INFLUENCED BY

A Survey of Writers on Contemporary Writers

Listening to writers read and discuss their work at Newtonville Books, the bookstore my wife and I own outside Boston, I began to wonder which living, contemporary writers held the most influence over their work. This survey is not meant to be
comprehensive, but is the result of my posing the question to as many writers as I could ask.

—Jaime Clarke

CHRIS ADRIAN

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NELLIE HERMANN: Why do we write?

It’s an age-old question, one with a million answers and the whole weight of human history behind it, one that each of us answers for ourselves, perhaps in our work, perhaps in the depths of our solitary nights. Libraries have shelves of tomes of aesthetic theory that attempt to answer it, and many anthologies and MFA program symposiums attempt it too. As with all of our most difficult questions, it is so complex to answer, so deeply unsayable, in many instances, that it is perhaps most often not asked and not answered at all.

In my day job, I teach creative writing to health care practitioners and other folks who may not practice it in their daily lives. I encourage those who are not used to exercising their imagination to try out their muscles, to embark on the creative process and see where it takes them—to use the imagination as a tool towards understanding, to exhibit and unleash its powers for processing questions and unimaginable things. I have learned that the average person feels uncomfortable with the notion of being “creative,” thinking that it is something foreign, when in fact they are creative in a million ways every day. How does a physician or a nurse wrestle with the awful truths of body and soul that they confront daily? However s/he does it, there is creativity in that wrestling, I guarantee. I tell them: this is why we write. Caregivers and patients alike, this wrestling is what it is for.

Chris Adrian makes plain the wrestling—his work says all that I’ve ever struggled to say in the classroom, and without directly addressing any of it at all. His work says: of course we wrestle, for wrestling is the moral, and the mortal, thing to do. If we stop wrestling with the world we are dead. His work does what all good writing should do, which is to answer the questions we didn’t know we were asking, and to answer them in
such a way that the work is the answer, beyond the need for any other words. A boy is troubled by the death of his brother, and so by the death of everyone, and grows up to build a machine that he hopes will abolish death once and for all and bring his brother back to life; a children’s hospital floats on the world decimated by a second flood, and the population of the hospital (guided by a second population of angels and ghosts) struggles to survive and take care of each other; a re-telling of Midsummer Night’s Dream becomes a story of fairies that are wracked by grief, couples that struggle to find their way back to each other, and Love as it crosses over death and the realms of the magical and the real. And these are only the novels.

I don’t write like Adrian—I have never (yet) had a fairy in a story of mine, never (yet) employed magic or the supernatural. There is a wonder to his work, an enacting of a world beyond us that we can’t see, a putting-to-work of mystical forces that I have not (yet) been able to harness. Yet his writing makes plain to me something about my own work and about the work of all writers that I love: at root, our answers to the age-old question of why we do it is the same. We employ what we can, we imagine what we must. Since we can’t find the answers, we make a story that dramatizes the struggle, we make a story that shows that the answers can’t be found, and that in our searching is where we come the closest to them.

Chris Adrian answers the question of why we write in each piece of his writing; answers it so thrillingly and with so much depth and complexity that you feel silly for even asking it in the first place. In his work, the question is thrown up in the air and then exploded into a trillion shining bits of magical light that then fall down on your head and blind you. Why do I write? It is because life is not easy, because life is complicated and often cruel and full of heartbreak and death and sorrow and also glory and mysterious and sustaining love, and because I know no other way than to wrestle with what compels me beyond my understanding through tiny created worlds made out of words. Chris Adrian teaches me, reminds me, and provokes me to remember this, to know why I write.

SHERMAN ALEXIE
Unlike the rest of us idiots, brilliant people are hilarious. Sherman Alexie is not an idiot. But humor isn’t the whole of what makes his work brilliant. Take, for example, the beginning of *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, where Sherman Alexie plaits storm fronts and landscapes with socialized human bodies, psyches, souls. From this twill his spare dialogue emerges, dialogue that expresses volumes more than it speaks explicitly. “Rain and lightning. Unemployment and poverty. Commodity food. Flash floods. ‘Soup,’ Victor’s father would always say. ‘I want a bowl of soup.’ Mother’s Kitchen was always warm in those dreams.” Here, Sherman Alexie presents the essential elements of Indian and non-Indian alike: rain, light, poverty, food in capitalism, again rain, and soup. Or rather, words written and/or spoken about soup in a dream, words that prove soup to be more than itself.

In much of Sherman Alexie’s work, landscapes seep into human bodies and minds as history mingles with the present, where dreams and reality mingle too. Sherman Alexie presents time that is not literal or linear, but is cumulative and omnipresent, a gathering-together that proves greater than any particular moment, event, or life. With this temporal model Sherman Alexie does not flinch in the face of atrocities enacted against tribal members by the United States Government and its citizens, but presents a historical and contemporary narrative of multifaceted universality based on humanity’s ongoing prismatic story and stories; the story and stories we forever tell and retell ourselves about ourselves so that despite everything we’ll have reason to carry on, together and alone. In this increasingly homogenizing and synchronous warming global culture, models for collective and autonomous time, thought, action, and aesthetics like those presented by Sherman Alexie appear increasingly essential.

By way of Twitter Sherman Alexie sent out this message recently: “There are approx 2 mil In’dins so there are approx. 2 million ways of being In’din. Don’t let those In’din fundamentalists tell you otherwise.” The day before, on the Fourth of July, he wrote, “All In’dins are selling fireworks today in celebration of white people’s independence.” A poet first, a poet always, Alexie isn’t limited by 140 characters; he’s emboldened by the space or lack of it and makes it his—as music, subversion, a poke and a joke, a punch in the gut or nose, depending.

He’s been called the Native American James Baldwin and the comparison fits, but more than Baldwin or any writer I’ve read, Alexie is a trickster, a compulsive shape shifter. He’s a Spokane Indian who admits how angry he is—at whites and often enough at Native Americans. He’s a heretic and a comedian; a man who wants to belong but who also wants to be free of the compromise and sometimes complacency that can entail. In an interview with PBS’s Bill Moyers on the occasion of the publication of his new and selected stories *Blasphemy*, Alexie claimed he lives in between cultures, as insider and outsider: “The end game of tribalism is flying planes into buildings. So since then I have tried, and I fail often, to live in the in-between.” He then described how vital it is to him to hold any number of conflicting ideas in his head at once. He referenced Keats and that poet’s term for just this expansiveness of mind, “negative capability,” and then Alexie admitted again, “But I fail often.”
As fluent as Alexie is at confrontation, as definitive and unsparing in denouncing injustice, simple foolishness, he’s tender, too, regretful, frequently within the same work or interview or public address, explaining that “it’s not oil that runs the world, it’s shame.” Yours, mine, his. The line comes from his remarkable short story “War Dances,” from the collection of the same name, about a man who, like Alexie, is Native American but can pass for white (or in the range of white) and who, with a single swing of his son’s aluminum baseball bat, kills a black teenager who has broken into his home. “It was self-defense, but it was still murder. I confess: I am a killer.” Written years before George Zimmerman and Trayvon Martin had their tragic encounter in Florida, before the much televised trial, it touches on how the court of public opinion feeds on itself, and in its frenzy to get the story (or some version of it) fudges the facts, misses the point, and then moves on blithely to the next story, the next carnival, as if nothing was lost at all, as if no one was culpable or, worse, culpability has become irrelevant.

In his poem “Vilify,” an irreverent consideration of Mount Rushmore, the speaker of the poem, Alexie (yes, invariably Alexie, bold again, denuded and glad to be), tells us, “I’d much rather commemorate the other presidents. Let’s honor JFK’s whoring and drinking/ Or the duels Andrew Jackson fought to defend his wife’s honor. Why/ don’t we sculpt that?” And later in the poem, “Because I know every president, no matter how great on the surface, owned a/ heart chewed by rats.” He knows because he knows his own heart and his own imperfections and readily cops to them in his work and elsewhere—his alcoholism, his bi-polar disorder, his weakness, his longing, a desire so intense and unwieldy he can barely contain it—and yet he’s uncowed, unbowed. He’ll make fun of social media as only he can and then make brilliant use of it. He’ll assert that his first story collection *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* was not autobiographical and then, later, upon re-reading the stories, he owns, “Wow, this is memoir” and laugh at himself, marvel, and keep Tweeting—with teeth, humor. He’ll keep writing with his characteristic electricity and immediacy—the latter of a poet—but also of a man in between, who can speak all the languages of the cultures he’s ostensibly part of, with terrifying ease, even in short hand, with irony (“‘In’din”), and make you laugh while he’s measuring the distance between us all, playing with that distance, collapsing it. No matter the dominant tone of a poem or story or longer work, there’s that live, unpredictable voice, his singular achievement, that voice, seducing, chiding; and whatever the emotion expressed, the energy of his work opens out, expanding, to pull us all in; complicit, yes, we are. We are joined by our fallibility and somehow in Alexie’s hands the knowledge is both terrifying and freeing. Yes, how freeing it is to laugh at oneself, laugh out loud.

I should admit here that I’m an editor by trade. I’m also a fiction writer, though I’m usually shy about admitting this. When I was, for seven years, *Playboy*’s fiction and literary editor, I worked with Alexie a few times. Working with an author, particularly an established one, is not a guarantee of liking them or their work, not at all, and working at *Playboy* was rarely straightforward either, given the jokes and judgments and confusions about the magazine and its legacy or legacies. I took my job seriously—to make literary work as lively and relevant an element in the magazine as any other. A tall order and it required patience, stubbornness, and often subversion. We did a series of essays about crushes, titled “Truly, Madly, Deeply.” Sherman contributed a piece about
his crush on Indigo Girl singer/songwriter Amy Ray. The piece begins, “I fall in love with lesbians. Not porn lesbians. Everyday lesbians. The ones who don’t want men to fall in love with them. Oh, they don’t mind the attention, even the flirtation, but the physical boundaries are firmly in place. But wait, I fall for the other kind, too. The lesbians who want men to fall in love with them so they can ground and pound the vain masculine heart.” He’s at it again: confiding cheerfully, acquainting the reader with the impossibility of his longing, the hilarity of it, and one is taken in, wants to keep pace with him and his gorgeous fluency, no matter he’s playing outside of some readers’ experiences, rules, even outside that magazine’s longstanding and some would say calcified love affair with a narrowly defined American heterosexual male. In doing his job so well with that essay, Alexie helped me do mine—converting readers to the cause of reading by showing them that words on a page can be as alive and surprising as any competing visual media.

On that occasion and so often when I read Alexie’s writing, he has brought to mind a line from Psalm 94:1: “Oh God of vengeance, show thyself.” There are many translations of the line, particularly the second half. These are “display your splendor” or “be revealed” or “shine forth.” As a woman editor at Playboy, fighting for the magazine’s smarter self, for the congress of voices and perspectives available to it, and now as a writer—one in progress—Alexie’s work has come to feel like a call to action: to find your proper voice and tell your story, maybe out loud, maybe in broad daylight, with commitment, even vengeance, regardless of whether those around you agree with you or have ears or eyes for what you’re offering. Alexie counsels going big (in his case, dizzyingly so), even as you feel small. Certainly writing and publishing literary fiction in what feels like an increasingly unliterary age requires putting shyness aside. It requires trying and failing, sometimes publically. “I fail often,” Alexie says.

In their conversation Bill Moyers asked Alexie what he means by blasphemy, the title of his 2013 collection. The author replied, “I don’t believe in your God. And ‘your’ means the royal ‘your.’”

Moyers asked, “Do you believe in your God?”

“No.”

“What do you believe in?”

“Stories. Stories are my God.”

Well, all right, then Amen. Amen to that.

MARTIN AMIS
By chance, I recently started rereading *The Information* by Martin Amis. (It was sitting in the little lending library in our building’s laundry room; I picked it up just to pass the time while my son was busy running around the basement playing and clothes were being soaked and rinsed.) I began reading and remembered first picking this book up in 1995 or 1996, right around when it came out. I don’t know quite why I bought it then, I don’t remember being terribly caught up in the hype about the novel. (Amis got an advance that could only be counted in gobs and, much worse to the Brits, had his terrifically bad teeth fixed as part of the advance; that’s the story anyway.) Whatever the reason, I read the book then and it just staggered me.

*The Information* is about Richard Tull, an aspiring, and generally untalented, writer living in middle-class London. He’s published a few books to nearly no acclaim. His best friend, Gwyn Barry, had been doing even worse until, one day, Gwyn publishes a novel that becomes a worldwide sensation. He’s suddenly wealthy, famous, and married to a distant cousin of the Queen. Richard loses his mind and decides to destroy Gwyn’s life in various ways. Hell hath no fury like a writer passed over! As you can guess from the summary the book is manic and hilarious. But it’s also so beautifully written that it almost makes me lose my breath, even on my second reading now. Let me quote one little passage, choosing this one simply because I’m on this page in the book:

"It would seem that the universe is thirty billion light years across and every inch of it would kill us if we went there. This is the position of the universe with regards to human life."

This has nothing to do with the plot of the book, but it touches on the larger ideas (how important, or unimportant, we are in the larger scheme of things; general middle-age-crisis hand-wringing but done with black humor.) This novel spurred me into reading much more of Amis: *Money, Success, Visiting Mrs. Nabokov*. I was a glutton for his prose. I indulged in Amis. And I think his work meant so much because I was trying to learn to mimic, his fluidity, his bleak humor, his endlessly inventive similes.

It’s strange, now, to realize how much Amis has meant to me. Strange because I feel as if I’m transitioning away from some of what made him so important to me at first. His willingness to sacrifice narrative at the altar of pithiness seems especially problematic
now. But for a very long time the man could do no wrong in my eyes. And, despite that criticism, rereading *The Information* now really is like finding a wine I’d forgotten I loved so dearly. The temptation is to stay drunk on it for a long while. Say, a century.

**NATHANIEL RICH:** I discovered Martin Amis thanks to Stone Gossard. I had read an interview with Pearl Jam’s guitarist in *Rolling Stone, GuitarWorld,* or *Guitar.* I know it was one of those three because they were the only magazines to which I subscribed during high school. (You may recall my popular band of that period, the Blanket Vibe; our hit album was called *Over the River and Through James Woods.*) In the interview Gossard spoke highly of *Money;* he mentioned reading it on an airplane and laughing out loud. That’s all I needed. I took *Money* with me on a canoe trip in Maine that summer. I dropped the paperback in the St. Croix River and had to leave it to dry on a rock. I remember being worried that the pages would tear, but the sun was hot and crisis was averted.

Reading the novel I was seized immediately by the cynicism, nastiness, elegant crudity, and, most of all, those sentences. I’d never encountered anything like them before:

"Recently my life feels like a bloodcurdling joke. Recently my life has taken on form. Something is waiting. I am waiting. Soon, it will stop waiting—any day now. Awful things can happen any time. This is the awful thing."

I decided to devote my life to reading Amis with the same level of obsession that, in the previous five years, I had applied to Stephen King.

**DONALD ANTRIM**

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**JAMES FUERST:** The three novels that comprise Donald Antrim’s trilogy—*Elect Mr. Robinson for a Better World* (1993), *The Hundred Brothers* (1997), and *The Verificationist* (2000)—are all odd, powerfully imagined works that are as funny and
disturbing as they are riveting and original. Despite their many differences, all three are narrated in first person by a middle-aged male who guides us around his sliver of suburbia and lures us into his confidence, a confidence we only slowly come to grasp as that of a social misfit, an instigator, a lout. Meanwhile, our guide has already eased us through a series of relatively minor violations of moral, physical, and intellectual norms; a turn is then made, something inexplicable occurs, and the initial weirdness of the narrative grows ever weirder. The absurdist and hallucinatory escapades that follow are impossible on a number of levels and in a variety of ways. But Antrim’s impossible narratives unfold so seamlessly from the engaging voice, perspective, and experiences of his narrators that we find ourselves too mesmerized to balk at their transgressions of the “real” and too captivated to turn away. Instead, we are giddily swept along in the mounting delirium and ultimately find ourselves treated to warped and unforgettable renderings of the emotional lives and ordeals of unstable men illuminated brilliantly from within.

Acclaimed authors such as Jonathan Franzen, Jeffrey Eugenides, and George Saunders have all lauded Antrim as a true American original—at once unique, delightfully peculiar, and lacking in precedent—praising his linguistic prowess and exquisite sentences, his unfettered imagination and devilish humor. In September 2013, The MacArthur Foundation awarded him a “Genius” Grant, an honor he richly deserves. His reputation and status in the contemporary canon are secure for the foreseeable future. But the greater part of the influence his works will have on younger and coming generations of American writers will most certainly stem from the fact that they are irreducibly his own, from the extent to which Antrim stands as our time’s most accomplished and inspiring exemplar, in the words of René Char, to cultivate one’s own legitimate strangeness.

I was fortunate to take a literature seminar with Donald as an MFA student. The topic was “fantastic fiction,” and the readings he assigned were an eclectic mélange that included George MacDonald’s *Phantastes*, Angela Carter’s *The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr. Hoffman*, Ben Marcus’s *The Age of Wire and String*, Rachel Ingalls’s *Mrs. Caliban*, and Henry Green’s *Party Going*, among others. As a teacher, Donald was approachable and easy to talk to, generous with his time and talents, very knowledgeable about the subject material, and both thoughtful and responsive to students in and out of class. We learned about the fantastic as suspension of disbelief, then as suspense, then as sustaining a reader through sudden reversals, and so on. As an unanticipated bonus for fiction concentrators, Donald allowed us to submit a short creative piece in lieu of a longer essay at the end of the semester, the best of which, selected by him, we would discuss in class.

It seemed that the stars had aligned so I could make an impression on a writer I admired: I’d read *The Verificationist* in preparation for the course and was excited to learn from someone whose own aesthetic was so intensely smart and wildly imaginative. I submitted a highly polished story that I’d been working on for a while and of which I was proud. The story was—as was its author at the time—let’s say, bookish: I loved the multitudinous ways that books spoke with and to other books and tended to gravitate toward that subject when I wrote. Since each of Donald’s highly
intelligent narrator-protagonists deploys some version of what Tom from *The Verificationist* calls a “psychoanalytic vernacular,” there was reason to think he would be especially receptive to my concerns.

The class finally arrived, and once we got under way, Donald first selected a fellow student’s story for us to discuss, then he selected another, and then another, and another, and so on, until suddenly everyone was packing up, and it was time to leave. Confused by the omission, I approached Donald afterward and asked if he’d read my story. He said yes. I asked if he liked it. To his great credit, he answered without hesitation or evasiveness. No, he said, I didn’t like it. When I asked why, he said that my narrator was too distant, too disconnected, too far away; I needed to get closer, much closer to what I was writing about.

It was the kind of criticism that cut deeply for a couple of reasons. First, no one had ever told me that before. Second, as soon as Donald said it, I knew that it was undeniably and indisputably right: not only was the narrator of that particular story too far removed, but I realized almost instantly that all of my narrators were too distant, too disconnected, too far away, as well. If I wanted my fiction to improve, I needed to get closer, much closer to what I was writing about, I had to find more effective ways to work from the inside of a story to the outside, rather than the outside in.

In many important respects, I have been trying to do just that in my own work ever since.

**ERIC LUNDEGREN:** I’m tempted to call the trio of short novels Donald Antrim produced between 1993 and 2000 a Divine Comedy for our time. Certainly, finding these books in the course of getting my MFA, when I was reading so much fiction in photocopy that also seemed like a photocopy of … something—these books were otherwise. Being young and foolish, I read them backwards, starting with *The Verificationist*, retreating to *The Hundred Brothers*, and finishing with Antrim’s debut, *Elect Mr. Robinson for a Better World*. Returning to Antrim a decade later, I can see how these slim novels form a sequence, from the drawing and quartering of an ex-mayor (by Subarus) in *Robinson*, to the Brothers’ claustrophobic male hell (there’s even a brother named Virgil) and ending with *The Verificationist*’s vision of transcendence: a hallucinatory visit to a Revolutionary War battleground with a teenage Pancake House waitress.

Antrim speaks to the chronic outsider in us. These are queasy comedies of cramped quarters (*The Hundred Brothers* in a crumbling estate library, *The Verificationist* confined to one all-night pancake restaurant). Yet the books themselves seem expansive, generous, even ecstatic. They are narrated by nervous men who are beset by doubt and death, who are in trouble with women, who are precise delineators of their discomforts and anxieties. They could be title-card writers for Buster Keaton or Harold Lloyd. The comedy is the comedy of trying and failing to comfortably exist in the world. Of inhabiting a failing body that will die—ha ha.
Yet how richly he delights. Antrim seems to come out of nowhere: the underwater coelacanth-on-bison love scene in *Robinson* will never be attempted again. I believe naming Antrim as an influence would make him uncomfortable. His work is full of juvenile rebellion and uneasy paternity. I think of Doug in *The Hundred Brothers*, unzipping in his family’s library to “hose down, as they say, a few literary masterpieces.” I think of Bernhardt, the father figure in *The Verificationist*, lifting his protégé Tom in an ecstatic, transcendent embrace—never mind the fact that Bernhardt’s boner presses painfully into Tom’s back for almost the entire novel. No, I’m not going to get into the fraught issues of Antrim’s influence on a younger generation. Let me simply quote another young writer’s response to Antrim’s recent MacArthur grant: “I was so happy. I wouldn’t have been much happier if I’d gotten the grant myself.” That goes for many of us who speak of his books in hushed tones, with evangelical fervor and cultish protectiveness, with awe and ardency.

PAUL AUSTER

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KEVIN P. KEATING: In 1992, when I was studying film as an undergraduate at Columbia College, Chicago with dreams of becoming the next Stanley Kubrick, I took a class in Contemporary American Literature, and for the first time in my life I was introduced to books by ambitious authors who, like Kubrick, attempted to make the avant-garde popular, or at least more palatable to mainstream audiences. While *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *The Shining* may have been marketed as science fiction and horror movies respectively, these epic films, even to the casual viewer, clearly had much more to say about the human condition than the mass-produced genre pieces of the same era.

One of the first serious writers to capture my imagination in this regard was Paul Auster, whose 1989 novel *Moon Palace* combined the tropes of the old-fashioned adventure story, placing a special emphasis on the quest motif, with lengthy discussions of books and artwork, luck and money, madness and freedom. Through the magic of his art, Auster somehow managed to successfully combine elements of mystery and metaphysics with an almost vertiginous intertextuality (before I knew what
intertextuality even was), all in the context of an appealing, yet deceptively complex, narrative style.

The novel concerns the Dickensian adventures of Marco Fogg, an orphaned boy sent to live with an eccentric uncle who surrounds him great books and classical music, all of which serve as catalysts for his transformation into a young man. When he turns eighteen Marco reluctantly says farewell to his uncle to attend Columbia University in New York City and there comes under the wing of the morally ambiguous Thomas Effing, a “blind, elderly gentleman” who may or may not be totally insane and who, in effect, takes on the role of Marco’s mentor and shaman.

While much of the story is set in a modern American metropolis, it could just as easily have taken place millennia ago in some barren, desert wasteland with a cast of Paleolithic cave dwellers. That is to say, the whole story, as I read it, sounded timeless to me, and indeed much of the action occurs in the isolation of a cave in a remote corner of Utah where a man named Julian Barber spends his days painting hallucinatory images on the cave walls and, in the process, slowly and inexorably loses his marbles.

But unlike the anonymous chroniclers of ancient Israel who, trekking across vast wilderness landscapes, felt compelled to credit a supernatural force for imbuing human existence with meaning and purpose, Paul Auster tends to see life, good and bad, as little more than a sublime cosmic comedy “guided,” as it were, by blind chance. In his 2002 novel The Invention of Solitude, Auster writes, “Just because you wander in the desert, it does not mean there is a promised land” and perhaps more to the point, “There is no room in the world for a man who does not have a sense of his own ridiculousness.”

These ideas have influenced my own work in profound ways, especially my novel The Natural Order of Things (Vintage Contemporaries 2013), which concerns the adventures and exploited of skeptics and free thinkers, young and old, students and priests, at a Jesuit prep school in a dying industrial city who dare to question the concept of a supernatural order and who ultimately pay a heavy price for their perceived “heretical” beliefs.

Blind luck, random chance, a roll of the dice, life as a big gamble, existence as a dangerous and therefore thrilling game: all of these ideas can be attributed to my early exposure to Paul Auster, an author whose contribution to American fiction has, for me at any rate, been invaluable.

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Nellie Hermann, author of The Season of Migration and The Cure for Grief

Anne Marie Wirth Cauchon, author of Nothing: A Novel

Amy Grace Loyd, author of The Affairs of Others
Victor LaValle, author of The Devil in Silver, Big Machine, The Ecstatic, and Slapboxing with Jesus

Nathaniel Rich, author of Odds Against Tomorrow, and The Mayor’s Tongue

James Fuerst, author of Huge: A Novel

Eric Lundgren, author of The Facades

Kevin P. Keating, author of The Captive Condition and The Natural Order of Things

Lettering by Caleb Misclevitz.
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A Survey of Writers on Contemporary Writers

Listening to writers read and discuss their work at Newtonville Books, the bookstore my wife and I own outside Boston, I began to wonder which living, contemporary writers held the most influence over their work. This survey is not meant to be
comprehensive, but is the result of my posing the question to as many writers as I could ask.

—Jaime Clarke

NICHOLSON BAKER

RYAN McILVAIN: Nicholson Baker is white-bearded and pudgy, Melvillean in his poetry and non-narrative meandering and occasional cantankerousness, and in his New England digs. Over the years he has amassed a decent half-shelf of slim, wild books, none slimmer or wilder than Vox, an erotic starburst of a novel. The book’s claims to extra-textual fame include Stephen King’s referring to it slightingly and, for Baker, productively (see his essay on the subject), as “a meaningless little fingernail paring,” and also Monica Lewinsky’s giving the book to President Clinton as a naughty token.

And it is a naughty book. One of the things I most love about Baker is his unflinching, matter-of-fact interest in sex. Baker doesn’t force his characters to settle for mere cuddling; he doesn’t coyly cut away from skin. He summersaults into the fraught fleshy territory that too many other contemporary writers tiptoe around. Vox narrates verbatim the conversation of a man and a woman who meet on a phone sex line. They talk about wetness and hardness and double penetration, and so on, and in the end they both get where they were going all along, but they also talk about their childhoods, favorite writing utensils, mail-order catalogues, the mysteries of pop music. At one point the unnamed woman in the conversation describes how she used to buy cassette tapes and “turn them up very loud—with the headphones on—and listen very closely, trying to catch that precise moment when the person in the recording studio had begun to turn the volume dial down, or whatever it was he did. Sometimes I’d turn the volume dial up at just the speed I thought he—I mean the ghostly hand of the record producer—was turning it down, so that the sound stayed on an even plane. I’d get in this sort of trance ... where I thought if I kept turning it up—and this is a very powerful amplifier, mind you—the song would not stop, it would just continue indefinitely. And so what I had thought of before as just a kind of artistic sloppiness, this attempt to imply that oh yeah, we’re a bunch of endlessly creative folks who jam all night, and the bad old record producer finally has to turn down the volume on us just so we don’t fill the whole album
with one monster song, became for me instead this kind of, this kind of summation of hopefulness."

It’s a magnificent passage, and it’s in very good company in the book and in Baker’s entire oeuvre: that juxtaposition of high and low dictions, the stuttering, then searing eloquence, the close, obsessive attention to detail, and of course the humor all throughout, or all underneath perhaps. I think Baker is rarely straight-on funny, rarely aiming for a laugh; rather, he is incidentally funny, funny along the way, in the headlong rush to get from one genuinely earnest mundanity to the next. His characters think and talk like he does, as did those of Henry James, an influence on Baker, and an obvious influence on his prose. That an artist settles into a certain style, a certain voice, and imparts that same voice to his creations, is not necessarily a demerit in my book. If the pony’s lone trick, or gift, is to talk interestingly and at length, well, don’t look it in the mouth.

MATTHEW VOLLMER: I like to tell people that *The Mezzanine* is a story about a man riding an escalator. I do this because I assume the idea of a novel set entirely on an escalator will—to most readers—sound brave, or maybe impudent. What man in his right mind would dare to write a book about such an inconsequential event? The answer to that question—if I’m going to be honest—is no one. Not even Nicholson Baker. *The Mezzanine* is not, as it turns out, a story about a man riding an escalator.

At least, it’s not only about that.

It’s true that our hero is carried up, up, and away by a flight of silver, “crenellated,” mobile stairs. But he’s also carried away by memory and imagination and wonder. On the first page, he notes with admiration the “long, glossy highlights” on “each of the rubber handrails,” and in a footnote—one of many—confesses to loving “the constancy of shine on the edges of moving objects.” And so begins a string of meditations on modern contrivances, each one rendered in prose so vivid—so precisely focused—that they seem downright lurid. The narrator conceives of a shoe, from his foot’s point of view, as a “sauna of cordovan.” Staple-holes in paper resemble “TB vaccine marks.” Turn signal switches “feel as if they were designed with living elbow cartilage as their inspiration.” Loose doorknobs, made of “faceted glass” possess a “knuckly, orthopedic quality.” And at one point, the narrator remembers how his mother warned him not to “jam a wad of molar-textured pink gum into the gap between one curved riser and the grooved stair below it,” perhaps because she knows he wants to “to see the gum crushed with the dwarfing force of a large, steady machine, the way garbage trucks forced paper cartons to crumple into each other.”

We get no explanation of why our narrator is so finely tuned to his surroundings, but one gets the sense that it might be a kind of superpower with which he is imbued, along with the ability to employ language in the service of transmitting those perceptions. Thankfully, Baker’s narrator is less interested in describing the obviously grandiose or conventionally beautiful; instead, he takes us on a tour of the kind of everyday ephemera we take for granted—a shoelace, a stapler, a milk carton, an escalator rail—to prove that each one is worthy of contemplation, if not outright praise. Consider, if you will, the
inefficiency of hand-driers over conventional towels, or the way toilet paper, if used as a substitute, turns to “semitransparent puree” in one’s hands. Observe the “Ms and Vs the night crew left as stokes of their vacuum cleaners wands made swaths of dustless tufting lean in directions that alternately absorbed and reflected the light.” Does the ice cube tray, according to our narrator, deserve a historical note? Indeed. Do grooves made by skates merit an extended meditation? Absolutely. Baker’s narrator reminds us that life—supposing it is lived in a perpetual state of wakeful appreciation—can become a perpetual treasure hunt, transforming mindless chores into occasions to pay close, rapturous attention. Don’t take sweeping for granted, otherwise you’ll miss the production of “those ruler-edged gray lines of superfine residue, one after another, diminishing in thickness toward invisibility, but never completely disappearing, as you (back) the dustpan up.”

*The Mezzanine* reminds me how pleasurable it is to see something that one has seen a hundred times before, something that one’s mind has noted without noting its noteworthiness, then seeing another person articulate it—as if seeing it for the first time—with just the right words. It’s an experience that is accompanied always by an immediate sense of recognition and gratefulness: Yes, I think. I too have borne witness to such phenomena!

You could say that not all that much happens in *The Mezzanine*, but you’d be wrong. In the absence of the kind of physical action that supports scene, we get something just as active and able to generate its own kind of suspense: a linguistically gifted, wide-awake narrator, whose gleeful appreciations of contemporary paraphernalia make us wonder what he will possibly turn his attention to next. What could’ve been a book-length stand-up routine interrogating the absurdities of modern technology seems instead like an invitation to appreciate our interactions with human invention, whether it’s a tube that enables us to suck liquid from a container into our mouths, a sugar packet, a rubber stamp, or a moving staircase ferrying us to higher ground. In the end, *The Mezzanine* shows us that if we look hard enough, we’ll understand that the notion of “ordinariness” is a myth, a failure of our own perception, which, if properly engaged, has the power to interpret the everyday as it truly is: miraculous.

**RUSSELL BANKS**
DAN CHAON: His early novels and stories gave a voice to the lives of small town, working class people in a way that gave them the depth and dignity of Shakespearian tragedy. Novels like Continental Drift and Affliction explored stunted lives with an intensity and sympathy I’d never encountered. The Sweet Hereafter used multiple perspective to stunning effect. He’s also a remarkable story writer.

BRUCE MACHART: Perhaps the most important decision a writer makes, story by story or book by book, is that of point of view. Often this “decision” is one of instinct. The first draft comes out in first person, and we leave it that way because it serves the story well. Other times, the point of view seems geared consciously toward the aims of the narrative in more conscious ways. I remember, for instance, reading Russell Banks’ tour-de-force short story, “Sara Cole: A Type of Love Story.” It peeled my scalp back. Here was a story that was told in first person but explicitly taught the reader that this first-person narrator was going to speak of himself in third person POV. And there’s a logic to it. And a narrative necessity. And the story teaches us how to read it. Along the way, we feel the power of the narrator’s need to distance himself from certain events from his own life, and, upon further study, we find that the tenses also change from present to past and back again. There is a narrative logic, subtle but definite, at work in the story. I read this story when I was in my early twenties, when I was just beginning to try to write stories, and the experience was epiphanic. I saw, perhaps for the first time, the artist at work behind the art. I realized for the first time that this understanding of craft was essential, that it distinguished the ways that readers and writers read stories. Of course, I went in search of more of Banks’ work, and I found Affliction, which remains, for me, among the most impressively wrought examples of point of view innovation I’ve ever read. All too often, young writers (including many published writers) use multiple points of view in stories or novels because they don’t seem to understand why they are telling stories they way they are telling them. We have multiple first person narrators in works that could easily be written in third. We have first person narrators and third person narrators in the same work, and most of the time this is unnecessary and befuddling for the reader (Who the hell is telling me this story? they ask.) When one reads the earlier works of Russell Banks, one never feels this way. The innovations aren’t “experiments;” they are essential to the stories being told.

WHITNEY TERRELL: It’s hard to find a writer who has covered more ground than Russell Banks. He can write about small town life, as he does in The Sweet Hereafter, but his most recent novel, Lost Memory of Skin, is excellent on the dissociations and discontents of our current period of technological change. He has confronted seemingly every major issue of our time, from race to immigration, child abuse to environmental degradation. And yet always, in his work, these larger social themes are undercut by humor and his constant awareness of the stubbornness and unpredictability of the human soul. All of this while writing in a straight, realistic style. Also, I would argue that Banks’ insistent exploration of how his characters have been marginalized and economically cut off from “mainstream” America was ahead of its time. It’s important to remember that he wrote novels like Continental Drift (1985) and Affliction (1990) when
the country was comparatively booming. Now, after the crash of 2008, those novels seem more prophetic than ever.

FREDERICK BARTHELME

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BEN GREENMAN: I think that at some point I started to become aware of the Barthelme brothers, Frederick and Donald. I list them in that order even though most people would list them in the other order. When Second Marriage came out, which was in the early eighties, I was fourteen or fifteen. Tracer came out a year after that. I was probably mired in a maximalist phase at that point, reading lots of Joyce and Faulkner, writing unregulated sentences, dreaming up philosophy, and I had such great admiration for Barthelme’s compression, the coolness and lightness that actually, surreptitiously, moved large amounts of heat and darkness. I came to Donald about a year after that, and that’s maybe a clearer influence on my brain and my work, because it rewarded my suspicions regarding the artifice of all fiction and all narrative and reinstated my devotion to the cosmic joke. I think that’s something I’ve struggled with ever since: how to be a True Believer in the land of fiction and, at the same time, retain my conviction that conviction itself is a preposterous pose. The funny thing is that I have probably read less Donald than Frederick, in part because I want to keep my headspace clearer from Donald’s ideas, and make sure they don’t step on my own. Frederick, I use as a reader to better understand pacing and quick sketching and banter and then the sudden unpredictable thunder of emotional disappointment (and thunder’s only unpredictable, remember, when you have your eyes shut for the lightning).

CHARLES BAXTER
SCOTT HUTCHINS: I hear the whisper of Charles Baxter's writing everywhere in my generation of storytellers. He's been called a Midwestern Kafka, and there's no doubt his sensibility tilts more to Eastern Europe than to Dirty Realism. But a more helpful comparison might be Bruno Schulz—or even New Wave cinema. Or even Flannery O'Connor. Baxter has that eye for the grotesque, though without sanctimony. He is one of the few American writers working today who is a master at rumination. I include his two essential collections of essays, *Burning Down the House* and *Subtext*, but also his novels, *First Light* and *The Soul Thief*. Where he sinks his initial claws into the reader, however, is his short stories—or perhaps that novel built of stories *A Feast of Love*. When I read “Love Too Long”—with that drunk Tiresias, his gut like a balloon full of gravy—I was introduced to a new vision of the world, both fictively and actually. Baxter's sense of the uncanny, as well as his characters' quixotic, but never satirized search for meaning, captures the depth of life in the under-portrayed sections of the country. Its depth, its struggle, its wild reality. There's a true warmth to his work, which shouldn't be mistaken for naïveté—or even, frankly, hopefulness. Aside from the gorgeousness of his sentences, what I most take from his terrifically varied and inventive oeuvre is his careful thinking and his insistence on seeing clearly.

RATTAWUT LAPCHAROENSAP: I was lucky enough to be one of his students at the University of Michigan in the early 2000s. I owe him everything as a writer. I often look to Baxter's work—to his short stories and novels and essays—and to his example as a teacher, as yardsticks against which to measure myself. He is not only a tremendous teacher and reader but he also expanded my sense of what might be possible in fiction. His short stories have been a source of continual joy and wonder; his essays strike me as peerless examples of a certain kind of clear-eyed criticism about fiction that seems increasingly in short supply; and his personal reading recommendations to me over the years have profoundly shaped my thinking about fiction.

ANDER MONSON: I discovered Baxter in, I think, tenth grade. Maybe eleventh. The wonderful thing I remember about Baxter was that, unlike pretty much everyone I had read before (which says something about my reading up until this point), he was writing about a place I knew: Michigan. Admittedly, a lightly fictionalized Michigan. I found myself attached to his stories in particular, especially *Through the Safety Net* and *A Relative Stranger*. There's something dazzling about reading something set in a place
(not exactly my place, admittedly, since I hail from about ten hours northwest from Baxter’s Five Oaks, if I’m remembering the name right, a fictional suburb of Detroit), but my state, certainly, a state that felt to me (and still feels) relatively underwritten, a blank space on the map, compared to Paris, New York, Alabama, Mississippi. Of course I knew that there was such a thing as a Southern writer. I could in fact then name a handful: Harper Lee, William Faulkner, Eudora Welty. But I had no idea that there was such a thing as a Michigan writer.

I should qualify this: Baxter’s not from Michigan. But I think of him as a Michigan Writer. One of his first books (of poetry; he was a poet before he was a fiction writer, itself a useful lesson, I thought) is The South Dakota Guidebook, paying homage to what I believe is his state of birth. But he did live in Michigan and teach at Wayne State University, then at the University of Michigan. He observes well, and has suffered many a (lower) Michigan winter. Southern writers must, of course, be born there (and preferably their ancestors should have fought on the right side of the War of Northern Aggression, as they term the Civil War). But a Michigan Writer need not be born in Michigan, as long as she writes about the place honorably.

I’d like to say that I took from him the lesson that we can write about what we know and care about. But I’m not sure that’s true, exactly. What I took from him was the knowledge that my state—my place, even if not quite my peninsula—was worth writing about, and that people had written about it, living people, even, and that there was something there in those two books that resonated with me, and that I still hold close to my heart. They’re very weird books, coming back to them now. Some stories are quite straightforward narrative, but others (like “A Late Sunday Afternoon by the Huron,” which is a pointillistic metafiction name-checking the famous Seurat painting and trying to adapt its methodology in a story) are much weirder, unhinged really, often formally or stylistically inventive. This is clearly something that affected—or possibly infected—me, since that kind of playfulness continues to be one of my major interests.

Too, I find instructive Baxter’s beginnings as a poet: though much of that work isn’t all that distinguished—to this reader anyhow, compared to his fiction, you can see his poet training on the micro level deployed in his stories too. In fact the vast majority of the prose writers I love the most are trained as poets. I remember thinking to myself (or maybe this is bogus reverse engineering of a memory for the convenience of a point: one can’t tell, not really, I don’t think): oh, so you don’t just have to be a fiction writer. Or you don’t just have to be a poet. Or you don’t just have to be a Michigan writer. Or a Southern one. Or a realist one. And so forth. There was something cool in that to my punk-ass seventeen-year-old self that stuck.

ERIC PUCHNER: One of the first contemporary story collections I ever read was A Relative Stranger, by Charles Baxter, and I don’t think it’s an exaggeration to say that it changed my life. I’d entered college wanting to write poetry, something I had little talent for. My advisor must have recognized this, because he gave me a stack of story collections to read—Carver was in there, and Amy Hempel, and Richard Ford—but there was something about Baxter’s Midwestern voice that appealed to me in particular: it was plainspoken yet eloquent, and I liked that his characters were essentially good and
decent people, trying to make their way in the world. Mostly, though, I liked the way the stories, so grounded in reality, burst unexpectedly into dream. There was a strangeness at the heart of them that took several pages to emerge, usually in the form of an arresting and otherworldly image: I’m thinking of the Chevy Impala trapped under the ice in “Snow,” for example; or the albino deer that the protagonist encounters in “Saul and Patsy Are Pregnant”; or the deeply peculiar moment at the end of “The Disappeared,” when a Swedish man who’s been clocked over the head wanders into a maternity ward and pretends to be the father of an American baby. The short story has its roots in the uncanny, of course—Irving and Poe and Hawthorne—and of all the so-called minimalists to come out of the eighties, Baxter seems to be the one who’s managed to fuse psychological realism with something stranger, a true capacity for wonder. (Some of his stories, like “Kiss Away,” border on fairy tale.) And if you’re lucky enough to have read *Gryphon: New and Selected Stories*, you’ll know that his work keeps getting richer and more mysterious.

ANN BEATTIE

MICHELLE WILDGEN: Ann Beattie’s *Chilly Scenes of Winter, The Burning House,* and *Secrets and Surprises* were among my teenage writing and reading touchstones. I have no idea how I encountered her writing—maybe at a writing class I took each summer for a few years. Ann Beattie certainly was not assigned in English class, though I once tried to write a paper about a Beattie story in the hopes that I would discover I understood more than I perceived. It turned out I understood even less, and at the top of that paper my teacher wrote “Please see me.” Mortified, I never did, and spent the rest of the year waiting to be punished.

The question of how I encountered Beattie’s work matters to me because I suspect that if I had encountered her work *through* someone, I might have had a guide to understanding her a little more than I did. I only knew that something about her stories
appealed to me in a deep, indefinable way. They felt complete and solid and gleaming, an object like a pearl or a carved box rather than words on a page, with rich depths I couldn’t see from the outside but knew were there. The fact that I could not quite articulate what I loved was both part of the appeal and also meant that my attempts at recreating the magic were all centered around the surface trappings. So I wrote about what people ate and drank, strange disconnections in their conversations and between passages, funny/odd things they said and did that were maybe believable but mostly not.

I loved Beattie’s way of ending a story on an oblique image that left me in some discomfited but resonant emotional state, a sense of completion, even if it did not clarify a particular plot point. Little in the way of overt plot happened in her stories, and I did not know how to see, for example, that the plot might be happening on a level of emotion. Instead what I took away was that plot was not too crucial, and spent the next ten years trying to write around it.

So, was encountering Ann Beattie’s work the best thing I could have done as a fifteen-year-old or the worst thing? Her writing lit me up and energized me, even though I had no idea why. But I did spend the next several years taking away unproductive lessons, which I fully accept were of my own invention and not hers. The combination of my love for Ann Beattie’s work and my lack of an apparatus or even a vocabulary for understanding what I liked about it led to some of my very worst writing. But I have to come down on the side of the positive. Her writing was unlike any of the classics or pulpy contemporary stuff I had been reading, and it seemed to exist alone with me, free of other people’s ideas because no one else in my life read her work. She felt entirely my own. And even if I did write some impressively terrible imitations of her stories, the fact is, I was a teenager trying to write fiction about suburban parties and high school relationships. Reading Tolstoy would have led to my very worst writing, too.

Beattie’s stories grabbed me for their tight focus on the stuff of a life, the objects and items we acquire and consume. Munro’s stories feel more capacious, even though the lives she describes tend to feel abstemious, somehow—partially because of her general approach but also because her characters are often living in rural, hard-scrabble existences instead of, say, taking the occasional class at Yale. Whereas Beattie’s people seem to regard their own emotions with some faint sense of surprise or ironic distance, Munro’s stories often delve deeply into a person’s tumultuous inner life, revealing people we might assume have placid inner lives. (As a teacher of mine once noted, I don’t really want to hang out or have lunch with any of Munro’s characters, but I’ll read about them forever.) I found, and still find, her way of putting together stories completely compelling, because I think she can do anything she wants. Her structures can move in any direction at all, it seems, and she gets a lot of mileage out of the thin veil that covers an urgent, sometimes violent core.

AIMEE BENDER
CHRISTOPHER BOUCHER: I have the strange habit of hoarding books by those authors whose work I find most inspiring. All of a sudden, I’ll find myself seeking out multiple copies—a “home” copy, which remains untouched, and a “road” copy which I can carry around with me, write in, and not worry about losing. When I look back on these books—Aimee Bender’s *The Girl in the Flammable Skirt*, for example—I see a few common attributes. For one, each book contains sizeable risks—moments in which the writers cross lines I didn’t know could be crossed. Bender’s work packs just as much wallop, but via rapid-fire rabbit punches. Her imagination is unparalleled, but so is her technical prowess—in my opinion, her best stories display just the right balance of invention, voice, and timing. They seem to me to crash forward towards a stunning, and often devastating, conclusion.

RYAN BOUDINOT: Aimee Bender is an important writer to me. I’ve been a fan of hers since *The Girl in the Flammable Skirt*. With regard to her work, she does two things that I just love. One, she works within the realm of non-realism without getting foggy. Her stories are so crisp and vivid, there’s nothing murky about them. Two, she’s hilarious in an almost accidental way. I always get the feeling that the lines in her work that make me laugh weren’t engineered for that purpose, that humor is a byproduct of her work rather than being the main point. And while she’s known for the surreal elements in her work, I think she’s becoming an incredible storyteller of real human emotions. In *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake* she kept herself limited to a couple significant otherworldly details, but the guts of the story were all about easily recognizable emotions. I think she’s becoming an incredibly wise writer, and I’ve always looked up to her.

STEPHANIE REENTS: The opening lines in *The Girl in the Flammable Skirt* are devastating: “My lover is experiencing reverse evolution.” (“The Rememberer”); “One week after his father died, my father woke up with a hole in his stomach.” (“Marzipan”); “When I came home for lunch my father was wearing a backpack made of stone.” (“The Girl in the Flammable Skirt.”) I like to recite these lines when I’m teaching fiction writing and I’m talking about how to create narrative momentum or ways to build stories that turn away from realism by taking metaphors and making them facts that the characters have to live with. I also like sentences like the one at the opening of “Call My Name”: “I’m spending the afternoon auditioning men.” Jeez Louise! Listen to all of the
possibilities there—realistic, absurd, and poetic. Is the narrator a director? Is she secretly interviewing the men she meets on the bus? Or is she looking for someone to help her stop playacting through her own life?

These opening lines remind me what I love (and sometimes fear) about writing fiction: the fact that a relatively straightforward sentence can take you into territory you didn’t anticipate, especially once you open yourself up to a realistic description’s metaphors and a metaphor’s real implications. Aimee Bender does so bravely. Reading her makes me write more bravely, too.

PAULS TOUTONGHI: When I first read “The Rememberer,” in The Missouri Review, I was teaching short fiction—and thinking, every day, about the fact that there are so few terrific tiny short stories out there, stories that are jewels, where every detail matters, and refers only inward, to the world the story seals off for itself. And then: Here it was. A perfect small story. There was no need to know more than the story told you—and that wasn’t much—only a few hundred words. The premise is simple: A woman’s boyfriend de-evolves, becoming so small that she must relinquish him to the world. But it’s really about so many other things, right? Death and love and intimacy. “The Rememberer” was published in The Girl with the Flammable Skirt, and it lived, there, in the midst of other companion texts. But it stood out to me, always, and I’ve returned to it, again and again, over the past fifteen years.

LAURA VAN DEN BERG: I love everything about the opening paragraphs of Aimee Bender’s marvelous story, “The Rememberer,” but what strikes me most is the conviction. There is such certainty of voice, of idea, detail, of perspective. I love teaching "The Rememberer" and listening to students talk about how Bender turns such an “implausible” premise flesh-and-blood, for this story is a wonderful lesson in writing with such conviction that the reader has no choice but to believe.

KAREN THOMPSON WALKER: When I think of the most important influences on my early writing, I think first of Aimee Bender, the first writing teacher I ever had. I was 19 when I read her story collection, The Girl with the Flammable Skirt. Shortly after that, I took a workshop with her. From her writing, which is so unusual and imaginative, and from her teaching, which is so generous and sharp, I learned most importantly that there are no rules in fiction. Her whole attitude toward writing gave me a sense of freedom to try things, to be brave on the page and bold. Even though many years passed before I wrote anything that would be published, I’ve never forgotten the early sense of freedom she gave me, and it continues to influence me today.

PINCKNEY BENEDICT
WILL ALLISON: Lee K. Abbott was my first creative writing teacher. I took several workshops with him when I was an undergraduate at Case Western in Cleveland, then I followed him to Columbus, where he was hired to start the MFA program at Ohio State. I ended up getting an MA in English and an MFA there. All told, I studied with Lee for about nine years.

But as much as I valued Lee as a teacher, and as much as I admired his stories, I realized early on that I would never write like Lee. If you’ve read Lee’s work, you know he has one of the most distinctive prose styles in contemporary fiction. One can tell one is reading a Lee K. Abbott story almost from the get-go. It’s not that I didn’t want to write like Lee; I simply lacked his gift (among others) for high-wire sentences packed with vivid figurative language.

And so I found myself drawn to writers with a more plainspoken style, most notably Pinckney Benedict, whose debut collection, *Town Smokes*, was published in 1987, around the time I wrote my first story. I loved Pinckney’s rough, rural stories and the understated elegance of his prose. I was also struck by the fact that he was only four years older than I was. That a guy his age could publish a collection gave me hope (though it would be another 20 years before my first book came out). What’s more, Pinckney was a fellow Southerner. I’d lived in Ohio since tenth grade, but I was born and raised in the Carolinas and, at the time, still considered the South my home.

Lee K. once talked to me about the challenge of “finding your material.” In Lee’s case, that meant finding the right geographical setting for his work. He said his fiction didn’t really start to click until he stopped trying to write stories set in New York City and began setting his stories in New Mexico, where he was from.

I had a similar experience. With Pinckney’s stories as inspiration—including those in his second collection, *The Wrecking Yard* (1992)—I started setting my stories in and around my hometown, Columbia, South Carolina. Eventually I began writing stories set on a fictionalized version of my grandfather’s dairy farm on the outskirts of Columbia, stories that later became chapters in my first novel, *What You Have Left*.

A.S. BYATT
MAILE CHAPMAN: A.S. Byatt is the contemporary writer who most influences me; it humbles me to even mention her work and mine in the same sentence, but it’s true, especially her short stories. Her fiction is full and powerful with the flex and resilience of intellectual and creative maturity, and I don’t think I could have appreciated her work as a seventeen-year-old, but now I can see the shrewd intelligence and supple mastery in her prose, which somehow feels so effortless. To those who haven’t read much of Byatt’s work, or to those who have only read Possession, I recommend the novella The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye, which is one of the loveliest of tales, and also the two short stories, “The Thing in the Forest” and “Raw Material,” which are far more disturbing. All three say something about the ways in which narrative is constructed, and about the ways a story meets – or can refuse to meet – the expectations of the reader. All three are good to read for sheer pleasure (and, perhaps, horror), and all make moves that challenge the reader. “Raw Material” ought not to work; it breaks most of the rules quoted in any fiction workshop. Which is not to say that rules don’t matter, or that rules don’t generally work for valid reasons. But here is where that old truism about knowing the rules before you break them becomes palpable, because Byatt isn’t working just with the rules of fiction, she’s working with the much deeper laws of narrative, which determine the very nature of our existence.

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Ryan McIlvain, author of Elders: A Novel

Matthew Vollmer, author of Future Missionaries of America: Stories

Dan Chaon, author of Stay Awake: Stories, Await Your Reply: A Novel, You Remind Me of Me: A Novel, and Among the Missing: Stories

Bruce Machart, author of Men in the Making: Stories and The Wake of Forgiveness: A Novel

Whitney Terrell, author of The King of Kings County and The Huntsman
Ben Greenman, author of *The Slippage, Celebrity Chekhov, What He’s Posted to Do, Please Step Back, A Circle is a Balloon and Compass Both: Stories About Human Love, and Superbad/Superworse*.

Scott Hutchins, author of *A Working Theory of Love: A Novel*

Rattawut Lapcharoensap, author of *Sightseeing: Stories*

Ander Monson is the author of *Letter to a Future Lover*.

Eric Puchner, author of *Model Home: A Novel, and Music Through the Floor: Stories*

Michelle Wildgen, author of the novels *You’re Not You; But Not For Long, and Bread and Butter*

Christopher Boucher, author of the novel *How to Keep Your Volkswagen Alive*

Ryan Boudinot, author of *Blueprints for the Afterlife, Misconception, and The Littlest Hitler: Stories*

Stephanie Reents, author of *The Kissing List: Stories*

Pauls Toutonghi, author of *Evel Knievel Days: A Novel, Red Weather: A Novel, and Live Cargo: Stories*

Laura van den Berg, author of *Find Me: A Novel, The Isle of Youth: Stories, and What the World Will Look Like When All the Water Leaves Us: Stories*

Karen Thompson Walker, author of the novel *The Age of Miracles*

Will Allison, author of the novels *Long Drive Home and What You Have Left*

Maile Chapman, author of the novel *Your Presence is Requested at Suvanto*

Lettering by Caleb Misclevitz.
INFLUENCED BY

A Survey of Writers on Contemporary Writers

Listening to writers read and discuss their work at Newtonville Books, the bookstore my wife and I own outside Boston, I began to wonder which living, contemporary writers held the most influence over their work. This survey is not meant to be
comprehensive, but is the result of my posing the question to as many writers as I could ask.

—Jaime Clarke

ETHAN CANIN

© Red Diaz

BRET ANTHONY JOHNSTON: Before I read Ethan Canin, I didn’t understand what was possible in a short story. I’d read the requisite Hawthorne and Poe, then plenty of Faulkner and Hemingway and even, I think, some Wharton and Dinesen. Of course these writers are important, timelessly so, but their stories didn’t simultaneously break and heal my heart. They didn’t liberate my imagination. They didn’t, and this is paramount, surprise me. Those classic pieces of literature made me feel like a student; I worked to find symbols and fancy themes, and the stories provided ample material. When I read Canin—specifically the story “Pitch Memory” from his magnificent first collection Emperor of the Air—I felt vulnerable, deeply and inescapably human.

The story that did it for me might be called a Canin B-Side. Although “Pitch Memory” appears in his first and astonishingly good collection Emperor of the Air, it isn’t a story people usually cite when they laud Canin’s work. They tend to focus on “The Year of Getting to Know Us” and “Emperor of the Air”; they talk about the glorious novellas that make up The Palace Thief; and they talk about his affecting novels like Carry Me Across the Water and America America. I admire all of his fiction, and I’ve read most everything at least twice, but for me it all comes back to the exquisite little story in which a woman returns home for Thanksgiving and discovers that her mother is stealing again.
In “Pitch Memory,” as in most of Canin’s fiction, there is a revelation on just about every page. These feel neither engineered nor sentimental; rather, they are inevitable, essential to the characters. And there are other hallmarks of Canin’s fiction at play in the story: the clean and incisive prose; the attention to the passage of time, how the past forms and informs the future; the seamless narration, the profoundly humane lens through which the story is perceived; the way minor trespasses reveal our deepest wounds, the way our infractions betray our various losses and fears; the satisfying structure and the emotion that upholds the architecture; the way the revelations feel so inevitable and authentic that you sense they must have surprised the author, too, that they were born of purest empathy.

But all of this is the language of book reviews and workshops. Here’s what I want to say: I remember that the story made me want to write. I remember marveling at how a story so short could contain such multitudes of emotion. I remember recognizing the characters’ hearts, their longing and coping, their brief hopes for solace. I remember scribbling down the author’s name with a plan to scour bookstores and libraries for more of his work. I remember needing to be somewhere—to my job, actually—but instead of leaving, I flipped back to the first page of the story and read it again.

So I was wrong earlier. Reading Ethan Canin didn’t show me what a short story—what fiction—can do. Reading Ethan Canin showed me what it must do.

STUART NADLER: I’d read Ethan Canin’s short stories years before I ever thought of getting an MFA, and certainly before I’d tried to go to Iowa. I can remember vividly the feeling of reading the first two stories in Emperor of the Air, both of which use similar devices of putting their narrators into the position of hiding out in the story. In Emperor of the Air, the narrator’s gone out to hide in his neighbor’s tree. “In The Year of Getting to Know Us,” which is my favorite story of his, and which I go back to, over and over, the narrator, as a teenager, has stowed away in his father’s Cadillac as his father goes to meet his mistress. As a reader, there was the sense of anticipation that I’d remembered when I was young: that urgent need to know what happens next. When that happens in literary fiction, you’re either allowing yourself to be manipulated, or you’re in the hands of a terrific writer. Or, if you’re lucky, both.

He was my first workshop professor, and I suppose, saw something in my work that I didn’t, or that I’d hoped was there but wasn’t yet. There isn’t really much to learn in an MFA aside from learning how to keep working, which is an act of faith more than an article of craft. Ethan read everything I wrote those two years in Iowa, and was tough with me when the work was terrible, and complimentary enough when the work was decent, and I needed, simply, the illusion of progress to keep going. This is what a young writer needs.

His work, though—those two collections of stories—held up, even as I got to know him. He was always emphasizing structure: the idea that structure was the core element to a good story, the place to focus one’s energy, both during the act of writing, and in revision. It’s where I spend the most of time now. Fussing over plot and point of view and pacing—all of these elements that had first gripped me in his writing, and which,
when he was reading my writing, he forced me to confront.

**ANNA SOLOMON:** I remember gasping the first time I came to the end of “Batorsag and Szerelem,” a deceptively slight novella by Ethan Canin. This wasn’t a quick gasp, of mere surprise, but a deep, life-affirming inhale I felt in my bones. As a human being, I shuddered; as an aspiring writer, I wanted to cheer. What a completely unexpected yet entirely right (and by right I mean true) ending to this story! How did I not see it coming? How, once it came, did I feel as if I’d known it all along? What was Canin doing to manipulate his characters, his plot, his pacing, and me (!) with such precision?

Lucky for me, I had a chance to find out when I took a Novella Workshop with Canin at the Iowa Writers Workshop. Not that he broke it all down for us—one can’t, with a really good work of fiction. But more than some of my other teachers, who had other, also helpful, more ethereal feedback to offer, Canin really treated writing as a craft. I still think of him describing the “clothesline” that must run through the center of any story—if it’s taut enough, he would say (and I say to my students now), you can hang anything off it. He offered tips and tricks and concrete instruction, and though some students and teachers of writing shy away from this sort of “prescriptive” advice, I found it not only helpful but comforting, as well. While some parts of fiction writing (a strong imagination, for instance, or a feel for language) are largely instinctual, there are other elements (structure and plot chief among them) that many of us want—and need—to be taught. Acknowledging that writing is a craft as well as an art is, at least in some circles, a bold stance, but those teachers who take it provide many of us with a critical foundation for the stories we hope to tell. In this way, I’m indebted to Canin for his teaching, and his work.

**URBAN WAITE:** In many ways I owe Ethan Canin my career. I was twenty-four or twenty-five when I first read his story “Emperor of the Air.” At the time I was a writer but I wouldn’t have called myself that. I was just a young kid who liked to write. It was a pastime to me—something I did in my spare time, as casual as going to the park to sit in the sun, or grab a beer with a friend.

Like most great pieces of writing Canin’s story opened up something in me. I can remember finishing “Emperor of the Air” and simply sitting with it. The collection by the same name closed in my hands. I was running the themes around in my head. I was thinking about the dialogue and the characters. I was for the first time in a long time completely in awe of a piece of writing.

I think on it now and I feel as if I closed Canin’s collection and in the same moment opened the pages on the rest of my life. Writing—reading—trying to get the details of a life down on paper, and in many ways live up to what I hoped someday to be: a writer like Ethan Canin—a writer who stirs something to life inside his readers.

**PETER CAREY**
KEVIN BROCKMEIER: I begin to recognize myself in my reading choices around age nineteen, when I discovered Peter Carey’s story collection *The Fat Man in History* by chance the summer after my freshman year of college. Something about its conjoined flights of acidity and sentiment, the precision of its prose, and the use it made of its fantastic conceits offered the perfect introduction to contemporary literature for a lifelong science fiction reader like myself. The book is Carey’s very earliest work, and I understand he himself thinks rather little of it, but I owe it a great debt. Certainly it changed what I imagined I could do with my own writing. I think now that I was probably poised at the door already, just waiting for the right author to give me a nudge, but Carey’s was the book that opened the way to a world of pleasurable reading for me.

MICHAEL CHABON

L. ANNETTE BINDER: I first read Michael Chabon’s *Wonder Boys* in 2003, on a flight from Boston to LA, and I laughed so hard that my husband had to elbow me because I was disturbing the other passengers. I finished the book on that flight and promptly started it again from the beginning. I had only recently started writing fiction at that point in my life, and something about the rococo prose, the sheer joy of it, and the empathy on the page pulled me in. I’ve returned to the novel many times since. It’s one of the few pieces of fiction I can read when I’m hard at work on the first draft of one of my own stories or novels, and I’ve probably read it dozens of times by now. There’s no predicting which novels will linger with you. A technically flawless piece of writing can
impress while you’re reading and then leave you unmarked. Chabon’s *Wonder Boys* has both stunning prose and an incredibly long half-life, and for me much of its staying power goes back to empathy. Love your characters even when—especially when—they mess up. Chabon’s work taught me this early on, and this idea continues to guide me today.

**JENNIFER DUBOIS:** This is a passage from Michael Chabon’s *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* that I copied it down during my sophomore year of college—back when I was a political science and philosophy major who was reading fiction erratically and writing it very rarely:

A surprising fact about the magician Bernard Kornblum, Joe remembered, was that he believed in magic. Not in the so-called magic of candles, pentagrams and bat wings...Not in astrology, theosophy, chiromancy, dousing rods, séances, weeping statues, werewolves, wonders, or miracles. All these Kornblum regarded as fakery far different—far more destructive—than the brand of illusion he practiced, whose success, after all, increased in direct proportion to his audience’s constant, keen awareness that, in spite of all the vigilance they could bring to bear, they were being deceived.

What bewitched Bernard Kornblum, on the contrary, was the impersonal magic of life, when he read in a magazine about a fish that could disguise itself as any one of seven different varieties of sea bottom, or when he learned from a newsreel that scientists had discovered a dying star that emitted radiation on a wavelength whose values in megacycles approximated \[\pi\]. In the realm of human affairs, this type of enchantment was often, though not always, a sadder business—sometimes beautiful, sometimes cruel. Here its stock-in-trade was ironies, coincidences, and the true portents: those that revealed themselves, unmistakable and impossible to ignore, in retrospect.

At the time, I knew I was encountering something profound—a piece of fiction that expressed a feeling I’d had, but never articulated, about my own sense of wonder in the world. I look back now and, with all the sorcery of hindsight, realize that of course this passage was also capturing else that would come to matter to me a great deal: life gives us retrospective portents—but, often enough, only stories let us see them.

**STUART NADLER:** Michael Chabon, whose work I love, and whose talent I admire, writes staggeringly good sentences, the kind I need to stay away from before I sit down to write, but the kind I think every writer wishes they could whip up as easily as it seems he whips them up. He’s a perfect example of a writer whose books I look forward to as a reader, but not necessarily as a writer—he’s so good that I have that increasingly rare experience of forgetting that I’m a writer when I read them. This is always the problem when you spend so much time doing anything, that you become attuned to the seams in the construction. Reading someone like Chabon, or similarly, someone like John Irving, the seams disappear.

**ETHAN RUTHERFORD:** Michael Chabon has won just about every literary award imaginable, and won them young. Deservedly so, I would argue—his novels are ambitious, funny, engaged, and impressively big; his sentences coil unexpectedly; his paragraphs are propulsive; disparate narrative threads are braided together with
precision; his metaphors bloom. His characters do that thing you always hope your own characters will—they walk off the page, hang around after you close the book. After reading his best novels—I’m thinking here of Wonder Boys, The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay, and The Yiddish Policeman’s Union—you feel that what you’ve read is a story about his particular characters, rather than a book by an author using his characters to tell a story. His work is colorful, deeply saturated with nostalgia (though whose nostalgia is an interesting question), and indulges in his obsessions—comic books, detective stories, vinyl records. They are fun novels, but they are not cartoonish.

The quality of his work isn’t in doubt, nor is his popularity as a novelist. His influence on the next generation of writers, though, I think has less to do with the work itself than his selection of the fictive milieus his characters inhabit. In each book he’s delved deeply into the dusty corners of what some people might call pop-culture detritus and genre—comic books, the alternate history detective story, the barbarian saga—and elevated those personal obsessions into art. He’s certainly not the first writer to do this—David Foster Wallace is the most obvious example of someone who does a similar thing—but I’d argue that Chabon is the most generous in his approach, and the most committed to breaking down the barriers of “what serious novels are supposed to be about.” Where other writers dip into pop-culture in order to ironically shame or mobilize a critique about “consumption” and “junk” and the ways in which the crap we were fed as kids in fact shackles our own creativity and individuality, with his novels Chabon seems to be saying: no, no, wait a minute. This “junk” is important, it can be the stuff of imagination, the environment in which a story can begin, find its footing, become real, and break your heart. He’s also saying: here, you can do this too. His enthusiasm is infectious, and I think the greatest gift he’s given to the many young writers who are among his legion of fans is the permission to return to and celebrate those first loves—often the ones we were told we needed to abandon in order to grow up—and find the story there. Does this mean it’s easy? Not at all. But he has broadened the definition of where a beginning writer can—and should—look for inspiration, and I think that permission will echo for years in the many novelists who are now writing in his wake.

SANDRA CISNEROS

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RAMONA AUSUBEL: In tenth grade I convinced my parents to let me switch from the big public high school to a private school that I’d discovered. It was brand new—I would be part of the inaugural class—and very, very small. There were just a few of us in the whole high school, and, as it turned out, there weren’t very many teachers yet, either. I recall spending a fair amount of time wandering through the sagebrush—this was northern New Mexico—to the railroad tracks or sitting around outside smoking cigarettes (an activity for which you needed a permission slip from your parents, which I had forged). At some point, a Spanish teacher arrived. Maybe she taught us some vocabulary, but I don’t remember that part. What I remember is that she gave us copies of The House on Mango Street by Sandra Cisneros. I fell completely in love with the book. I loved the language, the precision, the short vignettes. I loved how, through the eyes of the main character, the regular old world was all new. I read it many times over.

Before that, my reading experiences had been divided in two: at home, I read or was read to out of great old storybooks, which I loved; at school I was assigned books out of which I needed to extract some kind of information for a grade. In this case, I have no memory of talking about the book in class or doing any assignments around it. This meant that it was a private pleasure. I had no idea at the time that that The House on Mango Street was commonly assigned reading in big classrooms. I did not think of it as “required.” It felt as if the book got dropped into my hands out of nowhere—no one was tracking my progress, no one was expecting me to perform—and my experience was my own. It made me want to write my own versions of that. I do believe I wrote some very terrible imitations, though thankfully they were lost in the hard-drive of our family’s first hulk of a computer. Still, Cisneros’s language, the wildness and realness of that place, and the pleasure I took from being there, stuck with me.

It was not long before my dad found out that I’d forged his signature on the smoking permission slip and my parents became impatient with the lack of school going on at school, and they pulled me out. I was only there for a few weeks, but I was there to fall in love with a book, and with the writing in the book, not in a class where I would be asked to write a five-paragraph-essay about the theme, or where I might have been influenced by another students’ dislike of the novel, but all by myself. That, as much as the story itself, mattered. It was all pleasure. Language was a way out into the world and a way into myself. That has never left me.

MANUEL MUÑOZ: Sandra Cisneros’s The House on Mango Street is everywhere on American high school curricula these days (and she even has two schools named after her), but back in 1988, the book was a small-press offering from Arte Publico of Houston. I got a copy while attending a summer enrichment program for low-income students at UC Santa Cruz. We were asked to do imitations, and I remember choosing "My Name" as my starting point. Whatever I did, the graduate student who was instructing the class was delighted with it. She was one of the first people to suggest to me that I could be a writer and was among the first to suggest to me that I should write about place. The House on Mango Street became a touchstone for me all through college for that reason, though it took well into graduate school for me to finally shake off all the baggage surrounding “write what you know.” That adage carries the whiff of early, unformed storytelling, suggesting the writer hasn’t gone through the steps of cleanly
separating fact from fiction. But, for me, it’s also a reminder that I’m one of the few on the larger literary scene who knows this particular world intimately. I’d rather speak to it than leave it in the dust.

J.M. COETZEE

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JOSH WEIL: The bravery he shows in his work has affected me significantly. True, some of it goes back to his narrative inventiveness (particularly in *The Life and Times of Michael K*), but mostly, when I read his work, I’m overwhelmed by the unflinching, almost harsh way that he forces the uncomfortable to light, forces himself to deal with it, and the reader to confront it. I don’t think I’ve ever pushed quite as hard as he does in that way, but I know that I want to, that I should, that his work seems to lurk behind me, reminding me, always, of what art operating at the highest level can do. Which, I suppose, is what all the best influences do.

MICHAEL CUNNINGHAM

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LISA BORDERS: I was born in the early 1960s, on the cusp of two generations: the Baby Boomers and Generation X. By the time I went to graduate school for creative writing, from 1988 to 1990, the voices of my generation were referred to as the literary brat pack: Jay McInerney, Tama Janowitz, Bret Easton Ellis. And while I enjoyed some of their books, the tone of cool detachment so prevalent in their works didn’t really
speak to me. Neither did the stories and novels of Robert Coover and Donald Barthelme that were held up as benchmarks in my writing program.

I had a romantic writing temperament in an ironic age; in one of my classes *The Great Gatsby*—an all-time favorite—was dismissed as sentimental. Both my reading and writing sensibilities leaned toward traditional storytelling, characters with both heart and brain, evocative, lyrical sentences. But it seemed the kind of writing I admired was out of fashion.

Michael Cunningham’s story “White Angel” came to me in the midst of all this, published in the 1989 *Best American Short Stories*. It was nothing short of a revelation, an example of everything I wanted to do as a writer: the lush, sensual prose; the masterful evocation of setting in terms of both time and place; the compelling, heartbreaking characters. Cunningham’s writing was the exact opposite of what I was being taught in my postmodernist-worshipping, experimentalist-touting writing program, and he became my benchmark. If I could write even one sentence as beautiful as any sentence in “White Angel,” I’d be on my way.

The novel from which “White Angel” was excerpted, *A Home at the End of the World*, was published in 1990. This was during my post-graduate year of temp jobs and economic desperation, and I rarely bought hardbacks because of their cost, but I bought Cunningham’s novel as soon as it came out. I devoured it quickly and then reread it, slowly.

The novel featured everything I’d loved about Cunningham’s short story, but it contained a larger revelation: the book was about love and connection, about characters without families forming their own. It’s a theme that resonated with me personally, and it’s one I’ve explored in both of my own novels; but back in that era of postmodernism, when everything seemed to be about the fracture of relationships, I can’t overestimate how groundbreaking it felt to read about characters who were finding new ways to connect, and to love.

Cunningham is, of course, best known and most revered for his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Hours*, published eight years after *A Home at the End of the World*. Although I cherish *The Hours*, it will never hold the place in my heart occupied by *A Home at the End of the World*. But then, one never forgets one’s first true love.

**ANDREW PORTER**: I first discovered Michael Cunningham’s work back in college when my creative writing professor assigned us his famous short story, “White Angel,” a story that I ended up reading and then rereading close to a dozen times that semester. At that time, I didn’t know a lot about contemporary fiction, but I knew what I liked, and what I liked back then, more than anything else, was beautiful writing. I liked stories that read like tightly crafted prose poems, and I liked writers who seemed to put tremendous care and thought into each and every sentence.

This was what had initially drawn me to the work of Raymond Carver, a writer whose influence could be seen in almost everything I’d written to that point, but in the case of
Cunningham’s writing I think what I was responding to was something a little different, something I hadn’t seen before. His writing was spare and elegant and economical like Carver’s, but it was also poetic, and vibrant and surprising. And there was also a certain musicality to it, a sensitivity to rhythm and sound and language that made me want to reread his sentences in the same way I used to listen to certain songs, as a teenager, over and over again.

For years afterward, I think I looked at “White Angel” as a kind of model of everything I wanted to achieve in the short story form. It was not only emotionally honest and resonant, but it was also perfectly constructed and, to my mind, perfectly written. In fact, before I began my own writing routine each day I’d often read a few pages of that story as a kind of reminder of what I wanted to achieve in my own work, of what I aspired to, even though I doubted very much that I’d ever be able to write something so elegant or pristine or moving. And what’s funny is that twenty years later, when I finally decided to take a break from writing short stories for a while and work on a novel, I found myself doing the exact same thing with The Hours, rereading certain passages of that book as a way of getting myself into the right mindset to write.

There are of course many other things I could say about Michael Cunningham’s work. I could talk endlessly about the richness and the depth of his narrative world, the intuitive genius of his storytelling approach, the complexity of his characterization, but at the end of the day when I think about his fiction what I think about most are his sentences, the lyrical, surprising grace of them. And I don’t know that there’s a greater compliment I could pay to him, or any other writer, than to say that at the beginning of each day, when I sit down to write, it’s his work that I turn to more than any others’, that it’s his sentences and paragraphs that I look to for inspiration and instruction and guidance and that I revisit them as a way of reminding myself why it is I decided to write in the first place.

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**Bret Anthony Johnston**, author of *Remember Like This: A Novel*, and *Corpus Christi: Stories*

**Stuart Nadler**, author of *Wise Men: A Novel*, and *The Book of Life: Stories*

**Anna Solomon** is the author of the novel *The Little Bride*

**Urban Waite** is the author of the novels *Sometimes the Wolf, The Carrion Birds*, and *The Terror of Living*.

**Kevin Brockmeier** is the author of *A Few Seconds of Radiant Filmstrip: A Memoir of Seventh Grade, The View from the Seventh Layer: Stories, The Illumination, The Brief History of the Dead, The Truth About Celia, Things that Fall from the Sky: Stories*

**L. Annette Binder** is the author of *Rise: Stories*
Jennifer DuBois is the author of the novels *A Partial History of Lost Causes*, and *Cartwheel*

Ethan Rutherford is the author of *The Peripatetic Coffin and Other Stories*

Ramona Ausubel is the author of *A Guide to Being Born: Stories*, and *No One is Here Except All of Us*

Manuel Munoz is the author of *What You See in the Dark: A Novel*, *The Faith Healer of Olive Avenue: Stories*, and *Zigzagger: Stories*

Josh Weil is the author of *The Great Glass Sea: A Novel*, and *The New Valley: Novellas*

Lisa Borders is the author of the novels *The Fifty-First State* and *Cloud Cuckoo Land*

Andrew Porter is the author of *In Between Days: A Novel*, and *The Theory of Light and Matter: Stories*

*Lettering by Caleb Misclevitz*
A Survey of Writers on Contemporary Writers

Listening to writers read and discuss their work at Newtonville Books, the bookstore my wife and I own outside Boston, I began to wonder which living, contemporary writers held the most influence over their work. This survey is not meant to be
comprehensive, but is the result of my posing the question to as many writers as I could ask.

—Jaime Clarke

KATHRYN DAVIS

MAUD CASEY: With Kathryn Davis there’s a wonderfully strange, smart sensibility at work—hers is roving and odd, too, mystical even. In The Thin Place, everything—dogs, the cosmos, people, nature—gets its due, is given equal attention. But the influence her work has had is even more specific than that. Her novel Versailles was a big part of how I began thinking about the *range* of historical fiction and, in particular, the sort of historical fiction that imagines its way into the gaps, wedges its way into the history we know and cracks it open. Here, Davis imagines her way into Marie Antoinette’s soul, for god’s sake! And so springs her from her corset of facts. I was—am—amazed by the daring of that book, but also by its careful, deliberate attention to the facts. That novel enters into a conversation with the facts, and in the end, the novel says: there is more to our lives than just the facts. But the facts—all the incredibly intricate, beautiful details Davis has clearly researched about Versailles itself—are crucial to this vision. The facts juxtaposed with the soul that eludes the anchoring impulse of facts. That novel was a big part of how I found my way into the novel I am finally (!) finishing. Davis’ boldness in general has had an important influence on my recent development as a writer, I’d say. I mean, one is always, like it or not, kicking and screaming, developing as a writer. Davis has an amazing sense of architecture in her novels as well. Every work invents the novel all over again. Hell, for example, with its three weird households juxtaposed and circling one another—a dollhouse, a 1950s family, and the cottage of a nineteenth-century expert on domestic management. There’s a lot of artifice but everything—a la the Julian of Norwich mystical thread in The Thin Place—is alive.

DAWN TRIPP: Kathryn Davis kicks all the windows open. That was the thought I couldn’t shake when I discovered her work. Nearly fifteen years ago, a close friend pressed her copy of The Walking Tour into my hands and said, “This book will say something to you.” I was writing my own first novel when I was drawn into the spell of
Davis’s fourth book, *The Walking Tour* was unlike anything I had read in contemporary American fiction—a fiercely imagined novel with sophisticated wit and the deft, twisting drive of a mystery. Halfway through, the story slips into a courtroom drama that, page by page, assumes the hallucinatory air of speculative fiction, exploring art, obsession, and the ways we make and unmake the real.

I remember, as I read, feeling that I was in the presence of a formidable intelligence, an unfettered mind. The narrative style defied category and genre, each page infused with stunning life. This is what art is, I remember thinking, and as I hit the last lines: “For God’s sake,” she told him, “it’s not like it’s the end of the world,” I closed the book and had that disorienting sense that everything I had been taught paled against this.

And so Kathryn Davis’s body of work became a kind of living mentor to me. After *The Walking Tour*, I went back and read her first three books. A few years later, I consumed *Versailles* as soon as it came out. Ditto for *The Thin Place*, and her most recent novel, *Duplex*. Each of her books is a world unto its own. But there is a common integrity of voice; the same far-reaching, nimble consciousness; the same thrilling strangeness; the same sheer driving narrative power. Her stories are highly structured, but not in traditional linear ways. There are detours that give her sinewy prose a kind of shimmer so that, reading, you feel transported and, more essentially, changed.

Her books cannot be pinned down into synopses of event. It might be tempting to describe *Versailles*, for example, as an historical novel of Marie Antoinette, but that hardly captures the bold, prescient voice of the young queen; or the spellbinding meditation on the interstices of fate and desire and the recyclable nature of the soul. If you tried to explain *The Thin Place* as a coming-of-age novel, you would miss the searing magic of this book and the virtuosic skill of Davis’s story, shot through with a fervent passion for life and keen observations of the natural world—at once mercurial and precise—where what is tragic and comic, sacred and profane, human and divine merge into a singular, cogent piece of art.

Because Davis’s work is art. It has that breathing, beating life that great work does. It is a rare fusion of consummate storytelling and real spiritual concerns: Why are we here? Where are we going? What is the consequence of our improvident and very human self-absorption? Our refusal to let the world in?

When you enter a Kathryn Davis novel, you enter a different country of the mind, and when you put the book down and move into your day, you notice you are seeing things differently. The world shivers. You are dizzy with it. What was ordinary a few hours before has assumed an altogether new intensity and range of color. You notice, for example, something transcendent in the pattern of dust on a windowsill. You see how light rips a blade of grass. You feel the hurting sky. You are keenly aware that life is right here, right now—glittering always—intimate and eternal both.

Davis’s books do this. They are hypnotic stories that entertain and at the same time insist that we turn and open to the world and let it blow through us—so we see, really
see, that the simple ordinary moments we blunder right past are thin windows to the infinite.

Over the years, as I’ve considered the impact of Davis’s work, I am always struck by the manner in which it shifts my thoughts. It digs, demands, and questions. It inspires. It also reminds me—and this is harder to admit—of risks I may not have taken yet. In the course of my career, I have worked to stay true to my leadings as an artist, but when I sit with Davis’s stories—the depth and brazen scope of her vision, the dreamlike immediacy of her stories, the way she draws together so many disparate elements into one taut, nuanced, driving whole—it reminds me that more is possible. In fact, it may be precisely that myriad aspect of Davis’s work that gives her books their revelatory power, allowing us to hear in a more defined way what we are called to do in our own work and lives. Her stories glint with ulterior life, and their very complexity has the curious upshot of shaking you into place. Davis shape-shifts the world as we know it and, in that altered vision, we can see not only how things are, but how they could be.

LYDIA DAVIS

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ELIZABETH CRANE: I’m pretty sure I came to the work of Lydia Davis not long after I had started writing short stories, but suffice it to say that as soon as I read her, her name went on my short list of writers I wished I could be but knew better than to try. I’ve included Lydia Davis stories in my reading packets for students, and though I teach only creative writing workshops, I recall some lively class discussions about whether some of her works were stories at all. I come down on the side of stories, of course—even the very shortest ones, sometimes just a sentence, paired with the title, always give me everything I need to know to fill in what might be left out—but I understand the inclination to debate it. What she does is so original, so completely Lydia Davis, as to almost create a new form. The story “Almost Over: Separate Bedrooms” is three sentences long, about a couple that is at the end of their relationship. At night, each has different dreams, indicating their distance. There’s nothing more to it, but it is so carefully edited, so carefully considered, that I can easily imagine their entire lifetime together that has led this couple to this moment.
Over the years I have written to many of the writers I have admired, to express my admiration and gratitude. In the course of publishing my own work, I have had occasion to meet many of these people in person. When I was teaching at the University of Chicago, I was invited with the rest of the faculty to attend dinner with Davis, who was a visiting writer; I declined. I thought—there’s no way I’m not going to make a dork of myself in the presence of Lydia Davis; even if I were to be seated at the farthest end of a long dinner table from Lydia Davis, Lydia Davis will from that distance recognize that I am an incompetent fool, unable to carry on a proper conversation about literature or anything else, my employers will in turn recognize my incompetent foolishness, and I will then be released from my contract and banished from academia altogether based on my inarticulate Lydia Davis fandom. I shook her hand after her talk, told her I was a fan, and went home. I will probably live to regret this; I think I already do. But I knew that Lydia Davis had already given me everything I needed from her. Reading her work, I knew that if it was okay for her to do what she did, it was probably okay for me to do what I do as well.

KATHERINE HILL: If you ask around, just about every living writer has had a Lydia Davis moment, that electrifying epiphany that fiction can be like this. A decade after I digested “Meat, My Husband” on the DC Metro, I’m still trembling from mine, still trying to emulate her in a million little ways. Davis writes pieces of genius that might be called any number of things: story-poems, fables, monologues, dialogues, letters, confessions, laments, studies, arguments, riddles, jokes, aphorisms, clippings, koans, lists. Yet however many categories we hurl at her, her writing defies classification. Better to say her small fictions are supremely intelligent, frequently witty, strange, and often sad. That many are briefer than this paragraph, and that collectively, they chronicle the idiosyncrasies of the personal, the great, quiet drama of possessing a conscious self. “Like a tropical storm,” reads one of my favorites in its entirety, “I, too, may one day become ‘better organized.’”

REBECCA MAKKAI: The rest of us have our microscopes set to 40x magnification. It was the in lab manual we received the first day. But when the teacher isn’t looking, Lydia Davis changes her setting to 40,000x. When we glance up again from our own blurry slides, she has swung the aperture and eyepiece toward the sky to fashion her own telescope. We check the assignment. This was not part of the assignment. She has taken the worksheet and burned it to ash, and put the ash on a slide. And this is her answer to worksheet question #4. The rest of us, the solid B students in the class, wonder if we could get away with this. We suspect we couldn’t. Still, the next time the teacher is distracted, we’d like to try. Lydia Davis is messing with the condenser now, and the light source too. Now she’s flipped the lens. Look what she’s sketched in her lab report, miraculous and precise: the inside of her own eye.

SHELLY ORIA: In 2006, Lydia Davis made me quit translating. I was at Sarah Lawrence, it was my second semester. We read Examples of Confusion and the assignment was to write our own Examples of Something. What was it about that piece that told me it was time to jump, that gave me the courage to jump?
I grew up in Israel—in Tel Aviv, mainly. When I was in the military I met a man I thought I would love for the rest of my life (and did end up loving for many years) and because we fell in love so hard and because we were too young to know how young we were, we got married. We had a fascination with American culture—I’d been born in L.A. and always felt I would one day be back—and we went on a coast-to-coast road trip for six months and decided to move to New York. Or, rather: he got into business school. That’s another way to tell that story. I was telling everyone I would soon be going to grad school myself; I was going to pursue my MFA in fiction. Oh, you write fiction in English? people would ask time and again. It was a logical question. But it was completely mysterious to me then. I’ve been writing since I was ten, I would say every time; I speak English. I would squint and the person would squint back, not sure if I had a strange sense of humor or was just not particularly sharp.

In New York, we lived in a small apartment in Hell’s Kitchen and the city was so new to us it seemed to be getting bigger every day. I took on the task of translating my work from Hebrew so I could put together a portfolio. This was a thing that needed to be done, the way you make a meal when you’re hungry; there wasn’t much spirit to it. Another story and another would get translated, then sent to my sweet cousin in L.A., a 6th grade English teacher. She would say this comma shouldn’t be here, this hyphen shouldn’t be here, beguiled doesn’t mean what you think it means. She would say crutch and crotch are different, you keep confusing them. I would make corrections and move to the next story.

By the time I was introduced to Lydia Davis—ironically also one of the best translators in the Western world—I had taught myself to rely on translation. For workshop, I would write a story in Hebrew and translate it, and my biggest achievement was that sometimes I’d be wild and not show it to my cousin. I now knew in my bones, in my fingers, what those squinters were asking me. They were asking if I could write fiction in my second language. And perhaps I couldn’t. Perhaps I needed to admit that and drop out of the program I’d worked so hard to get into.

This is what a Lydia Davis story tells a reader: let’s try something new. What a special gift that is, isn’t it? I remember sitting in that Hell’s Kitchen apartment, reading Examples of Confusion again and again and again, my breath getting away from me, ahead of me. What was this thing? A list of confusions? A map of the human psyche? A story?

Listen here, Lydia was telling me, language will take on any shape you give it; dare to be your own sculptor. I’d never had a story say that to me before, and had had very few stories altogether speak to me directly. So I listened. And the next day, I tried something new.

AURELIE SHEEHAN: I am trying to read a Lydia Davis story so I can appreciate it for you on the page, but eight men are outside my house cutting down a telephone pole, my dog is barking at the men, and my skull is beginning to compress my brain into a squished painful mush. I submit: Lydia Davis’s stories know about the men and the dog and the squished painful mush, and instead of turning away from those elements—those
distractions, pressures, vagrant insistent realities—she incorporates them into her work. She shortens the line between subject and object. Her fiction gives the impression of being stripped raw from her head—artifice, yes, but also confession. Davis analyzes life because life is analyzing her, hounding her, harassing her. So she confronts. *En garde!*

She has discarded all the fluff; she hugs subject to herself. Yet the writer is vulnerable to the loud and testy realities. They might knock her down. They might drown her. So she fights back. Her work comes out of pure necessity.

Davis has been there over the past couple of decades as I conceive of my own work. She’s played a role in the formation of a new kind of short story, a story that leans not on dramatized life but on association, on thought and direct experience. When you look at a painting you are swept up all at once in the painting. It is the same with a Lydia Davis story. The brevity of some of her pieces is revolutionary, as well as the insistence of the *I*, like a little harpoon. She is not writing prose poems. She is not writing flash fiction. She is not writing short shorts. She is not writing miniatures. She is not writing story-ettes or donut holes. She is writing eight men in bright green outfits and dogs on flawed missions of impossible control.

**DON DELILLO**

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**CHARLES BOCK:** DeLillo is colossal in my pantheon, and it’s a decent bet that half the writers in this collection stopped at his river and drank deeply. “The chief shaman of the paranoid school of American fiction” is what he was once called. But it’s so much more than paranoia. The speed and clarity and menacing humor of those sentences. The vision of how the fringe pulled and pulled and unraveled the center. By my thinking, that trio of *White Noise, Libra,* and *Mao II,* which he published in succession, is an unfathomable accomplishment, not just a high mark of fiction for the last thirty years, but a huge marking point for where fiction would go. For me those
novels refined the manner in which I saw the world, and DeLillo is a writer who taught me how to think.

ALIX OHLIN: Like a lot of people who graduated from college in the early to mid-nineties, I was in love with Don DeLillo as a young writer. I was so taken with the intellectual absurdism of his work, the distinctive cadences of its language, its deadpan dialogue, and its deft, often funny critique of American culture. I wanted to write a book like *Great Jones Street* or *The Names*. So the first novel I tried to write was a love story, set in the near future, between the Prime Minister of Canada (I’m Canadian) and the President of the United States, who meet as children when both their families are on vacation at a motel in the Adirondacks. There was a lot of material about water rights, and also dams. It is perhaps not necessary to add that it was terrible. Before too long I figured out that only Don DeLillo is able to be and write like Don DeLillo, and I would have to find a different territory to make my own.

JESS WALTER: My idea of what a writer could do, book-to-book, was changed by Don DeLillo’s string of four mid-career novels, *White Noise*, *Libra*, *Mao II* and *Underworld*. First, the books themselves are remarkable: written in deadpan, incantatory style, they manage to be entertaining while existing as near-perfect explorations of the sub-surfaces of American life and culture. Also, I think, I saw the idea of a writer developing and growing by writing books which may have been very different in tone and style and narrative, but which constituted an almost philosophical exploration of a larger subject—in DeLillo’s case, the undertow of American life and history.

CHARLES YU: My freshman year at Berkeley, I read Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* for a class. It was the first book I’d ever read that felt like it was taking place right at the moment I was reading it. That was 1993, and I believe the book was published in 1985, and so it was contemporary in that literal sense of having been written very recently. It was more than that, though—it was the first time I realized that a book could be about supermarkets, and television, and consumer culture (What can I say? I was a naive teenager). The airborne toxic event chapter was what stayed with me, throughout the rest of the year and beyond. But before that there was a moment when I realized I wanted to write, and it’s probably not hard to guess what it is: the chapter, relatively early in the book, about the most photographed barn in America.

JUNOT DIAZ
**ELISA ALBERT:** Diaz is such a natural stylist, an old school wordsmith. He makes it look easy. There's a fluency, a real looseness and exuberance, a sense of fun. He's bending language, subtly reinventing it, but adhering all the while to fiercely traditional sentence structure. There's emotional intelligence and obvious erudition, but funneled through an idiosyncratic *self* (narrative self? autobiographical self? some inexplicable mixture of the two? WHO CARES?), as authentic a literary experience as they come:

“Ana was a talker, had beautiful Caribbean-girl eyes, pure anthracite, and was the sort of heavy that almost every Island nigger dug, a body that you just knew would look good in and out of clothes; wasn’t shy about her weight, either; she wore tight black stirrup pants like every other girl in the neighborhood and the sexiest underwear she could afford and was a meticulous putter-on of makeup, an intricate bit of multitasking for which Oscar never lost his fascination. She was this peculiar combination of badmash and little girl—even before he’d visited her house he knew she’d have a whole collection of stuffed animals avalanched on her bed—and there was something in the seamlessness with which she switched between these aspects that convinced him that both were masks, that there existed a third Ana, a hidden Ana who determined what mask to throw up for what occasion but who was otherwise obscure and impossible to know.” (*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*)

**PATRICIA ENGEL:** I came of age during the 80s “drug wars,” when being Colombian came with a sense of public shame. Yet I was fiercely proud of my heritage, while simultaneously overwhelmed by the social silencing, the inertia of a North American collective that seemed to want to wipe me clean of my language, my dark complexion, and for whom I felt I would always be an outsider.

Teetering on delinquency, I found refuge in books and writing stories I’d never share with anyone, often cutting class to stay home and read. But I felt shortchanged by literature, unable to find anything written by an author with a cultural makeup resembling mine—young and Latin and finding our way in the United States. The message was that we were an insignificant population, undeserving of our own voices in American literature, our divided diaspora hearts safely ignored. I had no idea that just
miles from where I grew up in New Jersey, another Latin kid had internalized a similar heartache and was writing a book that would change everything.

Like many children of immigrants, I was left to figure out higher education on my own. In 1996, when Díaz’s first book, *Drown*, was published, I was a sophomore at New York University. Though I continued to write secretly, I didn’t hang with a particularly bookish crowd and it would be years before I’d learn that a writer like Junot Díaz existed. Upon graduating, I began a series of unsatisfying Manhattan desk jobs, plagued by an unrelenting emptiness and awareness that my voice, my identity, was growing weaker by the day. In, my frustration, I was able to articulate one goal for myself: to carve out a self as an artist and as a Latina in a way that felt both authentic and meaningful to me.

During a chance encounter in Miami, a Central American writer told me about *Drown*. In the boldness of Díaz’s prose, I discovered freedom. *Drown* named the demons we first and second generation kids live with; the tangled racial and socioeconomic webs, the harsh eyes we feel on us as we tread the lonely waters of this country while our parents are often distracted, trying to figure out things for themselves, dealing with profound sorrow for their forsaken homeland. To say nothing of his language—so sharp, so precise, so beautiful yet bloody, painful, and glorious—would be easy because it’s not Díaz’s language that continues to illuminate my heart, it’s the courage and tenderness behind the prose, the compassion for one’s people, no matter how flawed, the love for the country one has left behind, no matter how broken.

I was 27 when I first read *Drown*. The same age Díaz was when it was published. People are often shocked to learn that I came upon Junot Díaz’s work so late in my creative formation. But I think life presents heroes precisely when one needs them.

**V.V. GANESHANANTHAN:** I read *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* about a year after it came out, when I was preparing for Junot Diaz to visit the small college at which I was teaching fiction writing. I fell swiftly into the rabbit hole that led to Diazland; I feel like I’ve been reading and rereading Diaz almost continuously ever since. (Part of the reason, perhaps, that I don’t remember whether I read Diaz’s short story collection *Drown* before or after *Oscar Wao*! The answer must be both.) Today, some five years later, my students all know that I love Diaz, and especially *Oscar Wao*, which tells a story that matters in a voice I would follow anywhere. For me, Diaz’s hypnotic hold resides in his ability to invent a set of voices that hit every register and interact believably. I came to his work at a moment when I was struggling to think about how to address ethnic stereotypes in fiction; the way broad claims and individual characters nestle next to each other in Diaz’s fiction really works for me. Multiple stories don’t always mean contradiction; we may speak Elvish and Spanish, and need them both; we may announce the rules of our communities while simultaneously shattering them. How this solution still moves me! May I also sing the praises of the temporary but whole-hearted switch to Lola’s point of view? The generous and bilingual footnotes? The jokes? The comic book-influenced eye for myth and fable? The big-voiced omniscient narrator gradually revealing himself as something even more haunted and human? The most heartbreaking em-dash in all of fiction? This is a writer who trusts his readers to
be the best they can; reading him made me want to do the same. And what unabashed pursuit of love. This is what drives that voice—from *Drown* to *Oscar Wao* to *This Is How You Lose Her*. I understand its insatiable hunger as a form of optimism I can get behind, as a person, as a reader, as a writer.

**ALDEN JONES:** I grew up in North Jersey in the shadow of Manhattan. The Island of Cool was so close I had a perfect view of the Empire State Building and the Twin Towers on my drive to school, but it was just far enough away to be inaccessible, and I was trapped in the land of second-best. When I started writing in earnest—I mean back when I was twelve—I was pretty sure I would have to set my stories in a fantasy world or some generic suburb, because you couldn’t set stories in *New Jersey*. The writer who taught me it could be done was Junot Díaz.

In *Drown* Junot Díaz captured-slash-created a New Jersey I both recognized and felt transported into, and he shook off the shame that those of us who grow up in North Jersey take for granted. I recognized something real in the voice and the characters that echoed this frankness about place. Because he didn’t italicize dialogue in Spanish. (“I don’t speak in italics,” he quipped to one interviewer.) Because you could see the thin veil of autobiography, and because when I heard Junot speak, it sounded like the words of Yunior on the page come to life. There was a delightful transparency to his early stories.

In real life, back when *Drown* came out, Junot didn’t have a problem publically sounding off, which I also admired. Just after *Drown* made him a name, he dissed Julia Alvarez on the radio for being too upper crust to represent the Dominican Republic (“You can’t DO that anymore!” another writer friend insisted). He dissed black men who dated white women to me when I met him at a party and he dissed me at the same party for writing about Costa Rica when I wasn’t from Costa Rica. I liked that politeness was not on his agenda. I felt taken to task as a writer. He asked the right questions, and he did so with charming profanity. “Yeah, white people always want to write *about* us. Like we’re the fucking anthropological study of the month,” he said, and though this did not stop me from writing about cultures other than my own, it nudged me to consider my agenda.

Perched on the top of the hill where I grew up, in a neighborhood called Afterglow, I saw a lot of mindblowing sunsets. “The skies will be magnificent,” Junot Díaz writes in “How to Date a Blackgirl, Browngirl, Whitegirl or Halfie”; “Pollutants have made Jersey sunsets one of the wonders of the world.” Most people think of Jersey and it’s the pollutants they imagine, but Junot shows us the sunsets those toxins yield. And all those sunsets I enjoyed from Afterglow, well, I had to think about them differently after reading *Drown*. The important thing was that in the work of Junot Diaz, pollution and magnificent skies could coexist—frankly.

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**Maud Casey** is the author of the novels *The Man Who Walked Away*, *The Shape of Things to Come*, and *Genealogy*, as well as the short story collection *Drastic*.
Dawn Tripp is the author of the novels *Game of Secrets, The Season of Open Water,* and *Moon Tide*

Elizabeth Crane is the author of the novel *We Only Know So Much,* and the short story collections *You Must Be This Happy to Enter,* *All This Heavenly Glory,* and *When the Messenger is Hot*

Katherine Hill is the author of the novel *The Violet Hour*

Rebecca Makkai is the author of the novels *The Hundred-Year House* and *The Borrower*

Shelly Oria is the author of the short story collection *New York 1, Tel Aviv 0*

Aurelie Sheehan is the author of the story collections *Demigods on Speedway, Jewelry Box: A Collection of Histories,* and *Jack Kerouac is Pregnant,* as well as the novels *History Lessons for Girls* and *The Anxiety of Everyday Objects*

Charles Bock is the author of the novel *Beautiful Children*

Alix Ohlin is the author of the novels *Inside* and *The Missing Person,* as well as the short story collections *Signs and Wonders* and *Babylon and Other Stories*

Jess Walter is the author of the novels *Beautiful Ruins, The Financial Lives of Poets, Land of the Blind, The Zero, Citizen Vince, Over Tumbled Graves,* as well as the short story collection *We Live in Water*

Charles Yu is the author of the short story collection *Sorry Please Thank You* and the novel *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe*

Elisa Albert is the author of the novels *After Birth* and *The Book of Dahlia,* as well as the short story collection *How This Night is Different*

V.V. Ganeshananthan is the author of the novel *Love Marriage*

Alden Jones is the author of the story collection *Unaccompanied Minors*

*Lettering by Caleb Misclevitz.*
Listening to writers read and discuss their work at Newtonville Books, the bookstore my wife and I own outside Boston, I began to wonder which living, contemporary writers held the most influence over their work. This survey is not meant to be
comprehensive, but is the result of my posing the question to as many writers as I could ask.

—Jaime Clarke

JENNIFER EGAN

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ALLISON AMEND: Just for the record, I discovered Jennifer Egan before the Pulitzer Committee did. But they must recognize what I do when I read Jennifer’s fiction: An uncanny ability to predict the future of American society. In Look at Me (2001), she accurately predicted our obsession with reality television, and that the greatest terrorist threats would come from those living among us. Then A Visit From the Goon Squad (2011) did what I never thought was possible: included a speculative story using Powerpoint that felt not like a gimmick but rather so natural and enthralling that it completely transcended its medium. Goon Squad was so far reaching, so visionary, so completely unexpected, that I began to understand what engrossing experimental fiction might look like. Not the cerebral formalist playing of avant-garde writers, but stories that use the building blocks of emotion—character—to affect a reader. The form them seems like a literary lagniappe, enhancing the story and throwing the characters and their dilemmas into relief. What emerges from this short story collection (Story cycle? Novel? Novel in stories?) is a portrait of a generation, where we came from and where we’re going, a history of our time.

JOANNA HERSHON: In her masterful and oddly prescient novel, Look at Me, Jennifer Egan’s protagonist Charlotte—a midwestern model—has been through a jarring transformation. After a car accident leaves her face disfigured, she has reconstructive surgery, only to become beautiful again, though unrecognizable to anyone who previously knew her. This set-up alone seems Lynchian enough with its preoccupation with surface, but Egan’s magic lies in how, even when expressly writing about surface, she repeatedly transcends it. Charlotte identifies people’s “shadow selves...that caricature that clings to each of us, revealing itself in odd moments...” while becoming increasingly fixated with faded painted signs on the sides of buildings in New York City. Out of the many leitmotifs I’ve stumbled across in my life as a reader, and out of the many contained in that one brain-blasting novel, this is one that has permanently
wormed its way into my consciousness. I never pass an eroded painted sign without thinking of Jennifer Egan, and how those painted signs inevitably lead one’s gaze to the blank slate of the sky. But no matter how conceptual her later books may be (and conceptual they most certainly are: witness the completely successful chapter-as-PowerPoint-presentation in A Visit From the Goon Squad, or the metaphysical gothic hybrid of The Keep), there’s a bright physical sensation that lingers after reading her work. At the risk of sounding like one of the hippie sisters in her first novel (the magnificently sensual The Invisible Circus), each of Jennifer Egan’s books produces glittering trails of perception, a space that exists between dark and light, between truth and lies. Hers is the voice that I hear in my best moments of silence, when time feels extravagant, even irrelevant, and anything is possible.

**KATHERINE HILL:** We worship some writers for their sentences, others for their vision. Jennifer Egan is totally unfair because she’s an absolute master of both. She gets the little things right on the level of the line and she has the command of character and culture to sustain a powerful novel of ideas. In a single paragraph she can move from an earthy, sensory perception—say, of a “patient cow” getting milked by a machine in Look at Me—to a model’s heady conceptual paradox—“Being discovered felt like a discovery.” Her writing is packed with revelations that are never just revelations, bombs that explode in the moment and then reverberate pages later. At all times she has her larger arc in mind, her themes to which she constantly returns. Who else could write an intellectual spy thriller that works on Twitter, as penetrating in each epigrammatic paragraph as it is as a full-length feed? Who else could write a chapter in PowerPoint capable of moving a reader to tears? I usually take only occasional notes when I read, but I feverishly outlined A Visit From the Goon Squad, as if hoping to rewrite it myself. I needed to know the secrets of its composition, the clever ways in which those thirteen narratives hooked together, rubbed shoulders, battled time. The ways they answered, refuted, and evaded each other. “The sunsets!” I’ve been known to scream at a skeptic. “Look at what she does with the sunsets!” It’s hardly an exaggeration to say that Goon Squad was the best novel-writing workshop I ever took.

**DAVE EGGERS**
ARTHUR BRADFORD: Dave is an inspiring writer on several levels. First, he knows the craft. His sentences are well constructed and clever and he has read widely and therefore has a solid base of influences. But one would expect that from an established writer. What sets Dave apart for me is his sense of playfulness and desire to rethink the rules. Dave questioned the conventional wisdom which held sway in the literary and publishing world in the 1990s and ushered in a new sense of excitement about the written word. When he was first starting up McSweeney’s, he sent out these long rambling letters to his writer friends that were like a call to arms. His excitement was contagious. Before Dave came along I felt like the publishing world was a place run by far off academic types who operated by some sort of secret rule book and there was no way to change that. The first issue of McSweeney’s was populated mainly by stories which had been killed or rejected from mainstream publications—they were weird, and funny, and wild—so different from the fare of most of the literary quarterlies back then. When Dave’s first book came out, A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius, one needed look no farther than the title page, with its odd send-up of the Library of Congress’ classification system, to see that this was a writer who approached things with a fresh and irreverent perspective. This attitude made us all want to try harder, aim higher, and break ground into a new frontier. And I suppose Dave’s career would be less impressive if he had merely rattled a few cages and then settled into the same old groove. But he continues to offer new insights with each new work, fiction, non-fiction, or screenplay. And his work with 826 Valencia is a shining example of how writers can give back and support the world of literature. All those young writers nurtured in the halls of the 826 centers will be the ones questioning our stale ways in the years to come, and it’s how good writing will survive.

DAVID JAMES POISSANT: You never forget your first love. After I became a reader but before I was a writer, I was an unhappy high school English teacher who dreamed of what it would be like to be a writer. I’d read a lot as an undergrad and written a few short stories, but, a year out of college, I was still trying to figure out who to read and
what to write about. I’d even sent an impassioned email to the lead singer of one of my favorite bands asking what I should be reading. I can’t imagine why I thought this was a good idea, but it turned out to be a good idea, as, startlingly, the singer wrote back that I should read *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, a memoir written by a guy named Dave Eggers. I did. And nothing’s been the same for me since.

*A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* is an account of the death of Dave Eggers’ parents and Eggers’ subsequent quest to raise his younger brother, Toph, with help from their siblings. The memoir is a sad, funny, occasionally hyper, incantatory piece of writing. It employs all sorts of self-aware, metafictional and intertextual tricks so that, in the wrong mood, you can easily get bogged down in the excess. But, to let the book be what it wants to be, to give it the benefit of the doubt, is to surrender to a haunting story of loss and redemption. It’s also the publishing equivalent of Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*, which is to say that no matter what Eggers goes on to write, his memoir will likely overshadow and outsell what he writes. This isn’t necessarily a bad thing. It is what it is.

I was right in the middle of *Heartbreaking Work* when, in the fall of 2002, I opened a copy of *The New Yorker* to “Where Were We.” The story turned out to be an excerpt from *You Shall Know Our Velocity*, Eggers’ first novel and second book. I was hooked and bought the novel immediately.

*You Shall Know Our Velocity*, probably my favorite of Eggers’ novels, is the story of Will and Hand, two Americans who travel the world in an effort to get rid of some money that Will has come into and doesn’t want. The pyrotechnics here are less flashy than in *Heartbreaking Work*, though there are more than a few, including the clever insertion of several blank pages meant to represent how it feels to be airborne in a boat that’s just hit a wave, along with the deployment of Sebald-esque photographs that call into question the fictiveness of the fiction. *Velocity* is a kind of spiritual sequel to *Heartbreaking Work*, and if Eggers’ memoir feels a little farfetched, at times, for nonfiction, his novel feels very close to some secret truth, so that one can’t help wanting to read it autobiographically. I’m not the first reader to notice, for example, that the amount of money that Will wants to be rid of—$38,000—is awfully close to the sum Eggers claims to have netted from the memoir’s advance: $39,567.68.

I had put down the memoir to read the novel. I finished the novel, amazed, then picked up the memoir and was amazed anew. When I think about those books, it’s as if they share a spine. They run together for me, the stories and the narrative voices. But that’s okay. I think Eggers would have liked it that way. Here’s why:

Not long after the release of *Velocity*, Eggers announced that there was more to the novel, an additional 48-page “interruption” narrated by Hand and newly sandwiched between pages 250 and 300 of the 400-page book now retitled *Sacrament*. By the summer of 2003, Eggers would go on to publish “The Only Meaning of the Oil-Wet Water” in the magazine *Zoetrope*, a later story of Hand with nuances reminiscent of the *Velocity* insert. Then, Vintage would go on to reissue *Sacrament* in paperback, only with the original title *You Shall Know Our Velocity*. If you find all of this a little baffling, well,
so did I at the time, and still do. But it didn’t turn me off from Eggers, just as I wasn’t turned off by *Heartbreaking Work*’s 48-page preamble or the 48-page supplement, “Mistakes We Knew We Were Making,” appended to the memoir’s later editions. You could call all of this excess, but the demand was there, the curiosity, the readers, so, if you’re Eggers, why not riff on your new hit single? Why not weave a ten-minute guitar solo into your set? Especially when, for my money, those added bonuses are some of the best writing he’s ever done.

But to overthink all of this may be to miss the point, which is that his body of work is *fun*. I don’t know whether Eggers is having fun, but his books give readers permission to have fun with them, even as those books broach subjects dire as cancer, genocide, and Hurricane Katrina.

The distinctive Eggers voice (it’s hard to pin this down except to say that you know it when you see it, or would have known it when you saw it before its imitators became legion) is evident in *Heartbreaking Work* and *Velocity*, as well as in the stories of *How We Are Hungry* and *How the Water Feels to the Fishes*, and in the forewords to *The Best American Nonrequired Reading*, Eggers’ annual edited series. This voice has yielded, in recent years, to voices more appropriate for their speakers and subjects: a Sudanese Lost Boy in *What is the What*, a Syrian-American immigrant in *Zeitoun*, and an American businessman in *A Hologram for the King*.

What hasn’t changed—and the lesson I take from Eggers—is how the author continues to allow himself leeway to go anywhere and to do anything in terms of genre and form, short works and long, fiction and nonfiction and that which writhes between. As Eggers writes in *Heartbreaking Work*: “All events described herein actually happened, though on occasion the author has taken certain, very small, liberties with chronology, because that is his right as an American.”

It’s also, of course, his right as a writer. And what a writer he’s turned out to be. And made me want to be. That permission he gives himself—to be free wielding and wide-ranging, at times inventive and at times restrained, at times realist and at times absurd, here furious and there laughing himself into tears, here satirical and there sincerity itself, a writer whose work touches the twin hems of humor and despair, perhaps the best at this since Donald Barthelme—to be such a writer, a writer who stands at the edge of the stage and cries out: “Are we having fun yet?” Is there room enough in any given generation for more than one of these writers?

God, I hope so.

**KEVIN SAMPSELL**: Dave Eggers initially influenced me because of the sheer strangeness and otherness of McSweeney’s magazine when I first discovered it, probably around the year 1999, when issue #3 came out. I was at work at Powell’s Bookstore and we had just started carrying it. I picked it up not really knowing what it was at first. I was transfixed by all the text on the cover and that alone seemed to be an endless amusement. I thumbed through the pages and laughed out loud at so many things. It was as if the literary journal had been re-imagined by comedic geniuses and postmodern
experimentalists in equal measures. It felt, at the time, as if it were made for me. It was weird and funny and yet accessible and smart.

After that, I began sending stuff to Dave Eggers via email, and sometimes in the mail—strange Americana pamphlets I had found. He was encouraging and I had a few things published on their website. When he published his first book, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, he (and therefore McSweeney’s) became quite popular quite quickly. I was inspired by how he balanced humor and melancholy in his memoir and then later in his other books, as well as the books that McSweeney’s published in their first years. I run a small press too (Future Tense Books in Portland, OR) and I was originally inspired by independent record labels like K and Sub Pop. McSweeney’s was the first press I felt a kinship with.

I continue to be impressed by and happy with the changing directions and tones that Eggers displays in his work. Not to mention his contributions to the literary culture and his community as a whole.

**DEBORAH EISENBERG**

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**ZACHARY LAZAR:** I first met Deborah Eisenberg at the Iowa Writer’s Workshop when I was 23, and not a particularly precocious or mature 23. To give an example: I don’t think I’d even read any of her work, which is painful to admit now. Deborah explained that the way she wrote her short stories was to start by completing a first draft, which she then revised many times until it was as good as she could make it, then she tore up that perfected draft and started the whole thing over from scratch. It seemed (and still seems) a daunting if not an impossible way to write. But it gave me one of my first clues about the kind of commitment that was involved in this life—the life of trying to write good fiction—that I was so dreamily attracted to. It also gave me an early lesson in contradiction, the possibility of being one way at the desk (deadly serious) and another way in life, for Deborah at this time used to wear several differently colored Swatch wristwatches on the same wrist and had a kind of idiosyncratic star-power that galvanized almost everyone.
To say that I have now read her work is of course an understatement. I have read it over and over again. She is a writer who absolutely refuses to settle for a mediocre sentence or even phrase. More importantly, although her work is funny, it is deep—an overused word, I know, but in this case apt. By deep, I mean that every one of Deborah’s stories contains a world (sometimes worlds). When a writer doesn’t settle, when a writer is attentive enough to find surprise meanings and connections within her own work, then that work develops permanence. I’m talking about the green light at the end of Daisy’s dock, or the eyes of T.J. Eckleburg. In the same way, Deborah’s work often takes the mundane and magnifies it into the emblematic or even the cosmic. I don’t try to imitate what she does, I just try to remember the high standards. When I was 23, she once told me of a short story I later published that it was promising, but “young.” I had a ways to go, in other words. What I know now is that you always have a ways to go. I know it in part because of Deborah’s example.

MICHAEL LOWENTHAL: When I evangelize, as I often do, for the Church of Deborah Eisenberg, one of the verses I recite is the titular character’s outburst near the end of Eisenberg’s story “Some Other, Better Otto.” The fussily intelligent Otto is hypercritical of those around him, including his complaisant lover, William, whose placidity only perturbs Otto all the more. After a tense evening, William suggests that Otto “Try and get some sleep,” and Otto responds with the following tirade:

“Try and get some sleep?” “Try and get some sleep?” This is unbearable! I’ve spent the best years of my life with a man who doesn’t know how to use the word “and!” “And” is not part of the infinitive! “And” means “in addition to.” It’s not “Try and get some sleep,” it’s “Try to get some sleep.” To! To! To! To! To! To! To! Please try to get some sleep!

I love this rant not only because it is hysterical (in both senses of the word) and because it so deftly reveals Otto’s stickler-for-precision nature, but also because it highlights the precision with which Eisenberg herself constructs dialogue, down to the smallest parts of speech and punctuation.

For my money, no contemporary American writer writes better—or better-punctuated—dialogue than Eisenberg. Like most masters, she flagrantly flouts the rules that the rest of us coweringly abide by. She’s a profligate italicizer, sometimes even italicizing one lone syllable within a longer word of dialogue; she scatters exclamation points like grass seed; and she relies on so many em dashes that I’ve sometimes suspected she gets paid not by the word but by the omitted word.

Fiction writers are usually warned against using such stylized techniques, for fear of calling attention to form at the expense of content. But Eisenberg manages to have her cake and eat it, too. Her pyrotechnic punctuation is both highly visible and entirely transparent, an artifice whose effect is the opposite of artificial. Her characters’ heightened, hyperreal dialogue allows us to hear what they say (and don’t say) more clearly than any transcript of human conversation could.
Another tour de force of dialogue appears in Eisenberg’s story “Mermaids.” Kyla, an adolescent girl, has been pawned off on the Laskeys, the family of one of her schoolmates, so that Kyla’s single mother can go out on a date. Over dinner, the Laskeys constantly snipe and interrupt one another, their conversation gaining a terrible sort of momentum from its very choppiness. The family’s lines of fracture are all too visible in the repeatedly fractured lines of dialogue.

Eventually Mr. Laskey proposes to take Kyla and his daughter Janey on a trip to New York, even though he recently returned from “business” there, so that Mrs. Laskey “will have one entire week of peace, all to herself.” As we will learn, however, Mr. Laskey’s more urgent motivation is the extramarital affair he’s conducting in the city. Our first hint of this comes from Mrs. Laskey’s brutally direct and yet exquisitely elliptical response to her husband’s proposal. “And when did you become so enamored of New York?” she asks him. “The last time you and I were there together, hellish sewer, I believe, was what you … It’s a filthy place, and you loathe it, and you are now proposing to go right back and expose the girls to it, and for what reason I cannot—”

Here Mr. Laskey interrupts her, and so her highly charged sentence never gets completed. Her husband’s reason for returning to New York so soon is one Mrs. Laskey cannot … fathom? Cannot believe? Cannot condone? Cannot bear to admit to herself?

It’s what Mrs. Laskey doesn’t say—to which Eisenberg calls attention with her characteristically noticeable punctuation—that gives the scene, like all of Eisenberg’s fiction, so much resonance.

MANUEL GONZALES: Deborah Eisenberg traffics in reality in a way that seems at once foreign and out of reach to me. Her characters, her situations, the emotions that bleed through the page—they are quiet and small and focused and deal with nuanced explorations of conversations and the strange, awkward way people react and interact, their subtle navigations of the world that surrounds them, which is, for all intents and purposes, a real and realistic world.

In other words, she is almost exactly opposite of the kind of writer I am, which is why I find her so influential.

Whenever I am working through a story or a piece of fiction and want to make things louder, want to make them brasher or more extreme, and I begin to feel the fabric of the world I’m trying to create stretch and strain against the seams, near to bursting, I return to Eisenberg. Or whenever I feel that a story has left the earth, has become little more than some nightmarish piece of fancy, ungrounded and full of games but little emotion—I return to her work, then, too. Her story, “Mermaids,” or her story, “Custodian.” It’s not that there isn’t something loud and extreme and ambitious about her work, the language of her stories, but that she manages all of it—paragraph-long sentences, beautiful and horrifying descriptions, awkward interactions coupled the failings of human decency—she manages to fit all of this into the worlds of her stories, yet the seams never break.
What’s more, she fashions out of these stories moments of high-drama, of frightening tension and the uncanny sense that we have been transported to an otherworld, but does so without leaving this world or the rigorous and uncompromising constraints of reality. But more than for any other reason, I return time and again to the stories of Deborah Eisenberg because in them she ably achieves in a few words an emotional effect that I might achieve—with hesitation—over the length of an entire story, and one that I’ve filled with magic and monsters and robots and unicorns.

BRET EASTON ELLIS

CHRISTIAN TEBORDO: It seems to me that the first sentence of Bret Easton Ellis’s first novel anticipates his entire project as an artist. “People are afraid to merge on freeways in Los Angeles,” Clay, the narrator of Less Than Zero, tells us. Then he explains that this is something his sometime-girlfriend Blair has said as they prepare to merge on the freeway. Then he repeats the line, concluding that, “[t]hough that sentence shouldn’t bother me, it stays in my mind for an uncomfortably long time.”

It’s an unusually clunky sentence for a writer admired, or at least acknowledged, even among his many detractors, for his precision at the sentence level. When a precise writer writes a clunky sentence (especially when it opens a novel), I tend to give that writer the benefit of the doubt. In this case, I think Ellis tacked on everything after “merge” for fear of seeming heavy-handed.

People are afraid to merge.

True enough, though not particularly groundbreaking when given its traditional interpretation: that people have trouble connecting with each other. But while Ellis’s novels confirm this, they’re more concerned with the less conventional interpretation of that sentence: that people are afraid to merge their many selves.

In a world where the eyes of T. J. Eckleburg are not watching, a world where you can “disappear here,” as the billboard (just one of many Gatsby references in the book) of Less Than Zero informs Clay, humanism has no solid foundation, and there is no good reason for a person to believe in a “true self,” a fixed identity. Because of this, where a
more conventional version of the novel (or maybe a film adaptation) would have ended with some epiphany about how Clay and his friends are essentially good and well-intentioned and have only been going about things the wrong way, the emotional peak of *Less Than Zero* revolves around the rape of an underage girl. The moral quibble that Clay feels, as a witness, is provisionally resolved when he learns that the girl is not eleven, as he’d thought, but twelve.

This, of course, leaves Ellis open to accusations of nihilism, and that may be fair for all I know. But I’ve always read him as a profoundly moral, even moralistic, writer. In his first couple of novels, he mostly diagnoses and dramatizes the problem of identity, complicating this with the strange brand of deadpan satire (which may make it too easy to reject his work as shallow or gimmicky) that he uses to bring the problem to a crisis in *American Psycho*. It strikes me as strange that, more than twenty years after its publication, that book is still better known for its period signifiers than the howl of despair that the opening sentence (another deliberately clunky one) declares it to be. Ellis’s follow-up, *Glamorama*, explores the same issues of identity but on a broader socio-political scale and makes a good case that he may be a dark-horse candidate to succeed Delillo.

But it was with *Lunar Park* that Ellis really tried to solve the problem. He did this by publicly attempting to merge his many selves—the serious writer, the literary playboy, the pop culture aficionado, the vicious satirist, the sad human being who never got along with his father and couldn’t figure out why. It’s uneven, imperfect. Maybe necessarily so. But in its vulnerability, it’s one of the most daring and honest performances I’ve read by a living fiction writer.

Since then, he’s taken his act beyond the book, through film, a series of strange interviews, and, of course, his notorious Twitter account. It’s a spectacle worthy of Kierkegaard or Artaud, and I only hope it doesn’t keep him from writing more novels.

Because of all of this, the question of influence is a tricky one with Ellis. His approach seems easy to impersonate—take some Didion, a couple of mistaken identities, throw in some back issues of *GQ*, veer suddenly into ultraviolence, occasionally say something outrageous to make sure your microphone’s still on. But that’s not influence; it’s impersonation.

Ellis’s chief rival once said: “Fiction’s about what it means to be a fucking human being,” and that perfectly acceptable aesthetic or ethic has somehow become dogma. But in order to talk about what it means to be human, we need to start from a notion of what it’s like to be human, and Ellis has done that consistently and fearlessly. In doing so, he’s rejected the notion of literature as a genre, instead using the novel as a fluid medium for exploring the actual and the possible. That’s what I’ve tried to take from him as a writer.

What I’m getting at is, by denying us a glimpse into his characters’ depths (which may or may not exist), by focusing on the ways they relate to each other (mostly terribly), by showing them attempting (rather than realizing), Ellis seems to me to be demonstrating
and confirming the complexity of the experience of life. Call me sick, but it’s oddly beautiful and it makes me optimistic.

NATHAN ENGLANDER

SCOTT CHESHIRE: Nathan Englander is mostly known for his short stories, internationally so, and he has at least one international short story award to prove it. Like most of his readers, I discovered him with his first collection, *For the Relief of Unbearable Urges*, and felt I had fallen into a world both alien and totally familiar, and so I became forever hooked. For his humor, yes, and for the beautiful writing, yes, but I must admit, at first, it was largely because he wrote about religion. Englander’s work specifically explores the world of Orthodox Judaism, often its legacy and precarious existence in the modern world. What I find endlessly fascinating is his commitment to an unabashed interrogation of that orthodoxy from every possible perspective, the believer, the non-believer, the doubter, and always at very least the thinker. I am not Jewish, nor was I raised as such, but my youth was spent steeped in orthodoxy. As young Jehovah’s Witness I was all too familiar with the notion of “living within the world, but not a part of it,” as something of a stranger, at school, at work, always at a deliberate distance from others. I was familiar with insularity, ritual, loyalty, tradition, and faith. But I also recognized Englander’s respectful remove from it all. After long leaving that particular world, I tried to write about the experience of Christian orthodoxy for years. I always failed. In Englander I found the very thing I was missing: an artful balance between cultural celebration and respectful criticism, levity and gravity, light and dark. Plus he actually made me laugh. This uncanny and unparalleled ability remains in his second collection *What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank*. That title (and the title story) adroitly mixes light and dark in a way no other living writer I know of can match. And yet for all the attention his stories have rightfully received, it is his novel, *The Ministry of Special Cases*, that remains for me his masterstroke.

Writers often talk about the opening pages of novels, the reason being, I’ve found, that those first few pages so often deftly encapsulate in one way or another all that follows. I have taught classes on the opening pages of Don DeLillo’s *End Zone*, Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping*, and Max Frisch’s *I’m Not Stiller*, to name a few, and the
students are usually amazed to see how rich and long-reaching those first pages are. *The Ministry of Special Cases* is an especially fertile opening and exemplifies what I continue to love most about Englander’s work—the stakes are high. I’m not talking here about shootouts, or terrorist plots, or presidential assassinations. I’m talking about that daily war we all wage against death. And that war is alive and frighteningly real on every page of Englander’s novel, but is raised to an almost Shakespearean level in its opening pages. The story takes place during Argentina’s “Dirty War,” in 1976, when almost 30,000 dissidents were “disappeared” by the government. Englander’s hero, Kaddish, is triply “damned,” as he is Jewish, a “son of a whore,” and all this in Argentina. The man is an outsider. We first find Kaddish, on the book’s opening page, in a cemetery with his son Pato reluctantly accompanying him on their nightly work, removing names, with hammer and chisel, from gravestones. They remove and alter family names of the “respectable” Jews descending from those less than reputable: prostitutes, beggars, and gangsters. And Kaddish knows why: he “understood very well why the families turned to them with such urgency now. It was 1976 in Argentina. They lived with uncertainty and looming chaos. In Buenos Aires they’d suffered kidnap and ransom. There was terror from all quarters and murder on the rise. It was no time to stand out, not for Gentile or Jew. And the Jew, almost to a person, felt that being Jewish was already plenty different enough.” And so father and son hid under cloak of night, led by a flashlight, until Kaddish’s “fingers glowed orange, red in between, as he ran his fist along the face of a stone.” The elements here are so rich it almost overflows. We have a father and his son, of significantly different generations, with diverse sorts of pride, Kaddish’s in his not so comely lineage (despite his work), and Pato’s prideful recalcitrance to help anyone dilute their Jewish identity: “He did not want to be there. He did not want to cross through the United Congregations Cemetery, did not want to carry the tool bag or climb over the wall. He wanted no part of his father’s cockamamie and perverse and misdirected plans. At nineteen, a college boy, Pato was learning sociology and history, important things that can only be taught in a university setting. He had no interest in the thuggish world Kaddish came from.” And so we have the universal struggle between father and son, but cast in the light of war, a daily threat of violence, and the possible erasure of self-identity. It’s a brilliant opening, staggeringly ambitious, sad, grave, and somehow funny as hell. Just ask Talmud Harry. Kaddish does, wondering about the religious implications of removing the names of “fine Jews” from the company of dead “whores.” “You lie with them living,” Talmud Harry says, “why not cuddle up when they’re dead?”

As you might guess, things do not end well. But it can’t finish any other way, and it’s all right there in the opening pages. It’s in the first line, for goodness’ sake: “Jews bury themselves the way they live, crowded together, encroaching on one another’s space.” Life and death, death within life, and a son’s fight for independence (more space) from his father—all in the opening sentence. It’s even there in the names. Pato also happens to be the name of Argentina’s national sport, a mix of polo and basketball, and, for me, suggests all things youthful, playful, and innocent. If “The Dirty War” stole the youth of thousands (and it did), then such a name does not bode well for Kaddish’s son. As for Kaddish, it’s also the name of a central prayer of praise in the Jewish liturgy, and most often refers to “The Mourner’s Kaddish,” a prayer of mourning. Kaddish mourns for his fellow Jews, for his son, for the disappeared, for his mother, for Argentina. In lesser hands, such a moniker might be too heavy handed, too “symbolic,” but Englander
plainly explains where it comes from: “Not even Kaddish’s name was family given; it was
the young rabbi who’d picked it...Sickly, weakly, and grasping at survival, Kaddish
barely lived through his first week. His mother—a faithful woman—begged that the
rabbi be summoned to Talmud Harry’s to save him...His judgment was instant. ‘Let his
name be Kaddish to ward off the angel of death. A trick and a blessing. Let this child be
the mourner instead of the mourned.’” Kaddish, as a character, is emblematic of
Englander’s best work, and of the human condition—that futile fight against suffering
and death, no matter what faith, tribe, or nation, and made all the more noble as
Englander has us laugh along the way.

PHIL KLAY: Oftentimes, when writing a story, I’ll have a challenge that arises not so
much from the emotional stakes of the story itself but from technique. How do I move
through time and space smoothly, jumping into memories and dialogue, shifting
between the now of the story and the past that informs it? How do I get the universe I
want to express into the tight, constricted form that is a short story? How do I make the
story breathe?

When I’m stuck like that, I look to models. People I can steal from. Patrick McGrath.

In theory, some of his stories just shouldn’t work. How could you take readers through
the Night of the Murdered Poets by giving us a young man, writing a story in his head,
on his way to his death, while his companions argue? How could you manage getting the
decades-long history of Israeli settlements in a story of two mothers, a bargain, and
disputes over Jewish law? Or wrap the Holocaust and the Suez Crisis, the morality of a
man who is both victim and murderer, and free groceries into a philosophical discussion
between a father and a son? And yet his stories move forward with intense, compressed
energy. It’s remarkable. He earns so much space, to say so much, in just a few thousand
words. So I look at his stories, diagram out the tonal shifts and transitions and the
narrative moves he makes, and then I try to steal everything I can.

1. Look at what he does with the point-of-view in the opening of “Everything I Know
About My Family On My Mother’s Side.” The cinematic zoom in to the suspect husband
and wife, and then the real shocker, as the disembodied ‘we’ turns into an ‘I,’ distance
erased, we’re in the narrator’s head, a narrator who seems to be the author himself. Any
other author, this would feel like a post-modern metafictional game. With Englander,
with this raw, beautiful story, it’s the only way it could possibly be told.

2. If we weave through the crowd with a little gusto, we’ll make progress. If we take
advantage of the pause when the two stand by a table of trinkets—bracelets and lighters
and watches—we get close enough to become suspicious of their relationship, about the
nature of its husband-and-wifeness.

3. The two stop right in the middle of Canal Street. The wife faces the husband, and the
point she argues is so large, it’s as if the wife believes traffic will stop for it when the light
changes, as if, should the cars roll on, it’s worth being run down to see her point made.
It’s then that we catch up, then that we’re sure—as the woman smiles and hooks her arm through the man’s, guiding him safely across—that the wife is not a wife and the husband not a husband.

4. What they are, it seems clear now, is boyfriend and girlfriend. And that girlfriend, upon closer inspection, seems to be a cat-eyed and freckle-faced Bosnian. Standing next to her, looking ten years older and with a mess of curly hair, the other one—the boyfriend one—is, we see, just a little Jew. And recognizing the face, taking it in, we see the little Jew is me.

**LOUISE ERDRICH**

© Robin Holland

**CAITLIN HORROCKS:** In my required high school American Literature course, my teacher passed out worn photocopies of the first chapter of Louise Erdrich’s *Love Medicine*. At the time, I was the kind of insufferable student who thought that my job was to learn from The Classics, and that my teacher’s job was to teach them to me. We already had a class anthology we called “the brick,” nearly as thick as it was wide. What was the purpose of this suspiciously modern, suspiciously crumpled Xerox of something called “The World’s Greatest Fisherman”?

As I read I was entranced, and chastened. In those first lines, June Kashpaw, “a long-legged Chippewa woman, aged hard in every way except how she moved,” is tempted into a bar. It’s the day before Easter, and entering the dark room, June walks towards a sky blue egg in a man’s hand, “a beacon in the murky air.” June has a bus to catch, but at the prospect of a moneved man, she stays. She makes that decision on page three, but I was already scared for her, urging her to get on that bus and go. Four pages later, the man’s expensive down vest slides against June’s body like “an enormous tongue.” Vest like a tongue, blue egg like a beacon: I first read those lines 18 years ago, and I will probably remember them for the rest of my life. I will also remember the way that section of the book ends, with June setting out on foot for a destination she will not reach. The reader knows this is a walk June should not undertake, even as we understand why June wants to. June walks over the snow “like water and came home.” Even at 14, I knew what that meant, and I loved Erdrich for telling me without telling me, presenting me with a gritty world described in poetry, and allowing me the privilege of filling in the blanks by myself.
In the next chapter, the voice shifts to a high-flying lyricism: “So when I went there, I knew the dark fish must rise. Plumes of radiance had soldered on me.” Check this out, I said to my father, and read those first lines aloud to him; he helpfully corrected my pronunciation of “solder.” This was another form of trust Erdrich placed in the reader, I thought: this silent L, this word I didn’t entirely understand, but wanted to.

There was on every page something new to try to absorb: her sense of language, sense of character, sense of how the passage of time alters our dreams and sense of self. I also loved the way the novel was a stealth short story collection, arcs within arcs. I tore through the rest of Erdrich’s books, everything she’d written up to that point; there are few authors I’ve admired more or read so voraciously. She kept feeding me, challenging me, even inspiring jealousy, although I was not at the time allowing myself to believe that I might really try to become a writer. But on some level, I think I knew that I wanted to try and do what she did in that book, in those very first photocopied pages. I’m still trying.

JIM LYNCH: Louise Erdrich’s characters have popped off the page for me ever since “Love Medicine” opened with beautiful June Kapshaw having sad, drunken sex with a stranger in a truck before she walked off into the night and froze to death. Something about the rhythm, wisdom and playfulness of that novel made me want to write fiction. And now, thirty years later, she inspires me again with “The Round House” and another bucket full of palpable characters ranging wildly in style, age and sobriety. In this book, justice is elusive, the priest is profane, the kids are vigilantes. It’s a provocative story that dares to be political. Yet more than anything, like all her fiction, it feels real and raw, big-hearted and symphonic and worthy of re-reading.

VANESSA VESELKA: I don’t recall how I came across Love Medicine. As with many books that have marked me, it was bigger than the circumstances surrounding its appearance. I was in my mid-twenties at the time and couldn’t find my way into my own century. I felt like writing had grown small. It pointed at malaise and illuminated the petty but excised its role in real tragedy. Academic writing seemed to have cleaved the Great Novel in half—plot to one side, character portraits to another—in a sort of Solomon’s baby approach to literature and I, unable to choose, stayed with pre-Atomic age work. Love Medicine, and the story cycle that unfolded from it, was a portal for me into my own time. In Erdrich’s work, detail and character serves something bigger. That first trilogy is airtight. Every action, no matter how small, has karma of its own. The stark fragility of her world also stunned me. While I was not Chippewa, I knew and understood the people she wrote about. They made much more sense to me than, say, the depletion of retired businessman failing at monogamy and reflecting on how he used to feel things (no offense to retired businessmen). Erdrich’s characters, though, had messed-up belief systems and transcendental concerns, which played out with grand intention no matter how small the venue. In a rundown bar, in a truck, on a snowy field, they made decisions of terrible import, of grace and failure. Whereas the characters in many contemporary ‘literary’ novels were fascinated by their own jadedness, the people in her stories were alive with their disappointment. That, too, touched a hidden nerve: the need for unsparing vision to include beauty. Without my knowledge or permission, Louise Erdrich instilled in me a compass point that would guide my own work. Be as
dark as you like and show the truth the best you can, but love your characters, love your world.

JEFFREY EUGENIDES

KIRSTEN MENGER-ANDERSEN: I loved Middlesex, which I read on a vacation in Canada, the duration of which I was sick and confined to bed; I still think fondly of that time. The Marriage Plot became my favorite bus companion, and the novel rode with me all over San Francisco. Most recently, I read The Virgin Suicides, which I picked up because I was making a small study of novels that used a collective point of view. Eugenides uses the ‘we’ beautifully, but I found myself distracted from my own study by the many other things he does so well. One particular line from The Virgin Suicides escaped the page and joined my muses: “Inside, the leather bucket seats retained idiosyncratic perspiration marks—you could see where Mr. Fontaine had rested his head in traffic jams, the chemicals in his hair spray turning the brown leather a light purple.” I love how the environment, the character, and the character’s effect on the environment are drawn with one perfect line of text, and the description often floats through my thoughts as I write. The fact that Eugenides is crafting his work, perhaps even now, as I write this brief statement of admiration, is alone inspiring and glimmering evidence that we live in a remarkable time.

KAREN THOMPSON WALKER: Eugenides has a great talent for making the details of ordinary life radiate with meaning and beauty. It’s partly his lyrical language, and it’s partly his amazing eye for detail. And I love the way that almost every sentence in the book is suffused with emotion. After reading The Virgin Suicides, I began to realize that the small experiences of my own suburban childhood might be worth writing about, if only I could find the right angle. Soon after that, I began to write my first novel, The Age of Miracles.

BRIAN EVENSON
MATT BELL: Brian Evenson is a master of the fugue, of the discomfiting conjecture, of the ethical blankness that invites—or perhaps demands—that the reader insert herself into the story, ready to act. In his novel *Dark Property*, one of Evenson’s characters says, “Truth cannot be imparted. It must be inflicted.”—and it is likely that no matter what book of Evenson’s we’re talking about, a reader might indeed feel like something had been inflicted upon him, after spending time inside Evenson’s books, which are so frequently violent and disorienting, destabilizing norms of behavior just as they destabilize identity, place, memory. In an essay published in *Fence*, Evenson wrote that "the task of the writer is to use whatever tools he or she can to crack the reader open without the reader realizing, and then to initiate a process of transformation and destruction before the reader realizes it and can take steps to protect himself or herself.” But what then, is Evenson’s inflicted truth, and how does it transform and destroy us? In book after book, Evenson perhaps does not get us significantly closer to the “truth” of his big questions—and the bigger the truth, the more necessary the air-quotes—but rather, he gets better at phrasing these most difficult questions through narrative. In his most recent books, especially *The Open Curtain* and *Last Days, Fugue State* and *Windeye*—it seems Evenson is asking, in dozens of innovative and powerful ways, What does it mean to human? What does it mean to be moral? What does it mean to be me, this particular version of me, and is this person who I believe myself to besomething that can be known, pinned down, made to last? Moralities and memories, spaces and identities, these things shift constantly in Evenson’s work, and often away from surety or stability—but in the end, no matter what other violences are done or losses are suffered, often the questions remain, as vital and as moving as ever, or perhaps, paradoxically, they are even strengthened by the ways in which Evenson demonstrates—inflicts—what might be the most terrifying truth of all: That even as we approach the answers we have spent a lifetime seeking, we will never be able to know if we are right, if we have at last arrived at the end of our questions. Instead, we know only that we have paid the cost of our asking, and also reaped the reward—and that both the cost we have paid and the reward we have gained is to be changed, to be transformed, to be, as Evenson promised we would, destroyed.

BLAKE BUTLER: At this point I’m not even sure how I came across him, but reading Brian Evenson was a pretty huge discovery for me. I spent a couple years concerning
myself mainly with the big postmodern brains like Barthelme and Pynchon as well as those I like to think of as the “in their 30s in the late 90s” school like Antrim, Moody, Baker, Saunders. I think this first book of Evenson’s that I bumped into was *The Din of Celestial Birds*, which I ordered on a whim based on the weird macabre blurbs and images I found in online descriptions of his work. It took me totally off guard: his writing was more affective and psychological than a lot of what I’d been reading, with as much attention to language as to plot and tone, creating such a total effect that once I read any of his stories it was pretty hard to forget the way they felt, which is saying a lot for me because I have a horrible memory. I don’t think I’d realized before then how a book could be both languagey and immersive at the same time, creating a sense of mystery that did more than just tell a story. It really got my brain spinning. I read everything of his that I could get my hands on after that (and still do), and also through that wormhole was able to find more kinds of affective language-centric writing like the Lish school of writers and other dark mechanical shit like Robbe-Grillet and FC2, which really helped me move out of the way I’d been trying to imitate a lot of those late 90s people that I tried so hard to work in the tradition of and just couldn’t: it didn’t come naturally, and didn’t feel right in my mouth. Finally I started to see how you could wander in the dark and let something innate or waiting in you take more of the control from the ego, project a kind of mesmerized-like way of speaking that opened more and more doors as it progressed.

**PETER ROCK:** I’ve never met Brian Evenson. He and I have risen from/been spit out of a similar vortex, though, if in different directions, so I’m quite interested in him and his work. I grew up in Salt Lake City, Utah; while I’m not Mormon and never was, the religion was everywhere (we prayed a lot in Cub Scouts, for instance), and the spirits there are thick in the air. It’s not an environment that doesn’t shape you in significant ways. Now Brian Evenson, he was Mormon, and even taught at Brigham Young University, before being cast out (losing his teaching job and being excommunicated from the church) because of the content of his fiction. The cold, twisted fury of the stories in *Altmann’s Tongue* were a warning sign. *Father of Lies* is where he really got in trouble, writing about an abusive Mormon bishop. The tension of his work, and the awareness of the spiritual and physical being so bound up together, is truly specific. His willingness to push boundaries, to exaggerate without trying for humor or self-conscious irony, to really create a consistency in a very dark and unexpected place, is so fine. Stories like “Muller” and “House Rules” in the excellent collection *The Wavering Knife* are so terrifying in their attention. Evenson works as a translator, as well as teaching; he writes genre “horror” fiction; everything he does is managed with the same rigor and focus, and in my opinion it’s because he’s haunted by the strange spirituality of the American Rockies. Really, truly haunted. His most recent novel, *Immobility*, combines so many strands of what he does. It’s a postapocalyptic tale told in the Salt Lake valley and the surrounding foothills, and the prose and affect is akin in many ways to Beckett. So twisted! The characterization here, even when dealing with people who aren’t entirely people, is transporting, truly human.

**PERCIVAL EVERETT**
ADAM WILSON: As far as I’m concerned, the Jewish Novel as ghettoized sub-genre ended with the 1953 publication of Saul Bellow’s *The Adventures of Augie March*. Its famous opening line is a declaration of assimilation: “I am an American, Chicago born...” Augie is about the triumph of individualism in democratic America, and with it, Bellow opened the door for a literature encompassing the full panoply of American Jewish experience. A Jew could be any number of things—at one point, Augie gets deeply involved in the traditionally gentile art of falconry—but most importantly, he could be an American, no qualifier necessary.

*Augie March* may have made a statement about Jewish assimilation—a statement that would prove prescient in the sixty years since its publication—but certain ears continue to be deaf to it. I know this because, as a practicing writer and an occasionally practicing Jew, who wrote a book set in secular Jewish suburbia in which marijuana is the bitter herb of choice, I’ve logged countless hours (or at least they’ve felt countless) on panels and in Q+A’s defending my right to present this particular version of the American Jewish experience. “Why don’t the Jews in your book seem like any Jews I know?” I once was asked. In a country where the cultural representation of Jewish experience is so broad and varied that we get our news from Jon Stewart, our laughs from Larry David, and our erections from Natalie Portman and Mila Kunis, whose all-Semite sex scene in Daron Aronofsky’s *Black Swan* hits a high water mark for girl-on-girl action in American cinema, this question strikes me as just a wee bit out of date. Yet someone asks, and I must answer, and what I say is that Bellow already answered that question, and Philip Roth already answered that question, and Norman Mailer already answered, and so did Leonard Michaels, and Grace Paley, and Stanley Elkin, and Gary Shteyngart, and Sam Lipsyte, and the answer is no. And what I want to say after that is shit, man, why don’t you ask an African-American writer that very same question, but re: the representation of the black experience in American culture, and particularly you should ask Percival Everett, because he would tell you to get lost far more articulately and entertainingly and intelligently than I could ever do myself.

Everett’s novel *Erasure*, about a Percival Everett–like, Harvard-educated, arrhythmic, non-basketball playing, author of highbrow, esoteric, critically acclaimed novels that no one ever reads, who is market-driven to perform a pseudonymous minstrel act by penning a “ghetto” memoir called my *My Pafology*, is in a sense, a direct response to
this question. It bravely takes on Oprah Winfrey, the novel Push by Sapphire (later turned into the film Precious), and the way White America uses the language of political correctness to couch its hunger for stereotype perpetuating narratives of African-American violence, poverty, and illiteracy. My Pafology becomes a best seller, but not before its publishers give the book a more appropriate title: Fuck.

Allison Amend is the author of the novel A Nearly Perfect Copy and the short story collections Stations West and Things That Pass for Love

Joanna Hershon is the author of the novels A Dual Inheritance, Swimming, The Outside of August, and The German Bride

Katherine Hill is the author of the novel The Violet Hour

Arthur Bradford is the author of the short story collections Turtle Face and Beyond, and Dogwalker

David James Poissant is the author of the story collection The Heaven of Animals

Kevin Sampsell is the author of the memoir A Common Pornography, and the short story collections Creamy Bullets and Beautiful Blemish

Zachary Lazar is the author of the novels I Pity the Poor Immigrant, Sway, and Aaron, Approximately, as well as the memoir Evening’s Empire: The Story of My Father’s Murder

Michael Lowenthal is the author of the novels The Paternity Test, Charity Girl, Avoidance, and The Same Embrace

Manuel Gonzales is the author of The Miniature Wife and Other Stories

Christian TeBordo is the author of the novels We Go Liquid, The Conviction & Subsequent Life of Savior Neck, and Better Way of Being Dead, as well the short story collection The Awful Possibilities

Scott Cheshire is the author of the novel High as the Horses’ Bridles

Phil Klay is the author of the short story collection Redeployment

Caitlin Horrocks is the author of the short story collection This Is Not Your City

Jim Lynch is the author of the novels Truth Like the Sun, Border Songs, and The Highest Tide

Vanessa Veselka is the author of the novel Zazen
Kirsten Menger-Anderson is the author of the short story collection *Doctor Olaf van Schuler’s Brain*

Karen Thompson Walker is the author of the novel *The Age of Miracles*

Matt Bell is the author of the novel *In the House Upon the Dirt Between the Lake and the Woods*

Blake Butler is the author of five books of fiction, including *Three Hundred Million, There Is No Year* and *Scorch Atlas*, and a work of hybrid nonfiction, *Nothing: A Portrait of Insomnia*

Peter Rock is the author of the novels *The Shelter Cycle, My Abandonment, The Unsettling, The Bewildered, The Ambidextrist, Carnival Wolves*, and *This is the Place*

Adam Wilson is the author of the short story collection, *What’s Important is Feeling*, and the novel *Flatscreen*

*Lettering by Caleb Mislevitz*
A Survey of Writers on Contemporary Writers

Listening to writers read and discuss their work at Newtonville Books, the bookstore my wife and I own outside Boston, I began to wonder which living, contemporary writers held the most influence over their work. This survey is not meant to be
comprehensive, but is the result of my posing the question to as many writers as I could ask.

—Jaime Clarke

RICHARD FORD

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KATHLEEN ALCOTT: I nurture quite a fondness for Richard Ford. He writes the stillness of American life in a way many try to but few actually achieve: he can describe an economically depressed airport bar or stretch of highway so well that the scenes feel like memories being systematically implanted in my brain. Much has been written about the staleness of lyrical realism such as his, but I will defend Ford until I die. Writing like that takes the patience of a saint, and patience is the foundation of any great work. Joy Williams, who occupies another plane entirely, is an inspiration because her work feels like it lives entirely without influence. Emotional truths exist alongside occasional physical absurdities in between extreme discursions—and still she is totally in control.

LAUREN GRODSTEIN: Richard Ford’s Independence Day and The Sportswriter were sitting on my desk, getting read and reread, as I wrote A Friend of the Family. Like Ford’s books, Friend is an intensely first-person exploration of middle-aged malehood. It’s very talky, very ruminative. Whenever I felt at sea with my own novel, I read a few random pages from either of those books and let the voice of Frank Bascombe, Ford’s cranky, regretful narrator, lead me forward.

JOSH WEIL: I’d have to say the greatest influence on me and work at this moment is Richard Ford. That’s because, a few months ago, I read his collection Rock Springs for the first time. And, in each story, I was struck—as I am by the work that moves me most—by an inability to see at first exactly how it works. There’s such a naturalness to the way the events follow each other that they don’t feel planned. There’s an almost
uncanny verisimilitude to the way the characters speak; the dialogue feels as real as any I’ve ever read. And, perhaps even more baffling and impressive, the thoughts of the characters feel to me as real as any I could ever know. Baffling because, at the same time, I am always aware of the craft, the skill that’s gone into shaping each of these things. To pull that off—making what’s on the page feel magically alive, almost untouched by an author’s hand, while at the same time crafting each bit of it with such care that each piece is integral to the success of the whole: that’s something not just worth reading, but, as a writer, worth striving for. It’s the goal I’ve set for myself for these stories I’ll work on next. And so, at this moment, Ford is surely the writer whose work is most clearly working on mine.

JONATHAN FRANZEN

I spent the summer before my last year in college taking notes toward the experimental novel I intended to submit as my senior thesis the following spring. I say I was “taking notes toward” it, rather than “writing” it, because it was going to be an intricate puzzle of a novel, the kind that disdains the messiness of the outside world in favor of the self-contained perfection of the Fabergé egg. It probably goes without saying that this novel never got finished but it might be some surprise that it never even got started. There is a very simple explanation for that fact—the week before I went back to school, I read The Corrections.

It was the first work of fiction published in my adulthood that seemed to bring with it an entire literary context, one that became quickly familiar not just to publishing insiders and aspiring writers like myself but to some part of the larger culture. That week in early September when the novel appeared, a profile ran in the New York Times Magazine bearing the headline “Jonathan Franzen’s Big Book.” I was suspicious. I hadn’t heard of Franzen before. Having spent the better part of my college years reading contemporary American fiction, I thought that anyone likely to write a “big book” would be known to
me, at least by name. Some part of my thought that the mark of a great writer was precisely that he was known to me before he was known to the average reader of the Times Magazine. But the profile described an appropriately grueling decade spent struggling with this big book. It spoke of a literary apprenticeship at the feet of DeLillo, Gaddis, and Pynchon, and a friendship with David Foster Wallace—these four being precisely the writers with whom I’d spent the previous few years grappling. The profile also quoted from an essay Franzen had written some years before in Harper’s—now my employer but at the time just my favorite magazine, because it published Wallace—that was among other things about the feasibility of the “big social novel” making a real impact in contemporary America. The profile made clear that Franzen had succeeded in writing just such a book.

All of which is to say that *The Corrections* probably would have mattered to me even if it had not been a great book, simply for the possibilities it suggested to a young writer. But it was a great book. Franzen had indeed succeeded in writing a novel that brought its audience news about the state of the union and the souls inhabiting it, and the audience had shown itself willing to listen. The day after I finished the book, the towers went down. Late in the day, I picked up the book and turned back to the beginning: “The madness of an autumn prairie cold front coming through. You could feel it: something terrible was going to happen.” One very minor result of that day, among all the more serious ones, was a lot of public hand wringing by prominent American fiction writers about whether what they did mattered for anything. If I’d still been working on that experimental egg, I might have had the same question. But a book like *The Corrections* seemed to matter only the more.

**KATHERINE HILL:** In 2001, my head was buried in the Western canon, but even I couldn’t miss *The Corrections*. It stood out importantly in bookstores, those tall white-on-black caps announcing Jonathan Franzen’s name, that elegant title at once reclaiming the American novel and critiquing American society, that severed portrait of the whitebread family at dinner, that headless tie on the spine. I’d read very little current literature at the time, but this, it seemed, was it. So I plunged into “The madness of an autumn prairie cold front coming through;” into the sad anger of the Lampert family’s lives; into the raw, confusing, and entirely unprecedented experience of arguing with a writer in my mind. Franzen’s sentences sprang off the page, torquing irony into earnestness, thought into character, detail into society. And yet, how frustrating his characters were! How selfish, how self-destructive, how mean. I doubted Denise’s affairs, scoffed at Chip’s Lithuanian farce, wanted more from banal Gary than his author seemed to think he deserved. In so many ways, I found Franzen as wrong as Enid finds Alfred. Yet by the last page, I’d completely forgiven him, discovering, quite improbably, that my ignorant first impression was basically, well, *correct*. This broken family was literature, and if I wanted a part in it, I’d have to be as fearless as Franzen. Really every writer should be as uncensored as he is, as feeling, as intelligent, as ambitious in style and scope. Who will ever conquer the American family, the American temperament, the American mind? No one. They are mountains too large and changing. But we’ll never even glimpse them without writers like Franzen bravely hurling themselves at the rockface.
ANNAPURNA POTLURI: Some years ago, in the crowded isolation of a New York subway car, I was reading a back issue of Harper’s Magazine, immersed in Jonathan Franzen’s infamous essay, “Perchance to Dream,” in which he speaks with sociologist Shirley Brice Heath on the personalities of writers. She found that many writers, as children, were social isolates: children who feel alienated from classmates and family. For these children, “the important dialogue in your life is with the authors of the books you read. Though they aren’t present, they become your community.” Franzen, upon hearing this, comments that “I felt as if she were looking into my soul.” I thought back to my childhood room and the many hours I spent alone in it with stacks of Hardy Boys books, The Phantom Tollbooth and From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler and I too felt suddenly recognized.

Loneliness is a perverse catalyst for writers. It creates a monster that can only thrive by cannibalization, generating a spiritual crash that fuels the creative charge necessary for writing. When reading Franzen’s fiction, we find his characters imbued with a loneliness so true to life we can only imagine that their author is all too familiar with it. Here Franzen’s books rise to the level of great work—his characters are realer than real. I say this with the awareness of the high school ballerina who wants to let Mikhail Baryshnikov know that he’s “kinda like super talented.” Jonathan Franzen is a great writer.

When discussing literature that is canonical or nearly so, the question is often asked: What is the point of fiction? Aesthetes like me have a problem with the premise of the query, which suggests that art must have some practical purpose. It’s a bit too Protestant. But if I was made to answer, I’d say something like, “fiction teaches us how to be in the world,” or more likely, “fiction shows us how we are in the world,” the disparity between what we profess to desire and what we really want. This is illustrated poignantly in Freedom, as Walter Berglund sits in his car. There is a pretty and willing girl astride his lap, aggressive in her desire for him. Conflicted, Walter—more lonely in this moment than any other—says to her, “I’m sorry...I’m still trying to figure out how to live.”

Franzen isn’t necessarily a beautiful writer; Marguerite Yourcenar he is not. A percussive, Midwestern plain-facedness belies the profound waters in which his work swims: the sentences of The Corrections and Freedom are strung together with a chord of such rank fearlessness that I finished these books feeling fairly walloped in the stomach. The many characters in Franzen’s big, fat Tolstoian narratives display much failing and much ugliness; but, illuminated by Franzen’s incisive eye for the many manifestations of suffering, we connect with them nevertheless. When we arrive, near the end of The Corrections, at “he loved his children,” this otherwise banal sentiment feels like an emotional clobbering.

I am at a point in my writing life when crediting the influence of elder statesmen could be seen less as a compliment than an indictment. And anyhow, Franzen’s prose is American and muscular, where mine is fraught with a South Indian penchant for melodrama, verbosity and languor. I scarcely imagine that Franzen would like to be held responsible for this in a young writer. But he has influenced me. His is the lesson of
vulnerability, to write the thing that scares me the most. When, alone at my writing
desk, my courage flags, I imagine Franzen, a cartoon angel, saying: Potluri, write the
goddamned sentence.

—

Kathleen Alcott is the author of the novel *The Dangers of Proximal Alphabets*

Lauren Grodstein is the author of the novels *The Explanation for Everything, A Friend of the Family*, and *Reproduction is the Flaw of Love, The Best of Animals*

Josh Weil is the author of the novel *The Great Glass Sea* and the novella collection *The New Valley*

Christopher Beha is the author of the novels *Arts & Entertainments*, and *What Happened to Sophie Wilder*

Katherine Hill is the author of the novel *The Violet Hour*

Annapurna Potluri is the author of the novel *The Grammarian*

*Lettering by* Caleb Misclevitz
INFLUENCED BY

A Survey of Writers on Contemporary Writers

Listening to writers read and discuss their work at Newtonville Books, the bookstore my wife and I own outside Boston, I began to wonder which living, contemporary writers held the most influence over their work. This survey is not meant to be
comprehensive, but is the result of my posing the question to as many writers as I could ask.

—Jaime Clarke

MARY GAITSKILL

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ALICIA ERIAN: In college, my friend lent me her copy of Mary Gaitskill’s first book, a collection of stories entitled Bad Behavior, and said I should read it. What exactly that should meant wasn’t clear, but my friend was one of the best dressers I’d ever known, and this caused me to take her literary recommendations very seriously.

I connected with the disconnected misery of Gaitskill’s characters. They depressed the hell out of me, but they never bored me. I always needed to know what was going to happen to them. They mirrored my own emptiness, and from this I inferred that I had a shot at being interesting as a person, too.

Most especially, I connected with the story “Secretary.” It made me incredibly horny, and incredibly ashamed of being horny, since what was making me horny wasn’t something that was good for the main character, whose boss was sexually abusing her. At the same time, as a wannabe writer, I was aware that what Gaitskill had accomplished in terms of eliciting these conflicting responses from me was the apex of literary success. Gaitskill had revealed to me who I was—my basest instincts—before I’d even understood such things myself. I didn’t know her, but somehow, she really, really knew me. I hoped to offer the same experience to another reader one day, too.

ELLIOIT HOLT: I was in college—this was nearly twenty years ago—when I read Mary Gaitskill’s story, “A Romantic Weekend.” Everything about it was a revelation: the deadpan title; the cool, unsentimental tone; the confident shifts in perspective; the taut sentences. The subject matter was revelatory, too: I had never read a story about sadomasochism before. In fact, I had never before read something so unsparing in its description of “romance” and desire. “A Romantic Weekend” is a story about
disappointment, mostly: the man is a sadist and discovers, in their weekend away, that his new lover is not the true masochist that he thought she was. They are not sexually compatible. But once they let go of their rigid definitions and ideas of one another, they actually connect—briefly (we know it won’t last)—as human beings. Gaitskill’s sharp descriptions are unforgettable: “In the big coat he looked like the young pet of a budding secret police force. She thought he was beautiful,” observes her female protagonist, Beth. Meanwhile Beth’s sadistic lover thinks: “She was in love with the idea of intelligence, and she overestimated her own.”

I devoured Gaitskill’s first collection Bad Behavior. And then, some ten years later, when I was getting my MFA, her stunningly good novel Veronica was published. (I recently reread it and it’s even better than I remembered: the fierce voice is amazing.) Gaitskill is a brave writer: reading her gave me permission to take risks in fiction. And in 2006, while I was still in graduate school, I sent my first finished short story, “Evacuation Instructions,” to the Zoetrope: All-Story annual short fiction contest. Mary Gaitskill was the judge. Over 1500 stories were submitted to the contest that year, but I won 2nd prize. It was the first time that I had been paid ($500!) for my fiction and it was the first time that I felt like a “real” writer. I had never been published. But Mary Gaitskill had read my story and liked it enough to give it an award. It was just the encouragement I needed to keep writing, to believe in my voice. I’ll be forever grateful.

JAMES SCOTT: I think Mary Gaitskill is a badass. In fact, I think it’s that very quality that draws many young writers to her. She’s unflinching, and this, too, is influential. The problem arises from young writers pretending to be Gaitskill. In doing so, they often abuse their characters not for the sake of characterization, but for some misguided sense of ‘reality.’ Of course, lots of writers have this effect (Denis Johnson is one of the other oft-cited influences in this regard) but there’s something especially gritty about Gaitskill that enamors people.

DAVID GATES
JIM GAVIN: David Gates terrifies me. His novels make me laugh out loud—the coke-fueled jam session in *Preston Falls* is one of my all-time favorite comic set pieces, up there with Sebastian Dangerfield's London bender in *The Ginger Man* and Frederick Exley's last night with Mr. Blue in *A Fan's Notes*—but Gates only seems capable of providing the kind of laughter that might come upon a man who's facing a firing squad. A dread cackle that spooks the ravens from the trees. Gates is peerless in his depiction of male depravity, but his characters are not rogue outsiders, bravely marauding through the American night. His bastards hide in plain sight. They have families, corporate jobs, front lawns, mortgages. They like to BBQ and watch the ball game. They love these suburban ideals, even though they know it's all bullshit, but they also want desperately to escape, to recapture the promise and anarchy of their youth, and they try sometimes, but only in half-ass fashion, because they know, in their battered hearts, that wanting to escape is just another cliche, another form of bullshit, and so one evening, unable to reconcile their dreams and desires and horrible self-knowledge, they wander down to the basement and intentionally shoot themselves in the hand.

J.G. Ballard said: “The suburbs are far more sinister places than most city dwellers imagine. Their very blandness forces the imagination into new areas. I mean, one’s got to get up in the morning thinking of a deviant act, merely to make certain of one’s freedom.” If nothing else, Gates’ dickish heroes want freedom, a simple but essential wish, and maybe this is why I’m so willing to follow them as they sink into the Slough of
Despond and trudge their way through the Valley of Humiliation. They are degenerates, but this is the source of their honesty. They are incapable of lying to themselves. Every thought is undercut by the next, every motive gets questioned, every truth gets dismissed as an illusion. Gates captures this ongoing mental calculus in masterful style. First, let it be said that no living writer makes better use of italics. Especially in his dialogue, which by itself is worth the price of admission. But once he gets inside his characters’ heads—“Some inner life, boy”—you don’t have a chance. You will plunge to the bottom. You will watch each of these men become their own firing squad. Not a single sentence stands out as “beautiful” or, God help us, “lyrical,” but the cumulative effect of the voice—jittery and rhythmic and faithful to the vernacular—is so hypnotic, so pitch perfect, that you’re never distracted by a sentence trying too hard. It all goes down so easy. You forget that you’re reading. The book dissolves in your hands and it’s more like you’re listening to music. Hilarious and terrifying music.

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Alicia Erian is the author of the story collection *The Brutal Language of Love*, and the novel *Towelhead*

Elliott Holt is the author of the novel *You Are One of Them*

James Scott is the author of the novel *The Kept*

Jim Gavin is the author of the short story collection *Middle Men*

*Lettering by Caleb Misclevitz*
A Survey of Writers on Contemporary Writers

Listening to writers read and discuss their work at Newtonville Books, the bookstore my wife and I own outside Boston, I began to wonder which living, contemporary writers held the most influence over their work. This survey is not meant to be
comprehensive, but is the result of my posing the question to as many writers as I could ask.

—Jaime Clarke

RON HANSEN

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JOSH WEIL: When I was a kid, the books that grabbed me were westerns: an autobiography of a bronc buster, the journals of a Canadian trapper, *The Oxbow Incident* by Walter Van Tilberg Clark, Larry McMurtry’s epic *Lonesome Dove*. But it was Ron Hansen’s *Desperados* that had the greatest impact on me. The story of an old west outlaw gang, that novel has plenty of gunplay and thundering hooves, but it’s also told with a vision so precise and vivid that it sat me up in bed and made me realize what an author working at the highest level of his craft could do.

I think it mostly had to do with the remarkable vividness of Hansen’s imagery. I can still remember one image in particular: green peas being shelled into a metal pan. At the time I came across that image I still thought I’d be a visual artist, but something clicked in me at the realization of how different it was for a writer to paint a picture with words: it could be just clear enough to make it specific to the moment, the vision, and yet could leave enough blank space around it to combine with the reader’s own imagination; the product of that merging could make something as vivid and beautiful (perhaps even more so) than anything a painter or photographer could do. Somehow it was the bright green peas plunking down in the silvery pan that drove the idea home to me. Sentence after sentence Hansen gave me the gift of seeing a fictional world through the specificity of his imagination more vividly than I observed my own. From then on that became important to me. It didn’t want to simply look more carefully at my world (though I did that, too) but I wanted to try to convey the worlds I was writing about as vividly as
Hansen did his. It’s still one of the parts of writing that’s most important to me, and I’m still trying.

But there was another aspect of *Desperados* that affected me almost as strongly, and that was the musicality of the language itself. The rhythms, tone, pauses: Hansen managed my breathing. And being carried along with such control was thrilling. It grabbed me with Desperados, but it really squeezed me—literally made me breathless with the realization of such power and beauty—while reading another novel of Hansen’s: *Mariette in Ecstasy*. There, the rhythms come fully to the fore, the white spaces become as important as the words, the silences move directly onto the page, and into the reader, and are felt. As a kid in high school, I felt them over and over, rereading passages, absorbing the way that Hansen’s attention to the sound and feel of words didn’t pull me out of his story, but rather pulled me more deeply in, touched my senses in ways that enriched the reading experience beyond what I’d known before. That I thought was what I wanted to do. And it was that—as much as the characters I’d fallen for in the old westerns, the characters who had begun to live in my head—that set me on the path towards being not just a story teller, but a writer.

**AMY HEMPEL**

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**TRINIE DALTON:** Amy Hempel literally influenced me, since I studied under her advisement at Bennington Writing Seminars. I went to Bennington, in part, for the opportunity to study with her. Hempel is an exceptional and generous teacher, and while I’m not convinced she liked my writing very much—and who could blame her, what with my turning in idiotic stories ranging from those told from Hello Kitty’s POV to those with no point save some flagrant Texas bashing—she had a deep influence on
my storytelling as well as on my teaching style, now that I’m a creative writing professor.

First, I studied with Amy to absorb some of her stylistic magic, as myriad other young authors have done. I hope I did learn how to cut the fat from my sentences, to allow each word its proper heft, and to let each word or idea determine the next through consecution. An Amy Hempel story is a lean machine. I learned a lot about revision from her. (Though to be fair, I also learned about revision from my friend and mentor, Dennis Cooper, who edited my first book while I was studying with Amy.) Entire pages and “graphs,” as Amy called them, were often recommended for deletion in my drafts. Amy was so emphatic about adding and subtracting text, making sure what was added was needed, that she asked me to highlight all new sentences when I submitted revisions. While I was already aware of text on a page as visual stuff, having come to fiction with a poetry background, this practice nevertheless helped me realize how every word counts, helped me track incoming and outgoing changes draft-to-draft in order to assess essentiality versus pretentious effluvia. With Amy I studied sentence construction, syntax, and diction in storytelling, which was vitally important to me, a poet who suffered from abstract ideation that lacked narrative meaning. She taught me that a sentence isn’t good just because it has fancy stylistic elements; I learned a lot from Amy about avoiding cryptic language.

Second, Amy influenced my commitment to the set up and punch line, and my abiding interest in narrative’s comedic timing.

Third, Amy’s knowledge about comedy, helping me to study the differences between cold Juvenalian satire and that more mildly laced with emotionally variegated narrative, led Amy to recommend I read Grace Paley and Barry Hannah, still two of my heroes. Thank you, Amy Hempel, for introducing me to these two. I still continue to study extreme stylists and conceptual writers, and I appreciate those endeavors—but Paley and Hannah marry their distinctive prose styles strictly to empathic returns, which is in my mind all the more subversive. It still surprises me how Hannah can convince me to follow some truly officious and offensive characters. Their expressions of dialect are exquisite, their sentences have verve and swagger, they both understand the value of brevity, and they both know where to end a tale to yield the ultimate laugh (or conversely, make you feel like you’ve been stabbed in the kidney). I think in reading Hempel, one can see the Paley/Hannah influence, and I mean that as the highest compliment.

I’ll admit that I was so into sentence construction when I started working with Amy that I had zero interest in character development. Hempel subtly persuaded me, partially through introducing me to radical prose stylists who also care about their characters, that pathos in fiction is not an outmoded concept and is not the enemy of conceptual or transgressive literature. Yep: it’s called dramatic tension, and every story needs it. I’m not sure, given my stubborn ways, that I could have accepted that information from Hempel had she not delivered the message so gracefully. Just key story recommendations here and there and some beautiful, nearly calligraphic editorial marks
and marginalia, on some papers that I still get out occasionally to stare at when my fiction gets boring, or I suspect that on the page I’m talking a lot but not saying much.

**JAC JEMC:** Amy Hempel’s “The Man in Bogota” changed my mind in a million ways, got me writing, got me thinking. The message of the story, the moral and the punch line is, “He wondered how we know that what happens to us isn’t good.” It was a time when I needed to re-evaluate my attitude and the line rang in my head. That sentence is so full of assumptions and contrasts. She doesn’t write, “He wondered how we know that what happens to us is bad.” Instead she puts the focus on what that something *isn’t*, suggesting that maybe, after all is said and done, it *is*.

The story is short, only a page long. It was one of the first pieces of flash I read that really made me feel it was possible to tell more in a page than in a whole book. It’s a story within a story. It’s a story about the power of storytelling and it’s a story about survival. It was a time when storytelling was a survival tactic for me. It’s a “come-down-from-the-ledge” story. The language is clear and plain, in a way that stuns me. It’s a way I’m unable to write, a clarity I feel unable to express. While I’ve come to terms with that, I’m so thankful to read such a clean tale. The narrator says she tells the story to try and get the woman on the ledge to ask herself a question. I don’t know any better reason to tell a story.

**A.M. HOMES**

© Getty Images

**MOLLY ANTOPOL:** When I first read A.M. Homes I wasn’t yet trying to be a writer myself, and was blissfully unaware of all things writing-related. Reading was, at that point in my life, a completely personal and haphazard experience: I stumbled upon her story collection, *The Safety of Objects*, in my college library, simply because there was something so creepily beguiling about its cover art. That day in the library, I fell in love
with her stories—about a young boy’s erotic obsession with his sister’s Barbie doll; a pair of yuppie crackheads; a kidnapped boy returned home after not meeting his captor’s expectations. The premises were bold and strange, disconcerting and sometimes horrifying—and yet, halfway into each story, the twistedness of the situations began to ring as true to me as the most extreme and terrifying moments of real life.

I’ve never met Ms. Homes, but once I started working on my own stories, I found myself turning to her writing for advice as often as I did my graduate teachers. Every time I worried over how to make a series of events plausible, I’d think back to the stories in The Safety of Objects and remind myself that if a person writes with enough passion and confidence, even the most unbelievable situations can take on the authority of truth. And when I wrestled with dialogue, I’d read another collection of hers, Things You Should Know, which taught me that the old writing adage, “dialogue is just as much about what people don’t say as what they do,” doesn’t always fit—so often Homes’ characters know exactly what they want to say to one another and do so without a second thought: an unflinching frankness that consistently imbues the stories with even more friction and drive.

Recently I was struggling with the thing that’s hardest for me as a writer—action scenes—when I read her newest book, May We Be Forgiven, in which an arrest, a deadly car accident, an affair, a murder and a divorce all occur within the book’s first fifty pages. And the novel careens forward from there, succeeding wildly in being equally character- and plot-driven. With every one of her books, Homes completely explodes my idea of what fiction can do, leaving me surrounded by her characters’ emotional rubble. I can think of few writers who write with so much wit, warmth, intelligence, satire and pathos—and with so much heart.

LAUREN GRODSTEIN: At the end of my senior year of high school, our daring creative writing teacher assigned a few stories from A.M. Homes’s collection The Safety of Objects. Generally sweet and sheltered New Jersey teenagers, we had never read short stories like these before: so frighteningly intimate, so frank and awkward. We passed these stories around to our friends in other classes, joked about them, tried to write our own sad replicas—story after story about people doing obscene things to Barbie dolls. At home, I kept my copy of The Safety of Objects on my Most Important Bookshelf, among the Salingers and the SAT prep guides.

A few months later, I found myself at college, where my mind was totally blown: A.M. Homes herself was teaching an invitation-only creative writing workshop! Freaking out, I presented myself at her office hours to secure an invitation. I wanted to tell her about how much I loved her stories, how much they startled me, changed my view of everything fiction could do. Instead, I thrust a sample of my high school writing portfolio at her. She read a few lines, then looked at me. “You ever written anything really good?”

I thought about it, answered honestly. “No,” I said. “But I will.”
She appraised me, looked within my writerly soul, assessing the verve and the nerve I carried within me, and all the possibility.

“Well,” she said, after what felt like forever, “maybe you should come back when you’re a senior. If you’re still writing then.”

I just stood there. I didn’t really understand.

She looked at me some more, then said something I remember as, “you can leave now,” although maybe she didn’t say anything at all.

My best friend Allison, who by chance had been in the same creative writing class with me in high school, and was now at the same college, was waiting in my dorm room, anxious to hear how it had gone with A.M. Homes. When I told her I hadn’t made the cut, she picked up my copy of *The Safety of Objects* and tossed it in the garbage. “Forget it,” Allie said. “Who needs her?” Then we went out drinking.

But later that night, I retrieved the stories from the garbage and fell asleep reading them. They were still shocking, still so very sad. In the end, I never took a class with A.M. Homes, but I still keep *The Safety of Objects*, among different company, on my Most Important Bookshelf.

**CHARLES MCLEOD:** It’s easy for society, centuries after the fact, to look back at what humans did in ages prior and regard those collective actions with something approaching comedic disdain: how did we think that bloodletting would cure plague? How were packets of herbs or living underground or spoonfuls of crushed emeralds considered viable solutions? Today, such remedies are known as absurd, and while plague still exists, few would refer to its threat level as exigent. But what of new plagues, and the darkness they bring? And what if these plagues are perceived, sociologically, as wellness? What if a Barbie doll is a kind of plague, a sort of vast, media-born illness? And what if centuries from now society looks back at our suburbs and our medicine and how we treat the criminally sick and, in general, each other, and sees them as exactly as ridiculous as how we, today, view moving into sewers to escape a pandemic? I read *The Safety of Objects* for the first time in 1992, when I was in high school, and remember it as the collection that allowed me to understand what Chekhov meant when he said that “the role of the artist is to ask questions, not answer them.” It’s easy to label Homes’ work as dark, but I remember thinking then—and still think now—that her work is simply correct: that by the end of Reagan’s 80s, the nuclear family had gone radioactive; care wards made people more sick, and were staffed entirely by the afflicted. What I treasure in Homes is her ability to humanize those that might otherwise be seen only as inhumane, and, inversely, to show the status quo as grotesque, and to do so with enough humility, elegance, humor and grace to allow us to question that which we might not otherwise question.

**KAROLINA WACLAWIAK:** A.M. Homes has dropped horses and sinkholes in a person’s front yard, brought together a boy and a Barbie Doll in a masturbation-fueled love story, and made little Johnny desperate to be kidnapped. She has pushed the
boundaries of human decency and that’s exactly why I love her and seek out her work. She has convinced me that one of the only reasons to write fiction is to make your characters take the risks that you could not possibly take in your own life. See that line? Watch her nimbly cross it. In her audacious collection of short stories, The Safety of Objects, Homes plays PT Barnum to characters who cannot control their needs. She is the master of letting characters run wild while making their mistakes count. We walk away gutted, deliciously horrified, and energized by humanity’s delinquency. When I’m fearful of making a choice that might push the boundary of decency in my own writing, I say, “W.W.A.M.D.?” and then I jump across the line.

PAM HOUSTON

© Ann Cummins

JENSEN BEACH: I first discovered Pam Houston in a used bookshop for English-speaking expats in Budapest, Hungary in 2001. For three months I’d been reading anything in English I could get my hands on. I’d quickly finished the few books I’d brought with me, and I’d worked my way through what I think might be everything W. Somerset Maugham ever wrote (the saturation of Maugham’s books in used bookshops in early 21st century central Europe is an essay unto itself), and I was getting a little desperate. I wasn’t the kind of reader then who particularly enjoyed reading the classics. These were easily available at the small English-language sections of the city’s bookstores. And I wasn’t drawn to the canonical books my bosses at the various language schools where I taught kept recommending. I don’t think I had yet uncovered just what it was I wanted to read, or what sorts of writing would one day sit closest to my writer’s heart.
Pam Houston arrived at a formative moment for me, then, just the right one. She was one of the first writers I’d read that I felt gave me permission to pursue in my reading, and later my writing, what I wanted, my vision for what literature could be—messy and elegant and hilarious and heartbreaking, all at once. Her work strikes me, in other words, as real. I don’t mean to cast a genre definition on her writing. But rather say that her work seems to accurately represent people—our bad decision-making, our tendencies toward tragedy, and the ways in which all of this is often (perhaps always) absurd and funny if only we can take a step back and see it that way.

I read *Waltzing the Cat* in one sitting the day I bought it, and when I reached the end, I started again immediately. It took me out of the dreary apartment I lived in a block up from discolored limestone government buildings in central Budapest, many of them still riddled with bullet holes from the uprising in 1956, and to places somehow both more familiar and more exotic—a ranch in the mountains in Colorado with alcoholic Eric Sorenson and his bowling ball cannon, to a living room in which a daughter, having just lost her mother, watches her father dance with a comically overweight cat. And while the stories in this collection, as they do in her first collection, and as each short, lyrical chapter does in her novel *Contents May Have Shifted*, do almost everything just right, they are, most of all, simply great stories. They are exciting and emotion-rich. To my thinking, they defy genre. Told by a drunk in a bar, in an essay, a film, a television show, any medium at all, these stories would be equally, enviously, compelling. And it’s this quality that I keep returning to Houston’s work, for inspiration, for craft, and most of all, for pleasure. “I’m a sucker for a good storyteller,” Houston’s character Lucy O’Rourke says in the story “Then You Get up and Have Breakfast.” And like Lucy, so am I.

**KATE MILLIKEN:** I was nineteen years old the first time I read Pam Houston’s *Cowboys Are My Weakness*. This was in Boston, sometime in late January or early February. Crisp and cold. But I’d moved from Chicago and this, my first Boston winter, felt mild by comparison, even inviting, the sky staying open and blue. I don’t remember now if I was assigned *Cowboys* or if I picked it up at the bookstore, liking the title, but I remember reading it as I walked back to my dorm, across The Boston Common. Snow lined the salted walkways and every few feet or so, with my eyes on the page, I would veer off the walkway, the crunch of the snow steering me back to the path.

I was a high school drop out who’d spent the previous four years putting herself in precarious situations at best. But I loved to write and I received early acceptance to this small liberal arts college, as part of a “special” program. Yet I was more running away from a dysfunctional family that I was college ready. And I was also following after a boy who was attending the Berkeley school of music, a boy who liked me almost as much as he liked heroin. “This is what you learned in college: A man desires the satisfaction of his desire; a woman desires the condition of yearning.”—"How to Talk to a Hunter"

That day, reading *Cowboys*, I crossed the street to the Public Gardens, horns blaring, sitting on a park bench to keep reading, safely on the other side. “In every assumption is contained the possibility of its opposite.” If it hadn’t been the dead of winter, if the sun hadn’t slipped down, I’d have finished Cowboys, sitting there. Instead I went inside and
ignored my redhead roommate who paced, biting not the nail, but the skin of her fingers, while waiting for her forty-year-old boyfriend to call. College, in the six months I’d been there, had already made it clear to me that adulthood was going to be in large part about trying to fill in the spaces that our childhoods had left empty. I finished *Cowboys* and started it again.

I grew up in a theatre family, around actors and directors, and my mother was a regarded playwright. From my parents’ multiple divorces many households were manifested, all of which were alive with dialogue, conversations pitched at the frequency of stage direction, and passionate episodes of alcohol-infused hollering. They were, in other words, short on advice.

In Italo Calvino’s *Why Read the Classics*, he states, “A Classic is a book which even when we read for the first time gives the sense of rereading something we have read before.” Each of Pam Houston’s books, particularly *Cowboys*, has had this uncanny effect on me. With each story, essay, novel, I have been unknowingly waiting to read exactly what they offer. They call on an inner compass that reminds me to be brave, observant, and open to the larger world.

Houston’s work, in other words, has reached me most deeply on a human level, as a woman in particular, but beyond this her work has gifted me with lessons on the art of story telling. For instance, each of her narratives, particularly *Contents Might Have Shifted*, exemplifies that meaning is created through the accumulation and assemblage of well observed experience. The writing always being as active and as present as its author. And there is a respect for the reader, a dignity bestowed upon us by way of Houston’s respect for our intelligence, never editorializing the narrative, but believing in our empathy and ability to discern meaning.

Lastly, Pam Houston’s work has granted me the great outdoors. Yes, as an element of craft. My theatre family was an indoors kind of people, curtained, lights down, ready for a singular spotlight. But I found the great outdoors, the splitting of the sun at the top of a mountain, always calling, and so it was liberating to find that great outdoors was not only attainable on the page, but that it could be used beyond metaphor, as a character, an influence over all that occurs.

How fitting it seems to me that I began to read Pam Houston outside in the crisp, bright cold and that even with my eyes on the page—or perhaps because—I was that much more awakened to the snow giving beneath my meandering feet. Pam Houston’s work, while grounding me in the possibilities of being a woman, moved me outside myself.

**ILIE RUBY:** What young woman on the cusp of finding herself could not relate to “How to Talk to a Hunter,” the lead story in Pam Houston’s ground-breaking collection *Cowboys Are My Weakness*? When I read *Cowboys* soon after it came out years ago, I was struck by the style: poetic without being prohibitive; inclusive while retaining a strong singular feminine (or feminist) voice. Here was a book that was majestic and accessible and irrepressible and vulnerable. Here were stories that showed it was
possible to write about the kind of love that doesn’t end a woman, and more, that both
the feminine and the masculine aspects of ourselves might lead us through the dangers
and into the absolute rightness of needing another person. There’s chemistry to the kind
of expansiveness where style mirrors subject matter: the open range, the endless search
for fulfillment and belonging, the universality of the fight between independence and
desire, and the wide breadth of our capacity for love. I recently re-read “How to Talk to a
Hunter” during the writing of my last novel and was struck, yet again, by the appeal of
that story. Having this sort of history with a book, its cover now worn and pages taped
and dog-eared, allows a writer, over decades, to understand timelessness in a new way,
for once you’ve been found in Houston’s work, part of you remains there forever.

—

Josh Weil is the author of the novel The Great Glass Sea and the novella collection The
New Valley

Trinie Dalton is the author of the story collections Baby Geisha and Wide Eyed

Jac Jemc is the author of the short story collection A Different Bed Every Time and the
novel My Only Wife

Molly Antopol is the author of the short story collection The UnAmericans

Lauren Grodstein is the author of the novels The Explanation for Everything, A Friend
of the Family, and Reproduction is the Flaw of Love, as well as the short story collection
The Best of Animals

Charles McLeod is the author of the novel American Weather, and the short story
collection National Treasures

Karolina Waclawiak is the author of the novel How to Get Into the Twin Palms

Jensen Beach is the author of the short story collection For Out of the Heart Proceed

Kate Milliken is the author of the short story collection If I’d Known You Were Coming

Ilie Ruby is the author of the novels The Salt God’s Daughter, and The Language of
Trees

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comprehensive, but is the result of my posing the question to as many writers as I could ask.

—Jaime Clarke

KAZUO ISHIGURO

© Charlie Hopkinson

ALIX OHLIN: Like many people, I first became aware of Ishiguro’s work through the lovely restraint of The Remains of the Day. His gift at suggesting subterranean emotions, and at lending inarticulate characters depth and dignity, commanded my attention. What’s interesting to me is how he has pushed this gift further—the subsequent books are all different, still elegant but ever stranger, in wonderful ways. The Unconsoled, a dream-like novel about a pianist who arrives in a European city for a concert but cannot navigate the landscape—even of his own memory—is lyrically disorienting and, I think, a masterpiece. I also love how he has played with genre, writing about cloning in Never Let Me Go without employing any of the trappings or tropes of science fiction. Like all his books, Never Let Me Go is deeply sorrowful but very quiet, a tone that Ishiguro has made recognizably his own.

JAMES SCOTT: Kazuo Ishiguro had a profound effect on me. I think before I read The Remains of the Day, A Pale View of the Hills, and especially Never Let Me Go, I didn’t really understand what people meant when they asked for clarity. I assumed they wanted everything to make sense, which seemed both boring and counter to what I enjoyed in many of my favorite books. But reading Ishiguro, I understood what that clarity meant—a clear purpose, a sense that the author knows exactly what he or she is doing and out of that comes a trust that will allow the plot to go anywhere.
KAREN THOMPSON WALKER: Kazuo Ishiguro, especially with *Never Let Me Go*, reminds me that sometimes the best writing is the least showy. I admire how fully he inhabits his characters, his own voice completely submerged beneath theirs.

ALEXI ZENTNER: Men have sobbed. Women have wailed. Children have gasped. Sometimes all on the same page.

Younger writers often have characters carrying on in ways that are loud and obvious. I think that sometimes, the idea is that a great gnashing of teeth is the only way to convey just truly how intense the emotion is supposed to be. The reasoning is that if you are not clear as a writer that the characters are undergoing great joy or sorrow, if you don’t tell the reader how to feel, she might miss the point. I can understand this fear. Our readers don’t always give our work the attention we’d like, and breaking out the pyrotechnics can feel like a safety net. The concern is that we end up with redundant writing: the reader is both shown how a character feels (“the man’s shoulders were shaking as he cried over the body of his dog”) and then told (“the dog had been his only companion, and now he was sad and alone.”)

While I believe that great writers both show and tell, telling is best left to information. It is showing that is the province of emotion. But showing us how a character feels requires a great trust in the reader. More than that, when you have a character who does not entirely know herself and remains somewhat unknown to the reader, what is required is precision. And for that, I think of Kazuo Ishiguro and *The Remains of the Day*.

I’m particularly drawn to the moment, about halfway through the book, when Stevens’ father has a stroke. Stevens’ is a butler, and though his father is dying, he keeps working at a party that we are told is tremendously important. But partway through the party, Stevens’ employer sees him and is concerned:

“Stevens, are you all right?”
‘Yes, sir. Perfectly.’
‘You look as though you’re crying.’
I laughed and taking out a handkerchief, quickly wiped my face. ‘I’m very sorry, sir. The strains of a hard day.’”

And that is all that Ishiguro allows; he does not explain Stevens’ emotional state, does not take us inside of Stevens’ mind, does not tell us that Stevens was bereft. He trusts the reader to understand this. And very shortly thereafter, when informed by Miss Kenton, the housekeeper, with whom Stevens has had a muted romantic interest, that his father has died, Stevens does not abandon his post as butler. But as Miss Kenton turns to mount the stairs and attend to Stevens’ father, Stevens stops her:

“Miss Kenton, please don’t think me unduly improper in not ascending to see my father in his deceased condition just at this moment. You see, I know my father would have wished me to carry on just now.”
Note the language; in the first sentence of the paragraph, Stevens’ diction, already formal, is elevated to a level that is almost absurd. Read it again. He’s saying, “don’t think that I’m cold for not going to see my father’s body.” But the way he says it, the tonal change, the way in which Stevens becomes even more stiff and remote, shows the reader that he is, in fact, greatly moved by his father’s death. The tears that were mentioned on the previous page are highlighted here by their absence. Ishiguro does not need to add anything to convey Stevens’ emotional state.

This is the beauty of Ishiguro’s writing. In his precision, he can have a faith in the reader. Instead of hammering home his point — instead of both showing and telling the reader what the character is feeling — he can allow the reader to simply understand.

—

Alix Ohlin is the author of the novels Inside and The Missing Person, as well as the short story collections Signs and Wonders and Babylon and Other Stories

James Scott is the author of the novel The Kept

Karen Thompson Walker is the author of the novel The Age of Miracles

Alexi Zentner is the author of the novels The Lobster Kings and Touch

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comprehensive, but is the result of my posing the question to as many writers as I could ask.

—Jaime Clarke

DENIS JOHNSON

© Jason Diamond

DAVID BEZMOZGIS: Along with J.M. Coetzee, I admire Denis Johnson. It is hard to say that his influence is subordinate to Coetzee’s, but if we judge simply by the frequency with which I return to any particular work, that might apply. Still, I’ve read Jesus’ Son more times than I can count. Johnson can conjure up an altered, hallucinatory state that straddles the line between reality and dream—and often synthesizes the two. It’s to be found in all the books of his that I’ve read, beginning with Angels. He has the rare ability to access the metaphysical dimension, which everyone suspects but few can describe. And with Johnson, as with the other writers, it comes down to the boldness and vibrancy of language. I have never encountered a flat metaphor or thought in his work.

CHARLES BOCK: Denis Johnson’s first novel, Angels, and of course the great short story collection Jesus’ Son were important to me for their language and humor and ideas of redemption.

CHRISTOPHER BOUCHER: For me, Jesus’ Son’s impact has something to do with the way that I discovered it: I took a course in college on Edmund Spenser and John Milton, and halfway through our reading of Spenser’s The Faerie Queene I was struck by how different this literature was than any contemporary literature I’d come across. That was a pretty naïve observation, in retrospect, but nevertheless I met with my professor to ask if anyone was writing “this kind of stuff” nowadays.
He might have steered me in several directions—towards classic science fiction or fantasy, or towards other long poetic works, but instead he suggested work by two contemporary authors: Kathy Acker and Denis Johnson. I didn’t read Acker until later, but I read *Jesus’ Son* immediately—that weekend, I recall—and I was absolutely floored by it. I found it innovative, moving and unlike anything else I’d ever read. I read the book again right away, and I’ve probably read it ten times total in the fifteen or so years since.

*Jesus’ Son* is labeled a collection of stories, but each story has the same narrator—thus, I read the book like a fractured, fragmented novel. The story cycle form facilitates a sense of disorientation, but so does the dizzy mindset of the narrator, Fuckhead. Since Fuckhead’s mental meanderings are the reader’s only window into this world, the book makes no promise to be complete, true or accurate. We trade those traits, though, for the ever-present possibility that something unexpected or holy might happen: The character of Wayne sees his wife, naked, suspended from a kite in the sky in “Work”; in “Emergency,” Fuckhead mistakes a drive-in movie theater for a military graveyard; the boxes of cotton in a hospital begin to scream in “Car Crash While Hitchhiking.” There’s little or no explanation for these moments, which might be epiphanies or drug-induced hallucinations. In either case, the stories are continuously surprising and amazingly compact.

They wouldn’t work, though, were the voice of the speaker not so assured and the prose not so beautiful. The language is lyric, funny and precise, and so many sentences ring on after I read them. Take the beginning of “Dirty Wedding,” for example, in which Fuckhead brings his girlfriend to an abortion clinic:

“I liked to sit up front and ride the fast ones all day long, I liked it when they brushed right up against the buildings north of the Loop and I especially liked it when the buildings dropped away into that bombed-out squalor a little further north in which people (through windows you’d see a person in his dirty naked kitchen spooning soup toward his face, or twelve children on their bellies on the floor, watching television, but instantly they were gone, wiped away by a movie billboard of a woman winking and touching her upper lip deftly with her tongue, and she in turn erased by a—wham, the noise and dark dropped down around your head—tunnel) actually lived.”

It’s sentences like this one, where so much is accomplished, which made *Jesus’ Son* a call-to-action for me—an invitation to experiment, and find new approaches to narrative and language. I subsequently read all of Johnson’s novels and collections of poetry, and he became my first literary hero. It wasn’t until a few years later that I started taking risks with language and form (which, in turn, led to surreal premises and non-linear narratives), but *Jesus’ Son* was the first stone on that path. When I recommend *Jesus’ Son* to my students, in fact, I refer to it as “the book that made me want to be a writer.”

**VICTOR LAVALLE**: Denis Johnson’s collection of stories, *Jesus’ Son*, had a profound effect on me. His earlier novels as well, *Fiskadoro* and *Angels*, for instance. But if you came of age as writer in the mid-nineties then I think *Jesus’ Son* had a very good chance of sitting somewhere on your desk. When I think back on them now those stories rarely
add up to much, there isn’t ever a plot worth a damn and often characterization is slim to nil, so why did that book hit me like a hammer? The writing. Johnson was a poet before he started writing fiction and no book of his displays this fact more clearly than his collection of stories. If you read them, as I did, with your defenses down it’s really easy to think of those stories, those sentences, as being divinely inspired. I wasted so much time trying to emulate his writing!

NELLY REIFLER: When I was in graduate school a blonde, attractive gay woman who always wore leather pants and who wrote an essay about my unfairly sending confusing sartorial semiotic signals with my wallet (which was attached to a chain hooked to my belt loop) told me about this book she had read that had changed her life: Jesus’ Son by Denis Johnson. I recognized the Velvet Underground reference, but I wasn’t in any hurry to go out and get it. Eventually I concluded that the essay about my chain-wallet required some sort of exchange of attention, and I went to St. Mark’s Books, where I found Jesus’ Son in the back on the remainder table—a pile of hardcover copies for $4.99. Then I wasn’t in any hurry to read it. When I finally sat down with it, my mind was blown. It wasn’t the subject matter so much as the permission I felt from Johnson to do whatever the hell I wanted with language and form. After four long semesters of MFA classes in which well-meaning workshop-mates told each other that you can’t, say, bring in a new character in the final paragraph of a story, or address the reader, or tell about emotions (rather than show them), I experienced the book as a kind of revolutionary’s manifesto. I understood that you can do all of those things. You only have to be completely committed. And you have to allow yourself to reach for transcendence, which is hard to do because it’s embarrassing to try and most likely you won’t reach it.

JOE MENO: Denis Johnson’s willingness to experiment with various moods, styles, forms, and types of storytelling provide me with a genuine sense of artistic possibility. Unlike the vast majority of contemporary writers, who seem content to write about the same kinds of characters, in the same places, with the same style and tone over and over again, Johnson’s ability to investigate novels, novellas, short stories, poems, plays and various genres—pulp, detective, historical, the campus novel—gives me the permission to follow my own literary curiosity. His tone—sometimes savagely dark, sometimes absurd or surreal—feels completely original and at the same time, out of the tradition of Anderson and Faulkner.

PHILIPP MEYER: Jesus’ Son was a pretty important book for me, again intense style that perfectly mates with the subject matter, just consistently surprising and amazing language. I have probably read this book 50 or 100 times and lost a half-dozen copies because people keep stealing it from me. I will admit that I might have appreciated it a lot in college because of the subject matter. But even now it holds up.

JOSEPH SALVATORE: So many collections have deeply moved and marked me: Coover’s A Night at the Movies, Moore’s Self-Help, Munro’s Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage, my former teacher Amy Hempel’s Reasons to Live, O’Brien’s The Things They Carried, Edward P. Jones’s Lost in the City, Lahiri’s Interpreter of Maladies, Means’s Assorted Fire Events, Mueenuddin’s In Other Rooms,
Other Wonders. All George Saunders. And on and on. However, there are two about which I feel certain I would allow one of my fingers (okay, maybe just the pinky) to be cut off without anesthesia if I could have written either: Joyce's Dubliners and Johnson's Jesus' Son. Both books were never marketed as "a novel-in-stories," but both books have a natural, subtle, yet sublime, classical arc that is, for me, almost more satisfying in retrospect than it was during the reading. While reading Jesus’ Son, for example, I never thought “How, by the end of this book, will the protagonist ever get clean and sober and find redemption and healing in a believable way that brings together so many of the themes that the author has woven together so cleverly throughout this entire collection?” No. Rather, each story picked me up and carried me away, without a concern for the larger whole. Once I finished the book, however, I understood that something else had happened to me.

In Jesus’ Son, we start with Fuckhead (the only name to which our protagonist is referred) on a road to death (both spiritually and physically). We see him engage in all manner of self-destruction. But we sense that something else is going on for him—something more than merely getting high; he is, as William James calls it in Varieties of Religious Experience, a “sick soul." But moreover, he is, dare I say it, a pilgrim on a journey: searching for family, for vocation, for healing and home. Once we get to "Happy Hour" (one of the least happy stories in the collection), Fuckhead reaches the center of Dante’s Inferno at a bar called Pig Alley:

“The cigarette smoke looked unearthly. People...gave up their bodies...only the demons inhabiting us could be seen. Souls who had wronged each other were brought together here. The rapist met his victim....But nothing could be healed.”

Johnson finishes that paragraph blending indirect dialogue with one of several direct addresses to the reader (who, it may be said, stands in as his Virgil) saying: “And what are you going to do to me now? With what, exactly, would you expect to frighten me.”

The next story “Steady Hands at Seattle General” might function, then, as a sort of Purgatorio, where a horrific case of the DT's and an act of brotherly goodwill (a haircut) come together to create a liminal space for our protagonist. And finally, with the last story, a kind of Paradisio concludes the arc. “Beverly Home” brings Fuckhead to the end of his journey, a place where no longer is there the “knife dividing” alienation we’ve seen throughout, but rather a coming together and a healing: “All these weirdos, and me getting a little better every day right in the midst of them. I had never known...that there might be a place for people like us.” Chills ripple my skin as I type those lines, just as they did when I first read them.

EDWARD P. JONES
WILL BOAST: I’m a great admirer of Edward P. Jones’ fiction, especially his long story “Old Boys, Old Girls,” which, for me, encapsulates the qualities of his writing that make it so complex and satisfying. “They caught him after he had killed the second man,” the story begins, and what follows is a big chunk out of the life of Caesar Matthews, who, having gotten away with his first murder, gets a relatively light sentence and spends most of the next ten years in D.C.’s Lorton prison. These might sound like ingredients for a pretty sensationalistic bit of storytelling, and yet Jones is at all times patient, deliberate, and unrelenting in his detailing of Caesar’s journey toward something like redemption.

Throughout “Old Boys, Old Girls,” the quality of the narration is distant and cool, occasionally dipping deep into Caesar’s consciousness, occasionally borrowing the inflections of his voice, but just as often regarding his journey through Lorton—and, later, back into the outside world—with a weary reserve. An early scene, in which Caesar is advised to beat hell out of his cellmate and take the bottom bunk, in order to assert his authority, is presented unflinchingly, as a sickening and largely pointless exercise in the hierarchical social code of the prison. When Caesar has won the fight and claimed the bottom bunk, he experiences not triumph but confusion and remorse as he’s confronted with photos of the other man’s five children taped to the wall by the pillow. Caesar’s cellmate, we learn, is an ex-junkie who never passes a day without regretting the pain he’s caused his children. Everyone in this story has a living past, as well as their own personal, and very particularized, demons. There are no caricatures or plot devices disguised as characters here. A writer undertaking to complete a convincing story about prison life might be tempted by any number of clichés. That Jones avoids almost all of them is one of the several miracles in this story, and the clichés that he must work with, he somehow manages to reinvigorate. Yes, a calendar appears, and we see Caesar
marking off the days, but what Jones does with this little tool for ticking off the fictional time is, to me, a minor technical marvel.

One might come close to calling this story “realist” or even “naturalist,” and yet, as in Jones’ other work, there are the faintest glimmers of wonder, barely glimpsed but somehow strongly felt. Caesar is not a good man. (“The world had done things to Caesar since he’d left his father’s house for good at sixteen,” we’re told early on, “but he had done far more to himself.”) But it is still possible for him to do some good, even if those he does it for will never be around to see it. Somehow, despite everything, innocence is still a possibility in Jones’ fiction, even if a vague and slender one.

Caesar is eventually released from Lorton, but the story is far from over. (I’ll spare the interested reader by not listing further plot details here.) Jones’ stories tend to be long, and, indeed, he is almost always taking the long view of the lives of his characters—watching the seemingly arbitrary ways the world acts on them while also simultaneously building the palpable feeling that fate keeps mysteriously asserting itself. In this, he seems, to me, slightly out of step with the world of contemporary fiction. (“I don’t know a lot about what’s out there,” he’s said in interviews, “so I don’t know where I fit in. That kind of thing really doesn’t concern me. Not at all.”) I’ve read “Old Boys, Old Girls” many times, and whenever I do, I often read Flaubert’s tale “A Simple Heart” immediately before or afterwards. It’s a private association of mine, a pairing of meticulous, sometimes severe voices. In both stories, there’s a neat and almost impossibly difficult trick: An author seeming to take such a distant view of humanity they might be (unjustly) accused of not caring about their characters, while all along secretly cherishing their every act and word.

MARJORIE CELONA: Two stories into Lost in the City and I was inconsolable. If you were a certain sort of child and had a certain sort of parent, you’ll know what I mean. In “The First Day,” for example, a little girl on her first day of school watches her mother walk away from her:

“I see where she has darned one of her socks the night before. Her shoes make loud sounds in the hall. She passes through the doors and I can still hear the loud sounds of her shoes. And even when the teacher turns me toward the classrooms and I hear what must be the singing and talking of all the children in the world, I can still hear my mother’s footsteps above it all.”

Fourteen stories take us up and down the streets of a bygone Washington, D.C., and Edward P. Jones charts the entirety of human experience from infancy to old age. His are those rare eyes that take in the whole world at once. But there’s something else he does in this collection, something even more remarkable (at least to me): With the exception of Patrick O’Keeffe, I don’t know of another living male writer who can capture the minds of women and their children with appropriate sensitivity like Edward P. Jones. Appropriate sensitivity. It’s what is lacking from just about everything these days.
JENNINE CAPO CRUCET: It’s a little hard for me to write about how important *Lost in the City* was in my formation as a writer without my sentiments devolving into a series of exclamation points and/or my use of the phrase “…and I just *lost* my *shit*” when discussing his miraculous stories. Edward P. Jones’s writing devastated me, partly because of when his stories first entered my life: I was living in an inhospitable place, miserable in most ways, and on the writing front, I was still circling what would become my first book’s major themes and concerns, all the while desperately homesick for Miami and missing a community—in my case, a Latino, specifically Cuban-American one—that I rarely saw depicted with the kind of nuance and honesty I found in the work of writers I admired. Then I got supremely lucky; I was allowed to enroll in a workshop with Charles Baxter, who brought *Lost in the City* (along with many other blessings and other forms of invaluable guidance) into my world. And man, when I read those stories, did I ever just lose my shit.

What floored me about these stories was the generosity in every single piece: the way Jones gives us layers and layers of precise, telling details; how no character, no matter how short their time on stage, escapes from having a few deft sentences expose the totality of their life; how intimate they were, how very much like God his narrators seemed. And then there’s the bold, beautiful moves that are always in service to the story’s larger themes: how, for instance, in the story “A New Man,” he ends the very first paragraph by leaping forward a bunch of years and telling us how the main character will die (!!!); or how, in “The Girl Who Raised Pigeons,” he moves us through two years with a two-sentence-long paragraph (!!!), “She turned ten. She turned eleven.” (Seriously, !!!!!.)

I wanted more than anything to get so much of the world into stories so compact and perfect. I wanted to portray my city the way Jones portrays (and honors, via his sharp descriptions and rich portraits) his own hometown. *Lost in the City* was a mandate—a mandate just to me, it felt, that I start writing about home in a smarter way, the way my heart knew it. His work inspired me to write stories I was afraid to bring into workshop, stories that I thought would freak out my peers with titles that referenced men punching women in the face—the title a clear homage to Jones’s “The Night Rhonda Ferguson was Killed”—and so they never got copied and passed out; I never got brave enough, in that city, to go that far. But I’d get there, eventually, years later, largely thanks to the honesty and precision embodied by the narrators in Jones’s stories, each of them dwelling like Gods over his much-loved, much-flawed characters.

NAMI MUN: We are city dwellers. We scurry onto subways and buses, onto planes and through rush-hour traffic that invites arterial hypertension. Our minds play speed-chess in perpetuity, trying to win at work, at love, at money, at winning. And through all of this we pass by strangers every day—sentient beings that are nothing more than blips on our harried psychic screens. I too participate in this self-imposed oblivion. And the blinders get bigger every year. The passersby can never be more than blips—otherwise, we risk seeing too much at once, risk letting in too much of the chaos. But if we had more time, more desire, more space within us, or let’s face it, more courage, and truly saw these strangers, even for a few minutes, we would see the entire cosmos contained
within each of them. Emotions, history, knowledge, and memory as deep and endless as black.

This is what it is to read *Lost in the City*. In these stories we meet gospel singers, grocery clerks, throw-away sons, and homicidal fathers, sometimes for only brief moments, yet we see within each character decades of longing, decades of attempting to flourish in a low-ceilinged world. The characters bleed internally, endure suffering, and eventually accept pain as a mere by-product of being alive. We witness all of these things because Edward P Jones doesn’t write characters; he writes people. People you feel tethered to. Even the unforgivable ones. And it doesn’t matter your background; if you have a beating heart you will read Jones’ work and think, *I know these people*.

To say the least, he is generous with his characters. Whether you read a five-page story of his or a 400-page novel, you’ll still stumble away dizzy from having seen the viscous interiors of a fellow human. He can imbue a scene with zen-like presence but also fly decades into the past or into the future with Marquezian ease, allowing us to feel a character’s life in its entirety and almost at once. You get the impact of a novel in a single story, and the sharpness of a story within a whole novel. And just as importantly, his characters have voice. They speak words dipped in barrel-aged whiskey, words your grandparents might’ve uttered, whether they be from the South or South Korea.

I was not surprised to learn that Jones kept a little notebook filled with old family sayings. Or that he envisioned his two story collections, *Lost in the City* and *All Aunt Hagar’s Children*, published 14 years apart, to work like a pair of distant magnets still drawn to one another; where characters from the former populate the latter in such a way that creates, for the reader, a catholic understanding of an entire community, the lives of which exist beyond the pages of these books. Reading both collections is to be granted a privileged entrance into these people’s souls.

**PAUL YOON:** Sometimes I think that I write fiction as a way to communicate with the books and stories that have had an effect on me. That by creating an imaginary world of some kind, I am reaching out to all the other imaginary worlds I have lived in and experienced. So that writing becomes an act of love.

There are few short stories I love more than Edward P. Jones’s “In the Blink of God’s Eye,” which is the opening story in his masterpiece, *All Aunt Hagar’s Children*. It traces the life of a young newlywed couple who, early in the twentieth century, leave Virginia to start a new life in Washington D.C. One night, not long after their arrival, the wife, unhappy and still disoriented by city living, finds a bundle hanging from a tree. Inside, there’s a baby.

So begins an epic tale, one that spans many years; and every time I read it, I am in awe of the story’s breadth, its narrative movement, the way it reads like a compressed novel. But more than anything, what stays with me most is the abundance of imagination contained in each sentence, from the first to the last. He is, for me, one of the most courageous writers working today. And this story in particular remains one of my great
inspirations, a story brimming with the world, one I am always responding to in some way, every time I write.

David Bezmozgis is the author of the novels The Betrayers, and The Free World, as well as the short story collection Natasha and Other Stories

Charles Bock is the author of the novel Beautiful Children

Christopher Boucher is the author of the novel How to Keep Your Volkswagen Alive

Victor LaValle is the author of The Devil in Silver, Big Machine, The Ecstatic, and Slapboxing with Jesus

Nelly Reifler is the author of the novel Elect H. Mouse State Judge, and the short story collection See Through

Joe Meno is the author of the novels Office Girl, The Great Perhaps, The Boy Detective Fails, Hairstyles of the Damned, How the Hula Girl Sings, and Tender as Hellfire, as well as the short story collections Bluebirds Used to Croon in the Choir, and Demons in the Spring

Philipp Meyer is the author of the novels The Son, and American Rust

Joseph Salvatore is the author of the short story collection To Assume a Pleasing Shape

Will Boast is the author of the memoir Epilogue, and the short story collection Power Ballads

Marjorie Celona is the author of the novel Y

Jennine Capo Crucet is the author of the short story collection How to Leave Hialeah

Nami Mun is the author of the novel Miles from Nowhere

Paul Yoon is the author of the novel Snow Hunters, and the short story collection Once the Shore

Lettering by Caleb Misclevitz
A Survey of Writers on Contemporary Writers

Listening to writers read and discuss their work at Newtonville Books, the bookstore my wife and I own outside Boston, I began to wonder which living, contemporary writers held the most influence over their work. This survey is not meant to be
comprehensive, but is the result of my posing the question to as many writers as I could ask.

—Jaime Clarke

STEPHEN KING

© James Leynse

KELLY BRAFFET: When I was a teenager in Pennsylvania, there was this series of very coveted summer programs that only the Super Super Smarties were accepted into called the Governor’s School. There was one for pretty much any discipline you can think of, including creative writing; I applied every year I was eligible and was declared an alternate every year. It was one of the two greatest frustrations of my teenaged life: my inability to get into Governor’s School, and my inability to get that one dark, tortured beautiful guy to fall in love with me. Now I’m a published writer, and the last I heard of Dark and Tortured, he was a heroin addict who beat his girlfriend, so I think it probably all turned out for the best.

Anyway, as one of the standard questions during the Governor’s School application interview, you were asked to name your favorite writers. The first year I answered honestly: John Steinbeck and Stephen King.

“Really,” the interviewer said dryly. All I remember about him is that he had glasses, and he very clearly thought this whole picking-Super-Smarties-for-Governor’s-School thing was an enormous pain in his ass. “And what do you like about Stephen King?”
His characterizations, I said, and the vividness with which he captured the world around
him. The snap and crackle in his language; the way he built tension. I think it was a
fairly good answer, given that I was sixteen, but—as I’ve said—I didn’t get in. The next
year, the interviews were done by the exact same bespectacled killjoy, only this time,
when he gave his opening remarks before dragging us into his office one at a time, he
actually said, “So when I ask who your favorite writer is, you probably shouldn’t say
Stephen King.”

Shameful little sheep that I was, I didn’t, even though it still would have been the most
truthful answer. (Perhaps even more so, because that was the year that I discovered the
Dark Tower series, the first three books of which will go down forever on my Best Books
Ever list.) I’m sure I said Steinbeck again, and probably also added Fitzgerald, both of
which were also truthful answers in their own way, but I still didn’t get into the
goddamned Governor’s School, and I still loved Stephen King.

If King himself ever reads this, I can only say that I truly hope that his many years of
facing up to this kind of bullshit will enable to dismiss that petty little man as the third-
rate, embittered, closed-minded loser that he was. If the petty little man himself ever
reads this, I hope he’s ashamed. Not just because we were kids, and he was stepping all
over our burgeoning abilities to know what we liked and why, but also because he has
deprived himself of the joys of King’s massive, and vivid, and wildly imaginative body of
work.

For instance, he’s never read The Body, which was my introduction to Stephen King and
also to the modern coming-of-age story. With its effortless leaps in time, its mix of
nostalgia and pain—how can those two ever be truly separated?—and its wrenching
evocation of death and friendship and adulthood, that book said something about being
twelve that I recognized as true even when I actually was twelve, and which has
remained true ever since. He’s never read The Stand, in all of its messy vastness: my
favorite kind of apocalypse story, the one where the horror is tempered with hope, and
also a perfect portrait of the vast spectrum of human nature. He’s never read The
Shining and experienced the tense claustrophobic grandeur of the Overlook Hotel, never
watched from the inside as Jack Torrance’s sanity leaks slowly out of him, but his love
for his family never does—a trick and a half, if you ask me, since we all know (via
cultural osmosis if by no other means) how Jack Torrance ends up treating his family.

He’s never read the fantastic King. He’s missed the magical alchemy that happened
when King joined Straub, and created the wonder that is The Talisman—the scene
where poor Wolf strains and howls in the Box is one of the saddest and most horrific
moments I’ve ever experienced in fiction. Sometimes the worst happens, and we have no
choice but to live through it, and endure it. He’s never read The Gunslinger or
experienced Roland’s strange, dying world, with all of its eerie, perfectly chosen
evocations of our own; he’s never suffered along with Eddie Dean as he kicks heroin and
falls in love in The Drawing of the Three (in my opinion, the best of the Tower books, by
far). He’s never met Susannah, the Girl at the Window, and he’s never experienced the
joy of watching a younger, perfectly drawn version of the jaded, trampled Roland that
we know so well fall in love with her.
I could go on. King has written prolifically and massively, and anyone who’s openheartedly read even a fraction of his work can surely engage in a lengthy argument about the relative merits or demerits thereof, and it’s true that—as with any writer—some of his books are more successful than others. And certainly, there will be people out there who have read and genuinely dislike his work, for one reason or another. But his insane, curve-blowing success isn’t a fluke. People love his books because he loves the people in those books, and can convey that love convincingly on the page. Even as he tortures them and feeds them to vampires and locks them under airless bubbles of alien origin, he loves them. I always get the sense, reading him, that he tortures them to see how impressively they’ll rise to overcome the horror, and that his characters generally seem to do it so well speaks to something good and strong in us.

RYAN BOUDINOT: I’d have to say the first writer whose work suggested a model for what I wanted to write was Stephen King. I started reading his work when I was in fifth grade, with his collection of novellas *Different Seasons*. I was totally shocked, especially by the novella “Apt Pupil,” which was the most evil thing I’d ever read. I kept reading his books, and by the time I was in eighth grade had read everything he’d published up to that point. It’s fair to say that his gore and supernatural elements rubbed off on me, but I also think there was something going on underneath his tropes that shaped how I think about characters. I grew up in a rural part of Washington state, and King resonated with me because he didn’t condescend to characters who live in similarly rural places, mostly in Maine. I don’t remember a lot of the violent ends his characters meet, but those moments when his characters are kind and tender to one another remain with me. *The Stand* is one of the most beautiful reading experiences I’ve ever had, full of empathy and human connections, and I thought about it a lot when writing *Blueprints of the Afterlife*. I think King’s greatest strength is his talent for coming up with an incredible premise. Writer gets in car crash, is rescued by a psychotic fan. Guy gets a job as a caretaker of a haunted resort hotel in the off-season. Girl discovers she’s telekinetic after she gets her period. I’ve always loved how King can take such a premise and run like hell with it.

VICTOR LAVALLE: My earliest influence would have to be Stephen King. I didn’t come up in a household that read terribly much. There was the Bible, which was read often, and the Encyclopedia Britannica, which was used only when I had a book report due. In pre-Wikipedia days the Britannica sure did the trick. The pre-internet version of cutting and pasting was simply copying, verbatim, entries by hand! We knew how to cheat the right way when I was young.

My mother and grandmother were smart people, but not big readers. I had an uncle who read a lot of non-fiction but he didn’t live with us and what he brought with him when he visited was always over my head. The latest book by Kissinger was hardly fun reading for a nine or ten year old. So I came to Stephen King in much the same way I’m guessing lots of people did: he was popular. It was easy to get his books, either at the library or a cheap paperback in the local pharmacy.

I was a little intimidated by the size of his novels so the first book of his that I read was, I believe, a collection of stories called *Skeleton Crew*. This book had a few King classics
like the long story, “The Mist” and “The Raft” (which went on to be a cool little vignette in the first Creepshow movie). But the one that really thrilled me, like knocked me back on my ass, was a story called “Survivor Type.” This wasn’t the usual King story in that there were no monsters, nothing supernatural. A disgraced surgeon has been reduced to smuggling heroin on a cruise ship. Something happens and he’s shipwrecked on a small island, totally alone. Only he and the heroin have made it to shore. The story, told in journal entries, goes on to describe the lengths the surgeon will go to to survive. At a certain point he has nothing left to eat, nothing but, well, himself. He’s a surgeon so he knows how to make precise, non-life threatening cuts, and heroin acts as a reasonable anesthetic...

Can you not see how incredible this story would be to a boy of a certain age, a certain temperament? The story is grim, and relentless, and impossible to put down. At least it was for me. But most importantly, and this is the thing some people misunderstand most about Stephen King, it’s his narrative voice that makes this story, and his best work, so blisteringly good. Whether he’s writing in first person or third Stephen King always sounds like Stephen King. He’s got a great, casual way with narration. When it’s working it really feels like he’s your friend who’s come by to shoot the shit for twenty pages or for a thousand. Most writers, even the great ones, simply cannot make narration feel so natural even as the story is leading you down impossible paths. It’s a kind of charm, really. Like the glamour magic of fairies. You don’t quite know why it’s working on you, but before you even realize it you’ve been put under a spell.

NATHANIEL RICH: Between the ages of nine to fourteen, I read a single author exclusively: Stephen King. Sure, I read other books for school—novels like Island of the Blue Dolphins, Little House on the Prairie, Tuck Everlasting—but my free time I devoted entirely to King. I’ll never forget the look of disgust on the face of Ms. Sobel, my fourth grade teacher, when she read the titles of the books I’d listed on my summer reading form: Salem’s Lot, The Tommyknockers, The Dead Zone. She asked if my parents knew what I was reading. Of course they did, I replied. They’d bought me the books, after all. Ms. Sobel appeared to contemplate whether she should notify Child Safety Services.

My obsession began when, at nine, I glimpsed a black Signet paperback of Firestarter on the highest shelf of a family bookcase. On the spine was the face of a girl, about my age, silhouetted against a bright orange flame. When I asked my mother what it was, she told me it was too scary for a little boy. There is nothing she could have said that would have made me more excited to read that book. I demanded she take it down from the shelf.

Firestarter was too scary for a little boy, but it was also the first time I’d felt myself completely absorbed in a novel. Certainly part of the thrill had to do with my empathy for the main character, Charlie McGee, a seven-year-old girl who had the ability to cause fires with her mind. It was impossible not to identify with Charlie—she was just a couple of years younger than me, after all, and what nine-year-old doesn’t dream of lighting people on fire with his brain? But what really struck me was the notion that a book—a small inert object made of paper, glue, and ink—could evoke such a powerful emotion as
fear. When you’re nine, fear is the emotion you understand best. Fear comes first, and hits hardest. I realize now that King’s novel showed me that literature has the power to make you feel things. My desire to be a writer arose from that realization.

–

Kelly Braffet is the author of the novels Save Yourself, Last Seen Leaving, and Josie and Jack.

Ryan Boudinot is the author of Blueprints of the Afterlife, Misconception, and The Littlest Hitler: Stories

Victor LaValle is the author of The Devil in Silver, Big Machine, The Ecstatic, and Slapboxing with Jesus

Nathaniel Rich is the author of the novels Odds Against Tomorrow, and The Mayor’s Tongue

Illustrations by Caleb Misclevitz
INFLUENCED BY

A Survey of Writers on Contemporary Writers

Listening to writers read and discuss their work at Newtonville Books, the bookstore my wife and I own outside Boston, I began to wonder which living, contemporary writers held the most influence over their work. This survey is not meant to be
comprehensive, but is the result of my posing the question to as many writers as I could ask.

—Jaime Clarke

JHUMPA LAHIRI

ALETHEA BLACK: When I first read Jhumpa Lahiri’s work, I’d been writing for eight years, and was still about eight years away from publishing my first book. Her elegant prose, and what it taught me about precision, power, and restraint, was a turningpoint, and is still a touchstone I return to. What I love most is the way she is simultaneously insightful and entertaining, fluid and masterful. Her work makes me feel as if I’ve dropped down into the hidden undercurrent of truelife, and never fails to remind me of why I became a writer in the first place.

KAREN THOMPSON WALKER: As a graduate student, I studied Jhumpa Lahiri’s stories the way someone else might study a car’s engine, by dismantling them and studying the parts. Gradually, I got better at sensing the architecture of those elegant stories, the way the later sections rise directly but imperceptibly from the earlier events. I probably learned more about storytelling from her story “A Temporary Matter,” the ending of which is simultaneously surprising and inevitable, a subtle sleight of hand, than any other single work I’ve ever read.

CHANG-RAE LEE
RACHEL DEWOSKIN: The last lines of Chang-rae Lee’s A Gesture Life read, “I will circle round and arrive again. Come almost home.” The first time I landed on “Come almost home,” I flipped straight back to the beginning and read the book again. Slowly the second time, because I had blazed through it so fast the first. I subsequently read every one of his books, ravenously once and then carefully again, circling back. His novels have changed my writing, teaching, and thinking. My own books are about people on the periphery, and no one writes outsiders’ stories quite like Chang-rae Lee. His protagonists have still surfaces; they are constructed as finely as phrases of detached, perfect diction. And yet underneath their cleanly assimilated, English-language exteriors are histories of turmoil powerful enough to drive whole (often epic) novels. Theirs are stories of love in the time of comfort women, of war, and of perpetual circling, trying to find some balance between interior and exterior lives. History alternately creeps up slowly and accelerates, slamming into the present tense.

I always assign Chang-rae Lee’s novels to my undergraduate and graduate students, not just because I want to read them again and again myself, not just because they’re structurally brilliant, but also and always because they are full of empathy and grace. All of his protagonists get loving, calm, three-dimensional treatment, even in instances of criminal behavior, even when the plots reach frenzied pitches. Lee harnesses the repressed energies of his characters into stories so suspenseful that they are themselves at odds with his quiet style. How can we all be as simultaneously restrained and full-throttle, telescopic and giant in our scope?

RU FREEMAN: I admire Chang-rae Lee’s meticulously written prose which somehow manages to bridge the inherent self-consciousness of craft with the utter abandon of story-telling.
IRINA REYN: It is no exaggeration to say that Chang-rae Lee’s *Native Speaker* convinced me that becoming a writer was a worthy enterprise for an immigrant after all. It was published a year after I graduated from college, at a time I was drifting from job to job while struggling to cobble together a narrative around my immigration from the former Soviet Union. Everything I wrote felt too simple, organized into neat dichotomies of “here” and “there”. From the very first line—“The day my wife left she gave me a list of who I was”—*Native Speaker* was a revelation. I still remember that “false speaker of language” was one of the items on that damning list. Yes, I thought. At last. The way duality of language and culture fragments a psyche. The way we are forced to shuffle identities depending on the company we keep. This was no common tale of rosy-cheeked, striving, assimilating immigrants, not merely a story of isolation and alienation that we might expect, but something narrator Henry Park calls his “American education”: “My ugly immigrant’s truth... is that I have exploited my own, and those others who can be exploited.” Immigrants as exploiters. Now this was something new.

JONATHAN LETHEM

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IVY POCHODA: I grew up in Cobble Hill, Brooklyn back when you were lucky to convince a taxi driver to cross the bridge, when it was necessary to justify my parents’ preference for our borough over Manhattan, when it wasn’t somewhere “cool” but some place special. My friends and I would play unsupervised in the street, on the sidewalks, in the alley next to my house. We played city-kid games: stoopball, running bases, four square. We had block long water fights and tried our luck with skateboards on a homemade quarter-pipe. We knew our neighbors, rang their doorbells, stopped by unannounced.

Whenever I left home, for summer camp and later for college, I never tired of trying to explain Brooklyn to the uninitiated. My borough is and was important to me in ways I
struggled to articulate, ways I didn’t understand. It was tough and beautiful, hopeful and desperate.

I moved abroad after college, looking for my own “Brooklyn,” somewhere I could discover, or rather rediscover, like my parents had Cobble Hill. And in my absence, my old neighborhood changed. Streets that I was forbidden from walking down when I was a kid became home to Michelin-star restaurants. Italian social clubs turned into private yoga studios. My neighborhood, my Brooklyn, began to slip away, and I grew worried that I’d lost it forever.

I read Jonathan Lethem’s *The Fortress of Solitude* when I was living in Amsterdam. From the first page, I knew I’d come home. (Lethem’s book is set five blocks from my parents’ house.) It was all there both physically and emotionally: the delicious freedom of being allowed to play on the street after dinner, the old men sitting on milk crates, rolling empties of Manhattan Special, the inner city wonder of an ailanthus pushing through the sidewalk, the remarkable childlike perspective of an entire world narrowed to a single city block. Lethem brilliantly recovered a time and a place I feared lost to gentrifying invaders, to people who love Brooklyn but for entirely different reasons that I did and do. *The Fortress of Solitude* captures the entire panorama of my childhood, from the precise the slang of my corner of Brooklyn, the class anxieties of growing up in a neighborhood on the verge, to the pride I derived from my own outer-boroughness.

Of course there are no shortage of books set in Brooklyn, Lethem’s own *Motherless Brooklyn* for instance. But unlike other books set in the borough, *The Fortress of Solitude* unashamedly mixes poetry and street slang. It’s tough without being hardboiled. It’s magical and musical. It’s a novel of contradictions, both wholly realistic, yet imbued with a daring dose of magical realism that recalls the most powerful childhood imaginings. In other words, it’s a perfect reflection of the Brooklyn itself. My Brooklyn.

I was struggling to write my first novel when I read *The Fortress of Solitude*. I thought books had to be wildly imagined, fantastically conceived, take you places you’d never been, force your mind into different worlds. I didn’t know that the best stories could be found so close to home, that my own block might hold enough magic and wonder, poetry and pain.

**MATTHEW SPECKTOR:** Jonathan Lethem embarrassed me. I came to Lethem’s work late—this isn’t the embarrassing part—but after *Motherless Brooklyn*, and after the half-decade or so of work that preceded it, I picked up *Fortress of Solitude*. A little reluctantly. I’d nibbled the edges of earlier books without being fully persuaded (without giving them the sort of attention that would’ve allowed them to persuade), and so it took a wolf in so-called realist’s clothing to do it. Unlike its predecessors, unlike even *Motherless Brooklyn*, which was too alert in fucking around with gumshoe tropes to qualify, *Fortress* was a social novel. An evident social novel, anyway: by the time we got to any reality-bending elements, I was too deeply immersed in the Boerum Hill of the 70s to care. The thing was, I was touched by it. It wasn’t ambition, or scope, or scale, or ideas—I could feel the press of DeLillo all over it, his muddy thumbprints smudging the
sentences, but I didn’t care about that, either—it was *depth*. And a very specific kind of depth, at that. His characters were not merely haunted, or round: they were humiliated, in a way that felt nearly metaphysical. They were not mocked, but rather, butterflied. For all the yokings and beatdowns, the street-level subjugations endured by Dylan—and Lethem seemed to need to invent an even greater nerd, just to contain the overflow, in the indelible Arthur Lomb—the book seemed to contain neither a hunger for punishment nor one for revenge. *Fortress* isn’t a sadistic book, nor a masochistic one, but it is almost infinitely humane.

To that point, I suppose, I’d been under the spell of writers who were more or less mandarin: a James Salter here, a Shirley Hazzard there, writers whose sentences attained to a perfect equipoise. Lethem was deliberately lumpy (Ebdus joined a parade of protagonists whose names lodge like a bone in the throat: Lionel Esrog on one side, Perkus Tooth on the other), fine-tuned in his perceptions, calmly musical perhaps but never fussy. Yet the more important thing was this openness to embarrassment. The moment I saw it enacted as drama, I began to notice, too, the presence of humiliation as theme, as leitmotif, as organizing principle even. (How often the word ‘shame’ appears in middle-period Lethem, as well. Search *The Disappointment Artist* and see how often. Even when he’s writing warmly and lauditorily about Philip K. Dick, one of his heroes, Lethem returns again and again to Dick’s alleged worst novel, *Vulcan’s Hammer*, calling it out for “special shaming.”) What is Lionel Esrog’s Tourette’s syndrome but an engine for such, the relentlessness of the private, inappropriate self busting out in public? Lethem’s predecessors—Saul Bellow, say, in *Seize The Day*—give us the agonizing feel of the effort to maintain appearances in the face of private collapse. *Motherless Brooklyn* simply dispenses with the effort. The self can’t help but irrupt, in all its red-faced glory.

This is the American Grain, of course. Whether our secrets must be declared (Whitman) or suppressed (Henry James), our literature exists to shine a light on them, and Lethem’s casual disarming of his own defenses—the way he seemed to pick the lock on a generational self-consciousness—helped me put paid to my own. It did what writers have always done for each other, what Hawthorne did for Melville, for example. It liberated me, it woke me up, and it freed me to maximize my talents, to embrace—rather than dodge—my literary limitations.

**CHARLES YU:** Jonathan Lethem is unclassifiable. I don’t think he is constrained by anything, stylistically, thematically, formally. Many novelists of his caliber are, like him, in a category of one, but what Lethem does that makes him so important, I think, is that he imagines new completely new areas in literary possibility space, and then fills the possibility with an actuality, and does it in a way that acts as a bridge for other novelists to cross into the space.

**GARY LUTZ**
RYAN BOUDINOT: I’ve noticed that Gary Lutz’s lecture that he delivered at (I think) Columbia, “The Sentence is a Lonely Place,” is frequently passed around by writing grad students who are drawn to language-driven prose. It’s kind of ridiculous to even use the term “language-driven” because isn’t all prose driven by language? Regardless, Lutz, to my mind, is the best example of the acolytes of Lish, the writers whose work makes you stop and savor individual lines. He pushes his language into the realm of poetry and some of his stories barely hold together, plotwise. And as far as subject matter, he’s pretty uni-dimensional—his stories convey the same weary, alienated mood most of the time. But I want to underline every one of his sentences. He’s like a guitarist who can play three notes and you know who’s playing them immediately. A Gary Lutz sentence is like no other. There’s a whole domain of the English language that seems to belong only to him.

NELLY REIFLER: Reading Gary Lutz’s Stories in the Worst Way was like catching a virus. For several years I couldn’t get his weird precision and gymnastics with parts of speech out of my brain. I’d spend ages on each sentence that I wrote. Writing was a difficult; I felt contorted, twisted up in knots. It made me a better writer.

WHITNEY TERRELL: There are writers I read and admire even though their work is very different from my own. For instance, contemporary experimental writers like Gary Lutz. My interest in him quickened after my exposure to the war in Iraq, where I worked as an embedded reporter. The war was, to put it mildly, a surreal experience. When I looked back at past war literature, I found that writers like Blaise Cendrars and Celine had managed to bring that feeling to the page by defying and distorting the normal confines of realism. That led me to contemporary writers who did the same thing. I don’t know if I can define how Lutz and other writers like him (Aimee Bender, George Saunders, Adam Johnson) influence my work yet, except to say that they continually remind me that my way of doing things isn’t the only option.
Alethea Black is the author of the short story collection *I Knew You’d Be Lovely*

Karen Thompson Walker is the author of the novel *The Age of Miracles*

Rachel DeWoskin is the author of the novels *Blind* and *Big Girl Small*

Ru Freeman is the author of the novels *On Sal Mal Lane* and *A Disobedient Girl*

Irina Reyn is the author of the novel *What Happened to Anna K*

Ivy Pochoda is the author of the novels *Visitation Street* and *The Art of Disappearing*

Matthew Specktor is the author of the novels *American Dream Machine* and *That Summertime Sound*

Charles Yu is the author of the novel *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe* and the short story collections *Third Class Superhero* and *Sorry Please Thank You*

Ryan Boudinot is the author of *Blueprints of the Afterlife, Misconception*, and *The Littlest Hitler: Stories*

Nelly Reifler is the author of the novel *Elect H. Mouse State Judge* and the short story collection *See Through*

Whitney Terrell is the author of *The King of Kings County* and *The Huntsman*

*Lettering by Caleb Mislevitz*
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Listening to writers read and discuss their work at Newtonville Books, the bookstore my wife and I own outside Boston, I began to wonder which living, contemporary writers held the most influence over their work. This survey is not meant to be
comprehensive, but is the result of my posing the question to as many writers as I could ask.

—Jaime Clarke

CORMAC MCCARTHY

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BROCK CLARKE: Cormac McCarthy was a big influence on my early writing, although maybe not in the way one usually thinks of “influence.” In the mid 1990s I was reading a lot of McCarthy: I’d begun with All the Pretty Horses, and then gone back and read all his books leading up to All the Pretty Horses, a book I taught, and a book I loved, and a book that I think that gets short shrift by McCarthy nuts because it sold a lot of
copies and is relatively accessible and because it’s a western and not a southern and because there’s no necrophilia or incest in it. But it still is written the way those earlier McCarthy novels were written—that is, in language that is purposefully antique, a rhetoric that’s a holy cross between Melville, Faulkner, and the Old Testament. I was crazy for it, and set out trying to do something similar in my work. When I say “my work,” there really wasn’t much of it. I’d published a story, but it was a story that, while ending up in my first collection, didn’t really have much in common with the other stories in that collection. And those other stories in that collection didn’t even exist yet. I was still struggling to figure out what kind of stories I wanted to write, where they might be set, what they might be about. With everything, in other words.

But I did have an idea for a story: a friend of mine had told me a story about how, during some family trip, his father had parked their car underneath an exhaust fan outside a Kentucky Fried Chicken and when they came out the car was covered with chicken fat. I loved everything about this story. So I set about stealing it. But the problem was that I set about stealing it by way of McCarthy: the story’s language was ornate, the mood was gloomy and full of portent, and the story as a whole was absolutely humorless (unlike McCarthy, who can be very funny). The story was awful. I couldn’t bring myself to finish it, let alone to show it to anyone. And yet, after I realized how totally I had failed, I still very much wanted to write a story about a guy whose car gets covered with chicken fat.

That’s when I realized that while I had found my subject (the grotesque), I hadn’t yet found writers who could teach me how to do justice to the subject. I would find them soon (Barry Hannah, Grace Paley, Donald Barthelme, Padgett Powell), just as I would find writers who I’d read, but not closely enough (Flannery O’Connor, John Cheever). And I would eventually finish, and publish that story (“The Fat”). But I would never had done so if I hadn’t realized that as much as I loved McCarthy, he was absolutely the wrong model for the kind of stories I wanted to write.

**TONY D’SOUZA:** I love McCarthy so much. Look at the ending of Blood Meridian, where the long and violent epic loses its grip on everything, on language, on its central character, the bloody novel whirling in to a sort of meaningless that reflects the indestructability—for better or worse—of the universe and existence and how it works:

“And they are dancing, the board floor slamming under the jackboots and the fiddlers grinning hideously over their canted pieces. Towering over them all is the judge and he is naked and dancing, his small feet lively and quick and now in doubletime and bowing to the ladies, huge and pale and hairless, like an enormous infant. He never sleeps, he says. He says he will never die. He bows to the fiddlers and sashays backwards and throws back his head and laughs deep in his throat and he is a great favorite, the judge. He wafts his hat and the lunar dome of his skull passes palely under the lamps and he swings about and takes possession of one of the fiddles and he pirouettes and makes a pass, two passes, dancing and fiddling at once. His feet are light and nimble. He never sleeps. He says that he will never die. He dances in light and shadow and he is a great favorite. He never sleeps, the judge. He is dancing, dancing. He says that he will never die.”
Who is McCarthy’s judge? He’s loathsome, brilliant, vicious, relentless. And he will never die. Is he evil embodied? Is he mortality itself? We recognize that he really will never die, what he represents, that it will keep whirling and dancing just as the universe will. We will die but this monstrous thing—whatever it is—will not.

McCarthy is writing about that which our culture works hardest to ignore: that our lives are brief and perhaps without any meaning beyond what they have meant to us. And what happens to that when we are gone?

PHILIPP MEYER: Cormac is one of the few contemporary writers with an absolutely dominating style. And in the end, style really does matter. It takes longer, it’s much harder to write, you have to match it absolutely to the content or it sounds hackneyed. It’s faster and easier to write without style in the same way it’s faster to play music without caring to hit the notes in an intentional way. There are a few great writers who are not great stylists, but not many.

After a certain number of Cormac books, you feel like you’ve seen into his heart and know what you’re going to find next time you look. It will probably be dark, it will probably be hopeless, and it will probably not give much importance to internality. That said, I think some of McCarthy’s books are going to last, especially Blood Meridian. I am not sure there is another book like it in American literature. It is a perfect book. Narrow, but perfect—it is the highest level of expression of a certain aesthetic and worldview. One of those works that can’t be copied.

JAMES SCOTT: Cormac McCarthy was—and is—everything to me. He can do anything. The darkness and violence are what he’s most famous for, but he can also be hilarious, and he does all of this with a Biblical rhythm that’s both inevitable and surprising.

I can’t even remember which McCarthy book I read first, as I then devoured another five or six in quick succession, but it was the summer after my freshman year of college. I felt the magnetic tug of a voice that was totally different than anything else I’d ever read. McCarthy marries that incredible voice with genre elements, real characters, cartoonish characters, twisting plots, and clear-eyed settings. The way he describes the natural world reflects upon the characters and the plot in a natural but endlessly complex way. The fact that he can make so many disparate pieces work together defies all logic.

I never get as lost as when I’m reading a Cormac McCarthy novel, and that’s the greatest thing anyone can aspire to. It’s magic.

JOSH WEIL: I discovered his work in graduate school and it slammed into me like nothing else I’d read before. His Child of God taught me how deeply a writer can commit to an unsympathetic character, and how powerful that could be. It tapped into an interest I’d already had, and drove me in further in that direction with my own work. And it made me brave. That bravery is something that a lot of these writers gave me; they let me know that it could be done, that it was OK to go out on that limb. With books like Blood Meridian and The Crossing, McCarthy also opened my eyes to the ways a
writer can challenge a reader, narratively (I’m still not sure I understand the ending to
*Blood Meridian*, but I know it feels right to me, and that that feeling makes me, as a
reader, strive to understand it, and that striving engages me more fully). In *The
Crossing*, he takes my expectations of traditional plot structure, hooks me with a feint,
and then steals all my preconceived ideas right out from under me. I love that. Again, it
made me see the possibilities for narrative in a new way.

**JAY MCINERNEY**

© Dan Callister

**ADELLE WALDMAN:** Jay McInerney is often thought of as a novelist who excelled at
evoking a particular time and place—namely, Manhattan in the 1980s. He certainly
does, but I wonder if that one fact too often eclipses his many other achievements as an
acutely observant psychological novelist and an excellent and stylish prose writer.

Re-reading *Bright Lights, Big City* several months ago, I was struck by the thought that
what enables a writer to capture a particular time and place is not so much the period-
details—brands of clothes worn, detailed descriptions of food eaten, long passages about
interior décor—which after all we can get from journalism, from fawning articles about
the rich and famous, but rather the interplay of a few, well-chosen period details with
observations that are both acute and universal, that aren’t specific to a time and place.
You certainly see that in McInerney’s fiction. Take *Bright Lights, Big City*’s wonderfully
executed opening scene—a raucous dinner party given by its protagonists, Russell and
Corrine Calloway. Apart from the touches that place the book in the New York literary
world of the 1980s, the scene is full of smart, universal observations, like this one about
Russell and Corrine’s friend Jeff, who recently a published a successful novel: “Everyone
listened to him just a little more attentively these days, as he listened less attentively to everyone else.” This is a wry comment on success and social life, and how the two interact; it is not specific to the 1980s.

Apart from his evocation of a time and a place, McInerney consistently brings to his fiction an eye for psychological nuance and social detail, but unlike some writers who dissect status and status signifiers, McInerney resists the satirical: he doesn’t reduce his characters to caricature. In McInerney, as in life, the presence of ambition, or illicit lust, or greed or snobbery, does not mean the absence of more tender qualities. Characteristic is (also in *Brightness Falls*) his introduction of Harold Stone, a celebrated book editor and a prominent member of the New York intellectual establishment, who is also Russell’s boss. This is how Russell views Harold upon walking into his office:

“Looking up, [Harold’s] yellow-brown eyes blinking irritably through horn-rimmed glasses, he simulated something awakened out of a bad sleep... His lack of the recommended minimum social graces seemed a matter of principal, as if charm, manners and the other lubricants of interpersonal contact betokened a lack of seriousness.”

McInerney’s presentations are orchestral—they don’t rely on a single note or emotional effect. We’ve also just been told, by Russell’s colleague Washington, that Harold “used to be a big liberal” but isn’t anymore. “Look at the people he hangs out with now, socialites and neo-con economists, leveraged-buyout dudes. You think they’re jamming about Marcuse and Malcolm X at dinner?” Washington says. Such precision is typical of McInerney, who also gives us, cheekily and knowingly, Harold’s professional backstory:

“A junior associate of the old Partisan Review gang, Harold Stone became known as a wunderkind even before he came down from Harvard with an essay titled ‘Bakunin and the Idea of an Avant-Garde.’ He took a job at Knopf, shared a girl with Bellow and got his glasses broken by Mailer, thereby sealing his reputation.”

I fell in love with Jay McInerney’s books in the late 1980s and early 1990s, as a teenager in the suburbs who knew nothing about New York. I decided I wanted to live in New York in part because of his books. But when I re-read them now, as an adult and as a New Yorker, I see so much else to admire, so much that is timeless and gives pleasure to the reader.

Speaking of pleasure, I should also add, in case anyone has forgotten, that McInerney is very funny. Take this description of the Calloways’ neighbor, an elderly widow who peers out of her apartment door “as far as the chain would stretch” every time she hears someone walking down the hall, “as if her it were her fondest wish with to be a prosecution witness before she departed this crime-ridden world. All day long she opened the door like a bivalve drawing nutrients from the ocean.”

**DAVID MEANS**
JAMIE QUATRO: I discovered David Means’ short fiction in 2008, during my last term as an MFA student at Bennington. I read *The Secret Goldfish* first, and was knocked out by the prose—not just by the inventiveness of the narratives, the unpredictable shifts in point of view—but by the sheer poetry of the language itself. Reading a Means story, I thought, was like listening to a piece of music. I read *Assorted Fire Events* and *A Quick Kiss of Redemption* in quick succession, and bought *The Spot* the day it was released.

What was most salient to me as a writer, given the theological concerns of my own work, was the religious symbolism in the stories. Here was someone working in the vein of the great mid-century Catholics: Flannery O’Connor, Walker Percy, and John Updike. So when, in a December 2012 NYTBR essay, Paul Elie claimed that Means’ work treats Christianity like the sludge in the Kalamazoo river, “toxic if handled in anything more than trace amounts,” I balked. Surely not! Take “Railroad Incident, August 1995,” a piece that all but demands reading as a symbolic Passion of Christ: the “dainty man” at the story’s center sets out to “betray himself,” limping on a wounded heel (calling to mind the protoevangelium of Genesis 3: he shall crush you on the head / you shall bruise him on the heel); when one of his four assailants first spots the limping man, the assailant says—the first line of dialogue in the story—“Jesus shit;” they mock and nearly beat the wounded man to death, then drag him into a tunnel “near the crossing grade,” believing that what they’re doing is part of an overall scheme—“the stars were aligned in certain ways.” They imagine if the man recovers he might chalk up his experience to “a personal state of *deus absconditus,* abandoned in a sense like Christ on the cross” (recalling Christ’s own invocation of Psalm 22 on the cross: “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?”). The perpetrators kill him with a final kick and—“an afterthought, a coda, a grand finish”—lay the body across the tracks. Later, the corpse is severed by an oncoming train; the engineer doesn’t watch the “cleaning away of the body.” It’s hard not to read this story symbolically; yet no critic to date has mentioned the specific parallels to the Passion.
And it’s not just this story; Means’ work is rife with the language and imagery of the Christian faith. In “Coitus,” Bob Sampson is acutely aware, during the act of adultery, of his sin: “he prayed for the filth he was in, the deep blood-sucking void that he knew he had fallen into.” In “The Interruption” the homeless men wait for Roy to come out of the Hilton “the way anybody would wait for a savior.” Means uses a tiny crucifix as a footnote: “For Jesus fuck’s sake. Give the guy a chance,” the text says, a tiny hovering cross punctuating the injunction (the footnote tells us that two men drag Roy out of the hotel, his side bruised). Or look at the implicit symbolism in “The Secret Goldfish”: the Fish, traditionally a symbol for the Christian faith, wallows neglected in his tank while the marriage falls apart. (Means wryly points out: “he was not a symbolic fish”—of course begging symbolic reading). The marriage fails but Fish survives; the family, once the father has left, “will hold a small party to celebrate his resurrection.”

Or take “Reading Chekhov”: the lovers attend church together; the pastor quotes Job, speaks of “the elegance of grace, the manner of forgiveness and the nature of redemption.” The seminarian tells his lover that “adultery is multifaceted,” using the weighty biblical term for the act (rather than the trip-off-the-tongue “affair”). Toward the end of the year-long affair, he brings up the idea that it may be God’s Providence that brought them together: “When they tried to get God in, when he mentioned the idea of God nudging them together, the narrative, she would later think, became banal and meek, rooted in the world.” In typical Means mode, the point of view shifts—we’re alternately in the heads of the seminarian and the woman with whom he’s having the affair—and in her thoughts we do find guilt: “The shame she felt came from the truth: she had been fucked and was fucking.” Neither character feels a lack of compunction; the woman wants to stay in her marriage: “no matter how fanciful and wild, no matter how impulsive, in retrospect [the affair] had stood within the fact of the marriage itself.”

Certainly a symbolic appropriation of Christian language and imagery in fiction does not “make belief believable;” nor does the fact that Means views the darkest acts of violence through the metaphysics of the Christian narrative automatically render his voice a “Christian” one. But it bears mentioning that if the biblical narrative is concerned with anything, it’s with Redemption; and, as O’Connor says, “Redemption is meaningless unless there is cause for it in the actual life we live, and for the last few centuries there has been operating in our culture the secular belief that there is no such cause.” Means is one of O’Connor’s successors precisely because he is a writer who finds in modern life “distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem [is] to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural; and he may well be forced to take ever more violent means to get his vision across to this hostile audience.” [itals mine]. Means’ work is not, after all, symptomatic of what Elie’s Catholic ancestors called “serupulosity, an avoidance that comes at the cost of fullness of life,” but is reverting to, or relying on, symbol, taking Christian belief subsurface in order to reach an audience for whom the very term “Christian” is anachronism. To return to The Spot: in “A River in Egypt,” Cavanaugh outlines his set design for an isolated cabin with chinks in its mortar “that, when lit from behind, shot small beams...of light through the walls and the dust motes, forming crosses through which [the writer] might walk.” It’s an apt image for Means’ fiction, which—seen through the right lens—is shot through with cross-shaped light.
KEVIN BROCKMEIER: I read my first Lydia Millet novel through the advocacy of Paul Ingram, one of the booksellers at Prairie Lights in Iowa City. That novel was *My Happy Life*, which, alongside *Oh Pure and Radiant Heart*, remains my favorite of her books. The two of them are very different—*My Happy Life* a slender and I daresay perfect character-study organized around the experiences of a woman who’s incapable of perceiving anything other than benevolence in the abuse the world dishes out to her, and *Oh Pure and Radiant Heart* a long and mostly comic fantasy about the resurrection of Robert Oppenheimer, Enrico Fermi, and Leo Szilard, shuffled together with a caustic history of the nuclear age. Even their opening sentences show how dissimilar they are in their effects: “The door is locked from the outside; they went away and forgot me” and “In the middle of the twentieth century three men were charged with the task of removing the tension between minute and vast things.” I can’t say that I’ve directly used Lydia’s example to write any of my own books—or at least not consciously. But for me her fiction stands as a model of the kind of work that can result when a writer combines imaginative daring with dynamic, exact, emotionally suggestive prose.

ALISSA NUTTING: I was first attracted to Lydia Millet’s writing for its hard-spun comedy. Tucked between the cheek and gum of each novel by Millet is one burning wad of truth: life is not here to meet our needs—things are not fair that way (or any way, really). The taste of this affirmation coats the events, characters, and content of the stories; flavors them. The ironic distance between what characters desire vs. what they get is often funny, sometimes sad, and frequently poignant. This is the sympathetic side of the coin Millet is pressing into our hand.

The other side is a summoning of self-inventory. The personal flaws of so many of Millet’s characters are stripped bare and examined for judgment—judgment meaning not so much ‘culling blame’ as ‘reason’. At its most trenchant, her work might wrongly be interpreted as anti-human—that we’re simply a hopeless, violent lot and that’s that. But it isn’t. On the contrary, Millet’s body of work is profoundly social, particularly in its
use of satire. Socially, one of humor’s greatest uses is shaming: it’s a nonviolent way to suggest a course-correction is needed.

Beyond the humor, Millet’s writing stresses our social interdependence (and therefore our social responsibility) both to one another and to the other creatures on our planet. It holds up an odd sort of mirror: the reflection is not our own image, but rather the impossibility of our own image. We cannot, as her books attest, accurately understand our own individual selves. Even the most intelligent among us—perhaps even especially the most intelligent—are woefully myopic in this way. Sometimes we don’t fully understand our own context. Sometimes we’re too excited, curious, obsessed. Sometimes we’re greedy, or we lack information. Whatever our own failings are, they’re incredibly defensive and will likely protect themselves from being seen until it’s too late, if at all.

We have better luck in observing the failings of others. We can understand the things they don’t about their own situation; we can take in the big picture. We can approach with the objectivity needed for true perspective. In order to evolve in any true ethical sense, we must therefore learn from each other because we cannot clearly see ourselves. We’re thus dependent on learning from one another in order to figure out a better path for all of us. And there is a lot to learn.

Millet’s work is an objective correction to the worst of humanity’s platitudes—the ones that prioritize motive and struggle, allowing us to rationalize the terrible outcomes we’re responsible for. In Millet’s books, we see how just brittle the bones of intention are, how easily crushed by consequence. We have to live in a way that champions outcome above all else; otherwise our civilization and environment will self-pulverize. The finely ground powder left behind will attest only to the fact that we wanted more.

STEVEN MILLHAUSER
ADRIENNE MILLER: Do people know what a genius Steven Millhauser is? If they don’t, maybe his refusal to be classified, and his roving intelligence, might have something to do with it. (I think of him like Kubrick in a way—a big and fascinating brain that seems to know a lot about, and have an interest in, absolutely everything.) Is his stuff historical? Yes, but he’s trickier than that. Is it magical realism? Yes, but he’s written some of the most heartbreaking domestic stories you’ll ever read, too. His books are rich, glorious Faberge eggs of delights, and he’s written so many of my all-time favorite short stories (can we discuss the tour-de-force epics “Eisenheim the Illusionist” and “The Wizard of West Orange”?). One of the many things I value him for: his weird, unsettling wit. And he’s so good with character. His quieter domestic stories tend to feature small-town people—reminiscent, in their essential mildness, of characters in Sherwood Anderson or Thornton Wilder—who seem to all be touched by some kind of fantastical event: a shadowy figure in a trench coat terrorizes a sleepy suburb by slapping its inhabitants in the face; a group of children discovers that the fantasyland of elaborate snow sculptures appearing in their backyards doesn’t leave them unequivocally happy, but instead fills them with an ambiguous new feeling—“a sharp, troubled joy” (and how great is that? “a sharp, troubled joy”); and, in the classic, amazing story “The Knife Thrower,” otherwise unassuming women derive a nearly sensual pleasure from allowing themselves to be the targets in a magician’s fatal game. These brushes with the extraordinary lead these characters directly to the center of life. Millhauser is great because he asks the big questions ... and isn’t that all we’re ever trying to do as writers? As his people emerge from their states of passive tranquility, they begin to question everything they once believed to be true—a transformation rendered most vividly in the devastating story “History of a Disturbance,” which examines how a man’s abrupt mistrust of words causes his marriage to disintegrate, and “the old world of houses, rooms, trees, and streets shimmers, wavers, and tears away, revealing another universe, as startling as fire.”

HELEN PHILLIPS: Steven Millhauser’s work has always felt familiar to me, as though it describes an alternate universe I too have glimpsed. Images from his stories—the somnambulant palace hallways, the house large enough to contain thirteen wives, the bizarre dresses and surreal contraptions and logic-defying inventions—swell into my consciousness like images from my own dreams.

One Millhauser story in particular has shaped me as a writer. “In the Reign of Harad IV” appeared in The New Yorker in April of 2006. I was halfway through my MFA, struggling to figure out what kind of writer I wanted to be (and wondering why I felt such an urgent need to be a writer at all). The realist writers I’d been reading, for all their skill and power, only underscored for me that my writing ambitions—vague though they were—lay elsewhere than in evoking the known world.

“In the Reign of Harad IV” is an exploration of the inexplicable, maniacal, even absurd obsession to which artists must sacrifice themselves. It instantly became a sort of
creative manifesto for me, due both to its matter-of-fact fantastical tone and, moreover, to its extended metaphor about the artist’s path.

The story concerns a celebrated court miniaturist, famous for “the uncanny perfection of his work.” Millhauser’s miniaturist develops an addiction to making ever-smaller reproductions of familiar objects, a drive that only increases over the course of the story. The joy of this endeavor is directly connected to its difficulty. Eventually, the miniaturist grows frustrated that even his most mini-miniature “reveal(s) itself too readily.” He challenges himself to work entirely in the realm of the invisible, to satisfy his own inner eye. The King reproaches him, requesting that he return to “the visible miracle,” yet even as outside forces bear down upon him, the miniaturist remains true to his private quest “for a world so small that he could not yet imagine it.”

The time comes, though, when the miniaturist finds himself “wishing that he could reveal his work to someone.” His loneliness is complete; like Kafka’s hunger artist, he has been abandoned and forgotten. So when a pair of young apprentices comes by to question him about his epic project, he can’t resist showing them his invisible kingdom. They praise him, but he perceives the hollowness in their enthusiasm. He is left knowing that “from now on, his life would be difficult and without forgiveness.”

At a time when I was unsure how to direct my intense drive to write and my attraction toward surreal subject matter, unsure how these urges related to my hope that my work might someday be appreciated by people other than my family and friends, this story read like an exhilarating parable about how to be an artist. Be relentless in your vision. Don’t bow down to the demands of outside forces. Your only obligation is to your own obsession. Millhauser gave me permission, and courage, to pursue the strange worlds I wanted to pursue.

Revisiting it now, I wonder if this can also be read as a tale of warning; one can’t help being reminded of the emperor with no clothes. Is Millhauser cautioning us against forgetting about our readers, losing our audience awareness? Should the miniaturist’s deep loneliness strike fear into all creators out there? We may relate to the miniaturist, but don’t we also fear for his sanity? Yet even as it explores the plight of an artist who pursues his vision to the exclusion of his audience, Millhauser’s story itself lets the reader in; it charms and fascinates and instructs. He takes the trope of the obsessive artist to its absurd, painful extreme in order to make his point. Ultimately, though, I believe he is suggesting that it is only by being uncompromising in one’s creative vision that one can have any hope of connecting meaningfully with one’s audience. This may not be true for our poor miniaturist, but it is true for his creator.

Soon after I read “In the Reign of Harad IV,” I took Millhauser’s advice quite literally; I began writing my novel-in-fables And Yet They Were Happy, comprised entirely of miniature stories, all exactly 340 words. Though I doubted it would ever be published, I’d never been so happy creatively. Like Millhauser’s miniaturist, I felt “a deep, guilty excitement,” as if I’d “come to a forbidden door at the end of a private corridor.”

**DAVID MITCHELL**
JESS WALTER: David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas* was a revelation in terms of structure, reinforcing some things I’d already believed about the freedom a novelist might have to treat the structure of a narrative as its art. So much emphasis, especially in creative writing programs, had been on the writing itself, on the quality of the sentences, and while Mitchell writes with a poet’s sensibility, he also revels in story, and doesn’t treat narrative as a finite series of choices, but as an explosive element of fiction itself. Many writers are dismissive of “plot” or speak about it as the least interesting element in fiction; Mitchell connects the idea of a story’s plot to its structure and because of that, finds new and innovative ways of crafting novels.

RICK MOODY
CHARLES BOCK: I worked as a bartender in exchange for room and board at the Bennington Summer Writing Seminars, and took a workshop from Rick Moody. At the time he’d published *The Ice Storm*, which may not have been even reviewed by the Times, and certainly hadn’t been made into a superb movie by Ang Lee. But that summer Rick had published out a book of experimental fiction—stories and a novella, which revolved around a sex club in the meatpacking district and junkies on line to score in the east village. A close friend of his at the time was important in putting the two of us in touch, and getting me to work at Bennington and take his workshop. She pretty much put *The Ice Storm* in my hands and took me to a reading he did at a now-closed bookstore on 17th and 7th. Rick had just shaved his hair and mostly pretty girls sat around him, watching raptly as he read from the opening story in that collection. When our mutual friend introduced us afterward and said I’d be in his workshop, he was polite and that was about it.

Between then and the workshop, I read *Ice Storm*, and inhaled the novella and its contents, and basically had my mind blown to hell and back. “The Ring of Brightest Angels Around Heaven” changed how I thought about sentences, about structure, about what fiction can do. That book, to me anyway, is a real bible as to how far experimental writing can go without losing a reader. One or three stories don’t work and indeed act as
the example of where you go too far. But it was the entirety: experimental deeply bohemian/decadent/artisty stories, all these media savvy art whores and wannabe screenwriters and self-aware couples, you know, the life I’d come to NYC to lead. And the writing just fucking blew my mind, it was just unfathomable, so funny and cynical and new and cool and glittery and heartbreaking. (That the author and I, at the workshop, actually didn’t seem to connect only made it better, because I really felt that I had to win his respect. Had to somehow write my way to his respect, which just wasn’t happening, and so made me work harder for his approval.)

At that same workshop, Rick read from the opening of an unpublished novel, what would become *Purple America*. It’s the thirteen page, one sentence paragraph, separated by semicolons, where every segment starts with *Whosoever*... The opening of that first sentence actually got changed slightly from what he read to make it more palatable to readers—it was just a massive FUCK YOU of an opening. Like: nobody can do this. But meanwhile it also delivers the goods, a rendering of an adult man in the throes of a crisis who has to come back home and take care of his invalid mother. At once it’s sad and beautiful and heartfelt and touching. It was, without a doubt, the most awesome thing I’d heard, live, writing-wise.

All these years later the opening of *Purple America* remains a tour de force of language and pace, the best opening to novel of the past who knows how many years (whatever you are thinking to yourself as a topper, with all due respect, that opening can fuck itself).

One thing that just amazed me in his writing was the inclusiveness, the connections: where thread on a tee shirt might come from, the financial plight of the team being advertised on the front of the shirt, how that and eight million other things could be focused and harnessed and used, via language and placement, to create a sense of a person and a place and a country. Again, it’s 1995. The internet is just starting to emerge and explode. On the page, he was really the writer with the language and energy of that explosion. He was angry about our country and angry about all kinds of things, and also had so much heart. And by shortening the space of time he was writing about, and then filling that short scene with everything, *everything*, he was able to blow out these little moments, just stuff the shit out of them.

**STUART NADLER:** At twenty, I loved Fitzgerald and Nabokov and Cheever, or anyone who could write a pretty sentence, but I also loved the contemporary fiction of the mid and late 90’s, the late post-moderns, and especially the first three or four books by Rick Moody. I read his third novel *Purple America* at the perfect time in my life—at the beach in Delmar the summer before I graduated at NYU. More than anything, this was the book that made me want to start writing fiction again. I’d been a film student in college, learning lenses, photography, lighting, and lugging cameras and sandbags and apple boxes all over lower Manhattan. I tell people now that I always knew I wanted to be a writer, but that I never wanted to be an English major. I didn’t know that then. I’d written when I was young, and stopped, and thought that I might be a musician, and then a filmmaker, and now, reading that book at the beach, I knew. I haven’t read it since. Part of me is afraid it won’t stand up. But it doesn’t matter. It got me writing
seriously, and it attuned to me to the idea of language as art. This was, more or less, the prevailing idea that dictated the next few year or two of writing. Language came first, and everything else—character, structure, narrative—all of that fell off to the side. Not because I didn’t think it mattered, but more likely, because I had no idea how to even think of it.

LORRIE MOORE

ELISA ALBERT: Moore-as-influence is by now such a cliché that her “importance” seems almost to go without saying, but let me tell you: “How To Become A Writer” had me face-to-floor. From the opening line (“First, try to be something, anything, else.”) to the last (that hilariously transparent effort at literary observational description), she just hit it for me, then, there. Gone with the Wind wasn’t going to cut it for me after that. The recognition was immediate and so gratifying. It was all the things literature is supposed to be and do but so seldom is or does—it reached out a hand to me and changed my life, empowered me to see myself as having a perspective that matters. I thought: oh, i can see things other people don’t or won’t see. I mean, every single one of us has that potential, but unless you fight hard to hold on to it, the life will tend to really file it down. “Pay attention to what they tell you to forget,” said Muriel Rukeyser. Anyway, that’s an awful lot for a single short story (or short story collection) to do. Fiction can be deeply, profoundly good, well-crafted, and smart, and still not manage to change your life.

KATHLEEN ALCOTT: Lorrie Moore is an immutable source of comfort for me. That works so overwhelmingly odd—so filled with what I see as nearly-private jokes between the author and the page—are so beloved, by so many, is a bright sign of contemporary readership.
ALIX OHLIN: I remember that the first time I read her work, my eyes just widened and I felt like I’d been hit in the solar plexus (in a good way). It seemed very new to me, unlike anybody else’s voice who’d come before. The wordplay, the humor, and also the anger in her work spoke to me—there’s a real edge to it that showed me new possibilities, especially when it came to writing about women.

TONI MORRISON

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JENNIFER CODY EPSTEIN: One of my most searing experiences as a reader took place more than a quarter-of-a-century ago. I was a sophomore in college, lying on my bed, wrapped so deeply in the papery grasp of a novel that I was having trouble breathing. The sentences were lyrical, gorgeous—among the most exquisitely-crafted I’d read. But it was the scene they relayed that was making me gasp: on a cold dirt floor in Ohio, a father was raping his adolescent daughter. Yet it wasn’t the act’s blasphemy that shocked me. It was the fact that what I felt for this rapist was not loathing, not disgust, but grief. I felt grief for the unconscious child on the floor as well, of course (the child over whom the father, dazed and spent, drapes a blanket before slowly leaving the room). But my overriding sympathies went not to 11-year-old Pecola Breedlove, but to her irreparably-damaged father Cholly.

Mystified, I read the section twice, and then a third time; studying its seams and wordings. I tried to comprehend how the writer had performed such literary alchemy; how she’d transformed one of the most reprehensible crimes imaginable into an act of tenderness, almost love. That writer was Toni Morrison, the book her debut, *The Bluest Eye*. In it’s pages, I’d found a devastating portrait of an impoverished family in post-Depression Ohio, one trapped by race, economics and era. Even more powerful, though, was Cholly’s heartrending descent from an idealistic youth to the warped soul we see in the book’s final pages; a man who blearily—almost poignantly—confuses an act of sexual abuse for an act of actual love.
Closing *The Bluest Eye*, I knew it had changed me: I’d never look at a “monstrous” act in quite the same way. And in the years since I can honestly say I haven’t. Reading the paper or a history text or even another novel I still sometimes feel Cholly Breedlove’s haunting presence behind me; his dark eyes on my hair; his dank breath on my neck. But it also made me think: Yes. This is the point of fiction—finding those rare flashes of insight; those perfect (if painful) moments of human connection. It made me want to read every word Toni Morrison had ever written. But more than that, it made me want to write like her—even if just a little.

**RU FREEMAN:** Toni Morrison’s *Tar Baby* is a book that I return to for the way in which she was able to make me, as the reader, sympathize with each character as I went along. *Sula*, one of my favorite Morrison books, reinforced for me, something that I had grown up believing: the tensile nature of women’s friendships.

**MELINDA MOUSTAKIS:** Just gorgeous, brave, and unflinching writing that was important in every way possible. I was also enthralled by Morrison’s use of imagery and the lushness of her prose. The fragmented stream-of-consciousness sections in *Beloved* stand out in my memory—as well as the character of Pilate in *Song of Solomon* who doesn’t have a bellybutton and the dictionary at the end of *Jazz* that props up an older couple’s bed. And now that I think about it, her portrayals of complicated women, especially mothers, must have become embedded in my brain. I was first drawn to the minimalism in Steinbeck and then Morrison introduced me to a more maximalist style fraught with lyricism and the different ways one might structure a line.

**JOSEPH SALVATORE:** Both in college and graduate school, this was in the late-eighties to mid-nineties, I was assigned Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* close to a dozen times. No hyperbole. I hunted for all my past syllabi (which I have held onto) but can’t come up with an exact figure. I know we read it in “American Literature II,” in “American Naturalism,” in “World Literature II,” in “Postmodern Fiction,” in “Woman As Hero,” in “Gender and National Identity,” in “American Feminisms,” in “American Slavery,” in “Era of U.S Reconstruction” (I minored in both Gender Studies and American History), in “Herstory/Hystory: Embodiment, Subjectivity, and Rupturing the Real.” At that time, at my school, a state university in Salem, MA, which embraced the gen-ed-requirement model, it’s possible we read it in “Health, Fitness, and Leisure” (my phys ed requirement), in “Weather and Science,” in “Algebra 1,” and “First Year Seminar: Note-taking and Study Skills.” The novel was that ubiquitous. Needless to say, I knew and know the book well, far better than all my recycled term papers and nearly memorized written essay exams could ever demonstrate. I was an English major who wanted to write like the writers I was reading. A fan of Faulkner and Woolf, I saw Morrison as their contemporary heir, which is to say: it was Toni Morrison’s style I fell in love with first.

When I began teaching at Parsons School of Design, at The New School, in the late nineties, I taught my freshmen *The Bluest Eye* in the fall semester and *Sula* and *Playing In The Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* in the spring. As a white young man from a working-class background in Boston, who now had mostly female students, diverse and international, talented, creative, and fiercely intelligent, I was aware—perhaps too aware at the time—that I could not identify in any way with Morrison’s
characters (except in the most private ways that we relate to all fictional characters, ways much too private to responsibly share in a college classroom). So in those days I worked with Morrison’s texts often in the context of what many other critics and scholars had to say about her work, as well as with the many interviews pulled from Conversations With Toni Morrison. In one of those interviews, Morrison, a former editor who had authored a style and usage manual, says that she works and works and works on composing and editing her sentences with the goal, in the end, being that they do not look the least bit worked on—that they, in Morrison’s words, “never seem to sweat.”

There is in the western tradition a discussion of sweatless prose that runs through Baldassare Castiglione’s 16th Century The Book of the Courtier, through to Yeats’s late 19th Century/early 20th: “A line will take us hours maybe / yet if it does not seem a moment’s thought / our stitching and unstitching has been naught” to Hemingway’s “grace under pressure” all the way to Pee Wee Herman’s late 20th Century’s “I meant to do that.” As with Herman’s falling off his bike, the courtier, according to Castiglione, were he, at court, to fall off his horse, he should make it appear as though he had rather dismounted with the utmost nonchalance, what Castiglione called sprezzatura, or effortless grace. For me this is what Morrison achieves in nearly all her lines.

Though I think Song of Solomon is her most accomplished work of fiction in terms of pure storytelling and craft, it is Beloved I return to over and over again—as much for her language as for the story. Those sumptuous, sinewy, sweatless sentences. It would take more space than I have here to fully analyze and explicate her prose, but let me say that one can see the development of her style refining itself with each book. In the early work, she has a stiffer rhetoric, almost self-consciously sweatless:

“Helene Wright was an impressive woman, at least in Medallion she was. Heavy hair in a bun, dark eyes arched in a perpetual query about other people’s manners. A woman who won all social battles with presence and a conviction of the legitimacy of her authority. Since there was no Catholic church in Medallion then, she joined the most conservative black church. And held sway. It was Helene who never turned her head in church when latecomers arrived; Helene who established the practice of seasonal alter flowers; Helene who introduced the giving of banquets of welcome to retuning Negro veterans...”

An entire essay could be given over to that paragraph as it relates to Morrison’s style. Note the typical freshman composition favorite: the topic sentence with a linking verb and a predicate nominative, which tries to conceal its formality with the voicey diction she supplies at the end by her use of the redundant clausal structure (“she was). Note the deliberate fragments in the second, third, and fifth sentences, about as subtle and unnecessary as Cormac McCarthy’s in The Road. Note the anxiously camouflaged use of the it-cleft structure in the sixth sentence, which typically throws emphasis off of the subject of the sentence to a more rhythmic spot further down the intonation contour of the sentence past the predicating verb. But Morrison does away not only with the expletive “it” throughout but with the predicating be-verb as well, even employing those semi-formal semi-colons to separate the syntactic units, heightening the chuch-y
sermonic tone but adding to the worked-over mannered quality, which is exactly what it’s trying so hard not to seem like. Never let them see you sweat.

But through *Sula*, with its anticipation of *Jazz*’s lyrical idiom, and *Song of Solomon*’s longer sentences, more clausal constructions, more luxuriant syntax, leading to the liminal and *Sula*-esque *Tar Baby*, through all these, we see Morrison working to marry the earlier rhetorical techniques to her deepening awareness and ability to render character on a much larger scope and scale. And though it seems merely the natural continuation of an artist honing her craft, nothing could have prepared us for the experience of *Beloved*. Gone was the stylistic scale-practice and throat-clearing of *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*; strengthened and stretched were the sentences of *Solomon*; reconciled was the conflict between the use of free indirect discourse and the reliance on expository narrative summary in *Tar Baby*; in its place we find in *Beloved* a narration that dominates every aspect of the world of Sethe and Denver, Baby Suggs and Paul D.

Far too many examples abound in the novel, but let me close by considering a similar paragraph to the one from *Sula* I cited above. This time, through a deep and desperate surface-textual honesty and yet a contextual unreliability of a first-person point of view character, we get a description of another character: here Denver, Sethe’s daughter, is talking about her father, whom she never knew. Note that it too starts with the same typical linking-verb topic sentence as in the earlier example, but here Morrison feels no need to fuss it up with obvious effort: with all those deliberate fragments (the fragments that do appear, at the end, function almost nearly as punctuation and beats as they do semantic utterances), with those stylized rhetorical cleft structures; here Morrison lets the character say it plainly.

And the effect is more powerful, frightening, devastating, and accurate: This is the voice of a child trying to convince both herself and the reader about something she herself is not entirely convinced of, and it is delivered in a childish arrogance/anxiety and repetitive/redundant (N.B. *purposefully* redundant) syntax and style that calls to mind the Joyce of *Portrait*. However, it should be noted that the style here is far, far more controlled, precise, calibrated, modulated; but now it achieves exactly what Morrison’s narrative needs, without the slightest grimace or the least drop of sweat; her control is utter *sprezzatura*:

“My daddy was an angel man. He could look at you and tell where you hurt and he could fix it too. He made a hanging thing for Grandma Baby, so she could pull herself up from the floor when she woke up in the morning, and he made a step so when she stood up she was level. Grandma said she was always afraid a whiteman would knock her down in front of her children. She behaved and did everything right in front of her children because she didn’t want them to see her knocked down. She said it made children crazy to see that. At Sweet Home nobody did or said they would, so my daddy never saw it there and never went crazy and even now I bet he’s trying to get here. If Paul D could do it, my daddy could too. Angel man. We should all be together. Me, him, and Beloved.”
WILL ALLISON: When I’m writing, I always keep a book of fiction on my desk, something to jump-start me when I get stuck, or to productively divert me for a page or three when I need some distance from whatever I’m working on. Over the past decade, more often than not, the author of that book has been the Canadian short-story writer Alice Munro.

I first read Munro in 2001, when my wife, a longtime fan, gave me Munro’s then-latest collection, *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage*. Up until then, for no good reason (probably because she was older and Canadian), I had always imagined Munro’s fiction to be staid and conventional.

Of course, her stories aren’t like that at all. I was immediately struck by their unconventionality, their (seeming) looseness of structure, their strangeness, their extraordinary depth. (Many readers have observed that Munro’s stories pack the emotional and literary wallop of novels.) Also, the setting of her stories—small-town Ontario—reminded me of the American South, where I grew up, and I identified with her protagonists, who often find themselves straining against conservative social mores.

What has been most influential to me as a writer, though, is Munro’s style, the plain-spoken elegance of her prose, its seeming effortlessness, its invisibility. I cannot recall ever coming across a single word in a Munro story that seemed out of place or struck a false note. Try as I might, I would never claim to write like Munro, but most of what I consider to be my best writing I’ve done while reading Munro. For whatever reason, she is the author who most reliably puts me in a writing frame of mind.
Since that first collection, I’ve gone on to read (and reread) most of Munro’s subsequent books, including *Runaway, Carried Away: A Selection of Stories*, and *Too Much Happiness*. Luckily, I’ve barely scratched the surface of Munro’s canon and have a lot more stories to look forward to.

**DAN CHAO**N: The stunning architecture of her complex stories continues to amaze and inspire me. She understands the way in which the “telling” of the story—the order of events in a narrative—can alter the effect on the reader. She is a brilliant tracer of character emotions, the way small moments can ripple and reflect larger ones.

**MAILE CHAPMAN:** Alice Munro, not just for the clarity and beauty of her prose, or for her astute psychological powers of observation, but for the way she uses these to demonstrate breathtaking emotional cruelty as if it were an everyday fact of life—which of course it is.

**BRUCE MACHART:** Her stories are so very quiet on the surface and roiling with sexual and psychological danger beneath. Imagine a little placid stream, so still that dragonflies sleep on the surface, but one whose subsurface torrent is so great that one ankle-deep step in it means that you’re swept downstream, your head bashed against the rocks. You’re lost forever in its sweep and swirl. That’s an Alice Munro story. And she does it again and again.

**ALIX OHLIN:** In my twenties I fell in love with the short story form and started reading it seriously for the first time. I was also writing stories, of course, and trying to figure out how they were made, what the possibilities were. I’d read Alice Munro before—as the child of literate Canadian parents, it had been impossible not to—but this was when she became a major influence on me. I was fascinated both by her style (the radical jumps in time, the depth of psychological interiority, the simple, unfussy, yet lyrically precise language) and the subject of her work (especially the complex, intense, and even brutal way she wrote about women). There is tremendous ambition and reach in her work, couched in a sometimes deceptively quiet tone. Her story “Friend of My Youth” is one I read over and over again during this time (and still do).

**HARUKI MURAKAMI**
RYAN BOUDINOT: I always get the feeling that I’m reading him more with my subconscious than my conscious mind, that there are whole projects going on between his books and my brain that I’m not aware of. And this has helped me approach my work a certain way. When I wrote Blueprints of the Afterlife I thought a lot about how a Murakami narrative makes me feel, and I leaned toward conjuring similar feelings in my prose.

REBECCA CHACE: Last spring I taught a creative writing class at Woodbourne prison in upstate New York, a medium security men’s prison. I was teaching as part of the Bard Prison Initiative (BPI) run by Bard College. I had decided that my prison class would follow the same syllabus I taught in the MFA Creative Writing class at Brooklyn College. It’s a tough, competitive program at Brooklyn College, but word was that the BPI students wanted to be pushed. The creative writing I encountered at the MFA level was often rich in language and poor in narrative structure, so I had begun to incorporate readings on the “Hero Journey” into our discussions of modern fiction. I was determined not to change my intellectual approach to the material for the inmates, and for our second class the students read a Joseph Campbell excerpt on “The Hero Journey” in conjunction with Murakami’s Kafka on the Shore. I drew an arc on the blackboard marking stages of the hero journey as defined by Campbell, and we discussed it in terms of the novel. Murakami’s novel has talking cats and parallel worlds that reference both Japanese and Greek mythology. I admit that I had wondered if this nonrealistic narrative would be too far out there for the prison population, but they got right to the heart of what Murakami was exploring in his novel. In fact, they were much
less critical of the novel than my MFA students had been. The Brooklyn College students thought that Murakami’s novel had too many plot holes and that his references to the Oedipal myth lacked subtlety. The prisoners didn’t care about plot holes and they thought the talking cats were just fine. They wanted to talk about whether it was right for Oedipus to try to defy fate by leaving home once he heard the prophecy about killing his father and marrying his mother. And what about his parents putting him out on the mountainside to die when they heard the prophecy? Were they wrong to do that? I pointed out this was a big argument: Do you believe in free will or determinism? One of the men who had been very vocal in this discussion stopped dead, “You want to talk about that in here?” he asked.

“Sure, I’ll talk about it in here. We can talk about anything as long as it has to do with the work.” I sounded braver than I was.

I wished that Murakami were there to hear the discussion. He may have been pleased, as I was, that talking cats and a boy who kills his father and sleeps with his mother were the perfect medium for a conversation about how storytelling is way we can begin to understand our own lives. Who does not have a life filled with plot holes? Prison is not the only place where “reality” can be a slippery concept indeed.

**Alix Ohlin:** In the past year or so I’ve been thinking a lot about Haruki Murakami’s work. I’m drawn to the strangeness in his work, how it seems to break rules not just of realism but of tone. He chooses the details he wants to present and leaves out the others, and asks the reader to accept the surreal worlds he’s narrating, without a lot of stylistic fanfare. Another writer might narrate dream worlds in a lush or lyrical style but Murakami goes the opposite route, of deadpan simplicity. The result is like a Magritte painting, somehow bright and strange at the same time. I think it’s why his work feels both highly contemporary and timeless. I’m interested in emulating that, or at least learning from it.

**Peter Rock:** The first time I encountered Murakami I was working on a ranch outside of Livingston, Montana, where I lived in a small house I’d rented with my girlfriend. On the days I didn’t go to the ranch where I worked, I stayed home and wrote. I was writing a very important novel, one that had fifty chapters of ten pages each and would be exactly five hundred pages long (I completed this, a disaster). I’d walk around the house looking at the bookcases—we’d mixed up our books, a big step, and there amid my Hemingway was a large, hardcover book. *A Wild Sheep Chase*. I read the title on its spine many, many times before I deigned to take it off the shelf. The cover had a sheep on it, a drawing of one, a star on its ass; but it was the back cover that I found more infuriating. There, a seemingly mild-mannered Japanese man stood holding a cat. I had a hard time taking him seriously, as he did not appear to be especially fierce. Writers I admired had dogs, and glared into the middle distance. Besides, I worked with sheep every day—what did a kitten-wielding Japanese man have to teach me?

Seven years later, my books had long been sifted from those of my ex-girlfriend, *A Wild Sheep Chase* still unread, straying all the way to Toronto while I returned to Utah, to San Francisco. In this time I had read Kawabata’s amazing *Palm of the Hand Stories,*
along with Mishima, and Tanizaki; I had begun to wonder who might have followed these masters when I came upon a story by Murakami called “New York Mining Disaster.” The ferocity of the sensibility, the curiosity and simplicity and depth—it was all there. That day I found another copy of A Wild Sheep Chase and began my education. Now it’s almost twenty years since I first picked up that novel (I was on Murakami before he became everywhere! I was also the first person to ever snowboard!), back in the cold days of Livingston, Montana and I’ve read every one of Murakami’s books.

Murakami is obsessive, repetitious, and I revel in rather than grow irritated by the similarity of his narratives. I expect the lost girl or cat, the dry well, all that underground action, spaghetti cooking, sex that comes from strange directions, as an emotional kind of friendship, the ear fetishism. It’s the mysteries between people that he suggests so well, that he demonstrates with stories that are a mixture of detective fiction and speculation and yearning; this is a literature of curious heart, not pretension. Not showy prose (in an interview, he said he strove to have no real style, as that would be distracting; my Japanese mother-in-law, reading his prose in the original, was quite unimpressed), but trust in his story. The shapes of his narratives arise from within, so organically that it makes me wonder at the very nature of fiction. In A Wild Sheep Chase, the reader starts into a humorous detective novel, veers into a seemingly alternate world, full of humor and surprise, and soon there is no turning back. A character in the book is so transformed that he is said to have been ‘sheeped’; in a sense, this is what happened to me. This is what happens to the reader of Murakami. Our DNA is slightly shifted, recombined. Our world is not the same, either. “I explain very carefully and clearly,” Murakami said in an interview, describing his work, yet what he has to explain is so mysterious that a careful explanation of what surrounds it is as close as we can get to apprehension. There is no better combination of respect and delight.

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Brock Clarke is the author of the novels The Happiest People in the World, Exley, An Arsonist’s Guide to Writers’ Homes in New England, and The Ordinary White Boy, as well as the short story collections What We Won’t Do, and Carrying the Torch

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James Scott is the author of the novel The Kept

Josh Weil is the author of the novel The Great Glass Sea, and the novella collection The New Valley

Adelle Waldman is the author of the novel The Love Affairs of Nathaniel P.
Jamie Quatro is the author of the short story collection *I Want to Show You More*

Kevin Brockmeier is the author of the novels *The Illumination*, *The Brief History of the Dead*, and *The Truth About Celia*, as well as the short story collections *The View from the Seventh Layer*, and *Things That Fall from the Sky*

Alissa Nutting is the author of the novel *Tampa*

Adrienne Miller is the author of the novel *The Coast of Akron*

Helen Phillips is the author of the novel *And Yet They Were Happy*

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Charles Bock is the author of the novel *Beautiful Children*

Stuart Nadler is the author of the novel *Wise Men*, and the short story collection *The Book of Life*

Elisa Albert is the author of the novels *After Birth*, *The Book of Dahlia*, and the short story collection *How This Night is Different*

Kathleen Alcott is the author of the novel *The Dangers of Proximal Alphabets*

Alix Ohlin is the author of the novels *Inside* and *The Missing Person*, as well as the short story collections *Signs and Wonders*, and *Babylon and Other Stories*

Jennifer Cody Epstein is the author of the novels *The Gods of Heavenly Punishment*, and *The Painter from Shanghai*

Ru Freeman is the author of the novels *On Sal Mal Lane*, and *A Disobedient Girl*

Melinda Moustakis is the author of the short story collection *Bear Down, Bear North: Alaska Stories*

Joseph Salvatore is the author of the short story collection *To Assume a Pleasing Shape*

Will Allison is the author of the novels *Long Drive Home* and *What You Have Left*

Dan Chaon is the author of *Stay Awake: Stories*, *Await Your Reply: A Novel*, *You Remind Me of Me: A Novel*, and *Among the Missing: Stories*

Maile Chapman is the author of the novel *Your Presence is Requested at Suvanto*
Bruce Machart is the author of *Men in the Making: Stories*, and *The Wake of Forgiveness: A Novel*

Ryan Boudinot is the author of *Blueprints of the Afterlife, Misconception*, and *The Littlest Hitler: Stories*

Rebecca Chace is the author of the novels *Leaving Rock Harbor* and *Capture the Flag*

Peter Rock is the author of the novels *The Shelter Cycle, My Abandonment, The Unsettling, The Bewildered, The Ambidextrist, Carnival Wolves*, and *This is the Place*

*Lettering by Caleb Miselevitz*
A Survey of Writers on Contemporary Writers

Listening to writers read and discuss their work at Newtonville Books, the bookstore my wife and I own outside Boston, I began to wonder which living, contemporary writers held the most influence over their work. This survey is not meant to be
comprehensive, but is the result of my posing the question to as many writers as I could ask.

—Jaime Clarke

JOYCE CAROL OATES

DAN CHAON: There are several living writers who have been deeply influential, but I would say that the most important of these is Joyce Carol Oates. I share her interest in extreme psychological states and the grotesque, and I appreciate her concerns with issues of social class in the United States. Her work is formally daring in a way that I admire, and I am particularly drawn to the way her prose can range from an incantatory intensity to a chilly deadpan within the same work. Her work also helped me to find ways to resolve the tension between the more realistic, “Carver” side of my work and the more fantastical “Bradbury” side—many of her novels and stories walk a beautifully delicate line between the “literary” and “genre” worlds. Books that I am particularly fond of include Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque; Heat; Black Water; I Lock My Door Upon Myself; The Rise of Life on Earth; and Wonderland.

TIM O'BRIEN
BRUCE MACHART: To my way of thinking...and this is wildly subjective, of course...there are only two perfect books: *Anna Karenina* and *The Things They Carried*. The latter is, all at once, a masterwork of realism and the only fully successful work of metafiction. The title story is, on its own, a gem, but it makes me a bit batty to teach that story without the context of the greater work from which it comes. From the dedication page (where the book is dedicated to the fictional characters), to the fictional alter-ego Tim O'Brien who becomes our narrator, to the fine and ever-developing notions about the difference between historical truth and “story truth,” the work entices us to believe even as it reminds us that fiction is made up, that “art” is the root of “artifice,” that the human condition can be made “more real” to us through the insinuations of the imagination. This is perhaps the only book that uses a first-person narrator who teaches us how and why he has the power to act, at times, as a third-person narrator, complete with the ability to access the thoughts, feelings, and sensations of other characters. It’s a rare thing of beauty...the incarnation of what a writer strives endlessly to be: A human being whose empathies are boundless.

HANNAH PITTARD: Tim O’Brien is a writer I turn to for stylistic and narrative pointers. His novel, *In the Lake of the Woods*, totally informed what I was able to do with *The Fates Will Find Their Way*. There were so many strange and wonderful strategies I’d not known were possible or permissible before reading that book. Plus, he’s an author who knows how to balance sentiment with sentimentality. He knows how to balance detail and character. O’Brien is one of those writers who seems like he’s crawled inside the human heart, seen its sloppy and sad and big machinery, and is somehow able to bring that experience to life on the page.
JAMES SCOTT: I read Tim O’Brien during my junior year of high school. The teacher gave us a list of authors and we had to choose one, read at least three of their books and then write a paper discussing his or her themes and style. I ended up with O’Brien, and read *The Nuclear Age, Going After Cacciato*, and *The Things They Carried*. The latter, especially, made me aware of the process of writing for the first time. I’d only ever thought of writing as stories put down in a logical order, but O’Brien had pulled the curtains aside and exposed the machinery of a story by messing with it: images and events got jumbled up and spun around and spit out as something new each time they reappeared.

*The Things They Carried* is the book I’ve read most often, which I can say with near-certainty because I can’t even think of what might be second. His precise details and his bare emotion left a huge impression, but the greatest quality that he instilled in me is the love of a story, and the idea that the creation of that story is equally if not more important than the story itself.

MICHAEL ONDAATJE

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STEPHEN DAU: The book that changed my life was given to me by my fiancé a few months before we traveled to Sri Lanka to be married. I’m uncertain, looking back, whether it was the book, Michael Ondaatje’s *Running in the Family*, the import of our trip, or some alchemical combination of the two that proved so potent, but when I stepped off the plane I stepped into a world that had already been conjured in my mind. I had never before lived a book so vividly, and have only rarely done so since.

Here, for example, was the house in the jungle where my father-in-law grew up, its red, polished cement floor cool to his perpetually bare feet, just as Ondaatje had described other Sri Lankan floors. And here were the thin iron bars over every window, and the egg-shell columns of the Mount Lavinia hotel, and the trees full of peacocks weeping.
into the night, and the heat, everywhere the heat, “a heat that embarrasses foreigners,” a stifling heat that could be cut only temporarily by gin and tonics and rain.

I had never before been to Asia, yet I had flown kites on the Galle Face Green, and eaten crab curry with my hands, and washed myself in the monsoon rain, and ridden the train from Colombo to Jaffna, where I sat in the Governor’s house as the tilted blades of a ceiling fan caught the air and folded it across the room.

The trip and the book rekindled in me a long-held desire—if not entirely dormant, then at least neglected and inaccessible—to write, which I had known since I was eight years old, but to which I had not yet committed myself. I had been hearing a chorus of “get on with it, then” from my fiancé and family when Ondaatje whispered in my ear. Perhaps the timing was simply right. “What are you waiting for?” he seemed to be saying, “this is what can be done with words.”

As I write this, I am traveling by train across Pennsylvania, where I am from. It is a landscape of winter-bare trees and industrial ruins and pale, overcast skies and rivers like brown glass and red brick chimneys smoking into a cold wind. It is in so many ways the complete opposite of Michael Ondaatje’s Sri Lanka. Yet here he is again, stealing up quietly behind me, whispering in my ear: “Look!” he says, “This too can be done with words.”

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Dan Chaon is the author of Stay Awake: Stories, Await Your Reply: A Novel, You Remind Me of Me: A Novel, and Among the Missing: Stories

Bruce Machart is the author of the short story collection Men in the Making and the novel The Wake of Forgiveness

Hannah Pittard is the author of the novels Reunion and The Fates Will Find Their Way

James Scott is the author of the novel The Kept

Stephen Dau is the author of the novel The Book of Jonas

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Listening to writers read and discuss their work at Newtonville Books, the bookstore my wife and I own outside Boston, I began to wonder which living, contemporary writers held the most influence over their work. This survey is not meant to be
comprehensive, but is the result of my posing the question to as many writers as I could ask.

—Jaime Clarke

ANN PATCHETT

MARY BETH KEANE: The first time I read Bel Canto was for pleasure. I picked it up at a bookstore and liked the first page. I didn’t know a thing about opera—still don’t—but I quickly learned that my ignorance didn’t matter. I read Bel Canto the second time to figure out how in the world Patchett pulls off such a perfect book given the limitations she set for herself. Virtually the entire story takes place in a single room. People cross that room, and cross again. They eat. They sleep. There’s very little flashback. Any action had to be plotted within those walls, with big moments—the moments that must move a novel—captured by small triumphs. And she pulls it off! Within that small space—the Vice President’s home—is contained passion, romance, hope, despair, everything a novel needs in order to be great. And this novel is great. Whenever I’m frustrated with my own progress, and start feeling that my characters should do more, should see more, should
move more, I think of *Bel Canto* and remember that everything I need is contained within, not without.

**JAYNE ANNE PHILLIPS**

**Nicholas Montemarano:** I came to *Black Tickets* when I was twenty-five and about to head to Prague to take a workshop with Jayne Anne Phillips. By then she had published four books—two novels and two short story collections—but I was unfamiliar with her work. Not long after opening *Black Tickets* I recognized its “dazzling virtuoso range” (Tillie Olsen), its “crooked beauty” (Raymond Carver), and its “knockout prose” (Annie Dillard), a rare case when hyperbolic blurbs are accurate. It remains a seminal influence on me as a fiction writer for many reasons, but here are two. First, *Black Tickets* is more than a collection of short stories; it is, in its structure and thematic unity, very much a *book*. It doesn’t feel patched together but conceived. The collection, with its rhythm of longer stories and micro fictions, hearkens Hemingway’s *In Our Time*. After reading *Black Tickets*, I never again wrote short stories outside the larger vision of a book. Second, and perhaps most important, is the voice—rather the *voices*—in her stories. She shows range—there are stories in *Black Tickets* with subdued voices and more traditional approaches to storytelling—but the collection creates its true power with its voices. Almost every sentence from the dark, beautiful title story is quotable, but its opening will do: “Jamaica Delila, how I want you; your smell a clean yeast, a high white yogurt of the soul.” Phillips, who wrote poetry early in her career, is a poet writing prose. *Black Tickets* taught me, and continues to remind me, that the music of prose, its sound and rhythm, matters greatly to me. I learned other things from Jayne Anne herself. I don’t remember the Prague workshop with her except the feeling of being taken seriously as a writer, and that mattered to me then. I saw her again years later when we were both fellows at The MacDowell Colony. I remember visiting her studio there and seeing pages of her novel-in-progress taped to the walls. Some people
call her a slow writer, but I think of her as careful and methodical, in no rush to publish anything that isn’t her best work. I’m grateful for her example of patience. One of my proudest moments as a writer remains Jayne Anne’s blurb of my first novel. She called me “an American stylist capable of redeeming our darkest dreams,” something I could say about her. If there’s any truth to that, I owe much of it to Jayne Anne’s influence, especially her first book. These are just a few reasons why last year I spent $60 for a first-edition hardcover of Black Tickets and why it sits on my desk, along with other favorites, as inspiration.

MARY OTIS: I first read Jayne Anne Phillips in the Santa Monica library a week after I’d moved to Los Angeles from the East Coast. It was a hot winter day, and a strange sun, the color of a children’s aspirin lurked outside the library window where I sat with a copy of Black Tickets in my hands. It was afternoon, and then it was evening. I was transfixed, captured in a way that only the best writing makes possible. I felt like the character, Lark, in the Phillip’s novel, Lark and Termite, who while in a typing class, imagines “flying above the town and the trees and the river,” and as long as she types, won’t crash. But in my case, as long as I kept reading that collection and didn’t stop, I could stay inside the world of her stories that taught me everything I needed to know about what it means to take a risk in writing. Not a risk to simply shock, but a risk to go all in, to tell the deep human truth. Her writing illuminates all that is strange and sad, and beautiful beyond comprehension, too—the edge of wonder.

Phillips followed Black Tickets with Machine Dreams, Fast Lanes, Shelter, Motherkind, Lark and Termite, and most recently, Quiet Dell. In her stories and novels she is compelled by the dislocations of thought, the mysterious territory of living, and how the past imprints itself upon us. She writes with a poet’s sensibility, and her lush prose breathes and sweeps, is masterful in its precision. She has said, “We look for mirrors of our humanity everywhere,” and this idea recurs in her explorations of family, loss, and the difficulty of communication. Phillips is a master of the emotional interstice, one who mines the ordinary moment between things to reveal everything that can’t be said and the only thing that matters.

I wasn’t a writer yet when I first read Jayne Anne Phillips that day in the library, but she gave me a memorable jolt—one that made me want to become a writer, to stay awake, tell the truth, and name the unnamable.

RICHARD POWERS
WESTON CUTTER: Here’s the best way I know to think about the work of Richard Powers—a body of work which stretches over now nearly thirty years and eleven books: while his books are classified as novels they are, all of them, longings, and the longing each novel enacts has to do with how we connect with and apprehend anything like meaning in the world. Such a broad claim is of course a gross simplification: what novel doesn’t in some way solve for that formulation? When we for instance read Franzen, we understand through the story and its characters’s travails how we might deduce something about how we might better live in or value or appreciate the world—we understand, say, that total selfish freedom does not set the soul quite free. The trick with Powers, however, is his directness: the reader’s not led to deduce larger abstractions from the small-scale lives on the page but is instead offered raw complexities and is trusted to navigate them. That gasp folks often let loose when they talk about Powers has something to do with audacity: that he’d be willing or foolish or whatever enough to be so direct.

Here’s another way to say it: Powers is writing, again and again, love stories that (like most) begin between minds. When his characters fall for and toward and onto each other, the falling’s most often the result of the heightened living that attends sharing an enrapturing trance regarding some abstraction. For instance: two people become fascinated with an older man who’s doing third-shift computer coding, and they begin to try to research his life, to find out how he ended up where he’s ended up, and in the process these characters fall for each other. Could anything be less surprising?

To address some basics: James Wood in his otherwise forgettable 2010 critical take-down of the work (“Brain Drain”) does a passable job articulating something of the shape of Power’s fiction. “In his novels, Powers generally likes to keep two plots going. One story line poses, and tries to solve, a relatively abstract puzzle: Does the human
mind function like a computer? Does genetics offer the best explanation of “the riddle of life”? What is the nature of consciousness? The second story line is almost always boy-meets-girl, in which protagonists connected to the first plot meet and fall in love or lust.” Wood is here (as in 98% of the rest of his take-down) implying such a binary is bad, or lacking, yet what Powers is examining, again and again through his braided plots, is overwhelming: by what structures will we make meaning of existence?

Take a moment with that question. By the time most of us sign our names to mortgages or student loans, we believe we’ve not only got some sense of what’s capital-I Important, but also some sense of how to move through the world to secure the treasure we believe is most valuable—love, loyalty, lucre, whatever. What Powers does, again and again, is present novels in which characters have to reevaluate all of that: what if you’re a reference librarian and discover that the most vivid, compelling living is being done outside the bounds of what books and magazines might record? What if you’re a writer and discover that the student who’s making your classes come to a new sort of life may be genetically coded for happiness? In other words: what do you do when the systems you’ve believed in crumble, are proved false? What do you believe in then?

The simplistic knock on Richard Powers’s novels is that the ideas are more animated and compelling than the characters—that, to quote Wood, his fiction “resembles a dying satyr—above the waist is a mind full of serious thought, philosophical reflection, deep exploration of music and science; below, a pair of spindly legs strain to support the great weight of the ambitious brain.” But Wood, again, is painting criticism onto amazement: what’s wrong with Powers’s novels featuring cognition as the central verb that leads to love? His characters apprehend the world through experiencing it and then thinking and reflecting about it. Does everyone live thus? Of course not—but no fewer people live like this than those who live precisely like the folks one’d find in any of Powers’s contemporary’s novels. No: his love stories don’t feature characters bumping along, attempting to figure out if they’re compatible due to how they take their coffee, or what TV they watch. There is, in all of his work, some deeper tidal movement in all the characters, a sense that some deeper and more deeply animating aspect of being alive is available to us only if we keep doggedly searching. Here’s how Stuart Ressler puts it in The Gold Bug Variations: “all longing converges on this mystery: revelation, unraveling secret spaces, the suggestion that the world’s valence lies just behind a scrambled facade, where only the limits of ingenuity stand between him and sunken gardens.”

This is the object of the longing throughout all Powers’s books: some way to solve for the mystery of being alive, for the glory and horror and awe of existence. “Pleasure in existence is a moral imperative” he wrote in a slim advice-offering book titled “Take It From Me,” and decode the phrase, consider the fact that he’s implicitly arguing pleasure’s more than merely an aesthetic or sensual phenomenon. There is, of course, no single answer, no one way to solve for life’s mysteries: even any grand unified theory in physics couldn’t explain the muckier interstices—love, pain, the rush and humbling attendant in any search for answers. Powers, again and again, proposes binaries only to smash them, to (of course) say both, to let his characters hunt and try through their experiments of living only to, by each book’s end, find themselves saying again and
again yes and to head and heart, to fate and free will, to the complex, answerless notion that life is most life when it’s an attempt to reconcile the twin pulls within us.

ANNIE PROULX

ANNA SOLOMON: “Hive-spangled, gut roaring with gas and cramp, he survived childhood....” So begins The Shipping News. My battered copy still flops open to the first pages, which I read again and again my first time through, mouth open. You can do that? I thought. Sentences were missing their subjects or otherwise incomplete; nouns and verbs, even adjectives, seemed interchangeable. I could find no center, and yet it held. And held, and held.

That first reaction was as a student of poetry, as I was just beginning to write fiction. Looking back, it was a pivotal moment in my gradual humping (Proulx’s verb) toward prose. I loved that one could play so freely with language, write something that begged to be spoken aloud, and tell such an intricate, complex and lengthy story. I was inspired and emboldened.

As I wrote and studied short stories, I continued reading Proulx for her language, but also for her tricks of structure, point-of-view and character development. She would dance through a century in a paragraph, leap bravely from one character’s perspective to another, make people and places vivid with a single word. Her stories were driven by often outrageous plots, yet these plots were so intimately bound up with her characters that it all felt inevitable, necessary, true. There was a kind of hyper-reality to her stories (the bizarre names, the even more bizarre things that happened) and yet a simplicity, too, borne out of specificity: I could see, hear, often smell the people she wrote about. (Most didn’t smell good.) Their bodies, their belongings, their trailers and trucks, the
sky and ground around them, were so concisely yet richly told—each chosen word serving more than one purpose—that I would have gone with them anywhere. I never thought, well, that would never happen. Because it did.

These days, as I work on my second novel, I return to Proulx for language and craft, and for something more intangible: her constant play between light and dark. In moments, her descriptions can come off as irreverent, even flip, yet they commingle with the opposite: such deep respect for her characters, such care in describing their inner and outer selves, that I can’t help but love them, too. Like them, maybe not, but love them, yes. Light, dark, comedy, tragedy, surface, depth—Proulx keeps moving, dismantling our assumptions and surprising our aesthetics. Her work exudes the kind of freedom that can only be achieved through great control. So I read it and I keep on with my own work, letting go, pulling back, trying (but not too hard) to find the right balance.

THOMAS PYNCHON

RYAN BOUDINOT: Thomas Pynchon had a pretty profound effect on me. I started reading his books as an undergrad, and for the first time felt two conflicting things I’d never felt when reading a book. One, I was utterly entranced. And two, I didn’t know what the fuck I was reading. His work perplexed me, but the rhythm of his sentences and the combination of vernacular and sophisticated technical language was like candy to me. It was the high/low language combination that felt totally right to me. And I had this weird feeling that his books were reading me, not the other way around. Like there was some sort of subconscious communication happening that my critical mind wasn’t privy to.

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Mary Beth Keane is the author of the novels Fever, and The Walking People
Nicholas Montemarano is the author of the novels *The Book Of Why*, and *A Fine Place*, as well as the short story collection *If the Sky Falls*

Mary Otis is the author of the short story collection *Yes, Yes, Cherries*

Weston Cutter is the author of the short story collection *You’d Be a Stranger, Too*

Anna Solomon is the author of the novel *The Little Bride*

Ryan Boudinot is the author of *Blueprints of the Afterlife, Misconception*, and *The Littlest Hitler: Stories*

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*Lettering by Caleb Misclevitz*
INFLUENCED BY

A Survey of Writers on Contemporary Writers

Listening to writers read and discuss their work at Newtonville Books, the bookstore my wife and I own outside Boston, I began to wonder which living, contemporary writers held the most influence over their work. This survey is not meant to be
comprehensive, but is the result of my posing the question to as many writers as I could ask.

—Jaime Clarke

MARILYNNE ROBINSON

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JAMES SCOTT: In my MFA program, I remember one teacher had us go around the table and name our favorite authors, and one of the first few people said Marilynne Robinson and the collective gasp made me scribble her name down and read *Housekeeping* right away. I’ve re-read it every year since.

The first fifteen pages or so—the summary of her grandparents and the train accident—could teach one everything he or she needs to know about the art of writing. From the perspective to the voice to the pacing to the vividness of the scenes, it’s as close to a perfect section as I have ever read. It thematically sets up everything to follow, though that’s not totally apparent until much later, which it’s why it’s critical that those pages are memorable: they need to instantly make their mark and become the lore of the family and the town.

KAREN THOMPSON WALKER: I read Marilynne Robinson for her wisdom and her eye. Her writing has a way of reminding me how extraordinary all the ordinary things of this world really are. As the narrator of *Gilead* says, “This is an interesting planet. It deserves all the attention you can give it.”
PHILIP ROTH

© Elizabeth Donnelly

T. COOPER: I guess the world just sort of split a seam when I read my first Roth book, which I’m pretty sure was *Operation Shylock*. Though *Portnoy’s Complaint* was really the one that cracked the world open and completely floored me. It wasn’t even that Roth was a conscious influence on my development either. In an eerie way, I was seeing his influence on my development in ways I hadn’t even realized until well after it happened. Both figuratively, and literally—like not even having read a certain book of his until after I was doing something that somehow came out as a distant relative of it (for example, *Portnoy, Plot Against America*).

STUART NADLER: If I were to guess, I’ve read more of Roth than I have of any other writer, which says something either about my reading habits, or about how prolific a writer he’s been. I’m writing this two weeks or so after his announced retirement, which, perhaps foolishly, I believe to be genuine, even though I suspect his compulsion to work, and his dedication to that compulsion is maybe unmatched in modern writing. I’ve read Roth in many different ways. First to understand what it meant to be a Jew then. Then meaning when my parents were young, or when my grandparents were as old as I am now. And Jew to mean a certain kind of urban, secular, assimilated, cultural Jew. I’ve certainly read the later, bigger Zuckerman books to see how Roth has disemboweled the structure of the novel to his advantage. I have no doubt that he would cringe to hear something like this. But who cares: that in itself is one of the aspects of his writing I love, and that I carry with me, or try to, in my own work. His fearlessness. It’s a fearlessness of subject-matter certainly. A willingness to slay the old verities, to put himself wholly onto the page, to investigate so deeply all the darkness that attends being human: the shame, the embarrassment, the constant failure, the vulgarities and thrills...
of desire and lust and temptation. Now I’m in the middle of writing a book where my primary goal has been to loosen myself from own tics and my own peculiar idioms. At a certain point in the revision process for my first two books, I became exhausted by my writing voice, and in the, say, two or three dozen ways I knew to structure a sentence. My goal for the new book was, and is, to break out of that. To put new rhythms to the page, to find new ways of structuring my thoughts. To find a new energy to put to paper. All of it makes me think of Roth, whose better books inhabit disparate voices so astonishingly. That Mickey Sabbath, with all his rage and venom and snark and cruelty, was written by the same man whose Nathan Zuckerman narrates with such subtlety The Ghost Writer, or whose Swede Lvov is so kind and big-hearted and decent, is as incredible to me as it is intimidating.

CHARLES YU: I’ve read more books by Roth than probably any other contemporary writer, tried to absorb what I can from his prose, his characters, his voices. In terms of development, though, I think what I learned most was structural - how does he organize his books around the major ideas or concepts in each one. Reading eight or ten or a dozen books by one novelist, you start to see what changes from novel to novel, and what stays the same, and that was highly instructive. I wasn’t even writing fiction when I read most of their books, but I was tacitly learning, I think.

RICHARD RUSSO

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WHITNEY TERRELL: Russo’s novels about small town life on the eastern seaboard seemed immediately familiar to me. My own town, Kansas City, is larger but in its own way equally insular. Russo is excellent on the influence of money (or the lack thereof) in
his characters’ lives and he writes extremely well about work. In Russo, jobs matter. His characters run diners, paint houses, teach, pastor churches, tend bars, and operate textile factories. Their spiritual flaws and aspirations are expressed largely through the way they approach their work, and there’s an incredible amount of detail in his writing about how their jobs are done. He’s also very funny. Faulkner and his descendants are certainly capable of humor. But, to make a broad generalization, I found that their style worked best when it involved physical comedy, preferably in a rural or natural setting, so that the characters could interact with their environment in a direct, physical way. (Think Faulkner’s novel *The Hamlet*, or the river scenes in Cormac McCarthy’s *Suttree*.) It didn’t work so well when confronted with the smaller, pettier slights and schemes of the business world. Russo, however, was perfect for that.

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James Scott is the author of the novel *The Kept*

Karen Thompson Walker is the author of the novel *The Age of Miracles*

T. Cooper is the author of the novels *The Beaufort Diaries*, and *Lipshitz Six: or Two Angry Blondes*

Stuart Nadler is the author of the novel *Wise Men*, as well as the short story collection *The Book of Life*

Charles Yu is the author of the short story collection *Sorry Please Thank You*, as well as the novel *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe*

Whitney Terrell is the author of *The King of Kings County*, and *The Huntsman*

*Lettering by Caleb Misclevitz*
A Survey of Writers on Contemporary Writers

Listening to writers read and discuss their work at Newtonville Books, the bookstore my wife and I own outside Boston, I began to wonder which living, contemporary writers held the most influence over their work. This survey is not meant to be
comprehensive, but is the result of my posing the question to as many writers as I could ask.

—Jaime Clarke

JAMES SALTER

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SARAH BRAUNSTEIN: In my early twenties, I found James Salter. I read *Light Years* holding my breath, read late into the night, immersed in the glamour and sorrow of the story. How did he manage to marry such cutting intensity with languid, delicate prose? I was stunned by his precision. By that mercilessly roving point of view. My copy is waterlogged and dog-eared and stained with coffee and spaghetti sauce. Opening to a random page, I see a sentence I’ve underlined:

“His uncombed hair was splitting at the end. It was also thinning, which pleased her somehow, as if he had been ill and she would see him regain his strength.”

And this one:

“Kate shrugged. She had the languor of a delivery boy, of someone who could not be hurt. She had lived through unheated bedrooms, unpaid bills, her father’s abandoning them, his returns, beautiful birds he had carved out of applewood and painted and placed on her bed.”
The whole book feels strangely throwaway, casual... *light* on the page, even when its subject is death, the failures of love, the disintegration of family. There’s an ease to the prose, an ease I feel even in the most far-reaching metaphors. This was something I wanted—I want—to reproduce. I wanted—want—to write like this. To see like he does. And so I tried to be looser on the page. I willed myself to take risks with metaphor.

Take this passage, circled and starred:

“The book was in her lap; she had read no further. The power to change one’s life comes from a paragraph, a lone remark. The lines that penetrate us are slender, like the flukes that live in river water and enter the bodies of swimmers. She was excited, filled with strength. The polished sentences had arrived, it seemed, like so many other things, at just the right time. How can we image what our lives should be without the illumination of the lives of others?”

Exactly.

**NIC BROWN:** For many years I worked as a musician. As a teenager, one of my favorite places to see a band was a place called the Cat’s Cradle, a storied rock club on the edge of Chapel Hill, North Carolina. I was thrilled when my own group was finally booked to play our first show there. I arrived early and went backstage, only to find that it—a true reservoir of teenage rock dreams if there ever was one—was little more than a long storage closet with graffiti-covered plywood walls. I remember almost nothing else about the show.

What do I remember, though, is returning to the Cat’s Cradle a few weeks later to see another band perform. I don’t remember who they were. What I remember is that when they came on stage, the usual thrill I felt at the emergence of any act—the swell of magic surrounding the performers—wasn’t there. Poof. I knew what the backstage looked like now, I knew just what their soundcheck had been like, I knew they probably ate dinner at the pizza place next door. And just like that, the mystique was gone.

I’m a writer now, and often I feel a similar diminution in magic when I read. As I scan a page, I can envision the laptop it was composed on, I chart out narrative arcs like passages on a map, I sense the author’s stolen hours, I feel their tricks of information withholding and disclosure. My awareness of process and its resultant demystification of art, of course, places a heavier burden on the art itself and is a good perspective for any writer to have. But I’d be lying if I said I don’t miss the easy magic that once came from almost any performance, or rose from just about any page I read.

The more I think about the work of the author James Salter, however, the more magical it becomes for me. I can envision him at his desk, sure. I can just about graph out the plots to his novels by memory. I’m close with a friend of his, I’ve seen interviews with him. But the more I think about his work, the more I know about its creation and creator, the more I’m mystified and beguiled.
Let’s look at my favorite Salter novel, *Light Years*. The tale of a marriage falling apart. The porous and flexible use of point of view in it—shifting between characters not only for different chapters, but sometimes in the same paragraph—is exactly the sort of thing I warn writing students against all the time. Same with his treatment of tense, which shifts between present and past seemingly at will. The opening pages alone start in first person plural—“We dash the black river...,” as if part of some elegant stage direction—then shift to third person limited. On one level I have the question, “How did he just pull that off?” On another I ask myself why I even bother asking.

Sometimes I see myself writing towards finding out what I’m writing about, my narratives just explorations of my own true intentions. I don’t feel this about Salter’s prose. He seems to know, with such confidence, what is at the core of what he’s writing about and can thus write around it from any perspective or tense he wants. His work is often described as impressionistic, but I think the more apt painterly analogy would be cubist—a succession of scenes told from multiple angles at once.

But that too is not quite right, implying some *Rashomon*-type fracturing, which Salter doesn’t exactly evoke. Again, the more I try to pin it all down, the more it seems to recede from me.

It seems only fitting that I found Salter through Darren Jessee, a songwriter and the drummer for Ben Folds Five, one of Chapel Hill’s most successful bands—one that I saw a handful of times at the Cat’s Cradle, in fact, and who used to evoke such magic for me on stage. They don’t anymore. Nothing against them, not many acts do. Unsolicited, Darren brought the book to my door one day and just said I had to read it. It was like he was an emissary from one art form to another, delivering magic to me in a paperback.

**GEORGE SAUNDERS**

© *The Guardian*
RYAN BOUDINOT: I found in the work of George Saunders a guy who recognized a certain ersatz Americana populated by characters who expressed what I felt at the time. Especially in the earlier stories, his characters were consistently shat-upon, trapped in absurd jobs where the tyranny of the management was never quite justified given the low-stakes or bullshit nature of the actual work. I just had a group of students read “The 400-Pound CEO,” which I was fortunate to discover when it came out in Harper’s magazine in the early/mid-’90s (I’m bragging in a I-was-into-that-band-when-they-played-clubs kind of way here.) The story still holds up beautifully, and I was impressed again by Saunders’s capacity to seize opportunities that other writers might let pass by. There’s no such thing as a minor character in his work. Every character has some hilarious problem or issue they’re contending with, like the Tourette’s-suffering waiter at a restaurant or the babysitter who is going through her grade school yearbook with a highlighter. I love how George Saunders’s work encourages us to be interested in people in all their beautiful and fucked-up glory.

CHRISTOPHER BOUCHER: No contemporary writer has influenced me more—both personally and professionally—than George Saunders. I first came across his work in college, when a friend of mine played me a tape of George reading his story “The 400-Pound CEO” during a long car trip. I’d never heard another story like it, and it was the first piece of fiction that I can recall which captivated me at a sentence-level. I’d understood style as a concept before that point, but I (naively) thought of it as a sort of syntactical signature. When I read George’s work, I began to understand style as the unique qualities of that author’s linguistic inquiry—a facet of the prose which runs parallel, and organically informs, the characters’ trajectories. The heroes in George’s first collection, CivilWarLand in Bad Decline, then, seem doubly-doomed—not only are they in bad situations (working in an absurd environment, suffering from terrible guilt or loneliness), but many of them struggle to express themselves within the confines of an exaggerated, hyper-PC lexicon. In my opinion, then, many of the characters in this book are trapped—and sometimes freed—by language itself.

This is not to overlook the other accomplishments of these stories—their hilarity, say, or their heartbreaking and enlightening crescendos. I’ll never forget the first time I read the end of the story “CivilWarLand in Bad Decline,” for example, when the spirit of the first-person narrator, who’s just been murdered, sweeps into the body of his murderer, Sam.

George writes, “I see the man I could have been, and the man I was, and then everything is bright and new and keen with love and I sweep through Sam’s body, trying to change him, trying so hard, and feeling only hate and hate, solid as stone.”

When I read that moment, which I found both unpredictable and exactly right for the story (especially given the despair in the phrase “hate and hate”), my feet welded to the floor and a hatch opened in my mind and I felt wind on my brain.

A few years later, I was lucky enough to study with George in the MFA program at Syracuse University, and I discovered that he’s as good a person, and as gifted a teacher, as he is a great writer. This might seem like an afterthought, but in fact I think it’s
central to George’s influence—on me and, I suspect, a generation of writers. George’s teaching and writing seem driven by the same qualities: a deep sense of awareness, compassion and humility. There’s no writer who I admire more, and to whom I’m as indebted.

MAILE CHAPMAN: The first writer who treated my own (embarrassingly self-indulgent) stories with seriousness, the writer who taught me the most about how to really read and understand the nature of my own work, was George Saunders, who was my thesis advisor in the MFA program at Syracuse. There are a lot of writers who I’m sure will list George high as an influence, whether they worked with him in person or not, and I think a lot of that is because he is so distinct and so intellectually generous as a writer. He takes the risk of being funny and emotionally deep at the same time, while allowing the reader to feel smart enough to get what’s going on without being pandered to. One of the very valuable things he imparted to those of us who studied with him was the importance of finding your own objectives, your own material and scope and style. He drew a bunch of mountain peaks on a whiteboard in class one day and said that they represented all of the literary titans whom he had read in formative times, from the Russians to Hemingway and Carver et al, big distinct voices, and he said he had despaired of ever trying to do anything even remotely like what they had done, and that this could be paralyzing. Then he said he felt much better when he realized that he didn’t have to even think about this too much because his project as a writer was to do his own thing, whatever it was, and then he drew a little lump between some of the mountains and said that this was his hill, and he was happy with it. So now when I fill my own whiteboard with influential mountains, his is one of them and I can be happy with my little lump in the background. He taught me and others a lot about the craft of writing but also about how to live as a writer, how to consider our work and our lives and how to approach the whole endeavor with wit and humility and a good work ethic totally apart from the angst of too much contemplation of measuring up to anything.

ARTHUR PHILLIPS: When I was getting started, I noticed how many of my contemporaries mentioned the same influences of the generation just before ours: Pynchon, DeLillo, Roth, Updike, Munro. I heard these names so often that I consciously decided not to read them for a while.

When I did get to them, I was surprised to find how much I liked them and how much I felt in sync with some of their goals and styles. I am thinking specifically of Pynchon, Roth, and DeLillo here. I just finished “The Crying of Lot 49” last night, for example, and felt very connected to it in some ways: as a nonsense, as a historical inquiry, as a plot of conspiracies, as a refusal to do the expected thing, and yet also for its characterizations/caricatures.

George Saunders, whom I admire enormously, does this awfully well, too, and seems an heir to Pynchon, for example.

JIM SHEPARD
WESTON CUTTER: Jim Shepard said (in 2010, during the Q+A about his guest-editing of Ploughshares) “Stuff that can’t be pinned down by a historian can be pinned down by a fiction writer.” The video the quote comes from is sort of strange: the questions are silenced, but Shepard’s answers are (obviously) at volume, so one can only assume the Q Shepard was A-ing had to do with his fondness for and mastery of fiction which is grounded in actual historical settings. Another thing he said was “I’ve often chosen people who...there are places where nobody knows what happened during those moments.” Shepard’s written novels and short stories, though as of 2013 his most recent several books have been story collections and he’s admitted an increasing fondness for and tendency toward the “guerrilla tactics of the short story” instead of the “massed armies deployed by the novel.” After the above quote about nobody knowing what happened to someone during some moment, Shepard talked about F. W. Murnau, a legendary German silent-film director (he directed Nosferatu) who, during World War I, crashed his plane (“I don’t know if you’ve ever seen a World War I aircraft, but it’s essentially like a chicken coop with an engine on it.”) in Switzerland, directed an opera company, and, from that, began his directing career.

Here’s another thing he said at that silent-Q+A: “One of the good things about fiction is that you can fill in the gaps.” What Shepard meant was that, in the case of Murnau, perhaps there was more to the story of the man’s plane crash and eventual leading of an opera than what had been uncovered by historians. This sounds fundamentally dry to talk about in this way, but what Shepard does with more verve and glory than just about anyone is not simply fill in the gaps—lots of folks are skilled at filling in gaps, from inveterate liars to six year-olds to daydreamers—but he is able to identify gaps that may be interestingly, satisfyingly filled in.

Ultimately, of course, most of us come to fiction for an experience of other, for that glorious whisper, that voice in our head of another person’s experience and existence. At this, Shepard’s as good as absolutely anyone—here for instance is the start of his glorious “Trample the Dead, Hurdle the Weak” from 2007’s Like You’d Understand, Anyway: “Guy’s hurt? Fuck ‘im. Guy can’t get up, play’s still going? Run his ass over.
Whistle’s blown? Stretcher bearer time. Grab a blow and let the Sisters of Mercy do their thing.” This example’s included simply to make clear that while Shepard’s most striking skill is not remotely his only skill: guy gets character as well as the best of them.

Still there’s this other thing, the settings Shepard situates his phenomenal characters within. What, for instance, might’ve life been like for one of the engineers at Chernobyl when it exploded in April of 1986? For many of us, the answer likely would include a sort of Tom Clancy-ish pace and feel: there’d be alarms and mayhem and grim attempts to fix what’s been broken, yet Shepard, in his “The Zero Meter Diving Team,” brings Boris Yakovlevich Prushinsky—brother to one of the Chernobyl engineers—to total life without making a nuclear meltdown the center of attention. Imagine that. Imagine writing about significant historical moments without defaulting into a sort of hyped news-speak. Imagine resisting the temptation to fall back into and rely upon the fireworking actual events instead of creating, despite or within the heightened scenario, fiction which features the same necessary elements as all great fiction shares.

After enough time with Shepard’s work, you realize he may be working in a new furrow of fiction: not magic realism, but a magic-of-realism. He creates and exposes the amazing, powerful aspects of the stuff we’re surrounded by (stuff, incidentally, many of us turn to fiction to escape or be soothed by). I don’t doubt the details of the Dutch Water Defense are fascinating, but I wouldn’t have imagined I’d’ve felt moved by a fiction set in that milieu. One wants to not make too big a deal of what Shepard is doing: he is, after all, simply making hugely compelling fictions populated with real-as-blood characters. That he happens to set quite a few of those fictions in scenarios which reveal a magic we may otherwise overlook seems like almost a lesson, something about attention, something about being able to sense and explore gaps—in our own lives, in the lives of everyone around us—we may not take enough note of.

**BRUCE MACHART:** Jim Shepard is the funniest man alive. I mean it. On the two occasions I’ve been lucky enough to be in his company, I’ve left with a diaphragm so sore from laughter than I had trouble rising from bed the next day. And his stories carry that humor in them, but they carry it toward such heart-shattering seriousness. I’m in awe of his ability to make us laugh until we cry...or to laugh when we know we shouldn’t be.

**LAURA VAN DEN BERG:** Jim Shepard showed me that you don’t have to stay in your own backyard.

**GARY SHTEYNGART**
ALEX GILVARRY: Gary Shteyngart was my teacher in the second fiction workshop I ever took. This was at Hunter College in 2002, and Gary had just published his first novel, *The Russian Debutante’s Handbook*. Until then, I didn’t know one could write novels for a living. In my young and naive mind all the great writers were dead. I thought of myself as a serious reader, but contemporary novels were something I ignored altogether. Perhaps this is not uncommon for a twenty-year-old college student. Suddenly here was this guy who was writing the kind of fiction I wanted to read. Gary was the first example I had of a contemporary writer, and his influence on my work was immense. I saw how one could be funny on the page and still make you feel a deep sadness. I became aware of voice. I studied voices. I began experimenting with big, loud voices in my early stories. Narrators that would humor me. This was the type of fiction I wanted to write.

ZADIE SMITH
CARLENE BAUER: Back in 2000, at three years older than her 24, I was afraid of Zadie Smith. You remember the gaze in the author photos; you know what I’m talking about. Bugger off, it said, I’m trying to think. You remember that thing she said about her own novel, too, how she disparaged it by calling it “the literary equivalent of a hyperactive, ginger-haired, tap-dancing 10-year-old.” Who at 24 could have enough trust in her talent to knock her own work in public, even if she performed that disavowal with her tongue in cheek? It suggested she knew there was more where that came from, so why be precious about this first? In short: she was brilliant and beautiful, and didn’t seem to give a crap. Or have feelings that you could hurt.

But my fear gave way to joy while reading the book, because White Teeth was fantastic. It merited the fuss, when hardly anything ever did. Finally, I thought, a young woman who could match all the lauded young dudes—Wallace, Eggers, Antrim, Moody, etc.—for energy, intelligence, and ambition. And those sentences, which came on like blasts from a gleefully wielded fire extinguisher. This girl—but you couldn’t call her a girl, because that would be like putting pink booties on a tiger, and I was pretty sure she’d never needed to cling to Sylvia Plath for inspiration on the voyage out. This person, then, would keep writing, and she would be with us for a long time. It was exciting to be present for the arrival of such a phenomenon.

She grew up, and I grew up, and thirteen years later, I am no longer afraid of Zadie Smith. It turns out she is human—and an unabashedly female human at that, one who happily and freely opines on that ever-changing, ever-baffling state when she is not opining on everything from Facebook to ordering takeout. It turns out she did cling to Sylvia Plath on her voyage out, and apparently has a love for the novels of Marian Keyes, one of the foremost practitioners of chick lit. Who knew? And: that turban. David Foster Wallace had his bandanna; she has that. I can’t lie: it’s a dash of panache that makes me
even more fond of her. *Bugger off,* that turban says. *I’m an adult lady with a podium to get to.* Speaking of which: she’s no longer afraid of being in the public eye, it seems. She has taken up the role Joan Didion, Elizabeth Hardwick, and Mary McCarthy used to play, writing criticism and fiction, speaking with authority of her moment. And she is taking that role into the 21st century without hiding behind the Internet.

I admire and am grateful for Zadie Smith, for her work and her person, both of which are very funny, and very wise. It’s not easy to be very funny and very wise at the same time. In America we require that writers be one or the other, but Smith is British, and the British, from Chaucer to Austen to the Amises and beyond, have had no trouble integrating the comedic into the literary, or accepting the comedic as literary. As a former English major who has been shaped by the criticism and novels of Forster and Woolf, as a writer who has written both fiction and criticism, I have also been compelled by Smith’s own wrestling with these influences. Her love of the city that made her, and the people in it—this too compels. She is outward-looking, forward-facing. *Only connect,* Forster famously said, and even if I sometimes roll my eyes at this amorphous, naïve, shopworn injunction, all the same I believe in it, I believe in it. Smith does too. “I like people,” she recently told an interviewer, “so I like to be around them one way or another.” All her books bear this out. She writes dialogue expertly because of it. Many of us who write struggle to balance our warring desires for society and solitude, so it’s no mean feat when one of us can actually like people—like being around them—but can also retreat from them gracefully, without defiance, in order to write about them convincingly and memorably. For the last few decades, it’s been fashionable to write fiction in which language, not character, is demonstrated to be the author’s great love. But Smith takes equal care with both.

**MEGAN MAYHEW BERGMAN:** Like many, I found Zadie Smith through *White Teeth,* a novel I read and re-read with the zeal of a fawning college student. But after teaching her essay collection at Bennington, my admiration increased; the intellectual heft behind her creative work inspires me, and also my students. Upon reading it I think: this is what a well-rounded, hard-earned life of letters looks like. Here is someone who thinks not just about her contract or publicity, but about the novel itself, what it can accomplish. Here is someone who makes genuine, high-value contributions to literature, both fictional and critical.

I grabbed *NW* in an airport the week it was published. The novel made me work, and it gave me great pleasure; it’s an ambitiously-imagined, magnificently executed novel on class, opportunity, and the way place shapes us. Smith’s novels are always rich, saturated, and real—but never overly tidy. In her essay *On Reading Nabokov and Barthes,* she writes: “The novels we know best have an architecture. Not only a door going in and another leading out, but rooms, hallways, stairs, little gardens front and back, trapdoors...” I admire, so much, the way her structure, style, and characters honor complexity.

It is a gift for any woman writer to watch another female novelist own her power, and to do so with grace and candor. As a mother, I benefit from Smith’s honesty about her internet addiction, the challenges of managing children and writing time, but also her
adamant stance that the “idea that motherhood is inherently somehow a threat to creativity is just absurd.” So as I fumble on, trying to string together sentences with the howl of a dog or the sound of my daughters’ crying in my ears, I often think of Smith’s notion that “the subconscious is a great organizer of material.”

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Sarah Braunstein is the author of the novel *The Sweet Relief of Missing Children*

Nic Brown is the author of the novels *In Every Way, Doubles,* and *Floodmarkers*

Ryan Boudinot is the author of *Blueprints of the Afterlife, Misconception,* and *The Littlest Hitler: Stories*

Christopher Boucher is the author of the novel *How to Keep Your Volkswagen Alive*

Maile Chapman is the author of the novel *Your Presence is Requested at Suvanto*

Arthur Phillips is the author of the memoir *The Tragedy of Arthur,* and the novels *The Song is You, The Egyptologist,* and *Prague*

Weston Cutter is the author of the short story collection *You’d Be a Stranger, Too*

Bruce Machart is the author of the short story collection *Men in the Making,* and the novel *The Wake of Forgiveness*

Laura van den berg is the author of *Find Me: A Novel, The Isle of Youth: Stories,* and *What the World Will Look Like When All the Water Leaves Us: Stories*

Alex Gilvarry is the author of the novel *From the Memoirs of a Non-Enemy Combatant*

Carlene Bauer is the author of the novel *Frances and Bernard,* as well as the memoir *Not That Kind of Girl*

Megan Mayhew Bergman is the author of the short story collections *Almost Famous Women,* and *Birds of a Lesser Paradise*

*Lettering by Caleb Misclevitz*
A Survey of Writers on Contemporary Writers

Listening to writers read and discuss their work at Newtonville Books, the bookstore my wife and I own outside Boston, I began to wonder which living, contemporary writers held the most influence over their work. This survey is not meant to be
comprehensive, but is the result of my posing the question to as many writers as I could ask.

—Jaime Clarke

DONNA TARTT

KELLY BRAFFET: When I was working on my first novel, Donna Tartt’s *The Secret History* was a huge influence on me: not just because it’s a wonderful book, but because she was a woman writing dark fiction that skirted the edge of the thriller, which was, and still is, what I wanted to be when I grew up. In fact, her books so thoroughly skirt the edge of the thriller that they completely circumvent the genre: in *The Secret History*, she tells you the identities of both the murdered and the murderer in the first few pages, and in *The Little Friend* you never learn the identity of the murderer at all. In essence, Tartt builds a stage set for a murder drama, and then gives you something entirely different—keeping all of that thriller-y tension, atmosphere and excitement.

She did an interview when *The Little Friend* came out where she said—I’m paraphrasing—that she saw absolutely no reason why a well-written book couldn’t also have an exciting story, and, being me, of course, I found that incredibly inspiring and affirming. I look forward with longing to her next novel, and everything else she writes.
**LESLIE JAMISON:** I read Donna Tartt’s *The Secret History* and wanted to write a novel just like it. I know I’m not the only one. I understood it somewhat differently at the time, more obliquely: My first novel had been so deeply grounded in character, I told myself—somehow both too much and too little had happened—and this time around I wanted to approach plot with more invention, more spirit of play. I wanted everything twining around the dark matter of a mystery. I wanted to evoke the electricity and claustrophobia of life on a campus. Tartt’s book was about a New England college; mine would be about an all-girl’s boarding school in California. I had craft goals and mood goals. My aesthetic sensibility was evolving and I was writing about it in my diary.

But really, it was like this: I’d fallen down the rabbit hole of *The Secret History* and I wanted to stay underground. It was a mystery about getting lost in myth; it offered its own mythology to get lost in. I wanted to stay in its bubble—part pastoral, part squalor: silent drifts of snow and crackling fireplaces and a drafty apartment full of empty whiskey bottles and the whiff of squandered privilege. I wanted to stay in the spell of its secrets—not just the central secret of a dead body but the murkier secrets of class and cliques: how people love what they don’t know, or can’t have. I was trying to write this boarding school novel—all sleek glass and cattiness, violent Pacific seething beneath—that was full of its own dark threads: an evil headmaster, unexplained deformities. In one draft there was magic; in another, only ritual.

I loved *The Secret History* so I was sad when it ended. That’s how it goes. But because I was a writer, I thought—without thinking, without admitting—that perhaps the book wouldn’t end if I wrote it again. If I made my own version of its world, I could keep living there. The same way you might take a trip to Paris and think, *I love it here*, and then decide that moving there would be the next natural extension of loving it so much—why not place your body forever where it loved being for a while?

But not everyone who loves Paris is meant to live there, and not everyone who loves reading Donna Tartt is meant to write like her. This is one of the cruel lessons of influence: admiration is a powerful but fickle fuel; we emerge from the froth and bluster of its drive and find we’ve made a Christmas ornament of popsicle sticks that doesn’t look much like the Eiffel Tower at all.

I went through an addict’s rise and fall with *The Secret History*, got that first rush—curled up with it, disappeared into it—then hit the two-year letdown of my failed attempt to recreate it. The secrets of my own novel felt shabby—contrived and crudely revealed, and its danger cartoonish, a scalpel casting long shadows across the room, characters bent to serve plot like figures twisted by funhouse mirrors. All of it felt claustrophobic. Everything smelled like someone else’s old clothes.

But I didn’t give up looking for that first rush. Eventually, I just looked for it somewhere else. The obvious place. Which is to say: I read the book again. I took it to a writing residency in Wyoming, a land that couldn’t have been further from its world: huge soaring skies, broad rutted roads that stretched visible for miles—a land with few crevices or secret compartments, wearing its truths broad-shouldered and sun-bleached, plain as day. I went for long walks. I followed a dirt road into the hills and listened to...
I remember one about *Infinite Jest*, another one about a college town full of drunk kids unintentionally breaking into houses they thought they lived in, a podcast that made me sharply nostalgic for my own home in a college town full of drunk kids unintentionally breaking into houses they thought they lived in.

The second time I read *The Secret History*, I loved it just as much as I’d loved it the first time. But my own novel still wasn’t working. I faced that particular shame available to writers gifted with a broad horizon of unbroken time: I was forced to confront more unequivocally the fact of my novel’s failure. There was no excuse or deferral—no *when I’m not working early mornings at the bakery*, no *when I’m not studying for orals*. It was only me waking up to long days when I could have been writing a brilliant, expansive, world-making book but definitely wasn’t. I was slamming myself against a wall.

So I went for another walk. This time, I didn’t listen to a podcast about drunk kids or anyone’s magnum opus. I didn’t listen to any podcast at all. Instead, I summoned an image of myself reading *The Secret History* that first time—curled on an Iowa futon, watching snow fall, drinking tea—and then, like a tender anthropologist, half-blind but full of seeking love, I summoned an image of someone reading my own novel, my as-of-yet-unwritten-or-only-written-terribly novel, my multiply aborted B-grade simulacra.

This reading girl was blurry, the girl I was picturing—not quite in focus—but she was enjoying herself. I imagined her dangling at the edge of each chapter, rushing home from work to start the next one. Imagining her let me feel affection where before I’d felt only self-recrimination. For once, I wasn’t thinking of myself—and my authorial aspirations and frustrations—but of someone else—albeit a hypothetical someone, still fuzzed around the edges. David Foster Wallace praised writing that was gift rather than request—he spoke of the “discipline to talk out of the part of yourself that can love instead of the part that just wants to be loved”—and though I’ve always had trouble understanding how this distinction could ever be drawn, I’ve loved the sentiment ferociously, the way one loves impossible asymptotes.

That day, on that walk, imagining myself toward an unknown woman, I felt I was moving closer to the self that could write *from* love rather than for it—that didn’t want to write what Tartt had written so much as I wanted to give what she had given: that sheer rush of pleasure, that surrendering of self into a world of someone else’s making.

**DAVID SAMUEL LEVINSON:** I was staying at a friend’s house in LA when I came across *The Secret History*, which was being used to prop open my bedroom door; the floors in the house slanted. This was back in 1995, a few years after Tartt had made her debut literary splash. I remember making a conscious effort to keep away from the novel and from her, forever leery of books and authors with mass appeal. I preferred quieter, most obscure novels and novelists, books one didn’t see clutched in the fingers of subway commuters. It had been everywhere upon its release and, though I had heard great things about *The Secret History*, I preferred to snub it. How could a book about an over-privileged set of undergrads attending a posh liberal arts college possibly speak to me? I didn’t think it could.
Of course I was wrong, as only my voracious reading of it can attest; I read it in two days. I don’t think I even left the bed, except to swim a lap or two in the pool, and even then I remember taking Tartt’s novel with me, like an old friend. And it was like an old friend, a best friend I’d given up on—that’s how I felt about fiction back then, until I ran into and fell in love with it all over again, thanks in large part to The Secret History.

After that, I reread The Secret History once a year for at least a dozen years, until the magic began to wear off and I craved something new. But I never found anything quite like The Secret History, no matter how hard I tried and how many books I read. So I decided to write a novel that to me contained the spirit of that amazingly well crafted and well told story—I set my own novel in an imaginary college town in upstate New York, I gave it plenty of suspense and mystery, I loved and hated my characters just as I imagined Tartt loved and hated hers. I wanted my novel to reflect and pay homage to The Secret History, since it is the one novel I can think of that continued to enthrall and bewitch me and that proved to me that novels could be more than the sum of their parts—beautifully written, incredibly intuitive, and just plain entertaining to read and read again.

ALLISON LYNN: I recently reread Donna Tartt’s The Secret History for the first time in two decades, and went in with trepidation. The book—or as it appears in my head, The Book—seemed to define an entire era of reading for myself and my cohort in New York in 1992, when it was published. We were all just out of college and in search of beauty and knowledge, both on the page and in our everyday lives. We were nervous and confident and consciously aware of the precipice at our feet. We were looking for a sign that we might be among our generation’s chosen. And into our world came Tartt’s imperious young scholars: Richard Papen, Henry Winter, Francis Abernathy, the doomed-from-page-one Bunny Corcoran, and the now-unfortunately-named twins, Charles and Camilla. They and their world—which consisted almost entirely of Hampden College’s classics department—were rendered in a modern, near-Gothic style that stopped just short of too-much, and they served both as our idols and our cautionary tale. They’d aimed so high! While the rest of us were shooting for beauty, they set their sights on the sublime. They were the chosen. And then, they were the damned.

Before we met the characters though, The Secret History came to us as a physical thing. The book was seductive, designed by Barbara de Wilde and Chip Kidd with a transparent slipcover that gave way to a close-up photo of Myron’s Discobolus. Entire articles were written about the jacket. And so we sprung for the full-price hardcover, this being the era before internet discounters and ebooks. If today we’re seeing a decline of the book-as-object, The Secret History remains a reminder of its heyday.

What we talked about though, was what lay inside. We talked about scholarship student Richard Papen, the novel’s narrator and requisite outsider, a stand-in for us readers. Would we have fallen for the seemingly privileged Henry and his crew as hard as Richard did? What was up with Judy Poovey? With Metahemeralism? Who the hell read Parmenides in the original Greek, as an undergrad? We questioned whether, by the time Bunny was killed in the woods outside Hampden’s campus, his fate, like that of the
Romans, was inevitable. And by “we” I mean not just those of us who wanted to be writers and were doing time as fact checkers and Letters Department lackeys. I mean investment banking analysts, paralegals, fashion assistants, waitresses, office temps. If you were in your 20s, you had the book in your bag back then. You deconstructed it while crammed onto a futon at Wednesday night’s impromptu rager in still-seedy alphabet city or Friday’s pre-party on the Upper East Side. Or at boozy brunches in lofts on Laguardia Place that were dirt cheap because who wanted to live on Laguardia back then? The Book was a litmus test for the people you dated. The Book created a community (in the absence of today’s knock-it-down blogosphere) in which anyone who read was welcome.

How did Tartt do it? Especially given that she was only 28 when *The Secret History* was published, the exact age that Richard Papen is when he’s narrating? (of course, Tartt’s age was part of the allure, part of the story that preceded the book) Rereading it, I’m struck by the novel’s structure. The book begins with Richard’s admission that many years ago, as undergrads at Hampden, he and his friends killed Bunny, one of their own. Now, he signals to the reader, he will tell the story of that murder. There’s no true mystery here, so we assume. It’s not a matter of the “what” or the “who,” but only the “why.” So it comes as a shock, even on rereading, to discover that the book is only halfway over when Bunny is killed and the promise of the prologue has come to pass.

It turns out that it’s not what Richard and his friends have done that matters. It’s how they will live with themselves afterwards. This is where the real suspense lies: in the final 250 pages of the book (the length of many full novels), the unexpected chapters that take place after the crime. Suspense, it turns out, isn’t in life’s drama. It’s in how we live around the drama.

It also turns out, as you’ve probably surmised by now, that my trepidation on returning to the text was unwarranted. The book’s cheap thrills continue to hold (the oddly mannered 19-year-olds, the slightly unkosher relationship between the twins, the beer bashes and doddering professors and hacky-sack sightings). The book’s indulgent prose still grips with the tenacity of ivy crawling up Hampden’s walls. But mostly, the book’s draw turns out the be its asking of the completely un-cheap question, “How do we live with ourselves?” It’s a question that—whether you’re age 20 or 40 or more—is as timeless as the Greek classics. And Tartt asks it with all the tension, the warring factions, the antiheroes, the illicit romance, and enchantment with ideas that mark so many of those classics. I feared that, all of these years later, the book might feel merely like a guilty pleasure. It is a murder plot, after all, even if it’s unconventional in the mystery sense. And damn if I wasn’t easily influenced in my 20s. Instead, though, *The Secret History* more than holds up. It has me remembering how Donna Tartt, in aiming for the sublime with her first novel, encouraged so many of us aspiring writers to drop our guards and think big. Two decades later, the book has me standing next to Richard Papen all over again, asking myself not what I would have done, but what I will do. How a person, whether aiming for the transcendent or the merely beautiful, goes on.
HOLLY LECRAW: When I was writing my first novel, the books I had with me at all times as guides and charms were *Gatsby, To the Lighthouse, So Long, See You Tomorrow* by William Maxwell, and *The Story of Lucy Gault*, by William Trevor. They sat on my desk in a talismanic pile. Sometimes I’d hesitate to look at them yet again, afraid of imitation, but mostly I clung to them like bits of flotsam in high seas.

They’re all lean, taut books (even *To the Lighthouse*, compared with, say, *The Waves*). There are few, if any, extraneous words, and certainly no extraneous paragraphs, subplots or characters. (It will not surprise you to hear that Dickens is not my jam.) As a group they represent a marriage of style and substance that I aspire to, and in some ways *Lucy Gault* is the leanest; Trevor’s next book, *Love and Summer*, is more expansive in plot but, as it’s the same length (each is less than 225 pages), even sparer in execution. It’s the sort of economy that is its own beauty and that is craft, not to mention art, of the highest order.

*Lucy Gault* was the first Trevor I ever read. I’m not sure what brought me to initially. It could be, I’m embarrassed to say, the blue hydrangeas on the cover. The book has the compact feel in the hand that I like best. However I ended up with it, when I finally read it the calmness and efficiency of his prose was a revelation, especially in the midst of my own floundering. The writing of openings, for me, is a long and painful struggle (and usually accomplished not first but last in the process); but the opening of *Lucy Gault* is a seemingly effortless masterpiece, as Trevor introduces Captain Gault, his marriage, his child, his servants, and his beloved home and the looming threat to it—for the Gaults are Protestants during the Irish Troubles, when the estates of the English were regularly torched—all in five pages. Miraculously, there is no sense of crowding, instead a
measured grace: “Tall and straight-backed, a man who hid nothing of himself, slight in his ambitions now, he had long ago accepted that his destiny was to keep in good heart what had been his inheritance, to attract bees to his hives, to root up his failing apple trees and replace them.” At first glance, ordinary prose; but actually the rhythms are so perfect as to be invisible. (I think here also of Alice McDermott: is it something in the Irish genes? Can one learn it?) Captain Gault’s decency, his humble priorities, even the domestic cycles of his life as a landowner are established with one stroke. One never doubts that Trevor is describing real people, beginning a real story. His authority is quiet and unquestionable.

And then at the end of this opening section, the subtle yet devastating note of fate comes in: Gault’s watchfulness in the face of danger “created in the household further depths of disquiet, a nerviness that affected everyone, including in the end the household’s child.” For it is, after all, Lucy’s story.

I read those few pages over and over. Breaking them down. Looking (mostly in vain) for the formula. Still, they never failed to move me.

The advent of cell phones and other electronic connectedness, the decline of religious guilt, and the normalization of divorce have, aside from any other societal repercussions, made the novelist’s job devilishly harder. The Story of Lucy Gault—a child thought dead, the parents leaving home in grief, not findable when it turns out she’s alive—depends on the absence of the first of these. The story of Love and Summer could not exist in the time of the second two. It’s arguably a larger (though shorter!) book, encompassing a much wider web of characters—a whole town’s worth—and secrets from the past that still cause ripples. Now it is 1950s Ireland, but except for the occasional radio and car it might as well be 1850, and hardly anything is said aloud without being wreathed in pleasantries and a tricky passive Gaelic syntax: “A garden of remembrance has been mentioned to me,” says a brother to his sister, about a memorial for their mother. About a stranger taking pictures at the funeral: “It was remarked upon in the house here,” the sister reports. “It was wondered did we want photographs.” Someone, or several someones, unnamed though they be, are always watching. Nothing goes unnoticed; the smallest changes in the life of the town and its individual inhabitants are never forgotten; at the same time tragedies never explode but are instead buried, to go on causing endless seismic damage. In Love and Summer passion is always punished, when it manages to flower, by the citizens who are victims themselves of archaic mores and yet also act to perpetuate them. Trevor even employs a character, Orpen Wren, full of delusions and confused memories, who acts as a near deus ex machina; but Trevor’s so skillful that he manages to walk the razor’s edge, and Wren, the instrument of the denouement, is woven inescapably into the web of history—of the ruined English estates of the Troubles, and small yet nevertheless thwarted hopes, and impossible loves—like everyone else. With the same skill, Trevor manages to introduce a breath of hope for future happiness at the conclusion, indulging not in sentimentality but instead a kind of bleak and regal decency.

When I wrote my second book, the pile on my desk changed, and I became a little less rigid about it. Possibly I was not as interested in imitation, instead more in inspiration.
On that basis Trevor still cycles in regularly. I find it heartening that hardly any of the books I’m most drawn to, including his, are debuts: *The Story of Lucy Gault* is Trevor’s thirteenth novel (and he has written nearly as many volumes of short stories); *Love and Summer* his fourteenth. Learning is possible, if not inevitable. Trevor’s quiet and devastating accumulation of mastery, old-fashioned and timeless at once, give me hope in art, in craft, and in the path.

**LIZ MOORE:** What I love about William Trevor is his obsession with pathos. In contemporary fiction, a good pathos fix is hard to come by—so much so that one assumes upon encountering it that it its inclusion is ironic, a wink to the reader by the self-conscious writer. Yet when used properly, sparingly, pathos is a powerful spice.

The lowest forms of pathos are the most obviously sad. Certain pathetic scenarios are used to the point of cliché in literature and film: the child who’s always the last to be picked up after school. The dying parent’s fond farewell. The fallen soldier who clasps a picture of his beloved to his heart.

Trevor’s pathos is subtler: it is the pain of unrealized, unarticulated hope. The parent—no, better, grandparent—who lovingly, painstakingly builds from scratch a present for his grandchild—a doll, maybe, or a toy car, or a model train—and then watches little Cartwright’s face fall in disappointment upon opening up the box and realizing that it does not contain a PlayStation. The middle-aged woman who’s slightly on the outside of a conversation—she is standing just outside a ring of co-workers, maybe, at a holiday party—and attempting to insert herself into it. She opens and closes her mouth; she laughs at jokes she doesn’t understand. She inches her foot forward, as if to part the waters, but nobody moves. An old man dining alone in a restaurant—but it isn’t just that he’s alone, it’s that he’s enjoying his food, really enjoying it. He closes his eyes to swallow.

My favorite of Trevor’s short stories, “Mrs Silly,” is brilliantly pathetic in this sense. It is the story of a young boy named Michael, the son of long-divorced parents. His father is wealthy, sophisticated, and remarried to fashionable Gillian; his mother, a secretary, dotes on him and chatters too much and has self-disparagingly bestowed the story’s title upon herself. She rambles. She dodders. When Michael’s father decides it’s high time his son went to the same public school that he attended, Michael is sent off to board there. Over the course of the story, both his mother and his father visit his school. He quickly learns that his mother doesn’t fit in nearly as neatly to the school’s culture as his father and Gillian; she makes simple mistakes that, to Michael, feel like the end of the world. These are not her people, and, worst of all, she knows it and nervously overcompensates. In the story’s climax, Michael’s confirmation ceremony, all three parent-figures visit, and his mother stumbles and falls. Later, when his schoolmates laughingly reenact the mishap and Michael realizes that they assume Gillian to be his mother, and his real mother to be some other, more distant relative, he does not correct them. That night, in his bed, he burns with shame and regret. “In the dark, he whispered to [his mother] in his mind,” Trevor writes. “He said he was sorry, he said he loved her better than anyone.”
I was nineteen-year-old Barnard sophomore when I first read this story—it was assigned to me in a creative writing class I took with the writer Mary Gordon, who loves William Trevor too—and I wept in my dorm room upon reading it. It was a gratifying, self-indulgent weep: the weep of a teenager who has had no really legitimate problems in life to contend with, and so must find her tragedies in the ends of brief relationship and in short stories she is assigned in class. This was a particularly good one. I was crying, of course, because I recognized myself in Michael, in the way he is simultaneously embarrassed of a loved one and deeply, passionately ashamed of himself for being so. But also—as every reader most likely will, unless she is a Kardashian—I recognized myself in Mrs. Silly, the outsider, the poor soul who stumbles and falls.

One of William Trevor’s many gifts is pointing us toward these outsiders and illuminating them with beautiful language. In doing so he causes me to notice them in my own life, everywhere I go, and to pay attention to them. I could say that William Trevor inspires me to try to be more compassionate, but this is a reduction of his gifts, for he is never didactic. Instead I’ll say that William Trevor inspires me to keep my eyes open to all the pathos the world daily presents from strangers and friends alike. What I choose to do with it, as a writer and person, is left to me.

—

Kelly Braffet is the author of the novels *Save Yourself*, *Last Seen Leaving*, and *Josie and Jack*

Holly LeCraw is the author of *The Swimming Pool* and *The Half Brother*

Leslie Jamison is the author of the essay collection *The Empathy Exams*, as well as the novel *The Gin Closet*

David Samuel Levinson is the author of *Antonia Lively Breaks the Silence*, as well as the short story collection *Most of Us Are Here Against Our Will*

Allison Lynn is the author of the novels *The Exiles*, and *Now You See It*

Liz Moore is the author of the novels *Heft*, and *The Words of Every Song*

Lettering by Caleb Mislevitz
INFLUENCED BY

A Survey of Writers on Contemporary Writers

Listening to writers read and discuss their work at Newtonville Books, the bookstore my wife and I own outside Boston, I began to wonder which living, contemporary writers held the most influence over their work. This survey is not meant to be
comprehensive, but is the result of my posing the question to as many writers as I could ask.

—Jaime Clarke

WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN

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KIM ADDONIZIO: I know William T. Vollmann’s work only through a few startling stories and a very short novel. That’s my Vollmann, though for others it may be his long, ambitious (is there any other adjective for fat novels?) books that come to mind—The Atlas, The Ice-Shirt, The Royal Family. I did buy The Royal Family, a 774-page doorstop of a book, and it sits on my shelf still. I confess to never having read it past the first thirty or so pages. I would have read more, if it had been, say, 374 pages, but I knew I was doomed to defeat, so I stopped. And anyway, with writers who trigger my own work, I tend to put them aside to get something down myself. Vollmann was a trigger sort of writer for me. The short novel, Whores for Gloria, is a vivid, grimy little slice of the Tenderloin district in San Francisco, a neighborhood of whores, pimps, refugees, drinkers and drug dealers and addicts, transvestites, and the vulnerable elderly. It’s a world Vollmann knew well, and like other worlds—that of San Francisco skinheads, say, included in The Rainbow Stories—he was embedded there. He worked like a journalist, which he also was, and is. When I was writing My Dreams Out in the Street, a novel set in the Tenderloin, he read a rough draft of the opening pages as a favor, being the friend of a friend, and suggested that I spend the night in Golden Gate Park (my main character was a homeless woman). He also suggested I stay in a res hotel, and offered to stay with me. This might sound calculating, but I’m sure it was genuine. He was just that
kind of writer. Now I wish I’d taken him up on it. Instead, I spent time with his work, absorbing the style of his sentences, and my novel was the better for it.

TIM HORVATH: In one section of his sprawling, *sui generis*, palindromic slab, *The Atlas*, “Outside and Inside,” William T. Vollmann writes about one of its less extreme, more mundane locales—Berkeley, California, in 1992. He sets the scene thus:

“Outside the vast squares of yellow bookstore-light, the panhandlers, longhaired and greasy, held out their palms, asking for their dinners, and two started fighting, while inside people turned the pages of picture-books whose flowers smelled like meadows of fresh ink.”

The description is gorgeous—“bookstore light” designating something so particular, a quality of illumination distinct from butcher light or shoe repair light or greenhouse light, the warmth of the presence of comrades in reading, page-turners. And then he scrambles the senses in a synesthetic burst toward the end, a frolic in a pastoral milieu. Seconds later, though the glass will be shattered, not by a drunk driver or a 2 x 4 or even by a fist, but by a woman’s head, and soon thereafter a book will be deployed as a pillow to stanch her blood. Vollmann is, as they say, unflinching—he does not pull back, as we might, reflexively, from the horror of the scene, and somehow the fact that the book gets the last word in this scene, speaking and feeling, seems less blatantly surreal than the brute fact of the conversion of a glass partition to a flurry of shards.

It is this collision—sometimes gentle, sometimes violent, between the world outside the bookstore and the “meadows of fresh ink,” the loveliness and lilt of language—that keeps me returning to Vollmann’s work. I am drawn to the range of his reportage, a range carved out by the sheer number of miles he’s covered, the continents he’s traversed, but also by his stylistic breadth, which goes from Biblical and ornate to plain and unburnished. And it’s also evident in the people—I shudder to call them “characters”—to whom he seems drawn again and again: the prostitutes and khat-chewers, the children naive but already learning about the power and mystery of sexuality and procreation, the adults grown fatalistic as they move among snipers’ scope. Again and again, he finds ways to braid these characters and language and the world, the strands twining and yielding fresh combinations and keeping the reader guessing where he’ll transport us next.

Indeed, one reason I clutch *the Atlas* so close to the chest is that it stirs in me a sense of the sprawl of possibility. Vollmann himself is understated, self-effacing, axial with eyes and ears while the world around him spins and shifts. In this book, you feel you are ringside as a Mexican boxer gets clocked, you are next to the “green garbed soldiers with Uzis ready” at the Western Wall, you are at the base of a jungle mountain where “skinny-legged barefoot kids sucked from plastic bags of sugared ice,” you are doing mushrooms and hearing “the mushroom laugh,” “the crowd of raven masks.” Throughout, the bravery and bravura of his writing vouches for the value of simply going, of bearing witness to the widest available array of people and places. He reins in commentary to a bare minimum—elsewhere, in books far more behemoth than this one, he will analyze the history of violence or the sources of poverty or the complications of
life on the U.S.-Mexico border—but in *The Atlas*, analysis is a braid that only the reader may hold. The writer serves up the experiences not quite raw—certainly, language and the poetry of his prose have cooked them a bit, but they are served up rare, the blood still runny, and we are unable to lose sight of the fact that they were recently alive, breathing, panting, jonesing, surviving, yearning. In lieu of analysis, Vollmann offers juxtaposition, pastiche, and arrangement—laid side by side, they allow us a palpable sense of the elemental human tectonics that connect Resolute Bay in the Northwest Territories to Mogadishu, Cambodia to Grand Central Terminal. Leaping across the gaps in the page is the palpable sense of longing for connection, a sense that given the right encounter, the right flash flood of person and circumstance, one will find transcendence, that in the “chapel of animals” one might “bec[o]me the painted lion.”

**VICTOR LAVALLE:** The contemporary writer whose work meant the most to me as I was really becoming the writer I am now, and the one I return to with some regularity, is William T. Vollmann. Now as soon as I type that name I find myself feeling the need to qualify the statement. The Vollmann I’m talking about, specifically, is the earlier William T. Vollmann. The author of a few specific books. *An Afghanistan Picture Show: Or How I Saved the World, 13 Stories and 13 Epitaphs, The Atlas,* and *Whores for Gloria.* I read these four books either at the tail end of undergrad (*Whores for Gloria*), grad school (*An Afghanistan…* and *13 Stories…*) or in the year or two right after school (*The Atlas*). I could’ve read more of his books, he’s got plenty, but I kept returning to these four and finding more and more there for me to enjoy, to learn from.

Over the years I’ve done my best to keep up with, and backtrack over, the output of this one-man Death Star of publication. But I must say that nothing else he’s written has ever struck me quite like these four books. Maybe it’s just that I was at the right age. My aperture was entirely open. But for a time there it wouldn’t be too much to say that I treated these four books like the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. I make this comparison not simply for the blasphemy, but also because they really did seem, in total, to be telling the story of a wild and almost holy man.

The book about Afghanistan is a work of non-fiction while the others are listed as fiction, but with Vollmann—in this period—that line is blurry at best. These books often read like the adventures of an astoundingly well-read, insane and naive artist who is simply trying to understand the world, worlds, that lie far outside the common lives shared by many Americans. These stories are told in often hallucinatory prose, meant to suggest the feeling of a moment more than to simply illustrate the events. I remember reading one story, "Incarnations of the Murderer," (from *The Atlas*) again and again, becoming genuinely queasy as I turned each page. The subject matter is rough—as so much of his subject matter is—but the prose itself is also lovely and lyrical and mesmerizing. Check this out:

> "Down the fog-sodden wooden steps he came that night to the street walled with houses, every doorway a yellow lantern-slide suspended between floating windows, connected to earth by the tenuous courtesy of stairs."
That last bit, "the tenuous courtesy of stairs," zaps me every time. Now admittedly, too much of this is as bad as not enough. And Vollmann’s later books regularly suffer from the former. But in these four books, for me, Vollmann approaches something mythic while still telling stories about the complicated and every day. This is rare to find and I still return to these four books—large portions of each—to try and understand how he’s done it. While I love many other writers now, and read my contemporaries with pleasure, these four books remain a touchstone for me. To write beautifully about so many ugly things, without becoming precious? That’s miraculous.

KENT WASCOM: The work of William T. Vollmann stands in glorious defiance of that ubiquitously bandied platitude and chief caution of our increasingly timid and herdlike culture: “Everything in moderation.” Now, this foolishness is not limited to those whose knuckles must be taped in order to avoid scraping them on the sidewalk; the literary world is rife with sighs and nods of bovine assent to the god Moderation. How often we read the stoic appreciations of a novel’s “unadorned” qualities, paean to kitchen-table austerity and an author’s paucity of language and rationing of subject (god help us if there is any action, or even a particularly interesting context within which the mundane events play out) as though she were a Blitz-era matron bravely doling out pats of margarine as the V-2s shriek over her bombed-out London block. Not so our Mr. Vollmann, who has been assailed by the dour legions of the constrained for the very reasons his work has been so influential upon my own. He is immoderate in his subjects—WWII Germany and Russia; a thousand years of North American history; the mujahidin in Afghanistan; Noh theatre and gender mutability; prostitution; violence; the Imperial Valley; nuclear power; a war between insects and the forces of electricity; the depths his own fears and desires. He is immoderate in his prose—sentences serpentine or terse but always of staggering uniqueness and beauty. (For Christ’s sake, a novel written entirely in Elizabethan English!) He is immoderate in his habits—consorting with prostitutes, skinheads, warlords, train-hoppers, the indigent; owning firearms, riding the rails, travelling the world; writing more, and more expansively, than anyone else. And he is, perhaps most importantly, immoderate in his empathy, his interest in the welfare and circumstances of his fellow human beings. I came to Vollmann at a time when I was in the clutches of those espousing cautious prose and subject, the smug temptations of the austere and limited abounding. Vollmann’s work swiftly consigned the moderates to the ditch; here was someone who took risks, whose interests were vastly far-flung, who worked until his hands hurt, who truly cared for his characters and subjects, who wore no air of authorial coolness or removal. Of course, to imitate Vollmann would be foolish and useless. The man’s heterogeneity renders him inimitable. Besides, an apprentice writer must soon abandon the emulatory instinct, and instead seek examples, those whose work assuages the fear that you are too obsessive, too consumed in the world of the page, and too disparate in your subjects and interests. Vollmann’s excesses, his grand immoderation, gave me that bolstering, the knowledge that in the face of a cautious and finger-wagging world of moderation-hawks, there are those who revel in excess—expanding, engaging, engorging sentences with image and verve. For those who prefer to wander the white and spotless halls of ascetic prose, head on your pious way. We remain the immoderate, the excessive, the Baroque, the word-whores and the lovers of weighty tomes. And by the way, you aren’t the only ones who
like to pare down sentences. I offer you an immoderate’s modification of your maxim: “Everything! in moderation”

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Kim Addonizio is the author of the short story collections *My Dreams Out in the Street, Little Beauties*, and *In the Box Called Pleasure*, as well as numerous poetry collections

Tim Horvath is the author of the short story collections *Understories*, and *Circulation*

Victor LaValle is the author of *The Devil in Silver, Big Machine, The Ecstatic*, and *Slapboxing with Jesus*

Kent Wascom is the author of the novels *The Blood of Heaven* and *Secessia*

*Lettering by Caleb Misclevitz*
A Survey of Writers on Contemporary Writers

Listening to writers read and discuss their work at Newtonville Books, the bookstore my wife and I own outside Boston, I began to wonder which living, contemporary writers held the most influence over their work. This survey is not meant to be
comprehensive, but is the result of my posing the question to as many writers as I could ask.

—Jaime Clarke

DAVID FOSTER WALLACE

KATHLEEN ALCOTT: In a way it’s embarrassing to name David Foster Wallace as an influence because such a grotesque has been drawn of him since his death in 2008—but I spent pretty much all of my 18th and 19th years reading and re-reading him, and feeling both so threatened and excited that someone alive was writing like that. I was thrilled by the stories and essays and novels in which the reader was asked to work almost as hard as the writer, and it left me less intimidated about the act of creation.

CHARLES BOCK: It’s hard to overstate the bomb effect of *Infinite Jest* on the New York literary world. One thing that was hugely influential on me: *IJ*’s honking long paragraphs that were actually *fun* to read. They had an internal rhythm and pace to them. They had jokes. One liners galore but not enough to break your pace. Sometimes Mister Big Book, as I called him to my sister and friends, got too clever for his own good and structured a grand thought around a word that you had to look up, and that sort of derailed the fun. But I came to think of those paragraphs as something to look forward to, like big thick slices of chocolate cake. You start to nibble and you get in and soon you are in love. I was one who did not tire or get sick of the cake. When I finished one big para, it was exciting that there was another one waiting for me. How many long amazing set pieces are in that novel—the guy whose tried to quit smoking pot waiting for his supplier to call or stop by and freaking out to where he splits himself in half when the phone and doorbell ring simultaneously; Kate Gompert ending a long dialogue with a physician by begging for shock therapy; the PGOAT deciding to try and off herself at
that New Year’s Eve party; the listings of tattoos inside the rehab center; things that a person learns when they go into rehab; these are off the top of my head and I can do a lot lot more.

But really it was that voice. More than the vision of the futuristic world, more than the commentary on entertainment. So infectious and addictive. The voice of pop culture and the voice of common sense and the guy who was just smarter than everybody else, taking on the biggest issues in the room. Who wouldn’t want that? In the same way that Hunter S. Thompson became the voice of the alternative press in the seventies and eighties, with every young male journalist and every alt weekly writer imitating that voice and diluting it, DFW’s writing style has long been assimilated. His voice now, more or less, has been appropriated and is the voice of the internet. To where it is old reading yet another writer doing DFW. Moreover, *Infinite Jest* has taken over from *Gravity’s Rainbow* and certainly from *The Recognitions* as the monster doorstop that smart young males go to. For more than ten years now, it seems to have given every young ambitious male writer permission to try and get every spare thought into a massive sprawling doorstop of a novel. I was in this boat for a long long time while writing my first novel. It helped me apply pressure to myself to try and go for it all, to want to be brilliant and to try and wrestle with huge ideas and take on the world. Was that because I loved the book so much? Was it because the book had been such a smash and the insecure needy part of me decided this was how a writer was supposed to do it? If you haven’t figured your shit out, a book like *Infinite Jest*, and the attention it then received, can complicate matters a great deal.

I went through real phases trying to write like Wallace. It took me forever, or maybe for a draft or two of my first novel, until I figured out that I didn’t really have the vocabulary DFW had and that when I tried to use big words it came off as pretentious, or that I wasn’t anywhere near as smart. About a zillion other differences to boot. But the process of failing to be like DFW made it more obvious when stuff was working. And forced me to kind of learn to move toward the material that was honest to my work, the voice that did come off as true.

**RYAN BOUDINOT:** David Foster Wallace was very influential to me, starting when *Infinite Jest* got published back in the nineties. I remember reading about him in a magazine and rushing out to get the book. I believe I bought it at a B Dalton, and for a while I just stood there holding it, knowing that if I read it I was going to end up writing like him for a while. I don’t think I’ve ever had such a strong feeling that a book was going to change my writing so thoroughly. And of course it did, to the point where a lot of what I wrote for years afterward sounded imitative. That’s always the scary thing—we want so badly to be considered *sui generis* and hide our influences, but I go back to what Stevie Wonder once said about being afraid of *not* being influenced by great art. *Infinite Jest* seemed to me to continue the project that Pynchon was working on, to marry erudition to verbal looseness. There was a period where David Foster Wallace, in my mind, could do no wrong. I saw him read at Elliott Bay Book Company in support of his essay collection *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again* and after the event was just elated that I’d gotten to shake his hand. I’ve read almost everything he’s written (bailed on *Everything and More*, and wasn’t able to stomach *The Broom of the System*).
and was thrilled by *The Pale King*. I recently finished D.T. Max’s biography and felt even more impressed that he accomplished his body of work and sadder that he left us when and how he did.

**BLAKE BUTLER:** After high school and in the first few years of college I kind of lost my bead on reading and writing at all. I went to Georgia Tech for computer science and was writing a ton of code and studying logic, which I think would end up being an influence on the way I think about writing fiction later, but really I wasn’t that interested for a long gap in storytelling or language at all. I talked to the machine and figured out how to make it tell someone something and had a brain for math that I really miss now. I think it was my third or fourth year of undergrad that I somehow ran across a review of David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*, and for some reason asked for it for Christmas. I think it was kind of on a whim, because it sounded machinic and mathy in its own way, and I missed the way reading felt. I ended up getting totally obsessed with that book, and then Wallace in general; actually walked out of a physics final review while reading it instead, and thereafter changed my major to multimedia design so I could get out of school as quickly as possible. Something about the way Wallace used story as a placeholder or an engine for a way of thinking about the world, and describing consciousness to such an extent that the book seemed to have a brain buried inside it really got me. From there I got infected and found a lot of other books from following Wallace’s references: DeLillo, Markson, Pynchon, Vollmann, Borges, etc. The book both taught me that there was a way of writing that could be more than just a story on paper, that could create space around the thing that it talked about, and also opened the world again to all these other kinds of books. Revitalizing me as a reader first, and at the same time making me realize there were ways of talking on paper that I hadn’t thought about, turned my brain back on, and got me reading and writing almost every day, which since then I’ve never really stopped. If I hadn’t found Wallace I might still spend the same amount of time I do now in front of the computer typing, though it’d be all in code. Sometimes I still like to imagine my code now is images and syllables.

**JOHN EDGAR WIDEMAN**
MICHELLE HOOVER: I was lucky enough to have John Edgar Wideman as my thesis advisor at the University of Massachusetts. God help the man for the awful prose he had to crawl through. He repeatedly asked me one question: “What are you trying to say?” At twenty-three, I was trying to say all sorts of things, but none of them were very interesting. When I introduce Wideman’s stories now to my freshmen, they are equally puzzled—and then curious, squinty-eyed, and shaking their heads in wonderment. The hard truths in Wideman’s work are never simple. Who else has written about race, class, and an author’s desire to explore both with such complexity and self-stated confusion? Who else combats these issues in a style as dense and musical as the best improvised jazz? And who else can mesh hard sex and motherhood, the insect and the human, the dead and the living? Who can write so entirely over our heads while striking at the heart of our guilty humanness? As an influence, I can’t pretend to even come close the intelligence and raging beauty of his work, though I do try to push myself deep into the heart of the strangers whose stories I tell and match his intensity. And I still ask myself and my students: “What are you trying to say?” I find that many of my students, no matter how skilled, are often stuck on repeat, at least in terms of their subjects, their visions. For many, the idea of “vision” itself seems a foreign affair. I often find myself stuck as well. But with Wideman looking over my shoulder, as all great teachers do, I know how important it is to continue to try—to write in a way that propels conversation,
that challenges assumptions, all the while staying true to character, their fears and yearnings, and the ever important, ever exquisite, ever mystifying sentence.

JOY WILLIAMS

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WENDY BRENNER: Two decades before I was born, Joy Williams grew up in a small town in Maine, an only child descended from “Welsh preachers and miners.” Her father and grandfather were Congregational ministers. To date, I have never met a Congregational minister. I was raised by Jewish atheists in Chicago; my family did not attend synagogue, let alone church. As a child Joy Williams liked reading the Bible, she once said in an interview, because the stories about “snakes and serpents and mysterious seeds” seemed to contain layers of hidden meaning. My own family’s large,
wide-ranging collection of books did not include a Bible, but we did own an actual
serpent, a pet boa constrictor my mother gave my father for their anniversary when I
was twelve. It was a literal snake and never showed any signs of hidden meaning. In fact,
I found it boring for that reason—even atheists know snakes are supposed to be
mysterious and exciting. Ours just sat there.

The only point of connection I can identify between Joy Williams and myself is Florida,
a place we both visited as children on family vacations and later ended up living in, and
loving for similar reasons—the primal extremity and contradiction and irrationality
of the landscape, the prehistoric-looking animals and trees, the snakes. Florida seemed
magical to me, somewhere people went to be transformed. Williams called it “an odd
and slightly unreal place.”

I did not know anything about Joy Williams when I first encountered her fiction as a
college student in Ohio in the 1980s. For a class I was assigned to read her short story
“Train,” about two ten-year-old girls, friends, traveling on a train from Maine to Florida,
where, Williams writes, daylight “fell without prejudice on the slaughterhouses, Dairy
Queens and courthouses, on the car lots, sabal palms and a billboard advertisement for
pies.” This sentence excites me still, how it reaches out the window of the train, past the
story of the girls, to contain the entire human condition, not in abstraction but in the
irreconcilable mundanities of daily life, which we readers suddenly notice are slightly
bizarre, a little absurd, a little beside the point—whatever the point even is. Meanwhile,
on the train, the little girls stay up all night, roaming the aisles and chatting convivially
with the other passengers, variously inebriated and vaguely threatening adults, about
lizards, pharmaceutical testing, custom car design, legendary European cemeteries,
astronauts. One of the girls momentarily retreats into the restroom to weep, feeling
“surrounded by strangers saying crazy things.” Elsewhere in the story collection
(Taking Care), Williams describes a character’s houseplant as follows: “The fern has a
lot of space around it in which anything can happen but it doesn’t have much of an
emotional life because it is insane. Therefore, it makes a good confidant.”

I was nineteen when I read “Train” for the first time, and after I read it I immediately
wrote Joy Williams an overwrought fan letter about my much-older boyfriend, a
mysterious character who had spent his teen years in mental institutions and now ran a
comedy club housed in a Chicago church—the way he talked was like the way she wrote,
what was it?—and then I wrote a short story in a weird, authoritative voice I didn’t
recognize, a piece of writing that later became my first published story. I felt that
Williams’s voice had unlocked my own voice, but it did much more than that. It
unlocked the world, what Williams calls the “teeming, chaotic underside” of everything.
Here was God, finally, not in any church or temple, but everywhere I looked, if I could
just pay close enough attention.

BROCK CLARKE: This passage—from Joy Williams’s brilliant 2000 novel The Quick
and the Dead—shows what she does perhaps better than any other living American
writer: she uses a particular character’s limited point of view to say something large and
true and profound about the country in which this character lives without breaking
character and also without making a big, off-putting deal about the profundity. This is
one of Williams’s great gifts: she is so wise, and one of the ways she is wise is that she doesn’t insist the reader genuflect before the altar of her wisdom.

“Her gruesomely contorted hands rose a little, then fell back into her lap. Suddenly she wasn’t in Africa anymore—the terrifying sunrises, the thick beaks of the birds, the gazelles floating through the air. She had loved the sliver of green in the fierce bone white of the thorn tree. But now she was unwell and in Florida. But where was that? Florida could be anyplace, which had always been one of Florida’s problems.”

CLAIRE VAYE WATKINS: One way scientists and art historians detect forgeries is by testing paintings for certain radioactive isotopes, namely Caesium–137 and Strontium–90. These isotopes do not occur in nature. They were birthed into existence the way some say we were, via explosion, specifically two: “Fat Man” and “Little Boy.” These isotopes allow protectors of authentic antiquities to distinguish between art created before the bombs and after. Equally explosive, the work of Joy Williams blasted my world open. A friend gave me her tour de force novel *The Quick and the Dead* when I was about half finished with the short story collection that would become my first book. Williams completely annihilated everything I was doing. I finished *The Quick and the Dead* and then, in an feverish binge that I haven’t undergone before or since, I read the stories in *Taking Care*, then the novel *State of Grace*, then *Ill Nature*, Williams’ tough, brilliant essay collection. When the dust settled, I surveyed what I’d written, what I’d thought were half a dozen finished stories, stories that had been published well, stories that had impressed my dream agent. I saw fluff and flab. I saw intellectual laziness and artistic incompetence. I immediately ditched two of those and set out trimming, tightening, and complicating the survivors on every level, structure to sentence to syllable. New stories got leaner under Williams’ influence and, most crucially, they asked more of their readers. *The Quick and the Dead* is my 1945. When I look through the collection now, I can date the stories as pre-Joy or post-Joy. Joy Williams is my tell-tale isotope, both fission and fusion. If I have written anything I’m still proud of, I’ve done so in her long shadow.

TOBIAS WOLFF
EDWARD SCHWARZSCHILD: I heard Wolff read during college and then, fifteen years later, I was fortunate enough to study with him. During those years between the reading and the Stegner workshops, the stories he wrote—in *In the Garden of North American Martyrs*, *Back in the World*, and *The Night in Question*—were absolutely inspirational. Stories like “The Liar,” “The Rich Brother,” and “Smorgasbord,” and many others struck me as both contemporary and classic. I wanted—I still want, I’ll always want—to learn how to write stories that seem so immediate and timeless. During those fifteen years, I also spent considerable time with the anthology he edited in 1983, *Matters of Life and Death: New American Stories*, and I discovered that Wolff was not only writing the kind of stories I longed to read and write; he was also a superb guide for what to read. I continue to refer to that anthology, not only for the stories Wolff assembled there (by Beattie, Carver, Elkin, Ford, Hannah, Vaughn, and on and on), but also for the wisdom of Wolff’s introduction, in which he describes how he came to choose the writers he chose:

“They speak to us, without flippancy, about things that matter. They write about what happens between men and women, parents and children. They write about fear of death, fear of life, the feelings that bring people together and force them apart, the costs of intimacy. They remind us that our house is built on sand. They are, every one of them, interested in what it means to be human.”

If I start writing here about what it was like, from 1999 to 2001, to study with Tobias Wolff, I’ll be heading into a much longer, even more hagiographic essay. Briefly, what I can say is that it felt like I’d been learning from him for years, and I still am, and there remains so much more to learn.
Kathleen Alcott is the author of the novel *The Dangers of Proximal Alphabets*

Charles Bock is the author of the novel *Beautiful Children*

Ryan Boudinot is the author of *Blueprints of the Afterlife, Misconception, and The Littlest Hitler: Stories*

Blake Butler is the author of five books of fiction, including *Three Hundred Million, There Is No Year* and *Scorch Atlas*, and a work of hybrid nonfiction, *Nothing: A Portrait of Insomnia*

Michelle Hoover is the author of the novel *The Quickening*

Wendy Brenner is the author of the short story collections *Phone Calls from the Dead*, and *Large Animals in Everyday Life*

Brock Clarke is the author of the novels *The Happiest People in the World, Exley, An Arsonist’s Guide to Writers’ Homes in New England*, and *The Ordinary White Boy*, as well as the short story collections *What We Won’t Do*, and *Carrying the Torch*

Claire Vaye Watkins is the author of the short story collection *Battleborn*

Edward Schwarzschild is the author of the short story collection *The Family Diamond*, and the novel *Responsible Men*

*Lettering by Caleb Misclevitz*