THE COMMON REVIEW
VOLUME 4, NUMBER 2 FALL 2005

OUR READERS WRITE BACK

TROMPE L'OEIL

Christopher Hitchens's tactic seems to be to change the subject and drown the reader in verbiage (Summer 2005). Maybe my eye skipped over but I missed words like: WMD, Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo, PATRIOT Act, torture, renditions. I get a truer sense of where he is on Iraq and other matters from his frothing and preening columns in *Slate*. I was amused that he couldn't resist that silly dig at Naomi Klein. (I've noticed that she really gets under the skin of middle-aged male pundits.) I would have more respect for him if he had another arrow in his anti-antiwar quiver than scorn, contempt, and cheap shots. What about the notion that the invasion of Iraq has actually empowered the "Islamofascists"? They seem to be running swathes of Iraq already.

Katha Pollitt
Columnist, *The Nation*
New York, New York

THE LIBERAL EQUATION

Hitchens uses the old trick of saying that Michael Moore equals liberalism. At the level of the rank and file, this is, alas, probably truer than I would prefer it to be (though not quite as true as Hitchens thinks; he should remember that *Nation* subscribers are not, by and large, liberals, which is why he used to like the magazine in the first place). But at the level of liberal intellectual leadership, which includes everyone from Richard Holbrooke to Hillary Clinton to James Mann to the *Prospect*'s editors—who wrote in March that the "first imperative" of U.S. foreign policy is to defeat terrorism—it is emphatically not true. I literally do not know a single person in the class of which I speak who opposed the Afghan War. Not one. And I resent the fact that opposition to the Iraq War—which if you ask me is looking like a pretty sound position these days—is cleverly lumped in with lefty anti-imperialism. There were many grounds on which to oppose that war that have to do with *loving* America. If Hitchens bothered to read the foreign policy prescriptions of liberal foreign policy intellectuals, he'd find a sensible and quite hard-nosed (but internationalist rather than unilateralist) world view—but one much harder to make sport of.

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PLAYING SOFTBALL WITH THE HITCH

I just finished reading your interview with Christopher Hitchens. Postel, you threw him one softball after another. I know you guys are friends, but even for the sake of livening it up you could have grilled him just a *little bit*. I take real thought seriously enough that I *never* assume the left has any natural monopoly on it. What I found hard to take in your interview was the assumption that this guy is a serious intellectual who has presented a compelling account of the present historical situation that we—notice how he doesn't even understand arguments from the intelligent left anymore, because they don't appear in his rage-fueled world of media "debate"—are obliged to take seriously.

There's nothing wrong with standing alone, and I'm sure Hitchens has made plenty of new friends, but ask yourself this: is there a single figure in the world today, whom you consider to be an intellectual, that shares his views on American foreign policy, Islamic fundamentalism, or the case for invading Iraq? We were both there when he spoke at the University of Chicago. Admit it, he made an ass out of himself. He is simply incapable of responding to serious people writing on the present historical situation, and instead spends his time trying to hold up the faulty intelligence he believed and propagated in order to justify his support of the invasion of Iraq.

Certainly a person can abandon old positions and become an intelligent spokesperson for new ones. This is not what has happened in the case of Christopher Hitchens. I would like to suggest that you and *The Common Review* not treat him as a public intellectual, but rather as the middlebrow, neocon hack he has become. ●

Gopal Balakrishnan
University of Chicago

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Two four-month internships will be awarded to qualified candidates for winter and spring 2006. Candidates should submit a cover letter, a writing sample and/or design portfolio, and a resumé with three references to Daniel Born, Editor, *The Common Review,* The Great Books Foundation, 35 East Wacker Drive, Suite 2300, Chicago, IL 60601-2298.

COVER ILLUSTRATION:

Untitled, by Jacob Weinstein. Weinstein was the art director of the *Philadelphia Independent*. He was recently awarded an artist residency at the Cité Internationales des Arts in Paris.

My Father and Muhammad Ali

By Daniel Born

"Without Contraries is no progression."
—William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

On questions of war and peace, my father is a clergyman of unwavering nonviolent conviction. And though he isn't a fight fan, while I was growing up he followed the heavyweight boxing division with avid intensity.

In 1965, shortly after we moved to Brazil where he would begin a teaching assignment at a Mennonite seminary, he bought a shortwave radio in order to follow the progress of a young fighter still commonly known as Cassius Clay. It was always a good moment when he took time out from his book-lined study, from the scriptures and commentaries and Greek and Hebrew lexicons, and hunkered down with me in the dining room. He would flip on the radio and we would put our ears to the speakers. I learned how to tune in the international broadcasts—and how to imagine human bodies flailing at one another in a specific kind of dance: the left jab, intended to bring swelling to the other fighter's face, or in the best scenario, open up a cut around the eye; the feint; the duck; the clinch; the combination; and the right cross to the head meant to send an opponent unconscious to the canvas.

The rising star, whose chosen name, "Muhammad Ali," hadn't quite yet caught on, was a man whose words seemed nearly as electrifying as his actions in the ring. He devastated formidable opponents including Sonny Liston and Floyd Patterson with speed and power. His footwork and lightning-fast combinations were things of beauty. And he was never humble in talking about his gifts—either before or after a bout.

My mother did not care for our enthusiasm over these spectacles, and she viewed my father's pugilistic interests as a troubling violation of our beliefs. Were we not supposed to put at the center of our lives the exhortations to peacemaking found in the Sermon on the Mount? Dad's outlook was more compartmentalized. Sports and warfare were analogous perhaps, but certainly not equivalent. Though there was never any doubt that he disapproved of using bare fists to settle disputes, the game was different. With his blessing, my brother Mike and I put on boxing gloves one summer while on furlough in northern Montana. We had discovered the gloves in the basement at Gramps and Grammy's farm—big, old, heavy gloves that felt like stones on the ends of your arms after one round, but which were so padded and soft that no real harm was likely to be done except perhaps to the ego. With these unwieldy instruments I developed a facsimile of a slow jab, an annoyance that Mike learned to swat away, usually finishing things with a roundhouse that would find my chin and leave me on my back in the grass, staring up into the cottonwoods and the big sky.

My mother's dismay with her husband and sons grew more pronounced when we watched the televised fights later, when Ali, vindicated by a court decision in his dispute with the draft board, returned to the ring in 1971. (To her credit, just as avid a reader and writer as my father, she was teaching us skills on a more practical side, and of equal symbolic importance: learning, for instance, how to decipher a recipe and to cook.) Time had passed, and Muhammad Ali had now achieved worldwide recognition. He was older, heavier, a step slower, but still magnificent. Joe Frazier and George Foreman took their respective places in the pantheon as Liston and Patterson had earlier: noble gladiators who would fall victim to Ali's hail of skillfully thrown punches and shifting ring strategy, or who would—especially as Frazier did in his three monumental bouts with Ali—sufficiently punish the bigger and faster fighter to show us that Ali was a man and not a god.

Ali's sacrifice of the potentially best years of his career by resisting the draft board enlarged his legend. His conversion to Islam and his opposition to the war in Vietnam became touchstones in the biography. "I ain't got no quarrel with the Vietcong," he declared in 1966, when the war was still thought to be just and winnable. "No Vietcong ever called me nigger." This was shocking stuff. It still is. My father did not say much in

interpreting this episode in Ali's life, and I don't think he or anyone else knew how to. It defied categories. In our first exposure to Islam, how were we to understand the antiwar claims made by the heavyweight boxing champion of the world, who invoked the names of prophets most Americans had never heard of?

I am still confounded, to this day, about exactly what it was my father saw in Muhammad Ali. Maybe it was the visceral love for a sport that defied virtually everything else in my father's code of conduct and belief. Or maybe, as Ralph Waldo Emerson, another minister, once put it, "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines."

Let me be clear about one thing: the connection between Ali and my father did not lie in identical beliefs about violence. Even if there was some kind of contrarian wisdom that drove both of them, my father was never drawn to Ali because of his position on Vietnam; Ali was hardly espousing universal pacifism but instead articulated what would become the mainstream American position by the early and mid-1970s: opposition to a particularly ill-conceived war. For his part, my father—in spite of a theology which left no room for participation in any war, period—once gave me a very interesting piece of advice. I had come home from a rough day of school in junior high, and asked my father a question I was certain would leave him silent: "How do you deal with bullies, Dad, if you don't believe in violence?"

He said, "You get everybody together on the playground, and then you sit on him. You don't hurt him—you just stop him from hurting others." Honestly, that answer didn't completely satisfy me; even as a twelve-year-old I could tell it was a rather utopian piece of rhetoric—the justifiable use of force, with no harm done. Still, over the years, I've been tantalized by this particular channeling of Thomas Hobbes and Mahatma Gandhi. It's a vision that partakes in equal measure of moral principles

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and tactical intelligence. In Blake's famous phrase: "Without Contraries is no progression."

Since a bearded religious fanatic named Osama bin Laden changed the course of world history four years ago, I have thought about growing up with my father and Muhammad Ali. I have thought about the challenges of reconciling their respective wisdom to the spectacles of violence and war, of suicide bombings in the name of God that now dominate the world's imagination and, worse, potentially threaten civilization.

Like my father, we who believe that books are more than simply a way to pass our leisure time will need to read with a renewed sense of purpose and intentionality: (1) We must continue drawing analogies between our past experience and our current behavior in order to figure out what's best to do now. At the same time, we will need to recognize the limitations of any analogy. Dunkirk and Dien Bien Phu and the helicopter graveyards of Afghanistan may bear resemblances, but they are not identical; (2) We must attempt to see things in their entirety rather than in part—that is, if we claim to read and understand the best of what has been known and thought in the world. The world holds multitudes, and the varieties of suffering and atrocity are endless. Anyone who has read Dostoevsky or Tolstoy, or Nadine Gordimer or Salman Rushdie, knows this. It is a world in which an Islamic tribal council can approve of a woman's gang rape; it is also one in which U.S. interrogators, according to the military's own records, have tortured and killed prisoners. (No parity is intended between these events, but to the victims of rape or violent death, such rhetorical debates are luxuries they can't afford.)

My father and Muhammad Ali are old men now. My father still spends much of his time reading the important books and speaking about them. As for Ali, I don't know what's on his bookshelf. His speech is slurred, and his body's motion, once graceful, has been destroyed by far too many punches taken to the head, as well as by a cruel disease. When he speaks, he no longer sounds like an oracle.

What I remember is how he appeared in my mind's eye when I huddled over that shortwave radio with my father. For those few short minutes the man moved with elegance, establishing order, defining a verdict with absolute clarity. And if my father has never explained what Ali represented for him, I believe he attempts to do his own job—reading and interpreting difficult texts—with the kind of prowess displayed by the Greatest of All Time.

What would it be like to read with that kind of passion, with that kind of skill? And if one did that, what kinds of things would be possible? After watching and listening to my father in his study all these years, what I know is that we'd better keep trying. ●

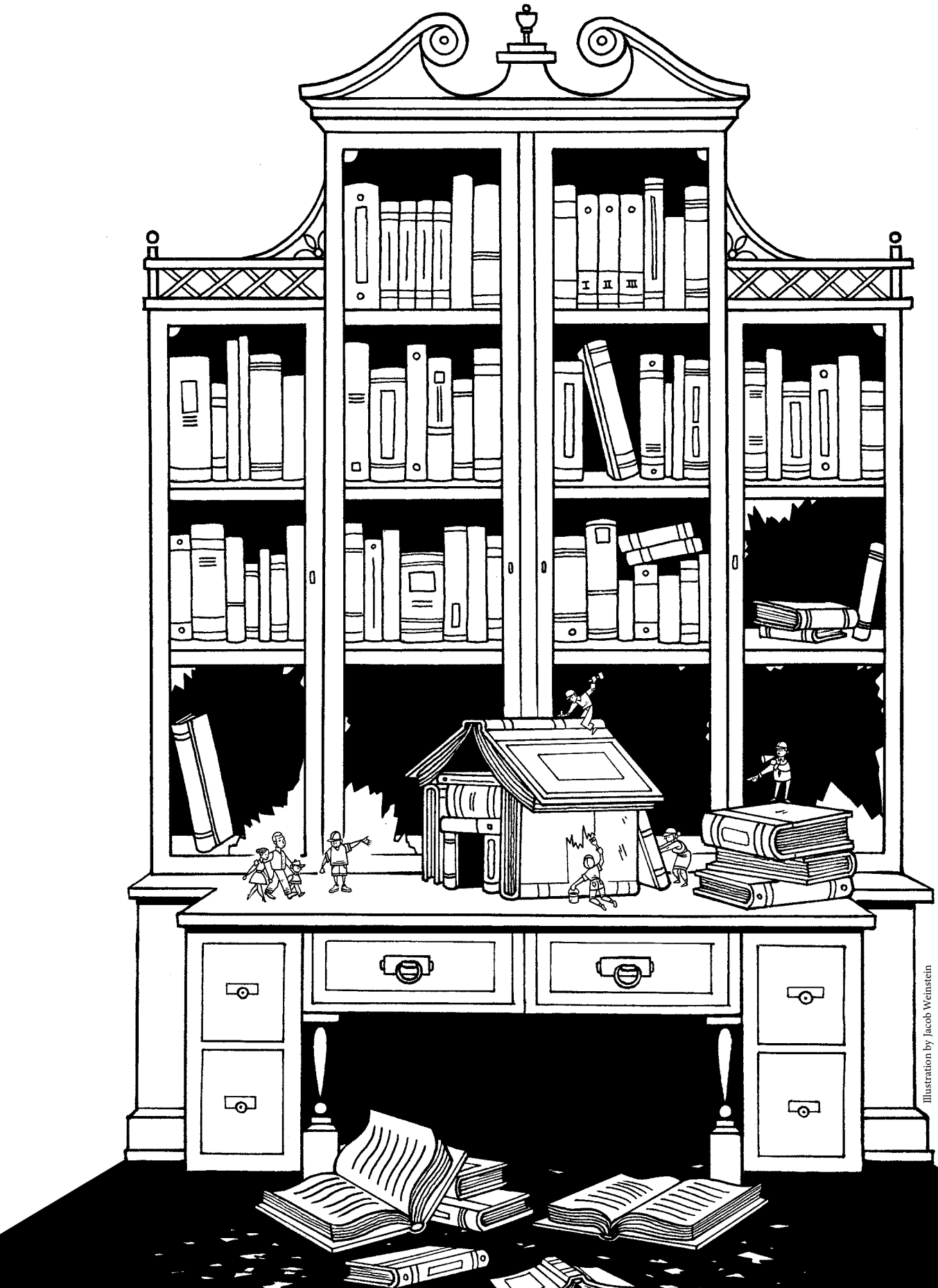

Illustration by Jacob Weinstein

WHAT'S NOT SERVED IN SERVICE LEARNING

BY DAVID NEIDORF

And boys, be in nothing so moderate as in love of man, a clever servant, insufferable master.
There is the trap that catches the noblest spirits, that caught—they say—God, when he walked on earth.
—Robinson Jeffers

HIGHER EDUCATION is a seller's market, but liberal arts colleges compete vigorously against universities and community colleges for highly qualified students who can pay full tuition. As a result, liberal arts programs have to market themselves like auto companies. Ten years ago, portfolio projects were all the rage; today the latest curricular fashion is *service learning,* in which students are asked, helped, or required to incorporate community service into their academic work.

A major impetus to service learning came from the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993, which defined service learning as "a method whereby students learn and develop through . . . service that . . . meets the needs of communities; . . . helps foster civic responsibility; is integrated into and enhances the academic curriculum . . . ; and provides structured time for students . . . to reflect on the service experience." With the phrase "learn and develop," the authors of the bill signaled their reasonable belief that mere "learning" isn't enough for the young, but they failed to elaborate upon the kinds of "development" that come about through the "service experience."

Service learning soon outstripped any association with the Clinton administration's national service and educational programs. It was taken up enthusiastically by public universities anxious to secure undergraduate budgets by reassuring conservative state legislators that the state gets a civic payoff for its academic investment. The number of offerings has risen steadily for several years. California State University, Monterey Bay, the newest school in the California State University System, promises that eventually all of its courses will "integrate work and learning, service and reflection." Portland State University, the largest university in Oregon, requires service-learning courses from students in their sophomore and senior years. A recent survey of a fifth of American colleges showed more than 6,000 service-learning courses offered by twelve percent of faculty to more than 700,000 students. Almost ten percent of these institutions required service courses for graduation. And the trend is not limited to colleges: according to the Department of Education, a majority of high schools in the country offer their faculty some kind of support to integrate service into coursework.

Certainly, nothing is bad and plenty is good about community service—it's hard to imagine anyone but libertarian or anarchist cranks standing against it. When possible, we should perform community service routinely. And young people, in particular, should do lots of it if they can. Young people spend four or more years in college communities at an age that craves meaningful action. Community service can offer a salutary furlough from a dispiriting and stunting sense of oneself as a bit player on the stage of life. So, it's a good thing that colleges have extracurricular programs to make community service possible for their students. But the key question is: Why should liberal arts colleges get into this business through their academic programs? How does community service, a good thing in itself, necessarily improve a liberal education? Is it the latest in a list of (to borrow a term from car manufacturers) "options" that college administrators feel compelled to offer? Or is it a whole new engine and navigational system that will revolutionize the industry?

The answer turns out to be plural. Sometimes service learning means sound and traditional educational practices repackaged under a new marketing and funding nameplate. Service can be another name for research: a biology course on neural regulation studies the effect of stressors like Alzheimer's disease, then requires that students volunteer in communities affected by such diseases. The service component exposes students to enough of the world that the science they study will be about something real. It is a nice way to gain students entry to nursing homes while minimizing their discomfort of being gawking spectators.

At other times, service provides audience engagement and response. For instance, at one well-respected college, creative-writing students work with a local elementary school by "sharing pieces written by both college and elementary school students." At a major southeastern university, accounting classes are encouraged to develop budgeting workshops for low-income families.

Liberal education must be, at least in part, about the same world as politics, and service learning is sometimes used to give students both the experience necessary to make sound political judgment and a longed-for sense of efficacy. The American Political Science Association promotes a course in human rights in which students help detained immigrants fill out paperwork and help build (as a credit-earning project) official requests for asylum. The American Philosophical Association provides the model of an ethics course that uses service in a community organization "to critically examine the concept of moral obligation by becoming part of the lives of those who are suffering."

Community service outside of school has long been a hallmark of American life. In a more direct age, it was called "duty." High levels of civic activity resulted from a unique combination of the traditional noblesse oblige of

European landholders with the communal self-reliance of Puritan and frontier communities. It provided a way to build character and community at the same time. In this sense, Habitat for Humanity is not far removed from the barn raisings and Boy Scout training of an earlier day. It is this tradition of community organization and can-do civic leadership that President Bush sought to revive in his 2002 State of the Union address, in which he called on each citizen to contribute 4,000 hours of community service over a lifetime.

Progressivism in the early twentieth century pushed many public institutions into community service, but the idea that it should play a central role in education traces back to William James's 1906 essay, "The Moral Equivalent of War." James suggests community service as a means of inspiring and civilizing the populace and as a healthy replacement for the maturing but destructive attractions of military culture and adventurism. "All the qualities of a man acquire dignity," James wrote, "when he knows that the service of the collectivity that owns him needs him." James isn't kidding about being "owned" by the collectivity. His fellow pragmatist and educational reformer John Dewey put it this way: "What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all its children. Any other ideal for our schools . . . destroys our democracy. . . . Here individualism and socialism are at one."

These complex origins in aristocratic virtue, Christian charity, New World self-reliance, and progressive politics explain why community service can appeal to or offend both the right and the left. The right would prefer to see faith-based service, and the left would prefer public institutions to take the lead. If the conservative notion of social responsibility leads to curricula emphasizing "character," then liberals are likely to

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design curricula exposing the structural foundations of social misery. Both will likely decry the politicization of coursework.

But these forces have been at play in American education for at least a century. There is no escape from their argument, and if we are fortunate, no resolution either—the best we can hope is that they balance out over time. They provide the background for the current service-learning craze, but they don't explain why it's happening now.

A liberal education requires worldly experience: the food for thought and the intellectual self-confidence that come only from a mind open to both the fragile sweetness and the breathtaking cruelty of the panoply of life. These virtues never take root if liberal learning is not respected as an end in itself—if all intellectual inquiry has to be economically useful, or else salutary when judged by reigning moral pieties.

Students need more and richer experience as a basis for education, not service learning in particular—a good reason for the old tradition of travel for the young who can afford it. I have seen college students build an entire two-year schedule around taking a class on the meaning of nature in which they will get to visit a farm and see lambs being born. The desire to see live animal births is a laudable sign of the desire to think about the mysteries of life—here masquerading, as they typically do, as concrete realities. What's sad here is the rarity of an experience once common to most people.

But still, no matter how worldly one becomes, the scope of an individual's experience is fatally limited. The *Odyssey* is a classic not because it was written a long time ago and still posts high sales numbers, but because no one who has spent real time with it can still think in the same old sleepy, narrow way about (among other things) nonjudicial incarceration, the mistreatment of prisoners, the gap between truth and meaning in the stories told by destitute immigrants, or the touchstone relation between a nation's character and the way it handles political asylum. But all this takes time and a real education in the reading of books—the kind of skill that liberal education ought not be embarrassed to take as one of its primary aims. Experience alone rarely gets you so far—and a few well-programmed hours in the lives of the suffering each semester, squeezed in between intramural basketball and waiting tables for gas money, won't even come close.

Advocates of service learning know that experience alone is limited, which is why reflection is invariably a component of any service-learning course. Typically students write a paper or have a discussion that provides opportunity to articulate the meaning and implica-

tion of the service experience. But without the deepening guidance that a liberal education provides, without access to the literary and scientific heritage that cultivates what Rousseau called "the art of thinking," such reflection almost invariably processes the same stale platitudes over and over—as anyone knows who has sat late at night in a dorm room or a bar talking through the day's experience, or arguing about world events in the light of that long-ago introductory course in macroeconomics. We all know lots of fathers and sons, but Homer, Sophocles, Machiavelli, or Turgenev can still cast richer lights on their relationships than observing (or serving) dozens more. Rousseau, an advocate of travel for the young, wrote that:

> The ancients traveled little . . . and yet one sees in those of their books which remain to us that they observed one another better than we observe our contemporaries . . . .There are many persons who are informed still less by travel than by books, because they are ignorant of the art of thinking.

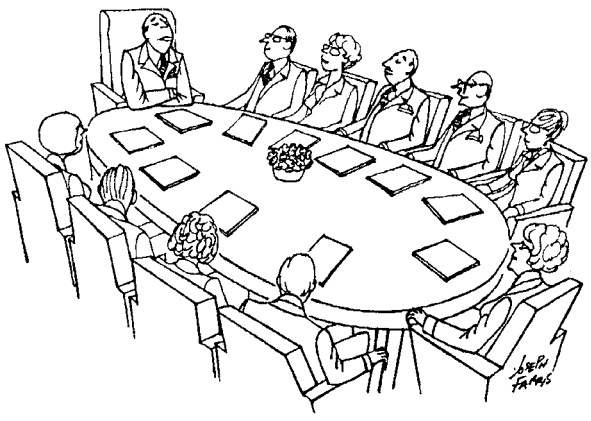
True, the literary cultivation Rousseau describes may not translate easily into the leadership skills needed to run an organizational meeting or to assemble enough rakes to clean the sheepfold. While essential, such prosaic skills have little just claim on scarce space in academic programs already squeezed by the expanding subject-knowledge demands of majors.

At root, the reason for the current academic emphasis on service is as simple as it is embarrassing. For all of its high and earnest talk about "critical thinking," "lifelong learning," and—with tiresome and grinding invariance—"excellence," liberal education has lost its way. In theory, a liberal education is something more formative than mere acquisition of knowledge and skills, and a liberal arts college is something different from a bush-league graduate school. But what?

Forced by the market to confront this question, colleges have discovered and begun selling first themselves, and then their stakeholders, on something that sensitive adolescents and recruiters for military and religious orders have always known. When your own life feels shallow, disconnected, and unredeemed by its aspirations, then service to others seems the antidote, the perfect healing answer. The sad paradox of service learning is that this answer isn't an answer at all. It simply underscores the disease it is meant to cure.

In brief, service learning purports to cure liberal education of the ennui of pervasive disciplinary fragmentation. Traditionally, a liberal arts education transcends the unavoidable narrowness of professional training, excluding job-training programs such as business or corporate communications. The distribution requirements that fill the early years of most undergraduate programs aren't merely the bait with which departments trawl for majors. They are also the vestiges of the humanistic ambitions of an earlier age for, at the least, its privileged leadership class: the knowledge that a broad education opens up vistas denied to experts, and the hope that the way the sciences and literary culture illuminate the world will enrich the sensibility of the educated.

Today, however, these goals are displaced by the instrumental role higher education plays in developing a competitive workforce. This focus follows necessarily from advances in specialized knowledge, and a corollary is that increasingly in academe, only specialists are respectable, only specialized knowledge legitimate. Professors have become narrowly focused experts, trained by other specialized experts to churn out more just like them. This explains the increasing importance and curricular time given to majors in most colleges, which now far outstrips the limited educational good of expe-



Before we start, has everyone shed their moral baggage?

riencing in-depth knowledge of a single subject—the original justification for majors in the first place.

As a result, the idea that a broad liberal education is a coherent, worthy, or humanizing end in itself—an idea always subject to hijack by dogmatists of all political stripes—is dead outside marginal outposts. It is edged by the need of modern society for expertise, and by students' need to prepare for careers. This takes precedence over, for example, teaching students to read Homer in a way that illuminates their sense of what it is like to be a refugee on strange shores, or teaching laboratory science in a way that illuminates the sources and limitations of modern science. Neither of these is the kind of work that generates publications in cutting-edge scholarship. So driven by mutually reinforcing pressures—the growth of the major system and the valuation of faculty on the basis of research production—liberal arts programs tend to become farm teams for the graduate school big leagues.

It is to the credit of undergraduate faculties that most find this state of affairs uncomfortable. There is nothing wrong with professional and disciplinary training in its place, but many professors sense that a liberal-arts college is not exactly that place. They know that very few students in a given class will go on to graduate school in the subject at hand, and they see that business as usual may not serve the needs of the others very well. Even as faculties and curricula specialize, campuses are rife with complaints about the absence of intellectual community. The best students resist the narrow example their professors set by taking double and even triple majors. Faculties know "liberal education" should mean something more, something held in common. The problem is how to say so.

But while the disciplines are atomizing, neither are the traditional goals of the interdisciplinary liberal arts self-justifying. Few colleges would dare to assert a broad and shared life of the mind as an end in itself, a pleasurable and worthy human good. Even if they were sure how to pursue it, such a declaration would be an embarrassment. The way work expectations are structured for most faculties prevents academics from reading and thinking widely, in effect restricting intellectual community to people who already share specialties. Together, the real and legitimate needs of students for workforce preparation and the endemic pragmatism of American life decree that any common aim for the liberal arts must be, without question, instrumental to some other purpose.

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And so it's here that service to community comes in handy. A world of specialists without community ties would be dreary indeed. Accordingly, in the last decade or so, the mission statements of liberal arts colleges began to add something like "civic responsibility" or "citizenship skills" to the lists of departmental disciplines within which students develop habits of thought.

Once effective and responsible community membership is an explicit goal of a liberal education, it makes sense for service learning to spread over the entire curriculum. Community service becomes a legitimate part of academic work because it redeems what are otherwise mere skills, requirements, and calculated self-interest. Service repairs the frayed fabric of the disciplines with the only thread that comes easily to hand. By becoming "part of the lives of the suffering," we can now see, those philosophy students don't just "recognize . . . a connection between [study] and the world beyond." They also cure their alienation; they bridge that divide.

Service has this curative allure because it retains an uplifting ring as a higher calling. National service, public service, service to humanity—all rank high on the list of things we honor with awards and would be happy to see (or make) our children do. This is true despite the vast range of meaning we assign to the word. A *service* or *servicing* is provided by waiters, auto mechanics, public officials, soldiers, priests, prostitutes, and cable companies. Interestingly, designated hours of community service have become a standard part of sentencing in the cases of

criminal offenders. *Servus* in Latin meant slave, someone whose life serves the purposes of others; the modern epitome of service is the network server, the computer "free" to execute workstation instructions because dedicated to no purposes of its own. Thus the honor bestowed on service entails an inevitable downward creep—to the familiar self-righteous cry of the most crude, petty, or discreditable business: "Hey, leave us alone—we're just offering the public a service."

The reason *service* is so vague is that it seems like a goal, a purpose, or a source of meaning—but it isn't. Like the computer server, *service* has no meaning or work of its own. Consider this dialogue I once had with an eight-year old:

Me: Now here's a "philosophy" question for you. What makes a person good?
Him: Oh, that's an easy one! A good person is somebody who helps other people.
Me: Really? So what does a good person help others to do?
Him: Whatever they are trying to do.
Me: Does a good person help others to do anything they might be trying to do, no matter what it is?
Him: Well . . . no, I guess not.
Me: Okay, then, out of all of the things people try to do, which ones does a good person help them to do?
Him: Oh, that's easy! He helps them do things that are good.

This child noticed right away that our conversation was circular—he discovered a question where, by repeating what parents and teachers had told him, he had seen no question before. The philosophical problem of the good uncovered in that little Socratic exchange—which, by the way, duplicates the opening argument in Plato's *Republic*—is precisely the problem that prevents service from being anything but an illusory solution to the problem of relevance faced by liberal arts education today.

College faculties are right to think that liberal education matters only if it aims at more than the disciplinary training and workforce building that occupy most of undergraduate education. But betting on the hope that civic responsibility and service learning will provide the missing educational goal traps them in the same circular and empty train of thought—they just say it with bigger words like *citizenship* and *responsibility*.

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The worth of service cannot be separated from the more vexing question of what competing ends are worth serving.

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It finally doesn't matter much to say a good person is someone who helps do good things, or service learning is good because it trains people to serve the community. The worth of service cannot be separated from the more vexing question of what competing ends are worth serving. The paradox of service learning is that it implicitly poses yet inevitably ignores that question—it merely exposes the confusion it was meant to heal. Service, by itself, is a child's idea of the good.

If liberal education can be said to liberate, it must free us from this kind of intellectual childhood. And it's here that the childish insistence that education be materially useful or socially salutary is especially deadly. Security and economic success, always necessary, are by themselves an impoverished kind of wealth. The respectable use of wealth requires having ideas about what wealth is for, about what human purposes are good.

As with wealth, service to the community also requires some idea of what goals a community ought to serve. To say that service isn't a coherent goal is also to say that "community" isn't, on the face of it, an end in itself. A community is as worthwhile as the kinds of satisfactions and happiness it supports—ultimately, the goals that give life meaning are what make a community worth supporting. Do those goals include fairness? Equality? Freedom, or maybe security? How about harmony, piety, power, or wisdom?

These alternatives name real and competing ends, perennial tensions that educated adults must consider, evaluate, and balance—in a working democracy, surely, but also in any life that aims at self-awareness and self-ownership. A liberal education is one that puts knowledge of the sciences and the arts in the service of this liberating ideal.

But thinking through these connections and possibilities takes time, and it takes a willingness to put the reigning pieties about a good person or a good community at risk. The difficult truth is that the educational practices that pursue this aim are at odds with the most efficient development of disciplinary expertise, and hence with the professional research of most faculty members. There is no easy solution to this problem; it must be endured rather than solved, in an ideal world balanced wisely by administrators. But

the pseudosolution of integrating academic work with service learning is worse even than a bad job of balancing, because it creates the illusion that the problem is solved.

When service to community is made an element of liberal education, what will be the source of the goals, the goods, that are served? Nothing else than the current orthodoxy of the community, whatever it may be—what William James called "the collectivity that owns" us. Offering a student an education like that is like offering your customer the latest model car—on the condition that they leave it on autopilot for the duration of their ownership. Of course, you have to trust whomever controls the autopilot to act in your best interest and take you where *you* want to go.

In this sense, a liberal education makes an effort to use learning to think beyond the collective. The respectable demand for relevance and experience in education—a demand initiated by John Dewey's influence on American education and brought to fruition by the reforms stemming from the 1960s—had as its enemy the spiritless alienation of the specialist and the cynical use of tradition by reactionaries. But it was a mistake to set up the idol of "community" in response, as if bowing down to it would make everything suddenly relevant.

For the uses of society, whatever society it is, service learning is indeed useful. But for the student who wants eventually to help judge, change, or even rule that society, and who wants to participate in the whole human life that justifies social service to begin with, the most relevant education is the one that goes beyond the confines of the useful and treats learning as a self-sufficient, animating aim. Faculties that advertise the importance of service learning simply testify that they have lost sight of this aim.

Let there be no mistake—community service is ennobling and worthwhile, and it should be done proudly. It is a good thing if colleges make service opportunities available for their students outside of the classroom. Many colleges, including my own, wisely make community participation a condition of attendance. But when service becomes service learning, when the gap between the purposes of acting and thinking is collapsed and denied in the classroom, the liberal education will be absent.

When college professors say, in effect, that what they have to teach isn't sufficiently worthwhile on its own terms, students would be wise to take their word for it—and to look for an education someplace else. ●

HOW I SINGLE-HANDEDLY WRECKED THE WESTERN NOVEL

BY RICHARD S. WHEELER

I'll concede that the title may be hyperbolic, but not to any great degree. In the two decades in which I have been churning out westerns, I have been the sole western novelist to jump the rails and give publishers exactly what they didn't want.

My publishers have responded by plastering a cowboy with blazing six-guns on the covers of many of my novels to conceal the heresies within, but it did little good. My loose literary ways trumped the orthodoxies of the western and eventually laid the genre in its grave—though that grave has yet to be filled in.

But let me step back a bit.

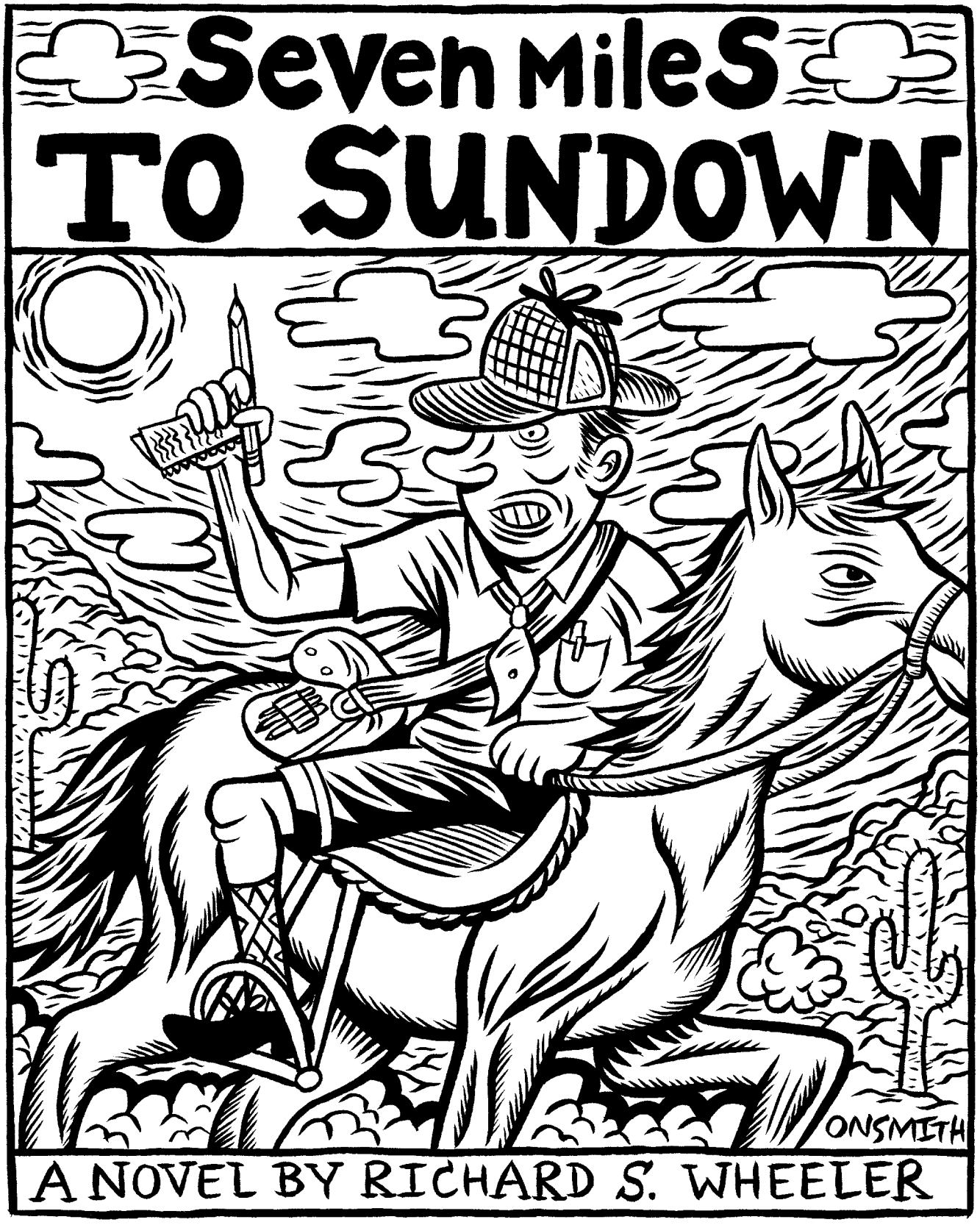
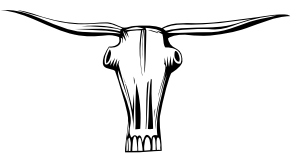


Illustration by Onsmith Jeremi

The western story is the most ritualized of all fiction. The usual western is a ranch romance, often featuring a feisty cowboy battling a cattle baron. Other ranch romances feature trail drives. Another western theme is the lawman—the sheriff, town marshal, or federal marshal—against bad guys. A third theme is the frontier skirmish with American Indians. There have also been a few novels about mining camps and lost treasure, but these have always been in the minority.

Western readers have always flocked to these traditional westerns, which they absorb as almost a religious rite. Louis L'Amour's stories are all traditional, featuring a brave young man wrestling with outlaws, range barons, or other malefactors, and he fueled an orthodoxy that has never changed. He did not create that orthodoxy: it has existed from the genre's earliest days.



The western story evolved from the dime novels—swift-moving, thrilling tales, mainly about the American Revolution, the frontier period, and the American Civil War—of Ned Buntline in the nineteenth century and the works of Owen Wister around a century ago (Wister's *The Virginian* is considered the first true western novel). As this evolution happened, the western began to acquire an extraordinary importance. It came to feature uniquely American themes—westward expansion, pioneers, buffaloes, American Indians, cattle ranching, the evolution of weapons from single-shot to repeaters, the blue-clad cavalry, early railroads, raw mining camps, mustangs, and overland trails. Western stories also embody those personal traits that made survival possible in a wild land, as well as the first rough justice imposed in a lawless land, such as the routine hanging of horse thieves. A whole branch of western fiction is devoted to lawmen, and especially historical lawmen such as Bat Masterson and Wyatt Earp, who showed up endlessly in novels, films, and television series.

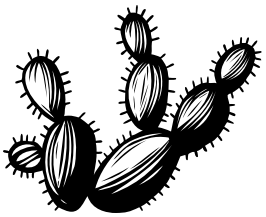
These stories also celebrated a number of character virtues: courage, bravery, audacity, loyalty, gallantry toward women, and a tender regard for the downtrodden. So deeply were these virtues embodied in the western heroes of our literature and film that generations of Americans of both sexes made them their own virtues. In the telling and retelling of these *American* stories, they became our national myth and the way we explained ourselves to the world.

Thus was born one of the most popular genres in American literature. Zane Grey's great novels often made the bestseller lists. Max Brand and Luke Short and Ernest Haycox all sold admirably. With the arrival of the mass market paperback, these westerns were suddenly available in groceries and drug stores everywhere for the low price of two bits, or thirty-five cents. Pulp fiction magazines were loaded with western novels that ran serially, along with the usual science fiction and detective fare. Slick magazines such as the *Saturday Evening Post* and *Colliers* often ran serial western novels as well as western short stories by authors such as Ernest Haycox or Dorothy M. Johnson.

But success has a way of mauling a body of entertainment literature. The more successful the western genre became, the more its editors wanted stories very like the ones that did so well. Western novels slid down the assembly lines of the great publishers like Model A Fords. In particular, the covers of nearly all the paperbacks featured cowboys with guns, done by artists who were very good at depicting action. That made the western instantly identifiable to potential buyers, but it also became the noose that gradually began to strangle the genre, as publishers hewed to what they felt to be the tried and true, and rejected what did not fit the formula.

The western field was larger by far than the pulp fiction being pumped out by paperback publishers. Distinguished authors took a crack at it, and the result was astonishing. Western stories were emerging from fine publishing houses. W. R. Burnett was being published by Alfred Knopf. Jack Schaefer, author of the western classic *Shane*, was published by Houghton Mifflin. The western novel, broadly defined to include frontier fiction of all periods and western Native American fiction, began collecting Pulitzer Prizes. Most recently, Larry McMurtry's *Lonesome Dove* won a Pulitzer, as did A. B. Guthrie, Jr.'s *The Way West*, Robert Lewis Taylor's *The Travels of Jaimie McPheeters*, Conrad Richter's *The Town*, and Oliver La Farge's Navajo love story, *Laughing Boy*. While it is true that there often was a gulf between these novels and

pulp western fiction, it is also true that they covered similar ground. Many of those who wrote elegantly of the west, such as Wallace Stegner, Bernard DeVoto, and A. B. Guthrie, Jr., professed to despise the lowly romantic western, but the putative gulf between their work and pulp westerns was always more modest than they claimed it to be.



By the late 1950s or early 1960s, western fiction was the dominant American genre. It regularly appeared in the hardcover lists of the New York City publishing houses and was a staple of most every mass market paperback line. Those years also saw the western film and TV series reach an apex. It seemed the lore and values of western storytelling reflected the lore and values of the republic.

But even as the genre reached its apogee, it began to decay. The western lines grew sclerotic as publishers tried to exclude anything that did not adhere to the proven, if formulaic, novel that had done well for generations. Then, through the 1970s and 1980s, everything changed. Cultural upheaval led to a reexamination of American history. The westward expansion was no longer something to be proud of; instead, it was seen as a greedy process that brutalized American Indians and Hispanics and robbed them of their homelands, despoiled an innocent and pastoral land, and unleashed ecological disaster. The very stories that touted the great virtues of courage and manliness were now seen within the matrix of a paternalistic and socially dubious expansionism. Since the 1970s, both readership and the publication of westerns have declined radically.

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For years now, mass market publishers, searching for new readers, have permitted western novelists to experiment to some small extent, but that does not hold true of the packaging, which is more rigid than ever. Whatever the story might be, it will probably receive a cover that features a cowboy with a gun, and a title that evokes memories of westerns in their heyday. (Authors have no control of the titles that are imposed by editors and marketing people on their original mass market westerns.)

I could never straitjacket my stories, and, beginning in the 1980s at least, publishers probably began to rue the day I started writing. My stories burst out of the classical western tradition and began to subvert the genre. I started by writing a few of the traditional ranch romances, but soon was out on new ground, exploring other ways to tell a western yarn. I developed a series that is still rolling along, called *Skye's West*. The hero is a British seaman who jumps ship in the 1820s, plunges into the American wilderness, acquires two Indian wives and a nasty, murderous horse named Jawbone, and becomes a guide. Two wives! Heresy in western circles. Skye takes missionaries, scientists, adventurers, hunters, and English peers into the wilderness, where they routinely get themselves into trouble. Not the usual western fare. Even worse, Skye is a binge boozer. That made him scandalous by traditional western standards.

As if that weren't bad enough, I started a new series about a bullheaded frontier editor, Sam Flint, who takes on cattle barons, mining magnates, and other nefarious types, employing words as bullets. He is no gunslinger, but a man whose pen *is* his sword. He defends the oppressed, the poor, the minorities, and the people being cheated by gamblers and crooks, and gets himself shot at for his troubles. These were not the usual ranch romance fare, but they were true to life. Frontier editors learned to keep a revolver handy because they were likely to be shot by the local cattle baron or a rival editor. Many a libel was settled with a bullet.

I began to write historical western fiction that took me even farther afield. In one, *Badlands*, the hero takes a party of early paleontologists to the Dakota badlands where they dig up bones and rile the Sioux. There's far more science than

gunplay in that one.

But it has been my mining camp stories that have led me farthest astray from western orthodoxy. In *The Bounty Trail*, the hero, if one can call him that, is Claudius P. Raines, a puffy, slack-jowled con man in patent leather shoes, black suit, and silk topper. His consort, MayBelle, is even less virtuous but considerably prettier. Between them, they revive a ghost town by salting the dead gold mines, achieving a rush they hope will yield them lots of loot reselling town lots.

My next mining camp novel, *Seven Miles to Sundown*, featured the most unusual western hero of all, Elwood LaGrange. He is a soi-disant lexicographer collecting new words out west. He wears knickers and argyle stockings and a deerstalker hat. That story also includes a Russian revolutionary, a Mexican gunrunner, and various sinister sorts. The publishers could not have a hero wearing knickers and argyle stockings and a deerstalker hat on the cover, so he was transformed into the usual cowboy with blazing six-guns.

And after that will come a novel not yet titled (they always guillotine my titles) about a mining engineer and geologist named Hannibal Jones who specializes in reviving moribund or abandoned mines. He always wears a white shirt, red bow tie, pith helmet, and tweed coat with leather elbow patches. In this case he is soon involved with a dead mining magnate's mistress and wives. There are Wobblies (Industrial Workers of the World) to deal with, a demented lieutenant with enough explosives to blow up Nevada, some rummy old miners, and the czar's former household steward, Colonel Rathke, who is a master of epicurean delights. They all need to find the grave of the mine's owner, the puckish Lucky Haggarty, hoping that Lucky's will may be buried in his coffin.

I suspect there will be a cowboy with blazing six-guns on the cover. I do hope the cowboy wears a pith helmet and bow tie and jodhpurs, but that may be too much to ask.

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As if that weren't enough apostasy, I have also been writing biographical novels about legendary western characters. In one, old Bat Masterson, now a New York newsman, and his common-law wife Emma revisit the places of his youth, goaded on by his friends Louella Parsons and Damon Runyon. What they find doesn't exactly match western mythology. Bat visits the early Los Angeles film studios, has dinner with a cranky old Wyatt Earp, gets married, and wrestles with Prohibition.

I also tackled Wyatt Earp, managing to antagonize all factions in the unending controversy surrounding the Earp brothers, mostly by arguing that the brothers were skilled lawmen but were innocents when it came to politics, propaganda, public relations, and dealing with newspaper reporters.

It was my intent to humanize all these western heroes, to let them become people with joys and griefs, good relationships and mangled ones, weaknesses and great strengths. None of these things are what the readers of traditional western fiction want to see. They want their heroes strong and manly, untarnished and unafraid.

So, here I am, writing stories that wreck the genre. Can anyone doubt it? Soon after I published my first novels at Doubleday Books, its western line expired. Soon after I published my novels at Walker and Company, its western line died. Soon after I published my westerns with M. Evans and Company, Fawcett Books, and then Ballantine Books, all their western lines croaked as well. Not long after I published my sole novel with Bantam Dell Publishing, its western line (except for L'Amour) faded into the sunset. The same happened after I published the last of my novels with NAL. I understand that soon after my last Pinnacle Books novel is published, its western line may be planted in a grave. That leaves only Forge Books, and its line is fading fast.

It is time for the romantic western to die. It served grandly for a century to enlighten and edify and delight Americans. But its day has come. I do hope it finds a happy place in the museums of literature. •

FILLING THE VOID

BY DANNY POSTEL

Discussed in this essay:
Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism
By Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson
University of Chicago Press, 312 pages, $24 (paperback)

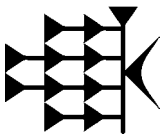
Between September 1978 and May 1979, the French philosopher Michel Foucault published more than twenty articles about the Iranian Revolution. Curiously, only three of them have ever been available in English—until now.

In *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism*, Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson have translated and assembled not only Foucault's articles on Iran but also interviews with Foucault on the subject (including one from an Iranian journal, translated from Persian), critical responses to Foucault's Iran writings by several intellectuals, letters to the editor of one of the magazines for which he wrote the articles, an open letter Foucault wrote to Iran's revolutionary prime minister, and statements by Simone de Beauvoir and Iranian feminists on the revolution.

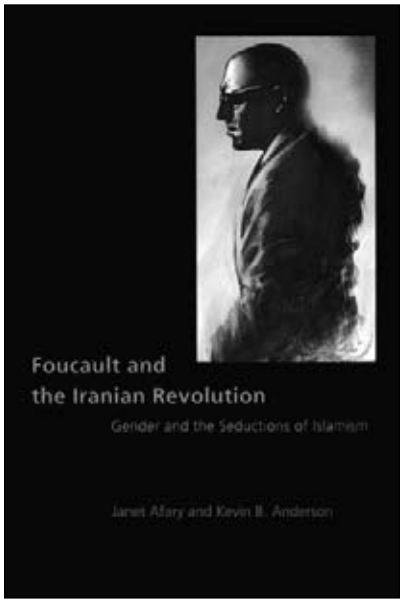
Illustration by Lisa Haney

It wasn't until 1994, with the French publication of a four-volume collection of Foucault's occasional writings—a full fifteen years after the fact, and a decade after his death—that several of his Iran articles were rescued from the proverbial trash heap of history. But we Anglophones had to wait another decade—more than a quarter-century since their original appearance—for the documents to be bound together. The dossier, twenty-two items and one hundred pages in all, appears as the appendix to this volume: another 160 pages are devoted to a narrative and critical reconstruction of the entire affair, which Afary and Anderson call "the most significant and passionate political commitment of [Foucault's] life."

The publication of this book is a major event in the world of Foucault scholarship, and it can be expected to generate a torrent of discussion, debate, reconsideration, and intellectual fireworks. Foucault's adventure in geopolitical journalism provoked considerable controversy at the time. In unearthing that controversy and forcing us to revisit it, Afary and Anderson's book is certain to evoke the same passions and push the same buttons that surfaced during the original dust-up, because the issues at the heart of the debate are still very much with us.



Foucault went to Iran in the fall of 1978 to write a series of articles about the growing unrest there for the Italian mass-circulation newspaper *Corriere della Sera*. He quickly developed an intense interest in what he saw unfolding around him, and



was deeply impressed by what he called the emergence of a "political spirituality" in the Islamist wing of the movement to topple the shah.

The shah was forced from power, and although the anti-shah movement was a coalition of Islamists, liberal nationalists, revolutionary Marxists, and secular feminists (with some of these categories bleeding into one another, quite literally), Ayatollah Khomeini and his followers were able to consolidate their control of the new regime, not only squeezing most of the other factions out of power, but unleashing a bloodbath of repression against many of their members.

Foucault's chronicle of these events comes in for tough criticism by Iranian and French feminists as well as some Marxists. At the time of the revolution, it became quickly apparent that the Islamists sought to turn back the clock "fourteen hundred years" on relations between the sexes, as one feminist group proclaimed, forcing women to wear the veil and relegating them to the home. Yet Foucault, his critics argued, seemed barely to notice—let alone express horror at—the Islamists' virulent sexism. Reading his account of the uprising, you would scarcely know that forced veiling and beating of women had become rampant in the Islamist wing of the movement—which was the main wing in which Foucault took interest.

Foucault was less than engaging in response to his critics. He accused them of Eurocentrism, of antireligious chauvinism, and of employing prosecutorial tactics against him, while refusing as a matter of principle to reply to one critique leveled at him. The situation under Khomeini's new Islamic republic deteriorated dramatically, with waves of repression against secularists, feminists, leftists, and homosexuals. Women were stabbed for refusing to wear the veil; leftists were rounded up, tortured, and made to disappear; and homosexuals were summarily executed.

With the exception of a single statement—which I'll discuss below—Foucault's response was one of silence: "From June 1979 until his death in 1984," Afary and Anderson report, "Foucault never referred publicly to Iran." He did not attempt to come to terms with what had happened, nor did he provide any expression of support for the victims of the new regime's tyranny.

How are we to make sense of this episode?

Philosophers aren't known for having the sharpest political judgment. Perhaps because of the conceptual altitude from which they peer down at the events of

their day, their political vision isn't always 20/20. Many students of philosophy are willing to forgive them for this and to chalk it up to naiveté about temporal affairs.

Afary and Anderson aren't quite so easy on Foucault. They fault him for displaying poor political judgment in his appraisal of Khomeini's movement. At the same time, however, they ask whether that judgment was connected to his larger intellectual project—or at least to certain aspects of it. They conclude that it was, and in important ways.

Foucault was hardly unique among Western intellectuals in throwing his support behind the movement to oust the shah—this was a cause célèbre on the Left. Where Foucault differed from many of his contemporaries was in hitching his wagon to the Islamist wing of the revolt (describing it as "beautiful") and in paying such scant attention to other elements of the anti-shah forces—including those of secular, liberal, feminist, and leftist persuasions. While French and American feminists like Simone de Beauvoir and Kate Millett stood in solidarity with their Iranian counterparts, Foucault viewed the modernist discourse of women's rights as foreign to the Iranian experience, as an orientalist superimposition on the religious masses.

Indeed, it was not *despite* the revolution's Islamist dimension that Foucault's intellectual-political juices got flowing, but *because* of it. He saw in the Iranian experience the promise of a whole different kind of rebellion—not just another national liberation struggle against colonialism, but something that went deeper: a revolt against modernity itself. Whereas third-world revolutions of the Marxist-Leninist variety were trapped, as Foucault saw it, in the language of the Enlightenment, the Iranians had chosen a different path—one that departed on a fundamental level from the logic of all modern revolutions and that promised not merely a new political order but, in his words, a whole different "regime of truth."

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Afary and Anderson link Foucault's intellectual intoxication with the Muharram rituals he witnessed to his fascination with what he called "limit experiences" that pushed the boundaries of life by flirting with death.

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Why did Foucault interpret the events around him in the particular way he did? Why, in the case of Iran, did he suspend the deep-seated skepticism and antiutopianism which so marked his overall approach to political questions? What exactly was it about the Iranian revolution that animated Foucault and stirred his imagination, leading him to view the events of 1978–79 as world-historical in nature?

Afary and Anderson propose two keys to making sense of this. The first is political and intellectual; the second, personal and existential.

Foucault's intellectual project was, on one level, a critique of the Enlightenment and the modern *Weltanschauung* it generated. Where its proponents championed the Enlightenment as a "science of freedom," Foucault saw something quite different: the machinations of power and domination. In a series of landmark studies, he scrutinized modern institutions such as the prison, the clinic, and the asylum in relation to the rise of the so-called human sciences of psychiatry, criminology, medicine, sexology, and other fields. In stark contrast to the secular priesthood of experts who saw modernity as an explosion of progress and knowledge, Foucault viewed modernity as the construction of an elaborate panopticon, a gigantic system of surveillance and social engineering.

I'll never forget the initial impact of reading Foucault as an undergraduate, the shock therapy of being confronted with this picture of modernity. His arresting, flabbergasting counternarrative about the modern world has immeasurably altered the landscape of contemporary scholarship—in the social sciences, history, and the humanities. His depiction of power and knowledge as inextricably interlaced, and the image he conjured of modern society as a sadistic prison house, are now burned into our collective cultural consciousness. It is not an exaggerated claim to say that we are, in one sense, all Foucauldians now.

But could it be, Afary and Anderson ask, that the widely remarked upon one-sidedness of this astonishing picture of modernity colored Foucault's understanding of the events he witnessed in Iran? Might his fierce enmity toward modernity have led him to embrace a revolt against modernity, and blinded him to the dark side of that revolt?

The second, or existential, factor in the equation has to with the religious rituals Foucault witnessed in Iran, and their impact on what we might call his sexual imaginary. Foucault was deeply moved by the penitence and martyrdom rituals he saw performed in the streets of Tehran. During this period, known as Muharram, Shia Muslims commemorate the murder of Hussein, the son of Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law Ali; as a descendant of Muhammad, Shiites believe, Hussein was the rightful heir to the leadership of the Muslim caliphate but was murdered by his opponents (the Umayyads) in a bloodthirsty power grab. This dispute marks the fork in the road between the Sunni and Shia branches of Islam, a feud that has important implications for Middle Eastern politics today.

Shiites mourn the massacre of Hussein and his followers through theatrical reenactment processions and self-flagellation rites; the mainly male participants in these passion plays chant eulogies, rhythmically beat their backs and chests with chains or sticks, use knives and swords to inflict wounds to their foreheads, and scorch their bodies. All the while, onlookers alternate between laughter and sobbing. "[Seemingly] oblivious to any sense of pain," some "cut their scalps in moments of frenzy," Afary and Anderson write, while others "smear dirt on their foreheads, indicating their eagerness to be buried for Hussein." Through the rites of Muharram, write Afary and Anderson, an "unacknowledged and unspoken, but clearly palpable, sexual energy is released on the streets." Noting "the whip and the little chains that the men twirl around to lash their shoulders," one scholar of Shiism was struck by what he called "the sexual nature of this festival of death."

Death figures centrally here. Indeed, Foucault himself described Muharram as "a time when the crowds are ready to advance toward death in the intoxication of sacrifice." As the revolt against the shah grew, Muharram became increasingly charged with political symbolism, with the evil Umayyads representing the shah maneuvering to destroy Khomeini, who of course represented Hussein. Foucault was particularly moved by the "intoxication of sacrifice" he witnessed among Khomeini's followers, who were not merely willing to face their deaths for the cause, but seemed almost hell-bent on it—"more focused, perhaps, on martyrdom than on victory," Foucault observed. One is almost tempted to call it "necropolitics."

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My friend Max Cafard poignantly captures the psychological dynamic at work here when he calls Mel Gibson's film about the final hours of the life of Jesus *The Passion of the Masochrist*. Whether in Christian or Islamic form, both are primal scenes of male suffering and physical agony; both are infused with the leitmotif of injustice and involve the internalization of guilt; both aestheticize violence and reach their climax in death; both contain more than a hint of sadomasochism and an undercurrent of homoeroticism.

In his 1993 biography *The Passion of Michel Foucault*, James Miller explored the interface between his subject's intellectual and personal preoccupations: Foucault's lifelong fascination with phenomena like pain, punishment, surveillance, and codes of sexual "normality" and "abnormality," on the one hand, and the penchant he displayed for sadomasochistic homoeroticism in his private life. Afary and Anderson attempt to connect the dots, as it were, between Miller's portrait and Foucault's writings on Iran. They link Foucault's intellectual intoxication with the Muharram rituals he witnessed to his fascination with what he called "limit experiences" that pushed the boundaries of life by flirting with death. (In his book *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault*, Alexander Nehamas celebrates Foucault's attraction to limit experiences as an expression of the eudaemonistic ethic of approaching one's life as a work of art. I see no reason to criticize Foucault for this; I just don't think it's a very useful way to make sense of political life.)

Adding a third ingredient to the mix, Afary and Anderson see all of this as intertwined with Foucault's quest, in the second and third volumes of his *History of Sexuality*, for an alternative sexual ethos to our modern, scientific, post-

Freudian discourse of "liberation." In search of this alternative ethos, he turned to ancient Greece and early Christendom, which contained, in his view, more open approaches to sexuality, and particularly to homosexuality. In his book *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality: And Other Essays on Greek Love,* David Halperin wrote that Foucault reached into the past as an intervention into the present, in order "to discover a new way of seeing ourselves and, possibly, to create new ways of inhabiting our own skins."

In an intricate and gripping interpretation, Afary and Anderson read Foucault's articles on Iran in tandem with his *History of Sexuality*—which, they point out, he was writing during the period of his travels to Iran. He imagined in Iranian sexuality—particularly in the Muharram passion plays—precisely the kind of homoerotic openness that he venerated in the classical Mediterranean world. (In due course of time, it must be noted, theocratic Iran turned out to be considerably less open to homoeroticism—to put it mildly—than Foucault imagined it might be.) Nevertheless, all of these elements were at work, Afary and Anderson venture, simultaneously: Foucault's pursuit of an alternative sexual ethos in the past; his personal proclivity for sadomasochistic homoeroticism and attraction to death; the excitement of the arresting spectacle of sexually charged religious rituals centered on pain and martyrdom; and his hunger for a new political spirituality that broke with both liberal-democratic capitalism and revolutionary Marxism.

Afary and Anderson sum up what they take to be the three points of convergence between Foucault's postmodernism and Khomeini's anti- or premodernism as such: (1) an opposition to the imperialist and colonialist policies of the West; (2) a rejection of certain cultural and social aspects of modernity that had transformed gender roles and social hierarchies in both the East and the West; and (3) a fascination with the discourse of death as a path toward authenticity and salvation, a discourse that included rites of penitence and aimed at refashioning the self.

Afary and Anderson offer a feminist and leftist critique of Foucault vis-à-vis Iran, taking him to task for dismissing feminist warnings about the dangers the Islamists posed to women and for downplaying the authoritarianism of Khomeini's movement. They also accuse Foucault of the very sin he accused some of his critics of: orientalism. Foucault portrayed the Iranian people as totally unified in their support for Khomeini and his program of Islamic government. The clerics, he wrote, embodied Iran's "collective will," a movement "without splits or internal conflicts." This, Afary and Anderson argue, was empirically inaccurate—an obfuscation of the huge divisions, for example, between the many secular feminists in the anti-shah movement and the Islamists, whose repressive program was a threat to women's rights. It was a projection, they contend, of Foucault's own sympathies and fantasies onto an Iranian context he knew little about. The notion that Iranians think with one mind was quintessential orientalism.

Just before his death, Foucault wrote a pregnant essay titled "What is Enlightenment?" to mark the 200th anniversary of the publication of Immanuel Kant's famous essay by the same title. In it, he seemed to be shifting philosophical gears and reflecting on his legacy. We should eschew, he admonished, "all projects that claim to be global or radical." "In fact we know from experience," he continued, "that the claim to escape from the system of contemporary reality so as to produce the overall programs of another society, of another way of thinking, another culture, another vision of the world, has led only to the return of the most dangerous traditions." Though Iran is nowhere mentioned in the essay, Afary and Anderson suggest that the tragic outcome of the revolution—to which Foucault lent his enthusiastic support—formed the subtext to these lines and weighed heavily on his intellectual conscience. If they are right, Foucault can perhaps be blamed for never making this reconsideration explicit. And yet one can appreciate his effort to come to grips, however quietly, with the experience.

Afary and Anderson are engaged in an admittedly speculative enterprise, and are thus wide open to criticism. Champions of Foucault will likely disagree with the conclusions these authors reach. This is as it should be. Among the virtues of this book is that its publication of original source material in English will allow readers of Foucault to judge for themselves. The full text of everything Foucault ever published on Iran is here, in Foucault's own words, allowing us—and history—to ruminate on one more illuminating chapter in the history of philosopher-kings. ●

EDITOR'S CHOICE

God Lives in St. Petersburg: And Other Stories
By Tom Bissell
Pantheon, 212 pages, $20

In Bissell's new book, *God Lives in St. Petersburg*, we learn that a picture of Ernest Hemingway adorns every English classroom in the nations of the former Soviet Union. Along with Jack London and Paul Robeson, Hemingway represented a model American for Soviet youth. But for most Americans, Hemingway represents the ideal expatriate, the artist who has forsaken his homeland for the pursuit of truth and the occasional marlin.

Yet as the stories in Bissell's book show us, today's aspiring expats (no matter how earnest) have become absurd in a world of unchallenged American power. These six tales follow Americans in Central Asia, specifically the region's former Soviet republics and Afghanistan. Each story's principal character goes abroad looking for something—an escape from the death of a loved one, aid for an ailing marriage, academic prestige—only to find one's personal assumptions challenged far from home. Each character also loses something precious while retaining a cumbersome American-ness.

Many of the observations of these stories (and an earlier memoir) are based on Bissell's experience as an English teacher in Uzbekistan. As a result, the book is more about what it means to be American overseas than to be Tajik or Kyrgyz at home. This does not represent neglect on the author's part, but honesty. Books that purport to portray the authentic culture or genuine plight of another people often wind up as patronizing or just plain wrong. Bissell's book is neither. Indeed, he has quite accurately drawn the many wrinkles in America's present, ambivalent face to the world.

For instance, in the title story (which won the Pushcart Prize), a young missionary named Timothy discovers how much of his identity, both religious and sexual, depended on familiar surroundings. In the United States, the presence of God had been a "glowing cylinder." In Uzbekistan, that presence has become distant radio static. Meanwhile, his students in an English class, cynical about the discredited rumor of a man named Khristos, seem to care more about Timothy's relationship to the American embassy than to the divine.

It's no surprise that this story, like most in the collection, ends up badly for its main character. But Bissell does not appear to have an anti-American axe to grind. Each of his characters decays in a uniquely beautiful way, independent of birthplace. Through Bissell's dexterous narrative style, not unlike Hemingway's, we discover that we Americans can still get good and lost just about anywhere. ●
—Andy Nelson

The Bomb: A Life
By Gerard J. DeGroot
Harvard University Press, 432 pages, $27.95

Though it may seem difficult to contemplate, this year's sixtieth birthday of the first detonation of an atomic weapon forces us to bend our nuclear language and metaphors to certain geriatric truths. The shock, the novelty, and even the horror of the bomb have faded—or at least have become familiar. Maybe the kitsch apocalypse of Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* or the stand-up routines Lenny Bruce enacted at the height of the Cold War ("We're all gonna die!") began to work their corrosive effect on our nuclear nightmares many decades ago.

Reading Gerard DeGroot's 400-plus pages of history on the subject of the bomb, one wonders if anyone was ever properly afraid—even in the 1950s, when pictures of the victims in Japan were still fresh, and America's own soldiers and livestock were regularly used as test subjects in the vicinity of nuclear blasts set off in the empty heartland. "For most people in Nevada," DeGroot intones, "the atomic blast had the same pleasant sound as the chink-chink of a cash register." He goes on to detail with laconic humor the Miss Atomic Bomb pageant, "in which contestants wore a flatteringly shaped cutout of a mushroom cloud pinned to their swimsuits," and the fads of atomic hairdos and cocktails in vogue at parties "organized to coincide with test shots" that rocked the desert with unbelievable megatonnage.

DeGroot's willingness to document the pop cultural and social fallout from the bomb does not get in the way, however, of his serious account of the science, politics, and use of technology. Though many of the particulars are mentioned in media accounts, DeGroot provides thorough coverage. He includes the massive genetic damage visited on survivors in Japan's bombed cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki; the poisoning of large parts of the earth's surface (by one account, according to DeGroot, as much as forty percent of the Soviet land mass); the problem of guarding nuclear materials in an age of failed nation-states and robust terrorist organizations; and the fundamental storage problems involved in disposing of nuclear waste, which requires planning not for years but for millennia.

Some readers may find DeGroot's sense of humor inappropriate to his subject. But it's important to say that this book avoids the kind of lugubriously moral tone that weighs down so much writing about the nuclear age. In other words, the reader can experience moral enlightenment delivered by way of clearheaded wit, rather than a jeremiad or a flagellant's lash. DeGroot writes about an episode of *The Simpsons* in which Sideshow Bob "threatens to detonate a ten-megaton missile . . . unless all television is eliminated. . . . The world (or at least television) is saved when Sideshow Bob fails to notice that the missile carries the notice: 'Best before November 1959.'" As DeGroot comments, this episode of *The Simpsons* "was painfully close to the truth. Bombs do indeed have a limited shelf life."

No scientists know exactly how those creaky, cranky, geriatric weapons will behave if, heaven forbid, they are activated in a full-out nuclear exchange. It's hardly a problem on the same scale as proliferation among aspiring or fledgling nuclear powers such as Iran or North Korea, but it does illustrate that there are more heads to the Hydra of the bomb than we at first imagined in those heady, early days of engineering prowess and wasted desert. ●

Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found
By Suketu Mehta
Alfred A. Knopf, 542 pages, $27.95

India, with a population second in the world only to China's, can lay claim to more than its share of impossibly large megacities. Bombay tops them all. As Suketu Mehta tells us at the outset of *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found*, the population of greater Bombay exceeds that of 173 countries. "With 14 million people, Bombay is the biggest city on the planet of a race of city dwellers. Bombay is the future of urban civilization on the planet. God help us."

Mehta, who was born in Calcutta and then lived in Bombay as a boy for nine years before moving to Jackson Heights in Queens, New York, has written a book that expounds the sociological and logistical nightmares of such a population (Mehta does not scrimp, for instance, on the mind-boggling details of Bombay's garbage disposal and sewer systems), but then succeeds marvelously on several other levels as well. Mehta's choice of individual subjects allows him to explore the dominant cultural institutions that make up modern Bombay. There is the police commander, Ajay, who uses torture without a second thought in his running battle with Bombay's sometimes overwhelming organized crime syndicates. There is Monalisa, one of the city's most celebrated and beautiful bar dancers, who, in spite of her fame, has made multiple suicide attempts. We are taken into the world of the Bollywood film industry, and learn how a boy from a village grows up to become a screen star in that system (Mehta has himself co-authored a Bollywood film, *Mission Kashmir*). Finally, there is a high-caste family of super-rich converts to Jainism, a religion which may well qualify as the ultimate form of worldly renunciation.

It is worth debating the degree to which Mehta becomes enmeshed, or complicit, in the lives of some of his subjects. One thing is sure: this existential kind of risk is one of the elements of *Maximum City* that gives the book its strong literary flavor and takes it out of the realm of mere reportage. Mehta details Monalisa's account of how she was deflowered as a young girl by a film producer ("Pataoed—not rape, not quite; not seduction, not quite. More like a confidence trick"), but a few months later, finds himself in Monalisa's own apartment where he continues his interview over lunch:

> When I am ready to eat she suggests we sit on the bed she sleeps in, and I prop myself up on her pillows and put my feet on the bed. She gets on and stretches out likewise, very close to me. I see her very long legs for the first time, in her very tight spandex shorts. She hugs a pillow and points out the bloodstains on it. "This if from when I cut myself. I haven't got it washed." Behind us is a telephone scratch pad filled with dozens of numbers, most of them beginning with 98: mobile phone numbers. . . . Monalisa is the kind of girl men don't give their home numbers to.

Mehta seems fully aware that his role as a journalist with full access to Monalisa's life story runs parallel to that of one of Monalisa's regular customers; his relationship to Monalisa consistently treads that very thin line between exploration and exploitation. Likewise, as he spends a considerable amount of time in the company of a police commissioner named Ajay, he bears witness to scenes of excruciating pain and torture inflicted by Ajay's minions on criminal suspects. Mehta stands by, watching, taking notes. In one incident, the cops apprehend three suspects in a car loaded with counterfeit money, then take them to the station where they are stripped and methodically beaten in order to extract information. Mehta writes:

> "Bring in the electric wire and the strap," Ajay commands a constable. The constable comes back with a thick leather strap, about six inches wide, attached to a wooden handle. One of the cops takes it and brings it savagely down across the fat man's face. The sound of the leather hitting bare human flesh is impossible to describe unless you've heard it. The man screams. The cop brings it down again.

Ajay, unmoved, explains to another observer who is thoroughly sickened by the spectacle, "This is nothing," says the police commander, "this is Walt Disney."

One can argue that the author's role as journalist in scenes such as this demonstrates once again the moral lacunae necessary to practicing the journalist's art: withdrawing or withholding a bit of one's own humanity in order to record such horror. In terms of literary art, however, we see a writer grappling with knowledge of himself as well as of his subjects. Mehta's book is a masterpiece. Considered as a work of literary journalism, it is to urban reporting what Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* was to crime-writing. Anyone who thinks or writes about urban culture from this time forward will have to have Mehta on the shelf, and any serious traveler to Bombay will do well to tuck this into their flight bag. ●

Free Culture: How Big Media Uses Technology and the Law to Lock Down Culture and Control Creativity
By Lawrence Lessig
The Penguin Press, 368 pages, $24.95

Lawrence Lessig, Stanford Law School professor and chair of the flexible copyright initiative Creative Commons, lays out a litany of charges against current copyright legislation in his new book, *Free Culture*. Lessig accuses the American judicial system of bowing to pressure from large corporate interests and creating a "permission culture" where intellectual property—songs, printed material, computer files, and images both moving and still—cannot be used without first securing the right of use from the copyright owner. The inconvenience and cost of hiring attorneys to negotiate and secure permission to reproduce copyrighted material are bad enough; even worse are the scope and duration given to current copyright protection law. According to Lessig, the current law harms our culture by staunching the flow of free and creative exchange, thus making any derivative use virtually impossible. He makes a nuanced and persuasive case for changing current copyright legislation by using Thomas Jefferson's distinction between intellectual property and physical property: "He who receives an idea from me, receives instruction himself without lessening mine."

Culture is formed through the free exchange of information. Lessig shows how Americans have historically appropriated bits and pieces of culture, reassembled these pieces, and fixed them in tangible forms to serve our own personal and commercial gains—a process he calls *slash, mix, burn*. Certainly we need to protect ideas and make them profitable for their creators, thereby promoting creativity and driving the market. However, we cannot protect them to the point where new ideas and new works derived from old works are never permitted, or are allowed only within a system of constraining permissions that must be negotiated with the aid of an attorney. For Lessig, the danger lies in the duration and scope of legal protection afforded to current copyright holders, which has been expanded eleven times in the last forty years: All works created before 1978 have a ninety-five-year term of protection, with no need to renew. In 1962, the maximum copyright term allowed by law was fifty-six years for a newly created work, and one had to apply for renewal after twenty-eight years. Under current legislation, copyright will be protected for the life of the author plus fifty years with no renewal necessary. Consider how the Walt Disney Company turned famous fairy tales into multimillion-dollar films. Does the estate of the Brothers Grimm get a cut of that? Of course not. As the copyright holder for *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* since 1937, Mickey and Co. still derive a good (nay, great) amount of income from not only the film, but also the officially licensed products. But for the grace of the Sonny Bono Copyright Term Extension Act of 1998, Snow White would pass into the public domain—free for all to use—in 2012. Under the extension act it will remain Disney's sole property until 2032.

Lessig claims that *Snow White* is part of a slim margin (around five percent, by his estimate) of material under copyright that retains any of its commercial viability for more than a few years after its release. The other ninety-five percent of material under copyright with little or no commercial viability—newsreels and historical documents, as well as old songs, books, and movies whose ownership is unknown or very difficult to ascertain without an attorney yet still protected by copyright—is held hostage unconstitutionally, Lessig contends, by a system fed with corporate dollars to protect a margin of profit for few at the expense of many.

Lessig outlines how major lawsuits by copyright holders against small-time copyright infringers, coupled with the expansion in copyright duration, are creating an atmosphere of hostility toward citizens and lining the pockets of lobbyists for the five major media conglomerates. (The Recording Industry Association of America can, and does, sue copyright "pirates" for up to $15 million for downloading a ten-song CD from the Internet—that's about 15,000 times the fine you would pay for stealing that same CD from a store.) Here lies Lessig's main point: If a few companies hold the majority of copyrights, then they decide who does and does not use images, books, songs, and so on—and ultimately these companies will, for all practical purposes, control culture itself.

It is Lessig's hope that *Free Culture* will help citizens understand how the expansion of copyright legislation does little to protect consumers and actually harms artists and the very process by which they create. Until the day Lessig wins his copyright battle, if you are seeking historical photos for an archive, trying to make a documentary with news footage, or simply looking for songs to sing around the fire at Girl Scout camp, you'd better call your attorney. ●
—Jason A. Smith

Genesis, Geniuses, and Guinnesses

By Jamie Huston

One of the American masters of horror fiction, H. P. Lovecraft, once wrote about a book so alien to our finite minds that reading it for too long would drive you insane. He was referring to the mythical *Necronomicon*, but the description applies just as well to James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, published in 1939.

That weirdness makes Joyce's last work inordinately unpopular. *Finnegans Wake* is rarely acknowledged, and even then often reluctantly, like Grandma's collection of potato chips that resemble St. Jude. In the Modern Library's infamous list of the 100 best novels of the twentieth century, Joyce's two earlier novels, *Ulysses* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, ranked first and third, respectively. However, *Finnegans Wake* came in at seventy-seven. A companion list created by online voting also included *Ulysses* and *Portrait*, but left the *Wake* off entirely.

What gives? It's not as if Joyce's earlier works were easy to read. (*Ulysses* was only the second English work of fiction to use the word *honorificabilitudinitatibus*—Shakespeare's play *Love's Labour's Lost* was the first). But readers with some small measure of perseverance could make sense of them. At least both *Ulysses* and *Portrait* had some semblance of order, with a plot, settings, and characters—hardly conventional, but still packing a story in there somewhere. *Finnegans Wake* has none of these. Instead, the reader gets more than 600 pages of pure puns, allusions, and whimsical riddles, whose loose association comes in the context of a dream (Joyce called the *Wake* the "night" companion to *Ulysses*'s "day"). In this dream, we find human archetypes interacting amid references to every tidbit of trivia you can imagine, with scraps of dozens of languages thrown into the mix just for fun. Brand new words—never before seen in the English language prior to 1939—proliferate.

In its most famous feature, *Finnegans Wake* abruptly ends in the middle of a sentence that continues on the first page, creating a circular story with no true beginning or end. Joyce couldn't have told us any more clearly to leave our linear expectations at the door.

So perhaps readers don't like the *Wake* because they don't understand it, and they are reluctant to undergo a counterproductively quixotic quest (to say the least). That's because there is not much to understand. It's best enjoyed simply as a swiftly flowing river of wordplay. And at this level of ecstatically abstract linguistic celebration, *Finnegans Wake* is the richest work in the English language. You'd be selling yourself short by ignoring it altogether, so here's some advice for getting something out of it.

Load up on puns. Master wordsmith Joyce had the time of his life creating his portmanteau "slanguage," often sounding more like lyrics from Nirvana or REM than English litera-

ture. Some favorite puns: a double reference to gambling and sex ("pennis in the sluts maschine") and a decidedly negative Yuletide wish ("End a muddy crushmess!"). Truly, Joyce had a well-rounded inventory of words, or a "volupkabulary." Keep your eyes open for thousands of these.

Bring your friends. Want to one-up Oprah's bold book club choice of Faulknerian fables? Round up your overeducated cohorts and throw the snarkiest literary discussion the world has ever seen. Take turns reading out loud, and brainstorm every interpretation and association you can. Nobody can find all the possible meanings of the text, much less notice its infinite references, on their own.

It's one to muse. Don't plan on reading this book cover to cover. That kind of compulsive guilt is simply not worth the cost. You might as well pick a random number between 3 and 628 and start on that page. Don't plan on going quickly, either. Like Lovecraft's *Necronomicon*, reading too much at once will only burn you out. It might take years before you read it all. You might never read it all. Just pick at it and find things you like, then let them marinate in your mind's stew for a while. Joyce's juices are exotic; let them simmer.

Use a pen. Before long, your copy of the *Wake* should look like some endlessly recycled poetry text in a college bookstore—hopelessly underlined, highlighted, dog-eared, sticky-noted, coffee-stained, and annotated in your own swanky style. It will help your self-esteem to keep track of parts you liked and things you understood. Throw in some doodles and the *Wake* is yours.

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Finnegan's Wake is rarely acknowledged, and even then often reluctantly, like Grandma's collection of potato chips that resemble St. Jude.

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Read far more lore. Each page of the *Wake* has enough winks at both serious academia and pop culture to make Matt Groening wet his shorts. Make a game of it: see how many references to music you can find on 359.31–360.16.

Don't worry that you don't know as much as he did. Joyce's notes for the *Wake* spanned forty-seven notebooks, and he spent seventeen years writing it. The most accessible guide to Joyce's myriad references is William York Tindall's *A Reader's Guide to Finnegans Wake*. Get it.

Be self-absorbed. The Mirror of Erised in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* "shows us nothing more or less than the deepest, most desperate desire of our hearts." *Finnegans Wake* does the same. That's the plus side of a book so dense that it can only be understood as a subjective riddle. Whatever your memories and experiences, you'll find tons of the *Wake* directed squarely at you. Say you come across the word "guenneses." The Sunday school memories suggest the biblical book of Genesis. The linguistic puzzler sees geniuses. And the drinker sees Guinness. All three are correct—if only because Joyce was all three of those people.

If you haven't seen your cup of tea yet, don't fret; Joyce has something on the menu for you. That's why the *Wake* is so damn long. Because it plumbs the murky depths of the common human soul, *Finnegans Wake* is every bit as universal as any play by the Bard (or, as Joyce refers to him, "Shapesphere"). To put it simply, "Here Comes Everybody."

And now you read the words aloud. Joyce's prose was his best poetry. Like all good nonsense nursery rhymes, it's even more fun to hear than to see. You will be surprised at how well it rolls off your tongue, like Irish honey. Listen to Joyce read some of it himself at www.finneganswake.org/joycereading.htm.

One more thing is worth noting to help you enjoy the ride. Joyce suggests a sort of setting for all of this monumental literary effort: the "chaosmos." Chaos + cosmos = the whole crazy universe. Could anything be more welcoming?

So relax, let go of your rational hang-ups, and get ready for a no-hassles guided tour of humanity's collective id. Only in the *Wake* can you dream like this. ●

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