy for the wind to carry. They are thus the creators of landscapes studded with hazelnut and walnut trees.

Moses does her research, and she never allows sentimentality to distort her findings. She loves hummingbirds, but "the mosquito, which I detest, is a significant source of protein for the hummingbird, which is an important pollinator. Hummingbirds also consume aphids, gnats, mites, and fruit flies, none of which I am very fond of. If all these vexing insects disappeared, so might the hummingbird."

This kind of thinking leads Moses to an inevitable conclusion: "Whether or not a creature was useful to me was not the way to measure the value of its life. Animals and plants shape our lives and each other's

lives in profound ways. Human beings are not the sun other animals revolve around, we are simply one more life form on this extraordinarily diverse planet." This lesson, so simple to read, seems nevertheless an impossible one for our species to learn. We will not learn it, and we are a fair way toward drowning or burning ourselves and all the other species with us because of that refusal.

Moses is greatly influenced by Buddhist thought. About her fear of spiders, she quotes Buddhist teacher Sylvia Boorstein, "Fearlessness comes from benevolence and goodwill in the face of whatever oppresses you." Moses is able to apply the lesson to her arachnophobia, to move from fear to friendly feeling to fearlessness. Elsewhere, she writes, "Buddhists say that the conditions for happiness are always present in our lives, if we can learn to recognize them . . . The hawk, the wild turkey, the monarch butterfly—these are my conditions for happiness."

About those wild turkeys: Moses's description of them is one of many gems of observation in the book: "Before I saw a wild turkey, I thought of the color brown as somewhat dreary and uninteresting. But the assorted brown plumage of the wild turkey is a kaleidoscope of woodland colors: rich bronze, soft chestnut, and burnt umber with creamy ivory stripes. When the sun hits their feathers the turkey shimmers like a vision . . . Looking at a wild turkey is like looking at a winged forest."

Elsewhere she speaks of an unexpected encounter with another large bird species.

"One night I left a movie theater in downtown Oakland, and as I was standing there blinking under the streetlights, I looked up into a tree that was filled with night herons. I was in the heart of downtown . . . and here [was] a congregation of blue-gray shorebirds roosting like feathered fruit in a sidewalk tree."

**Her house borders an expanse of dry eucalyptus- and tree-studded brush. In this landscape she has managed a genuine, subtle fusion of global thinking and local action.**

Moses does not shrink from the suffering inflicted by both nature and humans on so many animal individuals and species. She praises friends who rescue dogs from lives lived horribly at the ends of backyard chains; she notes that her neighbor Barbara, the local "crazy cat lady" who traps, spays and releases feral cats, is not crazy at all, but perfectly sane and very compassionate.

Moses also admires the "poet gardener" Benjamin Vogt, who calls gardening "an ethical act—a protest." She herself does much to create the conditions for life and to help the creatures who live on her land, but she recognizes the limits of human intervention. In one of many humorous passages, Moses observes a deer systematically nibbling the petals off the wild irises on the hillside: "I knew I should scare the deer away, but I was too exhausted to get up. Also I found that I didn't really care . . . sometimes you have to let things fall apart. They're going to anyway."

In true Buddhist tradition, Moses gives us in this book many opportunities to do what she does in this meeting with the deer, or when she is out riding and is able to smoothly take the reins of a runaway horse: "I remember the sensation of being perfectly poised in the saddle, as if [the horse] and I were a single being, fused together. I remember thinking, *So this is what it feels like to be alive.*"

Rebecca Taksel is an RCR contributing editor living in Pittsburgh.

## LIBRARY LINES

## Wally Is at the Wheel

Julia Larke

If you haven't yet heard the news, Mendocino County Library now has an interim Library Director, Wally Clark. He replaces Mindy Kittay who resigned in late March after serving approximately sixteen months. Wally is a good choice; he is familiar with the ins and outs of the Mendocino County Library because he has been a successful branch manager at the Fort Bragg Library for nearly two years. He grew up in Southern California, received a BA at California State University Fullerton, a Master of Library Science at UCLA and for over twenty years has worked at public libraries in the Pacific Northwest, most recently, before his Fort Bragg Library position, as Bookmobile Coordinator for the Meridian Public Library District in Idaho.

Wally is a great advocate for public libraries and has jumped right in with strategic planning for the county library. Residents of Mendocino County have a chance to participate in shaping the strategic vision for their libraries, and in order to have a strategic plan that reflects views of the entire county, Wally is organizing community meetings for the South Coast and Round Valley, two regions that were left out of the community meetings that took place in Ukiah, Willits and Fort Bragg in March. I encourage residents of the South Coast to attend their community meeting scheduled for Thursday, July 24, at 6pm at Coast Community Library. The meeting will provide a forum for public comments on the types of services and programming people want from their library and what they envision as the future direction of the library.

There is good news to report on the station vs. branch issue which became a non-issue when the County Civil Service Commission recently approved a Human Resources proposal for a job classification of Library Branch Manager at each of the branches. The concept of stations that offer limited services never did apply to any of Mendocino's wonderful full-service libraries. Thank You, Human Resources.

"Paws to Read" is the theme for this year's Summer Reading Program. Until August 13, we'll offer animal-related programs for elementary school aged children on Wednesdays at 1pm. Jeanne Jackson, author of *Mendonoma Sightings Throughout the Year*, will give a slideshow about baby animals, and Daniel Murley, of Ranger's Log fame, will give a program titled "Bears in the Neighborhood!" Daniel is also planning an adult program about animals of the IL'mena, a Russian American Trading company ship that wrecked near Point Arena in 1820.

We're looking forward to programs by Jennifer Ketting and Lani Bouwer of Windy Hollow Farm, Terri Peters's Zumba for Kids event, and Kathy Silva's origami workshop. Wild Things, Inc., a nonprofit wildlife rescue and education organization will present live animals native to North America for our final program. I want to thank all of the local businesses who year after year provide snacks for the children, and the fantastic Friends of the Library who help sponsor the program.

The Mendocino Coast and Point Arena Stornetta lands now have the distinction of being ranked by *The New York Times* as third out of fifty-two top destinations around the world in its "Places to Visit" list for 2014. The library is seeing an increase in visitors from afar and nearly all of them ask to use our internet computers or wifi access. I'm following the progress of an e-rate funded proposal to AT&T to establish a high-speed fiber cable network between the five branches that was left unfinished when Ms. Kittay resigned. With our current low download speeds of generally <2 Mbps it is frustrating to know that AT&T is now providing high-speed fiber cable broadband to Point Arena schools and that a fiber-fed AT&T office is located up the block from the library!

## READERS' LETTERS



## Wildier than Chandler

Before I start dishing out compliments on the latest *Redwood Coast Review* I want to ask why the photo of Billy Wilder [left] on page 7 is identified as being a photo of Raymond Chandler [right]? Are you trying to hoodwink the rustics who congregate at the Coast Community Library? If so, this is a cruel prank, therefore, a good one!

I learned of Wanda Coleman from my wife Chris, who—when she began to get serious about her poetry, which is very good poetry—took a class from Austin Straus. They gathered for class at the Straus-Coleman house, which, I gather, was no mansion! Stephen, I think yours is by far the best of the three or four obituaries I've read of Wanda C. You picture her as a real person instead of merely an icon, as a real friend instead of a spokeswoman for her . . . race, generation, gender, geography, etc. . . . although you also do explain those qualities for readers who've not encountered her poetry.

I love the words of the Eel River poet [Zara Raab], particularly those about "Billy Gawain." And the Proust essay was interesting and has almost (but not quite) tickled me into diving into *Remembrance of Things Past*. (What will eventually convince me? Perhaps the next personal confessions of someone who's read the novels.)

LEE QUARNSTROM  
LA HABRA

## BOOKS

## Searching for a Self

Marc Hofstadter

LOOKING FOR HEROES IN POSTWAR FRANCE: ALBERT CAMUS, MAX JACOB, SIMONE WEIL  
by Neal Oxenhandler  
University Press of New England (1996), 234 pages

This remarkable book by Neal Oxenhandler, who died in 2011, is at once an intimately personal and intellectually powerful memoir. Set mostly in Paris in the late 1940s and early 50s, it evokes a world in which art and intellect are pursued with as much passion as food and sex. The author, an American who has just served in World War II, at one point killing a German teenaged soldier and traumatized by the incident, is a young student at the Sorbonne at the same time Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir are the reigning Parisian intellectuals. He is sensitive and vulnerable, unsure of his sexual identity, questioning his Jewish roots, and in love with France. He is "searching," and he finds his way with the help of three French intellectuals, figures whose literary characteristics are examined with as much depth as in a work of criticism, while it is shown how personally their writing and example influence the young American.

We see Oxenhandler drinking coffee in the Parisian cafés where thinkers and artists congregate, taking classes at the Sorbonne, wandering the streets of the capital drinking in their color and verve. He is young, experimenting sexually with men as well as women, searching for a relationship that feels right. He is a Jew who is uncomfort-

able with the tepid religion of his youth and is impressed by the rich grandeur of French Catholicism. He is an American who sees in France what so many Americans have glimpsed there: a life of style and passion. And he emerges from his Parisian experiences a more mature person, ready for marriage, prepared to begin a distinguished career as an American professor of French literature, and having found a new spiritual identity as a Catholic.

The process through which Oxenhandler grows from malleable youth to mature adult is subtle, and it is difficult to say which shapes him more, the experiences he has or the ideas he encounters. The books he reads are not mere cognitive exercises. When he reads of the murder Camus's first hero Meursault commits (in *L'Étranger*), he can't



Neal Oxenhandler, 1940s

help but think of the German teenager. He struggles with political, moral and religious issues vicariously through Camus, as did many people right after the War. When Camus leaves the Communist Party, so do many of his followers. Gradually Oxenhandler's admiration shifts from Camus to Max Jacob as an icon. Jacob who, like Oxenhandler, was born Jewish, converted to Catholicism, and had homosexual experiences. And, since Jacob had been killed by the Nazis in 1944, his death forces the young Jew to confront issues of anti-Semitism and identity. Oxenhandler's lie to a Sorbonne professor about his Jewish identity cuts him "loose from (his) past and (sends him) prospecting for new identities, ethnic, religious, sexual."

Simone Weil, another Jew who rejects Jewish religion, becomes the perfect role model for this young man who has several

***He is an American who sees in France a life of style and passion. And he emerges from his Parisian experiences a more mature person.***

epiphanies and converts to Catholicism. He relates to her as to a "twin sister": "I know Weil's face, her body type, her anxieties, her changes of mood, her gaiety and depression." Like Weil, the author suffers from migraines, and associates it in both their cases with discomfort with sexuality. By the end of the book, Oxenhandler has married and divorced, then married again, a relationship in which finally he finds peace and happiness. His experiences in France have issued into maturity and self-acceptance.

This brief summary can give no idea of the incredible richness and subtlety of the psychological, literary and religious insights in this book. Anyone who has struggled with body image and sexual guilt, read and been influenced by literary or philosophical figures, confronted God and church, will find in it echoes of his or her own searches. As an American who loves France, a Jew who has given up Judaism for Buddhism, and a poet who has had his own literary predecessors, I found the work a prism through which to view my own struggles and identity. It is a powerful, evocative study of a mind with great relevance to our own time and place.

Marc Hofstadter is a poet and essayist based in Walnut Creek. His most recent book is *Healing the Split (essays)*.

## Some Recent Arrivals @ Coast Community Library

## FICTION

Billingham, Mark. *The bones beneath*  
Bova, Ben. *Transhuman*  
Burke, Alafair. *All Day and a night*  
Butcher, Jim. *Skin game: a novel of the Dresden files*  
Connelly, Michael. *The gods of guilt*  
Gabaldon, Diana. *Written in my own heart's blood*  
Gardner, Lisa. *Fear nothing*  
Grimes, Martha. *Vertigo 42: a Richard Jury mystery*  
Hoffman, Alice. *The Museum of Extraordinary Things*  
Johnson, Craig. *Any other name*  
Kidd, Sue Monk. *The invention of wings*  
Leon, Donna. *By its cover*  
Lescroart, John T. *The keeper*  
Moore, Christopher. *The serpent of Venice*  
Pratchett, Terry. *Raising Steam: a Discworld novel*  
Robinson, Peter. *Children of the revolution: an Inspector Banks novel*  
Rosenfelt, David. *Without warning*  
Walker, Martin. *The Resistance Man: a Bruno, Chief of Police novel*

## NONFICTION

Adams, R. J. *Field guide to the spiders of California and the Pacific Coast States*  
Alvarez, Julia. *Once upon a quinceañera: coming of age in the USA*  
Boal, Iain A. *West of Eden: communes and utopia in northern California*  
Brown, Susan. *Fashion: the definitive history of costume and style*  
Brukoff, Barry. *Machu Picchu*, photographs, Barry Brukoff; poems, Pablo Neruda; translation Stephen Kessler  
Collins, Billy. *Picnic, lightning*  
Conley, Sue. *Cowgirl creamery cooks*  
Cusick-Dickerson, Heidi. *Mendocino roots & ridges: wine notes from America's greenest wine region*  
Darlinton, Tenaya. *Di Bruno Bros. House of Cheese: a guide to wedges, recipes, and pairings*  
Duran, Eduardo. *Native American postcolonial psychology*  
Harrison, Susan. *Plant and animal endemism in California*  
Hart, Mickey. *Songcatchers: in search of the world's music*  
Hazen, Janet. *Rolled, wrapped, and stuffed: great appetizers from around the world*  
Katagiri, Dainin. *Returning to silence: Zen practice in daily life*  
Markham, Brett L. *Maximizing your mini farm: self-sufficiency on 1/4 acre*  
Patterson, Victoria. *The Singing feather: tribal remembrances from Round Valley*  
Pendergrast, Mark. *Uncommon grounds: the history of coffee and how it transformed our world*  
Smith, Eric W. *DIY solar projects: how to put the sun to work in your home*  
Whatley, Merita S. *Point Arena Lighthouse*

## ADULT GRAPHIC NOVELS

Hirano, Kohta. *Hellsing. I*  
Corwin, Tom. *Mr. Fooster traveling on a whim*

Kane, Bob. *Batman: dark joker-the wild*  
Moore, Alan. *DC universe*

## BIOGRAPHY

Brown, Elaine. *A taste of power: a black woman's story*  
Kahney, Leander. *Jony Ive: the genius behind Apple's greatest products*  
Owens, William A. *This stubborn soil: a frontier boyhood*  
Rampersad, Arnold. *Jackie Robinson: a biography*  
Safranski, Rüdiger. *Martin Heidegger: between good and evil*

## BOOKS ON CD

L'Amour, Louis. *The man called Noon*  
Angelou, Maya. *I know why the caged bird sings*  
Crombie, Deborah. *Now may you weep*  
Kidd, Sue Monk. *The invention of wings*  
Northup, Solomon. *12 years a slave*  
Patchett, Ann. *This is the story of a happy marriage*  
Tartt, Donna. *The goldfinch*  
Upfield, Arthur. *The clue of the new shoe*  
Winspear, Jacqueline. *Birds of a feather*

## DVDs

*Ancient aliens*  
*Da Vinci's inquest*  
*Galápagos*  
*Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*  
*Invincible*  
*King Lear*  
*Luther*  
*Seraphim Falls*  
*The silver stallion*  
*Underground*

## YOUNG ADULT (YA) ITEMS

YA FICTION  
Clare, Cassandra. *City of heavenly fire*  
Johnson, Jaleigh. *The mark of the dragonfly*  
Kuehn, Stephanie. *Charm & strange*

Roskos, Evan. *Dr. Bird's advice for sad poets*  
Rosoff, Meg. *Picture me gone*  
Roth, Veronica. *Allegiant*  
Rowell, Rainbow. *Eleanor & Park*  
YA GRAPHIC NOVELS  
Aoyama, Goshō. *Case closed*. Vols. 10-12  
Draughton, Leigh. *Shadow kiss: a graphic novel*  
Hosoda, Mamoru. *Wolf children: Ame & Yuki*  
Takeuchi, Naoko. *Pretty guardian, Sailor Moon*. Vols. 1-12

## JUVENILE ITEMS

EASY BOOKS  
Burns, Marilyn. *The greedy triangle*  
Casanova, Mary. *Utterly otterly night*  
Falkenstein, Lisa. *Professor Whiskerton presents Steampunk ABC*  
Hale, Bruce. *Clark the Shark dares to share*  
Schmidt, Annie M. G. *A pond full of ink*  
JUVENILE  
Bruehl, Nick. *Bad Kitty for president*  
DiCamillo, Kate. *Flora & Ulysses: the illuminated adventures*  
Meloy, Colin. *Wildwood imperium*  
Puricelli Guerra. *The Order of the Owls*  
Ringwald, Whitaker. *The secret box*  
JUVENILE NONFICTION  
California Poets in the Schools. *Turning into stars*  
Claybourne, Anna. *Gut-wrenching gravity and other fatal forces*  
Jackson, Donna M. *Every body's talking: what we say without words*  
Weill, Cynthia. *Count me in: a parade of Mexican folk art numbers in English and Spanish*  
Wildon, Christina. *For horse-crazy girls only: everything you want to know about horses*

## LIBRARY HOURS

MONDAY 12 noon - 6 pm  
TUESDAY 10am - 6 pm  
WEDNESDAY 10am - 8 pm  
THURSDAY 12 noon - 8 pm  
FRIDAY 12 noon - 6 pm  
SATURDAY 12 noon - 3 pm

Coast Community Library  
is located at  
225 Main Street  
Point Arena  
(707) 882.3114

## SCIENCE

## SOMETHING VS. NOTHING

Hilda Johnston

I've been reading about fractals, self-repeating forms, growing in scale, in a kind of stutter that becomes a fern, a coastline, branching veins of a body. After reading about the fractal nature of nature, it's hard to eat broccoli or cauliflower without feeling queasy. Thinking about the tireless repetition in these vegetables is like thinking about the bubbling universes imagined by some physicists—from every black hole, a new round of stars. The man who named fractals (from Latin for broken or fractured) is Benoit Mandelbrot, a Jew from Lithuania, who narrowly escaped the Nazis as a child only to meet them again in France, but he managed to continue studying with a false ID and a good French accent. Later, in America, he escaped the scientific establishment to apply the math that intrigued him to different fields, even to economics, and to formulate what is known as the Mandelbrot set, or as I like to think of it, the almond bread set.

Of course a Mandelbrot set doesn't explain why anything is there in the first place. Why the world exists, even a fractal of it, is a question that Jim Holt sets out to answer by interviewing philosophers and scientists. In the beginning, physicists seem to agree, a "riot of virtual particles ceaselessly wink in and out of existence," that is, electrons (matter) and positrons (anti-matter) annihilate each other with the odd electron escaping to become our world. "It is simply a matter of quantum chance," physicist Ed Tryon tells Holt, that our universe "popped into existence out of the void and ran away with itself."

But, says Holt, any purely scientific explanation is doomed to be circular. Even if it starts "with a cosmic egg, a tiny bit of quantum vacuum, a singularity—it still starts with something, rather than nothing." Nevertheless, the explanations of the physicists make good reading: the battle of electrons and positrons, the big bang—that "cascading festival of light and matter," black holes, and pocket universes, are more exciting than the platonic idea of goodness or the pure mathematical forms offered by the philosophers along with a cup of tea.

Holt ends his search where it began, in the dark, on a bridge over the Seine smoking a cigarette, recalling a radio discussion between a physicist, a priest and a Buddhist monk, the monk the most cheerful of the three, speaking of emptiness rather than nothingness and of form that has no real solidity, a theme the *New York Times* science correspondent Dennis Overbye takes up on reading that the Higgs field (producer of the Higgs boson) could "drop to a lower energy state like water freezing into ice, thereby obliterating the working of reality as we know it," and leaving, he quotes Shakespeare, "not a rack behind." This event wouldn't happen for 10 to the 100th power years, but "it would be as if we never existed at all," laments Overbye, losing, he says, "his Zen detachment."

On the other side of this lament is wonder at the prodigious forms of existence and that you of all people are here to observe those twists of clouds, this persimmon tree, its orange fruit and light green calyx rendered over and over with only slight variation. The realization that the world exists can be as disconcerting as the thought of its extinction.

Since matter, as Einstein proved and Holt explains, is "frozen energy," we can expect all form to be impermanent. According to the physicist Don Goldberg, every year about 98 percent of your atoms are replaced

with others exactly like them. We don't notice this because of "particle replacement symmetry." Goldberg quotes the comedian Steve Wright, who says, "I woke up one morning and all of my stuff had been stolen and replaced by exact duplicates."

The subtitle of Goldberg's book is: *How Hidden Symmetries Shape Reality*, and he devotes a chapter to the mathematician Emily Noether, a contemporary of Einstein who also left Germany in 1933 because of anti-Semitism. She obtained a position at Bryn Mawr College but died a few years later when she was only fifty-three. Her first theorem stating that "every symmetry corresponds to a conserved quality" provides the math, says Goldberg, "for much of the standard model of particle physics."

Like Noether, the Russian Mathematician Sophia Kovalevsky, had to leave her country to find a university position. Alice Munro brings her to life in the days before her death at forty-one in her story "Too Much Happiness." Munro takes her title from the mathematician's dying words. The source she credits is a biography of Kovalevsky called *Little Sparrow*, which I found at the UC library. The biographer draws on Kovalevsky's own memoir with its lively descriptions of Dostoyevsky courting her older sister—stories within stories that will disappear along with our libraries, the internet and the world itself, leaving only eternal forms to again be discovered by temporary minds.

Hilda Johnston lives in Berkeley and publishes often in the RCR.

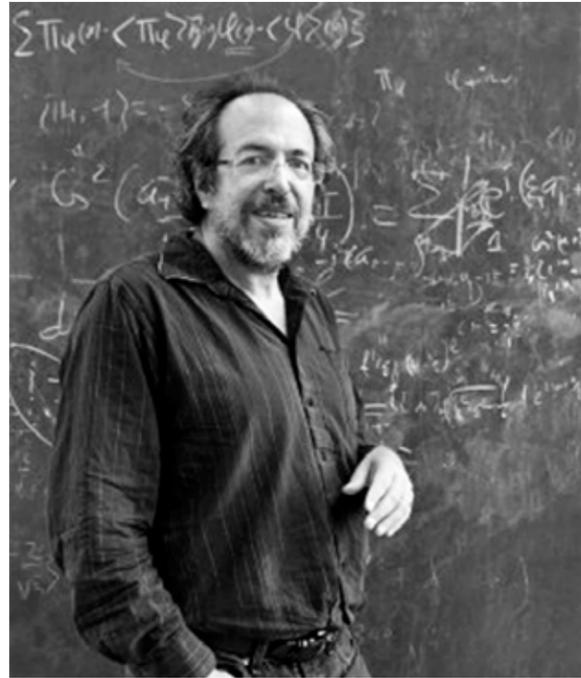
Benoit B. Mandelbrot, *The Fractalist: Memoir of a Scientific Maverick*, 2012

Jim Holt, *Why Does The World Exist?*, 2012

Dave Goldberg, *The Universe in the Rearview Mirror: How Hidden Symmetries Shape reality*, 2012

Alice Munro, *Too Much Happiness*, 2009

Don H. Kennney, *Little Sparrow: A Portrait of Sophia Kovalevsky*, 1983



Lee Smolin

## Physics &amp; Metaphysics

*Either the world is in essence mathematical or it lives in time.* —LEE SMOLIN

What we seek in our private lives—some sort of equilibrium—is not a good thing for the universe.

When the universe reaches equilibrium, or the point of highest entropy, there is no available energy to carry the experiment further. Say you're sitting with your cat on your lap, and you've mopped the floor, and a soup is simmering on the stove; this only feels like equilibrium as you and the cat are highly organized creatures, metabolizing and breathing, the soup is changing heat to steam, and the table holding your cup of tea is buzzing with atomic energy. What a memory a simple table would be at the end of time were there anyone left to remember.

But according to physicist Lee Smolin, author of *Time Reborn*, we no longer have to think of the universe succumbing to disorder or entropy. Taking his metaphor from biology, he sees the universe as evolving, self-organizing into galaxies, planets

and the complexity we enjoy here on earth. Rather than running down, the universe, he says, is becoming more interesting.

Smolin begins an earlier book *The Life of the Cosmos* with a quotation from Leibniz, the philosopher of reflecting monads: "Each simple substance has relations that express all the others and consequently is a perpetual, living mirror of this universe." It is Leibniz and not Newton who carries the day for Smolin, who describes space and time "as participants in a relational world rather than the stage in an absolute world." And "because in nature it is always some particular moment," he believes the universe can never be "captured by an equation or a geometrical construction."

Not frightened by what Pascal called "the silence of infinite space," he sees a galaxy as "an enormous self-organized system of great complexity and beauty." The ten thousand years it takes for a star to form is a day in galactic life. In this ecosystem large stars have a shorter life span than small stars. A massive star 30,000 times brighter than our sun will live "only about 10 million years before exploding as a supernova and enriching the interstellar medium."

Even as the infinite feels more familiar as a series of nesting ecosystems, what Pascal

**Smolin describes space and time "as participants in a relational world rather than the stage in an absolute world."**

called "the nothing of which we are made" remains mysterious. We know we are made of the same atoms as rocks and stars and we have named many of the particles that attract and repel each other inside and outside the space of atoms. But what is space at its most discreet? "Quarks and electrons," says Smolin, "are still absolutely enormous compared to what we expect should be the truly elementary things in the world." Whatever the bits or strings, space, he suggests, is a dynamic "network of connections." What we perceive is only an emergent property as water emerges from molecules or heat from the motion of atoms.

Once a string theorist himself, he regrets that this mathematical theory, which has led to dimensions beyond experiment, has become academic orthodoxy. He is open to alternate theories, but on the many-worlds solution to the uncertainty of quantum measurements, he quotes an artist friend who says: "To postulate an infinite multiplication of the world because one is unable to resolve a problem is like moving and purchasing new kitchenware because one doesn't feel like doing the dishes."

Smolin writes well and in the curious looking-glass world of modern physics is a friendly guide. But as a cosmologist in the field of loop quantum gravity, he travels back and forth between the very large and the very small; this, I admit, made me quite dizzy. I couldn't help wonder which way the cosmos was going—from the galaxies that provide atoms for our bodies or the other way around, from the quantum activity that makes the world appear in the beginning and for all time.

—HILDA JOHNSTON

## A NIGHT OF ONE'S OWN

Make a wish and a dandelion explodes.

There is no precedent for this.

I smoked my annual cigarette in January. Virginia rolled her own.

Some words can only be written at night.

Two boys tucked in a redwood cathedral. Slow breaths on the cliff of sleep.

Paper sucks ink like blood into sand. The process.

Dark chocolate. Pinot noir. More please.

I could drink a case of Joni.

Candlelight viewed through a steamy shower door. Midnight lantern.

A clutch of barn owls clamors for food. My basset hound sleeps.

I take odd comfort reading even pages.

Virginia wrote only in purple ink that even the Ouse could not fade.

I ache for sex, as night moves over bodies entwined.

This is what I tell myself whistling in the dark, singing to the moon.

Why would I ever erase this?

—KELLY CRESSIO-MOELLER

## 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](mailto:skrcr@stephenkessler.com).

Lee Smolin, *Time Reborn*, 2013  
Lee Smolin, *The Trouble With Physics*, 2006  
Lee Smolin, *The Life of the Cosmos*, 1997

## PERSONAL HISTORY



## My Mother's Sailor

Mike Tuggle

**T**HE WAR IN THE PACIFIC WAS OVER and my dad was due home in a month or so when the woman from California called. My older sister Marcia had overheard Mother telling Aunt Em about it.

"She told Mama that Daddy was coming home to California, not to Tulsa—to her, not to us!" she said in a hushed, choked voice, a tear making its way down her cheek.

She paused and shined her big brown eyes deeply into mine . . . "Our Daddy has a girlfriend and he might not be coming home!" She swallowed a sob and bit her lower lip. "They had an affair before Daddy went overseas and that's why we had to go live in Ramona! Because he was keeping it a secret from Mama!"

"What's an affair?" I asked.

"That's what a man and a woman do together when they fall in love. And that woman told mama that she and Daddy are very much in love and not to expect him home . . . And you know what, Mikie?"

"No, what?"

"That California woman is a blonde!"

At first I'd been upset mostly by my older sister's anguish as she told me what had happened. I was six years old and unprepared to believe that our dad could be taken from us by anything other than the war—by a blonde woman in California of all things—and closed it off in the back of my mind as one of those possibilities too unbearable to think about.

I didn't notice any changes in my mother's behavior, but I'm sure the phone call must have been alarming. I sensed intuitively that she believed in her heart, as I did, that Dad would come home to us and everything would be all right. She seemed neither angry or unforgiving. Men would be men after all, and the intensity of wartime made everything more urgent and a little crazy. Thinking of Eddie perhaps, she could understand how easily it could happen.

I never did find out how my sister knew the California woman was a blonde.

My mother had high Cherokee cheekbones, large hazel brown eyes and was beautiful like no one I'd ever seen was beautiful. Coming of age during the height of the Depression, she married my father when she was nineteen, having never traveled out of the state of Oklahoma. Her first sashay out into the big world would be thirteen years and four children later, when, at the age of thirty-two, she bought an old blue cloud of a Packard, talked my Uncle Gene into teaching her how to drive, got her driver's license, sold our little house on a bucolic tree-lined lane at the outskirts of Tulsa and lit out for California. Ostensibly to be near Dad, who was in training in San Diego, but also because she was restless and wanted to see a little of the world.

**JACKIE SUE, THE YOUNGEST, WAS TWO** and a half, my brother was three and a half, I was five and Marcia was eight.

I don't remember much about the facts of the trip but I remember sensations—small vertigos of gladness of a flock of blackbirds changing directions just above our car . . . how certain landscapes seemed to arouse me, stir my soul, give me little erections even . . .

We slept five to a bed at the motels, lying sideways. Mornings we'd get up, get dressed and find some breakfast, then hit the road. I admired how my mother could drive and keep on driving, leaning forward in her seat and aiming that hunky old Packard down the highway as intensely as if she were sighting a gun, no matter what was taking place in the back seat or barreling up the road outside.

Christmas was near and servicemen on leave were hitchhiking along the highway in both directions. When Mother asked us to keep an eye out for a friendly-looking sailor, my brother and older sister and I stuck our heads half out the window and stared at the faces while mother drove slowly by.

We chose a jolly-looking sailor, who hopped into the front seat beside baby Jackie and put his duffle bag between his feet. We knew immediately we'd made the right choice. Eddie was charming and funny and sweet. There was a twinkle in his light blue eyes and he learned each of our names right away, putting us at ease. He took turns with Mother driving and bought our lunch that afternoon at a diner in a truck stop. He was Irish and a very good singer. He and Mother sang "Oh Danny Boy," "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling" and "Over in Killarny," we children joining in as best we could. He delighted us with stories about leprechauns and fairies and taught us to sing "Mairsy-Dotes" and "The Clown Went Up the Ladder" and a song about a man who became so skinny he fell through a hole in the seat of his pants. We sang many rounds of "Row, Row, Row Your Boat" and all the Christmas carols we knew, then he and Mother told each there about their lives, talking nonstop for what seemed like hours while we children listened and dozed and dreamed.

That night when we stopped at a little adobe motel, Eddie slept in the back seat of the car. It had been cold and damp and it felt especially good to crawl into bed and snuggle under the covers. As usual, Mother slept between baby Jackie and Terry, myself between my brother and Marcia. I felt sorry for our new friend sleeping out in the car and hoped he wasn't cold.

*The clouds were drifting over a bright moon as I crept out the door and partway down the stone steps, and stopped in a deep shadow of the building.*

**SOMETIME IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT** I woke up and had to pee. Relieved that I hadn't done it in bed, I crawled headfirst out of the covers as carefully as I could and went to the bathroom. When I started to climb back into bed I noticed something was amiss. Baby Jackie was safe and sound asleep, my brother was snoring and Marcia seemed to be soaring in dreamland. But there was no larger form under the covers where my mother should have been.

Sudden panic. I stood there for a moment feeling abandoned, on the verge of tears, before I remembered Eddie out front in the car, and knew, instinctively, that my mother was out there.

The clouds were drifting over a bright moon as I crept out the door and partway down the stone steps, and stopped in a deep shadow of the building. From there I could see the car and—when the moon broke through the clouds for a moment—my mother in it. Sitting in the back seat next to Eddie.

Then the moon disappeared and I could see only the cold, dark shape of the car. Resisting the urge to run down the stairs to them, crying, I turned and made my shivering way back to our room and under the covers. When I woke up in the morning Mother was safely there in bed with us, sound asleep.

We parted company with Eddie that next day when we reached Los Angeles. He gave us little Christmas presents he'd bought along the way—a ping-pong paddle attached to a small rubber ball by a long rubber band for me, a bag of marbles for Terry, a package of paper dolls for Marcia and a coloring book with crayons for Jackie. I remember we were standing there holding our presents on the sidewalk near a busy intersection next to our car saying goodbye. He hugged each of us and when Mother gave him a kiss on his cheek there were tears in her eyes.

As we drove on south a hush seemed to settle over everything—we children, the car, the air itself, in which a trace of Eddie—tobacco, his aftershave, his man-smell, still lingered.

Mother's eyes were glistening and there was the sweetest, softest, dreamiest smile on her face.

**THAT EVENING WHEN WE ARRIVED** at the Naval Base in San Diego, we parked in the parking lot and inquired about Dad. He was on guard duty and it would be awhile before we could see him. We wrapped ourselves in blankets and went to sleep in the car and late that night were awakened by someone tapping at the window. A man in a white cap, carrying a rifle. It was my dad and I didn't even recognize him.

We got out of the car and after all the hugs, still half asleep, stood there and watched as he performed the Presentation-of-Arms, hup-hopping in place and snapping and twirling his rifle around in his hands from one position to another, his white cap and white leggings and white belt, his deep blue sailor suit dazzling in the moonlight.

Housing was scarce in San Diego, so Dad managed to find us a little cottage fifty miles north of the city near Ramona. He hitchhiked back to the base and came up on occasional weekends, when he could get a pass.

Our cottage rose up bare and treeless from the middle of a dead grape vineyard which spread part-way up the mountain behind. There was an outhouse near the back porch and an old stone water well farther up the incline. The water wasn't drinkable but we drew it up for our baths. We collected our drinking water in milk jugs across the highway at the pump beneath our landlord's windmill. Mother cooked on the wood-burning cookstove, in which we burned dead grapevines, and when it was cold we kept that stove going around the clock.

Coyotes yipped at night up on the sides of the mountain and we felt as if we were truly in the wilderness, though we were only a mile or so outside of town. Mother and I loved it and never wanted to leave.

I turned six that fall and we stayed until late winter, when Dad got his orders to ship out to war somewhere in the Pacific. That last weekend, he came up and packed us all into the car and drove us to the San Diego train station, where we bought tickets back to Tulsa.

We cried when we said our goodbyes, then found our seats on the train where we could see him right outside and below our window. We cried again when the train pulled away and we left him standing there waving.

Aunt Em and Uncle Gene took us into their home—a large flat in North Denver. We lived on ration stamps and the small government allotment. I made some friends in the neighborhood and started first grade and I remembered the friends but almost nothing at all about that entire first year in school.

**THE WAR IN THE PACIFIC ENDED** that next summer, and in September my mother got the phone call from the woman in California. I was in the second grade now. My homeroom teacher was a bristly old first sergeant of a woman who treated us all like little soldiers. The first time I ever saw her smile was one interminable late October afternoon when someone out in the hall caused a commotion by pulling himself up on the transom and peeking into the classroom for a moment. I hadn't seen it but several of my classmates had, and the teacher.

"OK, now whose father is a sailor and has returned home from the war?" she asked.

I knew immediately who it was but was too shy and embarrassed and overwhelmed to own up.

When the bell rang my dad entered in all his sailor-suited glory, and all the children cheered. He picked me up and hugged me to him without a word and I rode all the way home on his shoulders.

*Mike Tuggle, a former Sonoma County poet laureate, lives in Cazadero.*