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Joseph Nye on playing the power game

When things go wrong in Libya: John Bohannon

The miseducation of Tom Wolfe: Jenni Quilter

Marjane Satrapi's alternative Iran: Kristin Anderson

The life and times of Glenn Gould: Ditlev Rindom

Once upon a time, and what happened next ...

by Philip Pullman

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From the Editor

In 1951, Theodor Adorno claimed that 'cultural criticism exists in confrontation with the final level of the dialectic of culture and barbarism: to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric, and that also gnaws at the knowledge which states why it has become impossible to write poems today'. This statement, often reduced to the axiom 'to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric', remains to this day one of the most provocative challenges not just for poets (as well as writers, journalists, cultural and political critics, philosophers, and world leaders), but also for Holocaust survivors and all those who have inherited the legacy of the Hitler's 'Final Solution' and live with the after-effects of the Second World War. Indeed, even after the First World War, many writers struggled to find the words (and images and metaphors) to express the disillusionment of war, demonstrating that the methods and means of the previous century were no longer sufficient to truly represent the horrors of the twentieth century. Today, Adorno's claim continues to be put to the test. On 27 January 2005 when world leaders gathered in Poland to remember the sixtieth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, international newspapers were careful to report the event so as not to cause offence, but the outpouring of angry 'Letters to Editors' suggested that no matter the effort it was nearly impossible not to do so. In light of this, it is a great and rare relief when films such as 'Alles auf Zucker!' (a family comedy about the reunion of a notorious East German gambler and his Orthodox brother, directed by Dani Levy) are produced with slapstick humour and political incorrectness and achieve box office success—unfathomable and unacceptable possibilities in Adorno's era.

The last few months have witnessed the deaths of public figures including Susan Sontag (28 December 2005) and Arthur Miller (10 February 2005) who both made significant contributions to the preservation of the moral conscience of a nation and individually fought for human rights and peace. Sontag (who briefly attended St Anne's College in 1957), a passionate opponent of various causes including the Vietnam War, was known for the breadth of her critical intelligence and subject matter ranging from pornography to fascism, and was heavily criticised by both the right and the left. In the aftermath of 9/11, she provoked strong reactions with her statement in the *New Yorker*: 'Where is the acknowledgment that this was not a "cowardly" attack on "civilization" or "liberty" or "humanity" or "the free world" but an attack on the world's self-proclaimed superpower, undertaken as a consequence of specific American alliances and actions?' Arthur Miller, who won every major prize in his field, is best known for his plays, 'Death of a Salesman' and 'The Crucible'. He explored his own engagement with the Holocaust in 'Incident at Vichy' (1965), and throughout his life, was devoted to human rights issues includ-

ing: standing up against McCarthyism and the House Un-American Activities Committee, campaigning for the freedom of dissident writers, especially in the former USSR, and protesting against all forms of censorship. Most recently, he publicly criticised the invasion of Iraq and subsequent abridgements of civil liberties.

'Forty years after the Holocaust, I can speak about Memory, but not about *Versöhnung*, or reconciliation', wrote Eli Wiesel, one of the foremost writers on the Holocaust. If reconciliation is still not possible in 2005, at least we might in our own humble ways aim to the preserve the memory of those past atrocities (and the lessons they may reveal) and continue to fight passionately for universal human rights.

§

This Spring 2005 issue of *The Oxonian Review of Books* includes some unique contributions. Oxford based writer Philip Pullman shares his insights on 'openings' and his experiences with the recent National Theatre production of his trilogy 'His Dark Materials'. John Bohannon, *Science* journalist and recent Balliol post-graduate, offers an account of his recent trip to Libya to investigate the case of the Bulgarian nurses on trial for the contamination of a children's hospital with the AIDS virus sheds. His essay sheds new light on the disparity between Libya's newly-minted international image and the reality of its health and legal systems. The collision of politics and literature is explored in several pieces including an interview with Joseph Nye, Professor at Harvard and currently in residence at Balliol, whose novel, *The Power Game: A Washington Novel*, offers a rare inside view of issues of defence, non-proliferation and intelligence inside the White House. Kristin Anderson examines the personal and the political in her review of Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, a black-and-white graphic memoir about growing up in post-revolution Iran. Other unusual contributions include reviews of Kevin Bazzana's new biography of the pianist, Glenn Gould, and John Derbyshire's *Prime Obsession: Bernhard Riemann and the Greatest Unsolved Puzzle in Mathematics*. Our literature reviews include one of the first analyses of *Memoria de mis putas tristes*, Gabriel García Márquez's eagerly awaited first book in ten years; a fresh perspective on the life of the poet, Stevie Smith; an analysis of Tom Wolfe's new novel, *I am Charlotte Simmons* in the context of his other novels; and a review of Sandor Marai's *Casanova in Bolzano*, a refreshing retelling of the life of the famous lover Casanova, first published in Hungary in 1940 and recently translated into English.

Avery T. Willis, Editor-in-Chief
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The Nonagenarian & the Nymphette

On Gabriel García Márquez's newest novel

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The year of my ninetieth birthday I wanted to give myself a night of mad love with an adolescent virgin.

For most readers, this opening line may smack more of Henry Miller or Vladimir Nabokov than the perfumed, sensual prose of Gabriel García Márquez; but, like the Nobel Prize winner's previous novels, the first sentence of *Memoria de mis putas tristes* (literally 'memoir of my sad whores') engages the reader while encapsulating the central motivation of the narrative. The book—García Márquez's first work of fiction in a decade—relates the nonagenarian narrator's first encounter with actual love, revealing the late-blooming romantic hidden deep within himself.

The anonymous narrator, self-described as 'ugly, timid, and anachronistic', lives in a crumbling but beautiful aristocratic home in an unspecified city on the Caribbean coast. The solitude of old age and life-long bachelorhood dominates his existence: he lives alone, subsisting on memories of his saintly mother and the meagre pensions provided him by careers in journalism and teaching. His only activities outside his dilapidated residence are the occasional concert and a weekly column in the local newspaper. His sole accomplishment before we meet him on his ninetieth birthday, he admits, has been his prodigious sexual career. 'I have never slept with a woman without paying her', he boasts—no small financial feat considering that between the ages of twenty and fifty he had slept with 514 different women. His meticulous record of names and other 'details' was to become, literally, the eponymous *Memoir of My Sad Whores*. We only receive an incomplete version however, as these former encounters are eclipsed by the events of his ninetieth birthday. He reflects that 29 August represented 'the beginning of a new life at an age when the majority of mortals are dead'.

In order to fulfill his fantasy and find the above-mentioned adolescent virgin, the narrator enlists the help of Rosa Cabarcas—a brassy madam not unlike *Gone with the Wind's* Belle Watling—who is more concerned with the possibility of finding a virgin on such short notice than the anonymous protagonist's age. 'I don't mind changing diapers', he dryly remarks upon learning the only girl willing is 14 years old. Rosa eventually drugs the girl to alleviate her fears, leaving the virgin passed-out and unconscious of her imminent deflowering.

On the edge of pornography, García Márquez wrenches us back into the benignly erotic: rather than sleep with the unconscious girl, the narrator watches her attentively, overcome by her innocence and beauty. Night after night he returns to Rosa Cabarcas's bordello to lie next to the girl he christens Delgadina, 'little skinny girl'. Although no longer drugged, Delgadina sleeps—or pretends to sleep—through each encounter, interacting with the narrator only through body language and the occasional note left on the bathroom mirror in lipstick. Gradually the old man manufactures an 'identity' for the silent girl, complete with personal tastes, aspirations, and responsibilities, and subsequently falls in love for the first time. However, the protagonist is not merely a Pygmalion enamoured with the 'perfection' of an inanimate form. He feeds off of this perceived perfection (read: her youthful form as well as the invented 'content' of her life) and becomes rejuvenated himself; the mere possibilities of his relationship with Delgadina drives him, not just her aesthetic attributes. There is an abstract yet fulfilling love, one that emancipates him from the 'servitude that kept [him] subjugated since the age of thirteen'; in other words, it frees him from sex itself.



Gabriel García Márquez
Memoria de mis putas tristes
Alfred A. Knopf, 2004 .
112 pages
ISBN: 140004443X

The delicacy of this deferred release adds a particular potency to García Márquez's prose; the reader searches and waits for a climactic discharge to the bottled-up frustration of the couple's erotic yet sexless lives. Instead the author offers only tales of the corrupted diversions the narrator had experienced in his bizarre encounters with previous 'sad whores'. During this highly erotic period of late-life celibacy, the narrator tells us of his first sexual experience at the age of twelve, when he was raped by some local prostitutes, and then recounts numerous failed and superficial love affairs: the forced sodomizing of a washerwoman and other such dysfunctional sorts of 'love'. Only when he frees himself of the apparent necessity of sexual intercourse is he able to find true love with Delgadina. He discovers 'that love is not a state of the soul but rather a sign of the Zodiac', particularly revealing for a narrator born under Virgo.

Up to this point, those familiar with the source of the book's epigraph—the Japanese Nobel Prize winner Yasunari Kawabata's short story 'The House of the Sleeping Beauties'—will quickly see many parallels. In 'The House of the Sleeping Beauties', the main character Eguchi frequents a surreal brothel where old men pay to sleep beside young, drugged virgins. As Eguchi learns to experience Eros without physical contact, he recounts past conquests and longs to return to the height of his sexual prowess. Love as discovered under the sheets next to a dormant maiden is a curse: the impossibility of release frustrates the Japanese gentleman to the point of anguish. The narrator of *Memoria de mis putas tristes* approximates Eguchi in a biographical sense; obviously García Márquez drew heavily on his appreciation for Kawabata during

'I don't mind changing diapers', he dryly remarks upon learning the girl is only fourteen years old.

his writing process. However, the Latin American narrator finds new life rather than sorrow in his love for Delgadina. His abstinence springs not from physical inability but psychological fulfillment; sex has become marginal, merely 'the consolation that one has when love

doesn't reach him'.

In the second half of the novel's mere one hundred pages, García Márquez distils the timeworn progression of literary romance: initial bliss, followed by jealousy, separation, and reconciliation. The narrator channels these emotions into his newspaper articles-cum-love letters, emerging as a strange sort of sex symbol within the tropical town. The depth and verity of his love for Delgadina is demonstrated when he suspects that Rosa Cabarcas has 'rented' Delgadina to another man. Suddenly this ninety-year-old becomes a raging monster, destroying everything in sight and rebuking the girl as a whore, thereby grouping her with his previous, meaningless conquests. No one 'grows up' when it comes to love,

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or perhaps García Márquez thinks no one ought to; even at ninety the protagonist's passions are as deeply volatile a mix of love and hate as could be found at a sixth-form social.

In the ensuing separation—during which time he licks his emotional wounds—the narrator rekindles a relationship with a previous 'sad whore' and they travel together, ruminating on age, sex, and love. The seasoned prostitute reprimands him for losing Delgadina, saying 'there is no worse misfortune than to die alone... You are not going to die not having tried the marvels of screwing with love'. Galvanized, the old man returns to Delgadina to find what he describes as 'real life, at last'. The narrator and Rosa Cabarcas become pseudo-parents to the girl, making her benefactor of both their estates.

The book closes, in stark contrast to Kawabata's short story, with the protagonist looking to the future with anticipation—resigned to a happy death well into his hundreds. In the end, we have little choice but to identify with the narrator and surrender any reservations about abnormal forms of love or sexuality we had been harboring throughout the book. The undeniable universality of growing old—fostered within the novel by the anonymity of the protagonist—cannot but touch any reader, regardless of age. And it is dangerously difficult to avoid speculating that the author has not thrown a bit of himself into his aged character; although a presumptuous conflation, the narrator's perspectives on old age become more poignant with García Márquez's 76-year-old voice echoing behind the written word. However, *Memoria* is most successful not as a tale about growing old, but rather rejuvenation and first love, even in the strangest of circumstances.

Admittedly, to some readers it might appear that the plot of *Memoria* is merely a Latin American stereotype, too full of sex and humidity. García Márquez has executed another work of extreme verbal and narrative fecundity, a style made famous in novels such as *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) and *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1985). However, I would caution the English-language reader of García Márquez (the second most translated Spanish-language author after Cervantes) from conceiving of any part of *Memoria de mis putas tristes* as typifying Latin American literature as a whole. Such cliché (though often endearing) elements as fantastical sexual histories, isolated tropical towns, and decaying colonial mansions are not archetypes of Latin American writing in general but rather of García Márquez himself. For this reason, *Memoria* is a welcome, if inevitably minor, addition to his *oeuvre*, with little chance of reaching canonical status (although publishing practices in the Anglophone world may make it appear as such).

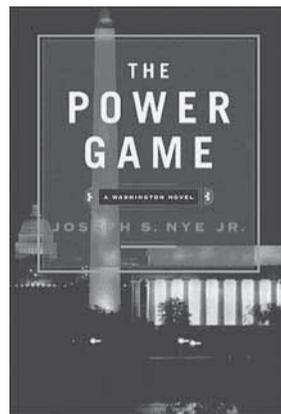
The English translation of *Memoria de mis putas tristes* will carry the title *A Memory of My Melancholy Whores* (an odd rendering of the original) and is due out in September 2005. Edith Grossman, the book's translator, has worked extensively with the pillars of modern Latin American literature, García Márquez, Mario Vargas Llosa, and Nicanor Parra (her version of Vargas Llosa's *Feast of the Goat* [2001] is of particular note). Hopefully her 'melancholy whores' can approximate the density and playfulness of García Márquez's *putas tristes*.

Glen Goodman is an American MPhil student in European literature at Exeter College. His work focuses on Latin American Literature.

The undeniable universality of growing old—fostered within the novel by the anonymity of the protagonist—cannot but touch any reader, regardless of age.

Talking power

Tim Soutphommasane and Shaun Chau interview Joseph Nye



Joseph S. Nye Jr.
The Power Game:
A Washington Novel
Public Affairs, 2004.
247 pages
ISBN: 1586482262

There are very few professors of political science writing novels today. Joseph Nye may be the only one. Until recently the Dean of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, Nye's name is synonymous among students of politics and international relations with the concept of 'soft power'. He is also esteemed as one of the most senior national security advisors. During the Clinton years, Nye served as Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs and as Chair of the National Intelligence Council; and had John Kerry won last year's presidential election, it was expected that Nye would have been offered a senior post in the administration. But now, if only temporarily, Nye has chosen a different medium for exploring ideas in the world of foreign affairs, turning his mind from the intricacies of international relations theory to the no less testing demands of character development, plot and dialogue.

In his first novel *The Power Game*, Nye tells a tale of political intrigue and power within the Washington defence and foreign policy establishment centring around Pakistan selling nuclear technology to Iran. It is a story to which Nye brings his own experience of working on defence, non-proliferation and intelligence matters. Indeed, on the surface, the story of *The Power Game* is not dissimilar from the author's own life. Peter Cutler, an idealistic political scientist, is lured from his comfortable academic post at Princeton University by the offer of a plum position as Undersecretary of State for Security Affairs in Washington. Cutler begins somewhat naively, but quickly finds his feet in the high-stakes power politics of the Washington elite.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, soft power, the idea for which Nye is best known, forms an important backdrop to the book. Since first coining the term in the late 1980s, Nye has been a prominent advocate of soft power, that is, the deployment of the 'attractive' power of cultural values and diplomacy, as opposed to economic and military coercion, to achieve political ends. Elsewhere Nye has criticised the current US administration for being too unilateralist in its approach to foreign policy and failing to engage sufficiently with other countries. In the figure of Cutler, Nye is able to develop and test the concept of soft power, showing not only in its manifest strengths, but also at times, its potential weaknesses.

Politics aside, it is perhaps ethics with which Nye is most concerned in *The Power Game*. Cutler is an intelligent, decent man who is steadily corrupted by power politics. Nye seems to ask: What is the price of power? Can power ever be used purely for justified ends? What truth is there in Lord Acton's dictum that power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely? The personal and political fortunes of Cutler, ending ultimately in his political downfall, provide the setting for an exploration, if not necessarily a resolution, of these provocative questions.

To understand the purpose behind the writing of *The Power Game*, as well as the concept of soft power that lurks in the shadows of its pages, we interviewed Professor Nye, currently on leave from Harvard as a visiting fellow at Balliol College and the Department of Politics and International Relations in Oxford.

Professor Nye, why did you decide to write *The Power Game*?

Nye: I've been intrigued by questions about ethics and power for some time, and thought I could explore it with more subtlety perhaps than I could in academic prose. I'm particularly interested in the seductiveness of power. When you get into a position of power you can become tempted by the opportunities it presents. Then, the question becomes one of how you keep your own sense of balance or moral compass. I found that when I first went to Washington during the Carter administration, I had to adjust to a very different kind of environment. It's something I try to describe in the chapters of the book, when I deal with what it's like to go from an academic career to a bureaucratic political struggle. Part of my reason for writing the book grew out of that—the question of how to keep your sense of balance. Another part of it grew out of my work in the Carter administration in trying to stop the spread of nuclear weapons. At the time we knew that Pakistan was trying to get a nuclear bomb, and the question was whether we could use force to stop Pakistan. This got wrapped up in the plot of the book as well. So part of writing *The Power Game* was personal, and part of it had to do with certain policy questions.

There are obvious similarities between Joseph Nye and Peter Cutler. How much of Joseph Nye is there in Peter Cutler? And, more generally, how much autobiography was involved in *The Power Game*?

Nye: No one character in the novel is a one-on-one mapping with anybody. The nice thing about fiction is you can take bits and pieces from people and make characters of your own. There are a number of things Peter Cutler experiences which were things that I experienced. But there are also experiences that I didn't experience. The book is a composite of these things. I would think of events or actions that happened to friends of mine that I put into Peter Cutler's life. *The Power Game* is not autobiographical in a one-to-one sense.

The picture that comes out of *The Power Game* is that power is really the only currency that counts in Washington. Is this the harsh reality of life there?

Nye: If you're not successful in power games, you can't accomplish the purposes you had set out. If you want to use power for good, you have to obtain power first of all. The question is what are your means in seeking out power, and what is the relationship between your means and your ends. But I think by and large the danger is one in which you become entranced with the means of power, the intrinsic satisfaction you get from power, and you forget about the larger ethical purposes you were trying to pursue.

How do you avoid this trap of power? Is it possible to avoid it?

Nye: Well, yes, you can. You keep a sense of perspective on who you are, and not let yourself become too self-important. It helps to have a good spouse who can keep you from running off the rails, and give you a sense of balance. It helps to get away from Washington, whether it be through running or taking a long walk in the woods, or anything that makes you step back and get a little bit of perspective. One of my friends in Washington talked about escaping up to the balcony and watching the people on the dance floor. It's hard to have that perspective

when you're in the middle of the dance floor. Occasionally you have to put yourself up on the balcony.

The main character in *The Power Game*, Peter Cutler, clashes with hawks in the White House and the Pentagon in arguing for more diplomacy and less heavy-handed strategies. You have been a very vocal advocate of 'soft power', that is, the power of persuasion and attraction. Is it possible to read *The Power Game* as an allegory about soft power?

Nye: I drew this novel as one in which soft power doesn't prevail. Peter Cutler advocates soft power but he doesn't win. And I think in that sense I don't think I was writing a fictionalized version of my book about soft power. I was turning to a different question—about how power relates to morality whether it be soft power or hard power. And so essentially it's a story about decline and fall. Peter Cutler starts out with good intentions, but in the process he becomes corrupted by power. It's not an allegory of soft power as much as it is a description of power and morality and I read the ending as slightly optimistic but somebody could read it as pessimistic.

You've said in one interview that at a conference in 2003, Donald Rumsfeld was asked about his opinion on soft power, but replied he didn't know what it meant. Is soft power something that has been ignored within defense and foreign policy circles in Washington?

Nye: It has been ignored in the Pentagon—by the civilians in the Pentagon. But it's not ignored in the State Department. For example, Colin Powell used the term soft power and he often referred to it. It is ironic that it is not ignored by many within the military, who know that winning hearts and minds is part of winning the battle. But the people who came in around Rumsfeld and Cheney remain very fixated with hard power and I think underplay the role of soft power.

We've recently had what seem to be successful elections in Iraq. Does this demonstrate that the use of hard power over soft power with respect to Iraq has been justified?

Nye: It's probably too early to make a judgment about Iraq. If you try to do a balance sheet on Iraq after the first year, I think you can say that the negatives outweigh the positives. After a year and a half, you've had the elections, you've seen a little bit more of the positive side of the balance sheet than you did before. But much will depend on whether you were able to create a stable government, whether you have really established democracy, whether ordinary Iraqis are truly better off than they were before, whether that justifies the number of people killed. Those are the things that you might be able to identify only after ten years. At this stage, if you're trying to sum up the balance sheet, it's still probably more heavily negative than positive. This is not to take away from the importance of the Iraq election, which was a very significant achievement, but we should put it into context of a continuing stream of events.

Critics of the current Bush administration would say that American soft power has suffered immeasurably in recent years, with perceptions of American unilateralism and the neoconservative thrust of American foreign policy. Is this a fair assessment? And if so, how long will it take to recover American soft power?

Nye: Looking back at the Vietnam period, when America was very unpopular around the world because of the Vietnam War, you had a situation where America had managed to turn around its unpopularity by the end of

the 70s. And part of that was because we changed our policies. We got out of Vietnam, we had an emphasis on human rights. So there are things you can do to regain soft power. I think in the case of the aftermath of Iraq, you have Bush's ability to achieve a political solution in Iraq, the ability to make real progress in the Middle East with the peace process, and the willingness to be more consultative in its foreign policy style. And in the early stages of the second term of the Bush Administration, it's almost as though it's rediscovered soft power. It seems to be heading in that direction, but it's probably too early to make a definitive judgment.

Is rebuilding American soft power the most important challenge facing America at the moment in the international context?

Nye: I think it's extraordinarily important because in the long run you can't prevail in the struggle against Jihadist terrorism unless you rebuild your soft power. And the reason is that you can't kill all the possible terrorists, because there will always be a new supply of terrorists coming along. Therefore your ability to win the hearts and minds of the populace from which the terrorists will try to recruit is the secret to success in the war.

It might be said that soft power can't be used by America to combat the threat of terrorism effectively. For example, you might ask why Islamist terrorists would care about America's attractiveness when they want to destroy America. Where does soft power then fit in?

Nye: I think that's true so far as the terrorists themselves. You're not going to attract bin Laden or Al Qaeda and the point is you need hard power to respond to bin Laden and Al Qaeda. The question I'm raising is how do you prevent bin Laden and Al Qaeda from recruiting a new generation of replacements or from broadening their appeal. That's where your soft power comes in. If you're attractive to the larger majority of the Muslim world, they'll be less able to persuade other people from supporting what I would say is their narrow and ideological version of their religion which they're propounding.

Are there any countries at the moment that are using soft power more effectively than the US?

Nye: Europe has been effective in its use of soft power, if you look at the ability of Europe to attract other countries to join the EU, and the efforts that countries like Turkey have made in changing their policies on human rights and democratic reform. A lot of that can be attributed to Europe's soft power. But the Europeans, while they have been effective in their use of soft power, sometimes don't pay enough attention to the need for hard power.

Finally, Professor Nye, are there times when you miss the politics of Washington?

Nye: At times. If Kerry had won last year, I probably would have been invited to go back to Washington and probably would have succumbed to the temptation to go back. There's something about having your hands on the levers of power, about people able to shape policy in what you would consider to be a good direction. It would have been a very tempting proposition.

Tim Soutphommasane is an MPhil student in political theory at Balliol College. **Shaun Chau** is an MPhil student in comparative social policy at Green College. Both hail from Sydney, Australia.

After Horace: II.3

Enjoy the fleeting hour!

Aequam memento rebus in arduis...

Dellius, my friend
Remember to keep a calm mind
When life is rough
And likewise, when life is good
Restrain from excessive joy.
For whether you live
In perpetual gloomy times, or
Recline your holidays in remote meadows,
Indulging in Falernian wine
From your innermost cellar,
You will die.

Why do the tall pine
And white poplar
Love to form a hospitable shade
With their branches?
Why does the fleeing water labour
Nervously over its twisted course?
This is it: Tell them to bring
Wine and perfume and the brief blooms of roses,
While life and time and the black threads
Of the three Sisters of Fate allow it.

You will leave the forest
You bought and your house
And your villa washed clean
By the yellow Tiber river.
You will leave them
And your heir will inherit
The wealth you have built up to great heights.

Whether you live
Under the sky a rich man
Or a poor man
From the lowest family,
It makes no difference.
You are still a miserable victim of Orcis,
Of Death.

We are all gathered together
To the same place
For the same purpose:
For all
The lot shaken in the urn of Fate
Sooner or later
Will come out
And put us on the boat for eternal exile.

Anabella Pomi



David Constantine
Under the Dam
Comma Press, 2005.
£7.95

Comma Press announces the hometown launch of *Under the Dam*, the first full collection of short stories by acclaimed poet, translator and Modern languages fellow, David Constantine. From an Americanized Moscow to the shores of the Hebrides, these stories resonant with a haunting sense of place and a knack for freeze-framing each character's life just at the moment when the past breaks the surface, or when the present - like the dam of the title - collapses under its own weight.

'A haunting collection filled with delicate clarity. Constantine has a sure grasp of the fear and fragility within his characters.'
A. L. Kennedy

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From Prophecy to Punk

Marjane Satrapi's alternative Iran



Marjane Satrapi
Persepolis: The Story of an Iranian Childhood
 Pantheon Books, 2003.
 160 pages
 ISBN: 0375422307

Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return
 Pantheon Books, 2004.
 192 pages
 ISBN: 0375422889

'Image is an international language,' Iranian graphic artist Marjane Satrapi declares. 'When you draw a situation—someone is scared or angry or happy—it means the same thing in all cultures... It is more accessible.' For her, this is less comment than credo: from the outset, it is clear that Satrapi is targeting an international market. *Persepolis* (2004), Satrapi's two-volume graphic memoir of her upbringing in, egress from and return to post-revolutionary Iran, contains a fiercely propagandistic streak which is advanced by her choice of the graphic medium. Certainly, her striking, tender illustrations and necessarily laconic text both work compellingly towards one end: correcting western misperceptions of Iran.

Writing from Paris in the paranoid political climate of early 2002, Satrapi finished *Persepolis* amidst the militant grumblings of a White House already anticipating a 'pre-emptive liberation' of 'evil' Iran. Such Western demonising is precisely what *Persepolis* seeks persuasively to undermine. Indeed, while critical of the Iranian theology, Satrapi remains a fervent patriot at heart, explicitly asserting her memoir as a counter-narrative to Western prejudice. The first volume of *Persepolis* is prefaced by a simple, and at times simplistic, polemic—part Iranian-history-for-dummies (yet the Persian language and culture withstood these invasions, and the invaders assimilated into this strong culture, in some ways becoming Iranians themselves) and part mission statement: 'this old and great civilization has been mentioned mostly in connection with fundamentalism, fanaticism, and terrorism. ...I know this image to be far from the truth. I believe that an entire nation should not be judged by the wrongdoings of a few extremists.'

Not surprisingly, Satrapi's publisher L'Association endorsed her quest for wide exposure: even before publication, *Persepolis* was heavily marketed as the Franco-Iranian answer to Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1986). Unfortunately, too many reviewers jumped on this bandwagon. To compare a graphic memoir to *Maus* is to a young artist what it is to label a songwriter the new Dylan, and the many critics who suggested as much do her a disservice. For one, the comparison is inapt. Perhaps because Satrapi writes within the more mainstream French graphic books industry, the text has none of *Maus*' artistic self-consciousness, nor does it reflect *Maus*' questioning and subversion of memoir as authentic historical record. Moreover, while Spiegelman uses the graphic format to build up intricate symbologies, Satrapi illustrates mostly at face value, employing her illustrations more photographically than metaphorically. Yet though her work is not as self-aware, sweeping, or meticulous as Spiegelman's, or even as Joe Sacco's (author of *Palestine*, to whom she's also been compared), it is still unflinching and immensely poignant.

Raised in a left-leaning and privileged family in Tehran, Satrapi's autobiography begins in 1979 when, 'after a long sleep of 2500 years, the revolution has finally awakened the people'. Her upbringing was, she acknowledges, far from commonplace: after being given a comic book entitled *Dialectical Materialism*, her pre-adolescent self dismisses a previous calling to prophecy and assumes the

mantle of Che Guevara, forming schoolyard juntas and at one point somewhat bemusedly yelling at her mother, 'Dictator! You are the guardian of the revolution of this house!' (Subsequently, when Allah still makes the odd appearance in her dreams, conversations become a bit awkward: 'So you don't want to be a prophet anymore?' 'Let's talk about something else.' '...You think I look like Marx?' 'I told you to talk about something else.' '...Tomorrow the weather's going to be nice.')

For all of its charm and idiosyncrasies, her privileged perspective can at times seem a bit at odds with her prefatory goals: this is hardly an everyman's story. Her Iran is a small one, a snapshot of Tehranian upper-middle class intellectuals who can afford to send their children abroad when domestic politics get too dodgy. Although she mentions that her grandfather was a prince and later served as prime minister under Reza Shah, we also don't know why the vocal Satrapis can remain relatively unscathed both financially and politically through such tumultuous times. How little she and her family suffer by comparison is a constant, guilty theme, and Satrapi is blunt about both her guilt and her privilege. Schoolyard falsehoods of revolutionary one-upmanship (of the 'my dad's in prison'... 'yeah, well, my dad's been dismembered' ilk) are recalled with embarrassment; and years later she admits, after being arrested and fined yet again for alcohol consumption, that, 'To be able to party, you had to have means.'

Progressing episodically through her childhood, the first volume of *Persepolis* addresses more serious and formative political occurrences than the second, albeit from a more oblique vantage point. Her perspective matures as she ages. Book one begins with childlike naivety: political events are filtered through day-to-day happenstance. This is an affective strategy, resulting in a seemingly immediate and unmediated narrative. Historical watersheds—the burning of the Rex Cinema, the US embassy hostage crisis—are nightmarishly surreal and fleeting, conjured out of schoolyard gossip and adult whispers. As her political consciousness develops, however, so too does the realism of her images. Situated in the interstices between the political and the personal, much of *Persepolis*' potency derives from the disjunction between Satrapi's plain, matter-of-fact descriptions and the often horrific events depicted. Thus, by the time the first book reaches its shattering climax—the torture and execution of her favourite uncle—so deliberately, brutally minimalist are Satrapi's images that the inexpressibility of her grief is tangible to a wholly empathetic audience.

More retrospective and sage, book two features an older Satrapi in place of the childlike narrator of the first volume. Accordingly, although *Persepolis 2* covers less epic political events, it is more wry and, for its wisdom, more touching. Sent to Vienna by parents worried about the increasing political tumult, it opens with fourteen-year-old Marjane newly-arrived at her Catholic boarding house. Not surprisingly, her culture-shock is immense, but Satrapi records it with customary irony (her comment of, 'It's going to be cool to go to school without a veil, to not have to beat oneself every day for the war martyrs,' is countered by a vacuous cousin's stare and the insightful retort of, 'this is my raspberry-scented pen, but I have strawberry and blackberry ones, too').

She has a keen eye for caricature, and some of her finest humour—as well as her most effective and subtle political commentary—comes by deadpan depiction of the vapidness and absurdity of her European counterparts (a direct parallel, she suggests, to the ignorance and bluster informing much of Iranian culture). As an outsider,

Satrapi makes friends with the marginalised, with secondary-school punks who smoke up, flip through Sartre ('my comrades' favourite author...I found him a little annoying'), and admire her because she's 'known death'; and with anarchists, whose main subversive pastimes include playing volleyball, misquoting Bakunin and doing a bit of LSD. With droll precision, she zips through her intellectual development, voraciously absorbing everything from the history of the commune ('I concluded that the French right of this epoch were worthy of my country's fundamentalists') to her mother's much-loved de Beauvoir:

Simone explained that if women peed standing up, their perception of life would change. So I tried. It ran lightly down my left leg... Seated, it was much simpler. And, as an Iranian woman, before learning to urinate like a man, I needed to learn to become a liberated and emancipated woman.

She manages this emancipation thoroughly, if fully. Her sexual adolescence—the ridiculousness of her first boyfriends, living with eight gay men, developing a sizeable ass—is traversed with typical retrospective self-mockery. (Early attempts at romance are candid and cringingly recognisable.) Secure finally in her sexuality, her intellect and her fiercely-guarded independence, she finishes secondary school with moderate success and, after a brief stint on the streets owing to bad luck and a drug habit, heads back to Tehran.

When she returns to Iran, however, her re-immersion is far from easy: Tehran's streets have been renamed after the martyrs whose faces now adorn building-sized murals; her childhood friends have lost limbs in the trenches or have glammed up into husband-hunting hostesses; there is a palpable, silent tension between her parents; and her embarrassment over what she regards as the personal failures of the previous four years, particularly when contrasted with hardships of a nation, leads to a chain of uncomprehending therapists and eventually a suicide attempt. Having reached her nadir, Satrapi rallies. In a few heady pages she goes from overdose to aerobics instructor to art school candidate—no mean feat given that 40% of all university places are reserved for children of the martyrs and that any university entrant must first pass a draconian ideological exam.

The second half of *Persepolis 2* is constantly backgrounded by political upheaval, and it is here, telling a personal story with political incidentals, that her autobiography is most compelling. During the early eighties, the government had imprisoned and executed so many students that by 1990, even the most educated, satellite-TV-nourished young adults avoided overt political demonstration. Revolution was relegated to the details:

It hinged on...showing your wrist, a loud laugh, having a walkman... The regime had understood that one person leaving her house while asking herself: 'Are my trousers long enough?' 'Is my veil in place?' 'Can my makeup be seen?' no longer asks herself: 'Where is my freedom of speech?' 'My life, is it liveable?' 'What's going on in the political prisons?'

Courtship itself becomes an act of rebellion: in a world of single-sex staircases (so men cannot watch women ascend), wearing the maghnaeh sexily becomes 'a real science—you learn how to fold it so that from the side no hair is visible but from the front small locks appear'. The conservatory too is a minefield: some of Satrapi's most scathing sarcasm is justifiably reserved for the hypocrisies inherent to an art institute run by a fundamentalist state. When presented with a (fully-clothed) male model, she's

chastised for looking at him directly; her incredulous query of, 'Should I draw this man while looking at the door???!' is met by a terse, un-ironic, 'Yes'. Similarly, after explaining the difficulty of studying anatomy as modelled by a woman in a chador, she dryly concludes, 'We nevertheless learned to draw drapes.'

Perhaps inevitably, a healthy underground culture arises amongst her college friends. Behind firmly closed doors, they pose for each other without inhibition; hidden satellite dishes broadcast CNN; drinking, smoking, sex and (tragically) Bon Jovi are de rigueur. And while such minor licenses at times have devastating consequences—in three wordless pages of beautifully austere silhouettes, a friend falls to his death in a moonlit flight from police—the parallels she draws between her own life and her readers' are apparent. The same vanities, the same insouciance. 'The more time passed,' she concludes with a newcomer's relief, 'the more I became conscious of the contrast between the official representation of my country and the real life of the people, the one that went on behind the walls.'

To that end, while Satrapi makes an effort to show most sides to an argument—once even depicting a mulah sympathetically—for the most part hers is a narrative infused with disbelief, irony and rage both at those who perpetuate Iran's fundamentalism and at those who judge it from afar. Her refusal to mention any Ayatollah is a pointed act of resistance – although it restricts an already limited perspective and political salience – that echoes her opening plea for 'an entire nation...[to] not be judged by the wrongdoings of a few extremists'. This is obviously fair, but were she to widen her scope to include information about these extremists, who must surely number more than a 'few', it might make her account seem a bit less one-sided and narrow without compromising her politics too severely.

Had she stuck to straightforward memoir, it would have served her educational aims just as effectively. Unfortunately, on the rare occasion when Satrapi does interrupt her autobiography with overt polemic, it typically takes the form of condescendingly didactic asides. Obviously intended for myopic post-9/11 westerners, these elementary history lessons have all of the realism of the Marx-Descartes conversation in her *Dialectical Materialism* primer. The odd footnote is understandable, perhaps even useful (an asterisk at the bottom of a cell noting that 'the term "mujahideen" isn't specific to Afghanistan. It means a combatant'); and the occasional lapse into clumsy platitude forgivable ('besides, fear has always been a driving-force behind all dictators' repression'). But her already clunky dialogue exacerbates such abrasive and unnatural moralising—take, for example, the following assessment cleverly camouflaged by familial conversation:

Marjane: The western media also fights against us. That's where our reputation as fundamentalists and terrorists comes from!

Mom: You're right. Between one's fanaticism and the other's disdain, it's hard to know which side to choose. Personally, I hate Saddam and I have no

sympathy for the Kuwaitis, but I hate just as much the cynicism of the allies who call themselves 'liberators' while they're there for the oil.

Cue visible flinch. Surely if the redressing of balances is her goal, hard-hitting reportage—interviews with those who endured Iraq's US-sponsored assault, or even the straightforward citation of statistics—would be more effective. Instead, Satrapi mounts the soapbox and damn well pummels her point home.² This occasional pedantic streak is unfortunate, as the humour and frankness of her story go much further towards humanising Iran.

Fortunately, her illustrations amply compensate for her prose's heavy-handedness. Striking and brutal, her monochromatic, largely untextured images ably evoke the oppressiveness of the Islamic Republic and particularly its strictures of attire (women are often reduced to silhouettes, opaque and anonymous). And yet out of these austere lines, she coaxes an extraordinary amount of facial expression: distinguishing from a morass of veils and shadow the shades of each character's personality is something Satrapi micromanages down to the dimple.

Though her images tend more toward the literal than the metaphorical, *Persepolis'* dream sequences and moments of crisis (the onset of the Iran-Iraq war, her departure from Tehran, the torture of her uncle) often edge towards the jagged surrealism of French artist and acknowledged forebear David B. (*Epileptic*). On these occasions, Satrapi's usually pared-down illustrations become richly and widely allusive, pointedly commingling western tradition with two and half centuries of Persian culture. The pietà is invoked twice: once poignantly, as her mother faints into her father's arms as she boards the plane for Vienna, and once ironically, a woman in a chador clutching a martyr in military uniform; many of the textures of Achaemenian/Sasanian art reappear in the background of dream sequences and epic histories; and the Islamic crescent moon rises at her lowest points with a sarcastic twinkle. Brilliantly, her single-cell delineation of '2500 years of tyranny and submission' is rendered as bas-relief pastiche, with Mongolian cavalry toe-to-heel with sunglass-clad Marxists and Uncle Sam. As Cyrus the

Great gazes at the scene in comic despair, Satrapi bringing history full circle with tongue-in-cheek wit. Clearly, she's still a patriot at heart: this incarnation of Iranian governance, she suggests repeatedly, is merely the latest in a cyclical history—there is something intrinsic to Iranian national character that withstands superficial ideologies. The ruins of Persepolis thus provide her with a perfect metaphor: an icon intriguing to and beloved of the western tourist, it is also a symbol of both imperial transience and the tenacity of Persian nationalism.

Ultimately, the graphic medium suits her purposes well for several reasons: for one, her prose is neither eloquent nor original enough to stand on its own. For another, the restrictions of her pared-down illustrations suit the absolutes and ironies of both Iran and Europe, and subtly draw parallels between the two that in straight text would lack nuance. Moreover, the graphic format permits her to oscillate between journalistic realism and solipsistic whimsy far more than would a more traditional autobiographical format. Finally, as she acknowledges, it renders the subject less serious, more sympathetic, more accessible—all desirable traits for a woman seeking to change the world's mind.

Of course, now, in 2005, her prefatory mission might seem a bit less urgent. Iranian/Western political relations are inching away from the messianic bellicosity of Bush's infamous 'axis of evil' speech and towards grudging diplomacy, as in the case of the recent Nuclear Proliferation talks. And given Europe's recent inundation by Iranian cultural exports—the bestselling *Reading Lolita in Tehran, Lipstick Jihad* by Azadeh Moaveni, the widespread acclaim of new films by Kiarostami, Magsoudlou, and Maryam Keshavarz—Satrapi's zeal to introduce Iranian counter-culture to the west might seem a bit overstated. Nevertheless, her endemic humour, arresting illustration and the comic-book format itself ('People don't take it so seriously,' she admits) effectively offset the moralising gravitas of her prologue. Certainly, Satrapi's autobiography is so likeable that despite a didactic strain it remains an engaging, compelling read. While *Persepolis'* feistiness and creativity pay tribute as much to Satrapi herself as to contemporary Iran, if her aim is to humanise her homeland, this amiable, sardonic and very candid memoir couldn't do a better job.

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Notes

1. Interview with Dave Welch, 17.9.2004 (<http://www.powells.com/authors/satrapi.html>).
2. Of course, if nuance and taste are so lacking in our own critical vocabulary that *Persepolis* is deemed a 'stylised, clever and moving weapon of mass destruction' by the *Telegraph*, perhaps Satrapi's within her rights to underestimate us.

When things go wrong in Libya



Anthony Ham
Lonely Planet: Libya
 Lonely Planet Publications,
 2002.
 264 pages
 ISBN: 0864426992

Libya Report 2004
 Amnesty International,
 London
<http://web.amnesty.org/report2004/lby-summary-eng>

'Libya is the type of desert nation you thought only existed in the imagination.'

Anthony Ham

According to the Lonely Planet guide to Libya, by Anthony Ham, winter is 'the most pleasant time to visit', and I agree. As I sat listening to Zdravko Georgiev describe how he and his wife Kristiyana were tortured by the Libyan police, I longed to open the window and let in the cool breeze that blows off the Mediterranean in the evening. I felt claustrophobic, although the interview was held in one of Tripoli's 'elegant white-washed' buildings from the Italian colonial era, with their graciously high ceilings.

I adore guidebooks. Not only do they give the traveler practical information—which items to pack besides a passport, where to find cheap lodging, how to say 'please', what to do when the passport is stolen—these days they include essays on local history, politics, and culture that make for good reading even at home. Secure at the top of the heap is Lonely Planet, the world's largest independent travel publisher, always striving to be the first to stake out virgin territory, excluding neither the unreachable (Bhutan) nor the inadvisable (Iran). Anthony Ham has placed another jewel in the Lonely Planet crown with his eloquent and detailed guide to Libya. Before Lonely Planet came to the rescue, the only reliable overview of the Great Socialist People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya had been Amnesty International's annual human rights report. Prospective tourists—expected to pour in now that sanctions have been lifted—will be pleased by this alternative to Amnesty's dry prose. I was lucky to visit Libya as a journalist in December 2004 and put Mr. Ham's guide to the test.

Although 'torture' does not appear in the index of the Lonely Planet guide, nine pages are devoted to the coastal town of Benghazi where Zdravko and Kristiyana were arrested. Ham admits that Libya's second largest city 'lacks the obvious Mediterranean charm of Tripoli', but says it is worth seeing 'Freedom Square, one of Benghazi's most enchanting spots, particularly in the late afternoon when Benghazi children play football'. Ham does not mention nearby Al-Fateh Children's Hospital where, should the play become too rough, children can be delivered for care.

Like most hospitals in the country, Al-Fateh is administered by Libyans but relies on many qualified foreigners such as Kristiyana, a nurse, to keep it running due to the shortage of local expertise. Late at night on 9 February 1999, Kristiyana was among 23 Bulgarian medics pulled from their beds, forced into cars, and driven away in blindfolds. Zdravko was working as a doctor in the Sahara when he heard that his wife had disappeared. He rushed to Benghazi and began visiting police stations for help. After several days, he too was arrested without explanation.

Months passed before the Libyan authorities fully

explained the arrests. But by then the media had caught wind of the situation. Hundreds of children treated at Al-Fateh had been found to be HIV-infected, and dozens were already suffering AIDS-related illnesses. Zdravko and Kristiyana, along with five other Bulgarian nurses and a Palestinian doctor, were charged with deliberately injecting children with HIV-tainted blood to 'undermine the security of the State', a crime that calls for the death penalty.¹

Later the country's long-time leader, Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, announced that the virus had been specially designed in a laboratory abroad and given to the medics for experiments on the children. He suspected the involvement of the CIA or of Israel's Mossad. Libyans rallied around this theory when three of the medics admitted to the crimes. Public opinion did not change after it came to light that the authorities had used torture and rape to extract the 'confessions'. When the Bulgarian embassy was allowed to visit the prison, some of the medics' health was visibly deteriorating. A doctor's examination revealed the scars of torture, although his report was criticised in court for not following correct procedure. (According to Amnesty, 'human rights violations continue to be widespread', including the 'arbitrary arrest' of political opponents and 'heretics' who are 'detained incommunicado for long periods without charge', suffering torture or 'unexplained death' in prison.)

I shifted uncomfortably in my seat as Georgiev stared at the floor. Compared to photographs I saw of him from a few years before, he seemed to have aged rapidly, his blue eyes trapped in a face of craggy, ashen rock. In his broken English, he quietly recalled his first year in prison. His mouth suddenly went dry and I silently wished he would pause to drink from a glass of water on the low table between us. (Ham accurately notes that the tap water is safe but 'tends to be salty and not particularly pleasant'.) Although he had lost teeth from continual beatings, he explained, this paled next to being kept in a damp cage until his clothing rotted and his skin festered. I felt a stab of nausea when he looked up and said, 'This was nothing, compared to what they did to my wife. This was nothing'.

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Unusual for the guidebook genre, the author of the Lonely Planet guide to Libya ventures a few of his own political views. 'Forget the myths about Libyan hostility to the outside world', urges Ham. The reputation is unfair, claims the Australian travel writer, because Libya has been 'maligned by a myopic Western media as a pariah state'. As a member of the Western media, this appraisal gave me pause.

Was I being prejudicial and short-sighted? Would my reporting amount to yet more Western distortion at Libya's expense? Taking Ham's warning to heart, I did my best to give each side equal time. Staying in the Al-Kebir, one of Tripoli's better hotels, proved to be a stroke of luck because it is the favourite haunt of Libya's business and media personalities. (I also concur with Ham that the view from the tenth floor is superb and the hotel's restaurant is 'flash'.)

Among the dozens of conversations I had with Libyans about the Benghazi affair, the most interesting was with Khaled Deeb, the Libya correspondent for Al-Jazeera television. I was walking by as his film crew packed up after an interview in the Al-Kebir's café. I introduced myself and asked if he might have time to meet. Standing together—me in t-shirt and jeans, Deeb in an immaculate, shimmering Italian suit—we couldn't have

better typified the difference between print and television journalists. 'Maybe a coffee? Here?' I added hopefully. 'Call me,' he said, smiling as he pushed a card into my hand and drove away.

A few days later, I met Deeb after work at about 10pm. Although his English seemed excellent to me, he brought his brother Jamie, who had spent many years in Canada, as a standby translator. Deeb was a natural for television, with his neatly trimmed moustache and wet-combed, senatorial hairstyle. He chose his words very carefully and often relied on his brother, confiding at length in Arabic for an English output that often amounted to a single sentence.

I never achieved the warm rapport I was trying to build. The brothers preferred mineral water to my offer of the hotel's thick Turkish coffee. (Indeed, as Ham notes, because alcohol is illegal, 'there's not a lot of choice when it comes to beverages'.) My opening move was to ply Deeb with celebrity questions. 'Have you had a chance to meet the Leader?' Prompting one of his brief smiles, Deeb rejoined, 'We are on a first-name basis'. As I quizzed him on his impressions of Western journalists in Libya ('quite friendly') and whether he visited other countries ('whenever Gaddafi travels'), the hotel's two-metre wide television played non-stop Al-Jazeera. This was days before the tsunami struck the Indian Ocean and Ukrainian presidential candidate Yushenko's poison-marred face stared at me over Deeb's shoulder amid Arabic commentary.

Finally, I plunged in. 'I met Zdravko Georgiev some days ago in the Bulgarian embassy.' As if I had intoned a spell, Deeb underwent a dramatic transformation. Where moments ago he had been the sleek, confident journalist, he now seemed lost and childlike. He fidgeted and looked away anxiously as if needing the bathroom. 'Georgiev described things that happened to him in prison that shocked me,' I said. As Deeb seemed to lose interest in the conversation, his brother took over. We spoke intensely, but without anger, about American imperialism and Middle Eastern politics. I sympathised on many points. Some assertions were hard to swallow, such as his belief that Mossad had delivered 'thousands and thousands of mice' to destroy Libya's agriculture. But eventually I felt we had found some common ground. I interrupted Jamie at times to thank him for speaking so frankly. 'It's no problem', he assured me.

But I couldn't let Deeb off the hook that easily, so I asked him directly, 'Do you think the Bulgarians were tortured?'

'They are lying', he responded tersely.

'How do you know?' I asked, pressing on. 'What evidence have you seen that I haven't?' By then I had reviewed the case not only with the Libyan lawyer representing the Bulgarians, but also with the Association of the Families, a group of relatives of the infected Benghazi children. I spent hours with the Association's spokesman, Ramadan Al-Faitore, who quit his job as an engineer years ago to devote himself full-time to 'fighting the wrong idea that the Bulgarians are innocent'. He was only too eager to share incriminating evidence with me, although much of it was difficult to believe, particularly as there is far more convincing evidence to the contrary. (One of the most outstanding facts in the Bulgarian medics' favour was the hospital's own record of when the HIV-infected children had been admitted. According to the official record, some children had been admitted for treatment before the accused had started to work at the hospital. In one case, a child of HIV-negative parents had been born at the hospital—and had become infected—long after the Bulgarians had been arrested.

‘Those records were wrong. We have the real record’, Al-Faitore told me, pulling files from his briefcase. Their version is very similar to the official record, although the dates of admission for all the HIV-infected children now fall neatly within the period of employment of the accused.

Before Deeb left suddenly for ‘another meeting’, Libya’s most respected journalist gave his final word on the matter. ‘I know they are lying because I know 110% that they are guilty. Why would my government use torture to make them say things if they are already guilty?’ And with that, he was gone. Following Ham’s advice, I left the waiter a tip of one Libyan dinar.

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‘For those who’ve spent any time here, the friendliness and hospitality of the Libyan people are likely to be their enduring memories’, says Ham, and I can see how he reaches that conclusion. Most Libyans I met—particularly taxi drivers, children, and hôteliers—seemed thrilled to meet me. But then again, Ham and I are unusual visitors. ‘The vast majority of non-Libyans who spend any time here are sub-Saharan refugees or migrant workers. I spent an afternoon with two brothers who, just a week after arriving in Tripoli from war-torn Liberia, had all their money taken by the police and were stuffed in a ‘stinking, packed cell like animals’ for months before release. (Their experience is not unusual according to Amnesty’s report.) ‘But it’s getting better’, they said. Until recently, ‘Libyans threw rocks at anyone black’.

“I know they are lying because I know 110% that they are guilty. Why would my government use torture to make them say things if they are already guilty?”



But being white does not seem to guarantee hospitality at the hands of the Libyans. After examining the Benghazi hospital, visiting the children, families, doctors, and nurses, a team of European AIDS experts concluded that hospital-wide ‘negligence’ was to blame rather than any deliberate action by the medics.² The children had been vulnerable to contamination from each others’ blood through many possible routes, including improper sterilization of instruments and the reuse of syringes. If anyone is to blame, said one of the scientists to me, ‘it is the Libyan Minister of Health’.

The Libyan court considered this scientific appraisal along with a counter-report written by five Libyan doctors claiming instead that all signs pointed to Bulgarian guilt. Although it was riddled with misunderstandings of basic molecular biology, the counter-report held sway in the view of the Libyan judges. On 6 May 2004, the medics were found guilty and sentenced to death by firing squad. Perhaps in light of the fact that he had not

worked in Benghazi since 1995, Zdravko Georgiev was given only a four year suspended sentence and now lives inside the Bulgarian embassy. Libya’s highest court meets on 31 May (recently postponed from the original date of 29 March) to announce their decision on the medics’ final appeal, although the Libyan government recently said it might reconsider the case if compensation is paid—Al-Faitore has suggested ten million euros for each of the 426 infected children—and if Britain hands over the Libyan suspect in the Lockerbie bombing.

As a friendly taxi driver whisked me away to the airport, I thought about Ham’s praise of Libyan ‘generosity and willingness to engage with the peoples of the world’. Had he looked through the eyes of the country’s more regular visitors, or had the opportunity to enjoy some Libyan generosity involving electrical cable, Ham might have included the amendment: ‘...as long as you’re white, and nothing goes wrong’.

John Bohannon earned a DPhil in Molecular Biology from Balliol in 2002. He moved to Berlin as a Fulbright scholar last year. His articles on Libya can be found at: www.johnbohannon.org.

Notes

1. Case 44/1999, People’s Prosecution Bureau, Great Socialist People’s Libyan Arab Jamahiriya.
2. The report is under review for scientific publication in April 2005. The principal author, Professor Vittorio Colizzi of Tor Vergata University in Rome, Italy, can be contacted at: colizzi@uniroma2.it.

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Once upon a time, and what happened next ...

Philip Pullman at the Oxford Women's Luncheon Club, Tuesday 8 February 2005

Philip Pullman, Oxford-based author of *His Dark Materials* trilogy, is the recipient of the Carnegie Medal, the Guardian Children's Book Award, and the Whitbread Book of the Year Award for *The Amber Spyglass* (2001)—the first time in the history of the prize that it has been bestowed upon a children's book. A two-part dramatic adaptation of *His Dark Materials*, directed by Nicholas Hyntner, is currently running at the National Theatre in London to widespread acclaim; the Lyric Theatre's adaptation of *The Firework-Maker's Daughter* has just concluded a national tour; and New Line Cinemas is currently developing a film adaptation of the trilogy. The speech below was originally presented to the Oxford Women's Luncheon Club. We are pleased to publish it here in a slightly abridged form.

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I thought I'd talk a little today about stories, and about my approach to one particular aspect of storytelling. We all have such an appetite for narrative, for knowing what happens next, and there's an enormous amount we can say about it. Christopher Booker has just brought out a book called *The Seven Basic Plots of Literature*, which is so heavy I dare not drop it on my foot. But I'm not an expert of that sort. I'm no literary critic. All I do is write stories, but in the course of doing it for nearly forty years I've thought a great deal about it, and learned a few things, too. I thought that today I'd tell you a little about one small aspect of this business, this craft, this art. And perhaps it's the one that people who are interested in telling stories are most concerned about, because it has to do with the fear of the blank page that I know many would-be writers feel. It's the question of how you begin a story.

Where do you start? What's the first sentence? We all know the phrase 'Once upon a time', the opening of a thousand fairytales. When we hear that, we know what to expect: we're in a world where strange and fanciful things can happen, where a princess can kiss a frog and turn him into a prince, where a curse can put a blight on a whole country until a young hero comes along to lift it, where a handful of beans can turn into a magic ladder into the sky. We wouldn't expect the latest novel by Ian McEwan, or Anita Brookner, or (at the other end of the literary scale) Danielle Steele, or the man who wrote *The Da Vinci Code*, to start with that phrase. Those writers all want to persuade us that the story they're telling takes place in the real world. When you say 'Once upon a time', that's not quite what you have in mind.

And there are lots of equivalents for 'Once upon a time'. The great tale from the Brothers Grimm, *The Juniper Tree*, one of the most ferocious and beautiful and terrifying stories ever told, begins 'A long time ago, at least two thousand years ...'

Setting a story 'Once upon a time', or 'Two thousand years ago', or whenever, means (apart from other things) that it's safe from awkward fact-checking; it means we can invent whatever we like. We're in a land where other rules apply, where we can expect things to be a bit different from here. I once began a story of my own, 'A thousand miles ago, in a country east of the jungle and south of the mountains, there lived a firework-maker ...' And it was only natural for a story like that to contain a white elephant who could talk, and a dangerous visit to the firefiend in his grotto on the volcano, and so on.

Once you've begun a story like this—'Once upon a time there was ...'—it has a sort of momentum. You have to continue by saying more about the person or the people you've just mentioned; because one thing all these openings have in common is that they mention the main characters at once. Like these openings taken at random from Grimm and also from Italo Calvino's (literally) wonderful collection of Italian folktales:

There was once a wizard who liked to disguise himself as a poor man ...

There was once a young hunter ...

There were once two brothers, one rich and the other poor ...

There was once a poor man who had three sons ...

There were once twelve brothers who fell out with their father ...

And so on. Get the main character on stage as soon as you can. This is a narrative technique that authors and filmmakers have borrowed from the anonymous tellers of fairy tales and folk tales, whose names are lost for ever.

For example: the first word of the most famous children's book of all is 'Alice'. It goes on, if you remember, '... was beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the bank, and of having nothing to do: once or twice she had peeped into the book her sister was reading, but it had no pictures or conversations in it, "and what is the use of a book", thought Alice, "without pictures or conversations?"'

So in the very first sentence the character and her situation are established for us. Something's going to happen—somehow, we can tell.

If we take a book written with a rather more grown-up audience in mind than *Alice*, namely *Middlemarch* (and Virginia Woolf said that *Middlemarch* was 'One of the few English novels written for grown-up people'), we find this first sentence: 'Miss Brooke had that kind of beauty which seems to be thrown into relief by poor dress'. Miss Brooke, Dorothea, is of course the heroine of the story, whose impulsive high-mindedness will get her into all sorts of difficulty as the story unfolds. And there she is, right in the first two words of the story.

It's interesting, though, to see the difference from *Alice*. In the book intended for children, something's happening, or at least being impatiently hoped for. We're right there on the riverbank with Alice, being bored, and ready for a diversion. In *Middlemarch*, by contrast, there isn't any action going on. Instead someone is being described; we're being invited to consider and reflect. And in particular, Dorothea is being described in a way that tells us what the narrator thinks *we're* like. She (I'm calling the narrator *she*, but there's no reason to assign a particular gender to the narrator just because the author happened to be female)—she assumes that we the readers are worldly and intelligent and sophisticated enough to

rub shoulders with the Prince of Wales. But they are more comfortably off, shall we say, than most readers; they don't need to worry about paying the bills. That is the sort of rich they are, which to most people is rich; so the narrator is assuming that most of her readers are not.

The first six words of *Emma* tell us a great deal more than they seem to, as long as we pay them the sort of attention that they deserve.

But the important thing as far as I'm concerned, is that, like *Alice*, like *Middlemarch*, like all those fairy tales, *Emma* begins with the main character plumb square in front of us. Alfred Hitchcock said once that if a film opens with a burglar breaking into an empty house, and we go with him up the stairs and into the bedroom and then, as he's ransacking the drawers, we see the lights of a car coming up the drive, we think 'Watch out! They're coming!' We're not on the side of the innocent people whose house is being burgled—we're on the side of the burglar. Because the *story* is on the side of the burglar. All the interest, all the investment of attention and sympathy, are on the side of the person whose actions we're watching. My point is that one very good way, perhaps the best way of all, of opening a story consists of putting the main character and their situation right there in the first sentence. Twelve years ago when I began to write a book which didn't have a title at that stage, but which later became called *Northern Lights*, I did just that. The first sentence says:

'Lyra and her dæmon moved through the darkening Hall, taking care to keep to one side, out of sight of the kitchen.'

That tells us quite a lot. First it tells us that we're focusing on someone called Lyra—an unusual name; and it tells us, in the most matter-of-fact way, that this Lyra has a dæmon. Moreover, dæmon is spelt not like the word demon that means devil, but with a ligature. So it doesn't mean she's got a personal devil; it means she's accompa-

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know what she means by 'that kind of beauty which is thrown into relief by poor dress'.

I'm not sure that I am, actually, but I'm flattered by the assumption. That sentence, as simple as it seems, tells us a great deal about what the book expects of us.

So does this opening, from Jane Austen:

'Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and a happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her'.

Again, we're opening with description, not with action. And again we're expected to be on our toes. We're expected to know and to notice the difference between *handsome*, as an adjective for a woman, and, say, *pretty*; and the same goes for the difference between *clever* and, say, *wise*. As for *rich*—Emma and her father Mr Woodhouse don't

nied by another being, perhaps some kind of spirit, perhaps something else, and that this being is hers in some way—Lyra and her dæmon; and that might suggest the old idea of a guardian angel, or a personal spirit guide. (Those who've read about Socrates might remember that he referred to his own *daimon*.) In the meantime, there's the rest of the sentence to think about. What are they doing? They're moving through a hall—capital H, like the Hall of an Oxford college—which is getting darker, so it's late afternoon or early evening, when college servants are occupied in getting dinner ready. And we can tell that Lyra shouldn't be there, because she's keeping to one side, out of sight of the kitchen. If someone sees her, they'll tell her off, perhaps, or chase her out.

So Lyra is our burglar, in the Hitchcock sense. She's doing something she shouldn't, but we don't want her to get caught. And when she goes into the Retiring Room (I could have said Senior Common Room, but this is



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another universe we're in, if we haven't already guessed that from the *dæmon*)—when she goes in there to look around, which is very much against the rules, we're already on her side, because of the way stories work. So when someone comes in and she has to hide, we don't want them to find her. I think it must be a pretty rare reader who disapproves of her actions, and really wants the Butler and the Master of the College, who come in unexpectedly, to catch her and box her ears and send her out. There wouldn't have been much of a story if they had, after all.

So off the story goes.

His Dark Materials, of which *Northern Lights* is the first part, occupies three volumes. In the first part, our focus is Lyra, although the narrator directs his attention (I'm calling the narrator he, but there's no reason to assign a particular gender to the narrator just because the author happened to be male)—although the narrator occasionally directs his attention away from Lyra and towards other characters.

In the second book, a new character comes in. He's very important: so important that the second book, *The Subtle Knife*, starts with his name, just as the first book starts with Lyra's. The first sentence reads: 'Will tugged at his mother's hand and said "Come on, come on ..."'

This was going to be a difficult thing to spring on my readers. They've never seen Will before, never heard of him, never dreamed that he could exist. Suddenly there's a new character, and what's more, he hasn't got a *dæmon*. After spending all of the first book in Lyra's world, and getting used to everyone having a *dæmon*, here we are in another world where, of all strange and bizarre things, people *don't* have *dæmons*. In fact, it's a world very like our world. In fact—good grief!—it IS our world.

Now what I had to do with the opening of *The Subtle Knife*, having established Will, was get him out of his world—our world—as quickly as possible, and have him meet Lyra. It had to happen in the first chapter. They'd give me the benefit of the doubt for about that long. I reckoned if I got Will to Lyra in the first twenty pages or so, the readers would stay with me.

So that's what happens. As soon as Lyra appears, the readers know where they are, and where the sympathy of the story lies. Lyra has been their eyes and ears and mind all the way through the first book: what, they are longing to know, does she make of this boy from our world? Will she like him? Will she trust him? How will they get on?

Well, Lyra has a way of finding things out. She has her alethiometer, her truth-telling golden compass, which she has learned how to read by manipulating the hands that point to symbols around the edge. So as soon as Will is asleep, this happens:

Lyra carefully set the hands of the alethiometer, and relaxed her mind into the shape of a question. The needle began to sweep around the dial in a series of pauses and swings almost too fast to watch.

'She had asked: *What is he? A friend or an enemy?*

'The alethiometer answered: *He is a murderer.*

'When she saw the answer, she relaxed at once. This boy could find food and show her how to reach Oxford, and those were powers that were useful, but he might still have been untrustworthy or cowardly. A murderer was a worthy companion. She felt as safe with him as she'd felt with Iorek Byrnison, the armoured bear.

And so ends the first chapter of *The Subtle Knife*. I thought the story was safe at that point; I thought the readers would stay with it. And so they did.

I won't go through the opening of the third volume, *The Amber Spyglass*, but I will say just a word about the end. This is a very long story, which took me seven years to write but a lifetime to get ready to write, and one of the very first things I knew about it was the setting and the mood of the final few paragraphs. I didn't know what would lead up to it—the 1300 pages in between the first sentence and the final page were a total mystery to me—but the *feeling* of that final page was crystal clear. It had the sort of intensity you feel when you wake up from a very moving dream. It's almost impossible to tell people about your dreams, because when you begin to relate them they sound so absurd or so banal; but you know the sort of dream you have once a decade, perhaps, a dream so beautiful and so moving you never forget it as long as you live. My feeling about the final pages was like that. There was a garden, and it was midnight, and Lyra was alone. Or alone with her *dæmon*.

So that's where it was all leading up to. And just as the first word of the story was *Lyra*, so is the last.

When you write a book you can decide these things; I mean it's up to you how you open and close a story. All the responsibility is yours, and you can take all the credit. But when that story is adapted for another medium, for the stage or the screen, someone else comes in and starts deciding things, and telling the story in a different way.

I'll just say a brief word about the stage adaptation of *His Dark Materials*, because I think it's been adapted very well, and because it has a strong bearing on this opening business. The adaptation was made by the playwright Nicholas Wright and was directed by Nicholas Hytner, and it had a very successful run last winter. It is now pretty well sold out for the whole of this run, so they must be doing something right. Actually, I think they are doing a lot of things right.

And this illustrates how *a lot of things* all have a bearing on each other, and determine how you have to tell a story.

In the first place, they wanted to make the story into two full-length plays, which would play separately on some nights, but twice a week they'd do both plays in one day. That's six hours on the stage. In the second place, the actress playing Lyra is obviously central: she has to be there onstage a great deal of the time. It's her story. In the third place, there are laws about the employment of child actors, saying how many hours they're allowed to work, and so on.

So it was clear from very early on that Lyra, and Will too, although they're about twelve years old in the story, would have to be played by adults. There are artistic

advantages in this as well as legal ones: the characters have to grow and develop through a number of complex and difficult emotional adventures, and there are some things that only a trained actor, with the physical stamina of an adult, can manage to convey.

But it does involve a suspension of disbelief. All theatre does anyway, of course, but would this be too much?

And here I come back to the subject I began with, the *opening* business, because Nicholas Wright solved it all with one brilliant stroke—and he did it by looking at the ending. The story ends with Lyra and Will, who have fallen in love, saying goodbye in the Oxford Botanic Garden, because they must part for ever. But they make a promise to each other. There's an Oxford with a Botanic Garden in Lyra's world, as there is in Will's, and they agree that for the rest of their lives they'll come to the Botanic Garden on midsummer's day and sit on the bench, each in their different world, and be together, although they're far apart.

So Nicholas Wright opens the play with a twenty-year old Lyra and Will sitting and talking under a tree, apparently to each other, but—as we soon see—not together at all, but in different worlds. Young adult actors playing young adults. And of course they reminisce; and as they do, they slip into their childhood selves and begin to tell their story ... and we're convinced. The whole play is, technically, a flashback. But we accept the adults playing children because we've already seen them as adults, and we know what they're doing—and also, by the way, because they're very fine actors.

Incidentally, Nick Wright made one vast improvement on my story. I had the two of them meeting every year at midday; he makes it midnight. Much better. Moonlight, a nightingale, no-one else around: much more romantic. I wish I'd thought of that.

But when we get to the end of the play and find ourselves at the place where we began, and knowing now what long journey has brought these two young people to this place and this time, it does work very well.

And perhaps there's something there for anyone who's not sure how to begin a story. If 'once upon a time' doesn't help, try starting at the end: you know the other formula that we associate with fairy tales. 'And they lived happily ever after' is seldom, as we all know, true. Perhaps it would be interesting to start there and see what happens to that happiness.

And actually that's a very good way to start a story. If everybody's kind and everything goes right and everyone is happy, there is very little to tell. Much better to have something going wrong—some little thing—some tiny flaw, hardly suspected, hardly visible ... A moment of temptation, a hint of weakness, just a shade of too much satisfaction with being handsome and clever and rich ... and off we go.

But that's another story.

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Fighting for recognition

Stevie Smith in combat

How far is reclamation the business of literary criticism? Romana Huk's new book on Stevie Smith (1902-1971), the still underrated British poet and novelist tries, for many of its three-hundred-plus pages to attempt exactly that: to reclaim or, more accurately, to proclaim, the deceptive complexity of an author still best remembered for her mannered poetry readings, her much-anthologised 'Not Waving But Drowning', or the oddly intransigent drawings that accompanied much of her work. Stevie Smith, who inspired a play of her life and two biographies before academic criticism saw fit to assess her, is perhaps, for British readers, still irrevocably tied up with the myth of the English eccentric; we see her dressed in her childlike Victorian costumes haunting the reaches of outer London suburbia. How apt then, that this vigorous plea to take her work seriously comes from the pen of an American academic.

Many reasons can explain the ham-fisted entrance of Smith into the literary academy. Her work is dense and allusive, and yet her poetry often borders on the facile. She was a fiercely proud writer who always insisted on her own integrity, and yet throughout her work we find the equivalent of the authorial shoulder-shrug, the sense of the writer making it up as they go along. The act of reading her work is often an exercise in bafflement—her use of simple ballads and fairy tale scenarios, particularly in her later poems, only emphasises the divide between our familiarity with the raw materials of her work and our uncertainty as to what she has created with them. Stevie Smith also adopted a number of guises throughout her career; from the 1930s modernist novelist whose first published work, *Novel on Yellow Paper* (1936), was mistakenly attributed to Virginia Woolf, to the 1960s performance poet who took the stage along with Roger McGough and Michael Horowitz. Academia likes its subjects malleable but not slippery, and attempts to read her in any sharply defined context often tend to unravel before they have begun. Feminists, too, have been wary about trying to accommodate an author who scorns the idea of a women's poetry anthology, and who calls the battle of the sexes an 'ancient' and, one infers, tired debate. Similarly, Smith's work fights shy of a popular following; although her work inspires cultish websites and her poetry is still widely anthologised, her collected works have remained stubbornly out of print for nearly ten years. There seems, then, an unevenness in the way general readers and academics might approach her *oeuvre*.

To balance out this unsteady reputation, Huk's book tries to do two things at once: to make Stevie Smith not only a complex writer, but also a serious one. The two attributes are not as compatible as they might seem at first glance. To acknowledge the difficulty and contradictions in Smith's work is often simply to read her as the artless joker, whereas to focus on her work as one serious 'project' often shuts down the complicated cross-currents to be found in her prose and poems. But this word 'project' is one to which Huk often returns. She absorbs Stevie Smith's corpus, her three novels and her numerous poetry collections, into one 'cultural project'. What makes this book's argument so interesting is the nature of the 'project' Huk has assigned to her: Stevie Smith, whose popularity was at its height by her death in 1971, becomes a war writer.

As Huk points out, Stevie Smith's three novels, published in 1936, 1938, and 1949 (before, during, and after, as Huk neatly surmises) are all explicitly concerned with the factors that lead to war. *Novel on Yellow Paper* (1936) draws links between the growing climate of hatred in Germany and the 'acceptable' anti-Semitism of pre-war Britain, *Over the Frontier* (1938) transforms

its heroine into a secret spy, whilst *The Holiday* (1949) is a self-proclaimed portrait of the 'post-war' climate. Yet Smith remains apparently uncommitted to the political seriousness suggested by a brief outline of her novels. *The Holiday* was in fact composed during the war, but, owing to publishing difficulties at the time, later simply updated by Smith by adding 'post' to each mention of it in her text. This is an act that, for Huk, becomes problematic in her determination to find in Smith a deliberate social commentator. Huk attributes Smith's actions to 'the prompting of her publishers, who argued that though the novel was written during the war...its failure to find the light of day until 1949 meant that it must be updated to the post-war period.'

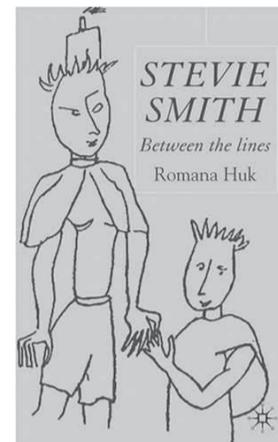
Yet Smith's transgression in slipping between wartime and peacetime through the addition of 'post' suggests more than an over-subservience to her publisher. Does it point us once again to Smith the artless trickster, an author of contingency, or to a deeply complex writer whose casual adaptation of her own novel's setting from war to post-war points up the limitations of language in tracking such an ideological shift from conflict to peace? What might it mean to call somebody like Stevie Smith a war writer? How important is the political in our engagement with literature? Or, to articulate the question that Huk's book often seems to dodge, what constitutes a serious writer?

Theodor Adorno, the writer and cultural theorist whose shadow hangs over much of this book, notoriously questioned the efficacy of lyric poetry after Auschwitz. Given the recent Auschwitz memorial, it seems pertinent that I am reviewing a book that argues for the less-quoted

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conclusion of Adorno's tenet; any post-war literature is by necessity a product and, in part, a reaction to that war. Several times while reading *Between the Lines* I was reminded of Dylan Thomas's assertion in 1934 that 'artists have set out, however unconsciously, to prove one of two things: either that they are mad in a sane world, or that they are sane in a mad world'.¹ Huk, who suggests that Smith's protagonists are undergoing Freud's talking cure through the process of narrating their own texts, argues it both ways: the characters that people Stevie Smith's novels and poems are deemed mad in their world of seeming sanity but, in fact, are the only ones attempting to cure their society's collective political amnesia.

Yet Huk's book perhaps shares some of that amnesia, despite its promises to give us a political reading of Smith's work. It seems happier to repeatedly situate her within a cultural context of Heidegger and Hegel than to explore the often very interesting questions Huk's approach raises about what a 'war writer' might in fact be. Huk only offers us the equivocal argument that 'indeed, at least in some respects, it would not be wrong to think of Smith as being, broadly defined, a "war poet"'. In Huk's bid to make a serious Smith, we lose any sense of how she might have taken up and abandoned this mantle for her own reasons. Why, for example, did Stevie Smith often dismiss her wartime novels in the final twenty years of her writing career? How did her alertness to the printed propaganda of the day relate to her own preoccupation with shaping an audience for her work? Smith's



Romana Huk
Stevie Smith: Between the Lines
 Palgrave, 2004.
 344 pages
 ISBN: 033354997X

own self-positioning as a war commentator in the 1930s and 40s, however oblique that commentary was, surely says as much about Smith's own desire to attain the position of the political writer, to become the Dostoevsky whom she so admired, as it does about our desire to reclaim her as one.

The conclusion to Huk's dazzlingly intelligent reading of Stevie Smith's work seems particularly apt in this context. In the final sentences, Huk draws comparisons between Smith's historical-political context and the current world situation—Smith's ominous promise that 'we shall kill everybody' in her poem 'How do you see?' becomes a prophetic warning of the war on terror. It is almost as if, having apparently argued for the efficacy of Smith as a war writer for the full length of the book, Huk was, after all, only seeking to reclaim an author with a continuing relevance—the context of war simply being

the most contemporary one in which to situate her work. Huk, in effect, is attempting to reframe our understanding of Smith's writing in much the same way that Smith herself attempted throughout her career.

Unfortunately, our passage through Huk's book, extremely learned and well-researched though it is, is not made easier by her own style, which cumbrosely piles up clause after sub-clause. With such complex material (and treatment) as this, a reader needs more than an overuse of italics to navigate their way through the book's argument. However, if Huk's convoluted but innovative reading of Stevie Smith leaves us longing to return to the less leaden rhythms of Smith herself, a re-read of poems such as 'Not Waving but Drowning' and 'The Frog Prince' may no longer provide us with the soothing tonic we anticipated. Huk's Smith is then undoubtedly serious, perhaps too serious; but as for complexity, it is primarily the critic's muddling voice that confuses the difficult material it attempts to elucidate.

Will May is a DPhil student in English literature at Balliol College. His thesis examines authorial self-construction in the work of Stevie Smith.

Notes

1. *Dylan Thomas Collected Letters*, ed. Paul Ferris (London, 1985), 90.

Re-writing the score

At one point during a film series he made in the 1970s entitled 'The Alchemist', Glenn Gould turns to his interviewer, Bruno Monsaingeon, and asks: 'You know who my favourite composer is? Guess: ...one, two, three—Orlando Gibbons'. It is a typically Gouldian comment—quirky, puritan, delivered with a cheeky twinkle in the eye—but one he was quick to defend: 'The thing about Gibbons is that he is not a completely individual composer; he sort of straddles the era of delicious anonymity that the pre-Renaissance knew about and were exploring, and the era of, really, almost total, exploitative, individuality of the Baroque [...] but I love *fin de siècle* characters'.

Anonymity, delicious or otherwise, is not a quality one readily associates with Gould. Personally eccentric and artistically subversive, he has become the subject of a critical biographical literature that expands with all the elasticity and seriousness of bubblegum. He has been referred to on 'The Simpsons'; his recordings have been sent into space; Hannibal Lector had him as his pianist of choice. 'ARTIST, PHILOSOPHER, MADMAN, GENIUS' rang out the advertisements for 'Thirty Two Short Films About Glenn Gould'. The tattered papers held at the National Library

of Canada are a sorry testimony to the snatching hands of the Gould industry. The more we write, it seems, the less we know.

One might expect a new biography to be attuned to these dangers, and, in *Wondrous Strange: The Life and Art of Glenn Gould*, Bazzana makes his position clear from the start: '...today no one comes to Gould's work except through a haze of posthumous glorification', he argues, shrewdly scanning the critical horizon. It is a brave as well as dangerous admission, since any work on the subject is at risk not only of swelling an already bloated market, but of contributing to the combination of eulogy and snide gossip that has proliferated so luxuriantly since Gould's arrival on the international scene in 1956. What more is there to say? Plenty, in Bazzana's estimation. The tone of his book is both good-humoured and refreshingly irreverent as he attempts to unpick the myth and unpack the reality of this most elusive (and reclusive) of figures.

Gould's character oscillated between a winning charm and familiarity and a guarded isolationism. There was no contradiction here: his encounters with the outside world always took place on his own, meticulously prepared, terms. Like Gibbons, he saw himself as in part removed from the Zeitgeist—while scrupulously modern in his ideas, he was peculiarly old-fashioned in his values. His increasingly eccentric interpretations were a series of negotiations, sometimes confrontations, between his own aesthetic sensibility and those of his chosen composers. Admiration was not a prerequisite of interest. He liked to quote Cage's ideas on the creative role of the perceiver and welcomed the destabilisation of the hierarchy of composer, performer and listener offered by the technological age: 'Dial twiddling is in its limited way an interpretative act', he once remarked. It is tempting to make the connection between Gould's thought and that of *nouvelle critique*, with its dismissal of tradition and the monopolisation of meaning; it is an elision that Bazzana proposes throughout this hefty volume. Indeed, one of the consistent pleasures of this book, alongside its colloquial even-handedness ('It was true; he was a queer duck'), is the way that the author counterbalances an analysis of post-modern discourses with an exploration

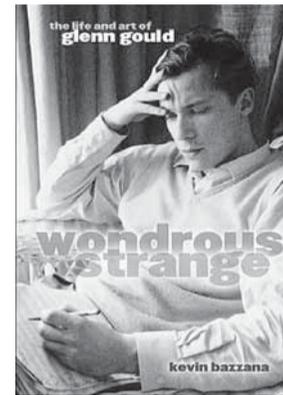
of the roots of Gould's ideas and aesthetic in his own personality and upbringing. This was the time of Toronto the Good, 'an excellent town to mind one's own business in' as Northrop Frye quipped, and while blandly provincial, it was also perfectly suited to an artist such as Gould, who coupled a heroic creative ego with a defensive need to shelter himself from that of others. He had an almost Beethovenian temper (itself tempered by a Presbyterian docility) and for all his advocacy of reason and restraint, this was always in quiet counterpoint with great reserves of feeling. In performance, this manifested itself in interpretations that were at once architecturally watertight and lushly Romantic, in ethos as well as in local felicities of rhythm and texture. In Gould, perhaps, post-modernism and Romanticism had their belated union.

Nonetheless, Gould indulged in liberties with his chosen scores that had little in common with the free play of a subjective will and intelligence conceived by Barthes and other poststructuralists as the model of interpretation; Gould's approach was one of re-composition rather than activation (though as a composer in his own right, he had everything but talent). The barely latent pun in 'The Alchemist' was irresistible: he turned everything he

played into pure Gould. What he shared with both Romantic creativity and post-modern *jouissance* was a supra-individualistic aesthetic that was ultimately theological in outlook. For

Gould, a self-regulating theist, art was an instrument of salvation that always pointed beyond the printed notes on the page, and it was a belief he proselytised with all the fervour of a convert (books found in his collection after he died included *An Argument for Evangelism through Your Vocation*).

So much for debunking the myth. Glenn the Saint, the mystical seer, is also the Gould of legend. The ongoing struggle for commentators has been to find a way to reconcile the clandestine and ascetic public persona with a less lofty but equally vital sexual identity. This tension has been to the disadvantage of neither Gould nor his record company: when his two Goldberg recordings were repackaged in 2002 as 'Glenn Gould: A State of Wonder' (it was a bestseller), the front cover pictured the musician writhing, tie undone, in a state of slack-jawed ecstasy that invited wonder as much at the goings-on beneath the piano lid as at the playing. With his doe-eyed good looks, impeccable discretion and limpid musicianship, he could not avoid speculation and rumour, usually directed



Kevin Bazzana
Wondrous Strange: The Life and Art of Glenn Gould
Yale University Press, 2004.
528 pages
ISBN: 0300103743

by the assumption that (as Alan Sinfield once put it) homosexuality, 'like murder, will out'. A study by Kevin Kopelson published in 1996 even ventured to describe him as 'a touchstone of queer pianism' (something in his touch?). In line with the humanizing, contextualizing impulse of his book, Bazzana puts paid to these strikingly conservative improprieties with an admirable blend of erudition and tact. In fact, Gould did have several affairs with women (naming no names), including one that lasted for several years; but the war between artistic isolation and the desire for interpersonal contact was never more sharply felt than in his personal life. In the end, it seems, art triumphed over love, but he continued to have close friendships—he adored the telephone—and was by all accounts a gentleman with a wonderfully silly and self-deflating sense of humour that belied his occasional pomposity.

There are many more facets to Gould's character elucidated in this splendidly researched and engagingly written biography: his love of nature, his bad driving, and not least his legendary hypochondria. The anecdotes contained here are abundant and the portrait it paints is rich, I particularly enjoyed the story of Gould driving around Times Square, wearing blinkers to avoid the neon glare of billboards, the solicitations of streetwalkers and all the other vitals of modern city life—certainly an apt image. But it is by resisting the implied imperative of his Shakespearean epigraph ('How shall we find the concord of this discord?') and by not trying to produce a view of its subject that is permanent and comprehensive, that Kevin Bazzana displays a spirit both adventurous and cannily Gouldian. *Wondrous Strange* cannot solve the mysteries of a complex and fascinating personality, but it can equip us to read the patterns of his behaviour and thought, and as such, it matches its title: wondrous strange indeed.

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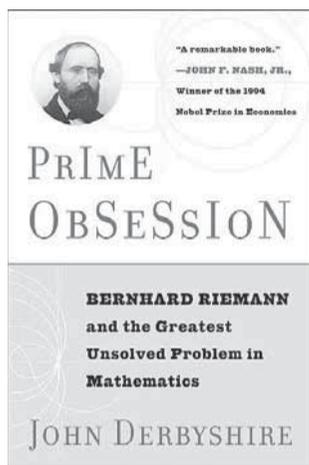
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Prime obsession

Bernhard Riemann and the greatest unsolved puzzle in mathematics



John Derbyshire
Prime Obsession: Bernhard Riemann and the greatest unsolved puzzle in mathematics
 Joseph Henry Press, 2003.
 448 pages
 ISBN: 0309085497

Mathematics and mathematicians have featured prominently in Hollywood in recent years. However, behind the veneer of scrawled equations, whose logical flaws everyone with a half-knowledge of mathematics will easily detect, there is little to discover. Films such as *Good Will Hunting*, *Pi* or *A Beautiful Mind* stay well within the boundaries of their respective genres and are more occupied with endorsing familiar clichés about mathematicians than with scientific content.

On the other end of the spectrum, there has lately been a more serious rise in public interest in mathematics. This might have been sparked by recent advances: only in 1994 did Andrew Weil prove Fermat's Last Theorem, the famous conjecture that there are no whole-number solutions to the equation $x^n + y^n = z^n$ (when 'n' is a whole positive number greater than two). The proof of this theorem took the academic community 357 years to achieve, spawned entire new areas of mathematics and made Weil the superstar of mathematics when he published his final result in 1994. Other equally difficult problems have received similarly widespread attention: the Four Colour Theorem (that four colours are sufficient to colour any map in the plane, no two adjacent regions having the same colour), which was proved in 1976 using no fewer than 1,200 hours of computer time; and Goldbach's conjecture (every whole number greater than two is the sum of two primes), which remains unproven. Such recent high-profile advances have subsequently inspired a new generation of authors who are trying to do what mathematicians are notoriously poor at doing: describing complex matters in simple terms. There are now popular books on Abel's theorem, on Euler's constant gamma and several on the Riemann Hypothesis. Of these, the lattermost presents the most significant challenge for the popular maths writer. The Riemann Hypothesis is a conjecture stating that in all the interesting places where the zeta-function is zero, its argument has a real component of $1/2$. As a theory, it is not only difficult to state in simple terms, but has proven to be more elusive to solve than many long-standing problems believed to be of similar difficulty. Over the years the proof of the hypothesis has become an end in itself despite the fact that its proof would have practical repercussions in mathematics, physics and cryptography.

Fortunately, John Derbyshire belongs to the breed of authors capable of putting complicated matters into simple words without overly diluting his subject matter. A mathematician and linguist by training, he has come to some fame as the author of *Seeing Calvin Coolidge in a Dream*, a 1996 novel about a Chinese immigrant coming to grips with American culture. *Prime Obsession*, written in a style wavering between that of introductory computer programming books and the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, marks a clear thematic and stylistic departure from his

earlier work.

The chapters of the book alternate between mathematical expositions and broad historical accounts. While this may invite the reader who is not interested in mathematical intricacies to skip the technical chapters, this is by no means recommended: not only does the line between purely technical and historical accounts blur, especially in later chapters, but the reader will only gain a full appreciation of the historical facts with an understanding of the basic mathematical results that are underpinning the historical development. The book is aimed at a 'curious but nonmathematical' audience; however, my feeling is that some of the later chapters might be a bit too difficult to grasp for a reader only fulfilling these minimum requirements. Moreover, the author's claim, that the Riemann Hypothesis cannot be explained using mathematics more elementary than used in his book, could potentially face some opposition from authors such as Marcus de Sautoy and Karl Sabbagh who have recently published books on the Riemann Hypothesis that seem to get by with almost no mathematics at all.

The thematic centre of Derbyshire's exploration is Riemann's 1859 paper, 'On the number of prime numbers less than a given number', which he presented at the Berlin Academy at the age of 33. Throughout the book, Derbyshire refers to the results of this paper and to the hypothesis presented therein, but it is not until the penultimate chapter, however, that the reader gets an idea of the full consequences of Riemann's work.

The book begins with an introduction to analysis, the discipline of mathematical thought that is concerned with the study of limits particularly of infinite sequences.

Recent high-profile advances have inspired a new generation of authors to do what mathematicians are notoriously poor at doing: describing complex matters in simple terms.

The author then delineates some ideas of number theory, in particular the prime number theorem (PNT) which gives an estimate of how many prime numbers exist with a value lesser than a given number N, assuming that N is a large number. While the reader is now familiar with the two strands of mathematics that Riemann successfully merged in his famous paper—analysis, and number theory (i.e. the study of the properties of integers)—it remains unclear until much later in the book, how the two interact. The technical chapters that follow are devoted to the analysis of the zeta function using the simple analytic tools that were given in the beginning of the book. Riemann took the zeta function, which had been studied by many previous mathematicians, and showed how to think of it as a complex function. This extended, 'complex' zeta function, referred to as the Riemann zeta function, takes the value zero at even negative numbers (the so-called trivial zeros). Riemann's hypothesis states that it also takes zeros on the critical line, a line of complex numbers with real part $1/2$.

In order to explain these concepts in greater depth, Derbyshire then introduces basic ideas of function theory and algebraic concepts such as fields. Mercifully for the lay reader, he diverts from this technical exposition to discuss some results on the Riemann hypothesis in the realm of quantum physics and operator theory. Only in the last two chapters, however, does he finally establish the connection between the prime number theorem, which states

that the number of prime numbers less than any number x is accurately approximated by $x/\ln x$, and the zeta function. Thus equipped, the reader understands for the first time why the Riemann hypothesis is of theoretical importance in number theory specifically and in mathematics as a whole. The last two chapters are mathematically much more demanding than the preceding ones, which might explain why Derbyshire has been holding them back for so long. While intensive, however, in the end these technical chapters give an accessible and interesting overview of the theory underlying the Riemann Hypothesis.

Although the thematic and chronological centre of the book is Riemann's 1859 paper, the historical horizon stretches far beyond the nineteenth century. In an order that is neither chronological nor terribly thematic, Derbyshire zigzags through centuries of mathematical thought, employing a recipe that too often seems to consist of overly familiar ingredients. The main theme here is the nutty professor cliché supported by a rosary of anecdotes. He quotes, for example, from a list of New Year wishes of G.H. Hardy, a British mathematician active at the beginning of the last century, which (naturally) includes proving the Riemann Hypothesis, but which also includes disproving the existence of God and murdering Mussolini. While these anecdotes spice up a text which could otherwise seem overinfused with mathematical intricacies, they also seem to be too obvious and self-consciously inserted to effectively strike a balance between the technical expositions and historical accounts. Indeed, more often than not the reader gets the impression that the sole *raison d'être* for these historical interludes is to make the whole text more digestible and, possibly, more marketable.

Prime Obsession would have greatly benefited from a tighter integration of the non-technical sections and mathematics as the alternation of technical and historical chapters often seems artificial and at times impedes the flow of the narrative. On the other hand, it is exactly one of the strengths of Derbyshire's book to bring mathematics into the historical context, and on the whole, he might be forgiven for sticking a bit too closely to his recipe. Certainly, the reason why Derbyshire's book does ultimately prove valuable is precisely because of his convincing integration of challenging mathematic theory with its cultural context, despite his failure to balance them quite as effectively and gracefully as he might.

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Living and loving dangerously

Sandor Marai's *Casanova in Bolzano*

It was as if it were utterly unusual and somehow freakish to find a man that was ugly rather than handsome, whose features were unrefined, whose body was unheroic, about whom they knew nothing except that he was a rogue, a frequenter of inns and gambling dens... a man about whom it was said, as of many a womanizer, that he was bold, impudent, and relaxed in the company of women: as if all this, despite all appearances, was in some way extraordinary. They were women; they felt something.

- *Casanova in Bolzano*

With this vivid description, Hungarian novelist Sandor Marai introduces Giacomo Casanova to the women of the marketplace and inns of a sleepy Italian town. It is an ambitious entrance for the hero of an ambitious novel, which with sweeping strokes attempts to get at the heart of a man who is part-poet, part-adventurer, and most certainly a great indulger in life. As Marai writes in a prefatory note at the front of the book, his Casanova only has a few things in common with the historic Italian lover: the date of flight from 'Leads' (a cell beneath the lead roof of the ducal palace in Venice) and later an arrival in Munich. In all other essentials, his work is one of 'fable and invention'. Nevertheless, in *Casanova in Bolzano* the institutions of the eighteenth century loom as large as the human characters, with the decadence of Venetian revelry and masque balls, the verse of Voltaire, the Inquisition, Louis' Versailles and the decline of the Italian gentry each playing a fitting moment on centre stage. And yet much of the book's strength lies in Marai's skillful offsetting of these large, opulent backdrops with a much simpler, quieter and very modern tale of the crisis: the failure of language to convey accurately the intangibility of love.

The novel was first published in Hungary in 1940, but sixty years passed before it was translated into English for the first time by George Szirtes in 2004. Sandor Marai was born in Kassa in the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1900 and acquired great acclaim during the 1930s as one of Hungary's leading novelists. Unabashedly anti-communist, he lived through the war, but was persecuted by the communists, who forced him to flee his native country in 1948 for Italy and later the United States, eventually settling in San Diego where he committed suicide in 1989.

Casanova in Bolzano begins with Giacomo's hurried escape from the infamous jails of Venice with a dissolute friar, Balbi, as an accomplice. His notoriety precedes him as he speeds across the Italian countryside, fleeing the police of the Inquisition under the cover of night. He arrives at the village of Bolzano, where he enjoys a comfortable bed, food, a good haircut and the pleasures of women after more than a year of deprivation. To the townspeople, he quickly becomes an object of mythic magnetism: women are enticed by him, gamblers come to spend the evenings at his table, moneylenders give to him willingly, and he acquires a reputation for healing the hearts of the love-struck. His bravado and devil-may-care nonchalance, however, conceal a far more complicated and ambitious psychology. As Casanova admits to Balbi midway through the novel, he is a writer before all other things, for, as he puts it, 'writing is greater than...fate or time'. Fortunately given his predilections, writing and living fully are inextricably linked, and his voracious appetite to write can only be sated through experience: 'I want to live. I cannot write until I know the world'.

It is this passion for living, for pushing the boundaries of what is safe or probable, that brings Casanova to Bolzano; and Bolzano is not just any small town in

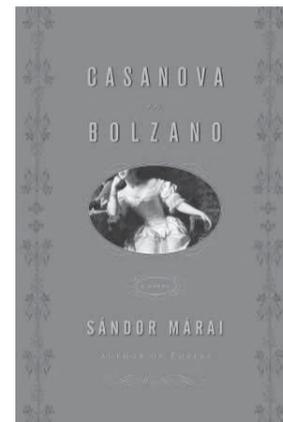
Italy. Five years earlier, Casanova had fought a duel there with the Duke of Parma, the leading nobleman of the region, over a young girl, Francesca. He lost the duel, was wounded badly and nearly died; Francesca married her aged suitor and became the Duchess. The Duke of Parma, meanwhile, threatened him with death if he ever returned to Bolzano. When the Duke does eventually meet Casanova upon the latter's return, he challenges him not to a duel but to a more difficult proposition that Casanova, as an artist and a man, cannot refuse. He gives Casanova a letter from the Duchess with the words 'I must see you', and dares him to use all his crafts to cure Francesca of her girlhood infatuation for him.

In a universe where Casanova has women easily and often—chambermaids, actresses, nuns, the nieces of Cardinals—Francesca remains an elusive, haunting image in his memory, recalled wistfully in times of illness and dire poverty. Was she truly 'The One', he questions; for she was one of the few women he could never have. This image of unrequited desire recalls Dante's Beatrice or Petrarch's Laura, and the poet's romantic yearning is indeed heightened through spiritual longing rather than through physical consummation. Certainly, Marai's descriptions of Casanova's love for Francesca invoke the courtly landscapes of troubador and trouvere song, and are among the most affective in the novel:

This love matured slowly, for like the best fruit it needed time, a change of seasons, the blessing of sunlight and the scent of rain, a series of dawns in which they would walk through the dewy garden among bushes of flowering May, conversations where a single word might suddenly light up the landscape locked in her tender, cloistered heart, when it would be looking into the past and seeing ruined castles, vanished festivals where traps with gilded wheels rolled down the paths of neat, properly tended gardens past people in brightly colored clothes with harsh, powerful and wicked profiles. There was in Francesca something of the past.

Whether this is simply Marai's description, or whether it has been filtered through Casanova's lovelorn, fictionalising lenses, the reader remains unsure. Regardless, like much of the book, it plays with notions of authorship and literary tradition on a meta-textual level: it is both grounded in literary history by Marai's neat hinting at the incipient Romantic age, and rendered ahistorical and timeless by the employment of such archetypal images.

I first discovered Marai through his novel *Embers*. Originally published in 1942 and first translated into English in 2001, *Embers* is a gauzy, lyrical, intoxicating work. Hailed by critics on both sides of the Atlantic, this first novel in English was described as a masterpiece and major literary rediscovery. In many ways, *Casanova* shares many similarities with Marai's earlier work. Set during the wane of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, *Embers* had told the story of two close friends, an aristocratic General and a bohemian artist, and their conflicted understanding of honour, duty and love in relation to the woman they both desired: the General's wife. Structurally, *Casanova in Bolzano* is very similar to *Embers* in its three primary characters and plot organization; yet *Embers* tells the narrative almost exclusively from the point of view of the affronted General, while *Casanova in Bolzano* is a much broader and bigger story. While the artist (in the guise of the writer Casanova) has the predominant role within the novel, Marai also gives considerable narrative space (and several pages of dialogue) to both the antagonistic aristocratic husband and the young woman in love, presumably to advance further meditations on authorship. *Casanova*



Sandor Marai
Casanova in Bolzano
Translated by George Szirtes
Alfred A. Knopf, 2004.
294 pages
ISBN: 0375413375

Casanova admits he is a writer before all other things, for, as he puts it, 'writing is greater than...fate or time'.

in Bolzano is a much more ambitious and unruly novel for this reason.

But this breadth of scope is also the book's weakness. I felt compelled to make editorial comments of 'cut, cut!' in the margins as Marai's overly-indulgent writing became too wrapped in the trivial egoisms and self-righteous philosophies of his characters, rendering the writing stilted, tired and dry. The brevity of *Embers*, and its fine choice of language and imagery, was a delight. Much of that lyrical poignancy can also be found in *Casanova in Bolzano*, but only after the laborious process of trudging through the rambling prose. Still, Marai is a gifted writer, and his work is well deserving of rediscovery.

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After Horace: I.23

To Chloe

Vitas inuleo me similis, Chloe...

Just like a fawn
 Seeking her shy mother
 Over pathless mountain passes
 Full of empty fears of trees and breezes,
 You shy from me, Chloe.
 If the arrival of spring
 Shakes the shivering leaves
 Or a green lizard
 Scatters a bramble bush,
 Her heart and knees tremble!
 But, Chloe, I am not
 A rough tiger
 Or a Gaetolian lion seeking you
 To crush you: Come on,
 Stop lolling after your mother
 You're ripe enough for a man!

§

After Horace: II.10

*The Golden Mean**Rectius vives, Licini, neque altum...*

Licinius, my friend,
 You will steer your life
 On a straighter course
 If you neither urge your ship towards the high seas
 Nor, while cautiously avoiding the gusty winds,
 Too closely hug the dangerous shore.
 The one who follows
 The Golden Mean
 Keeps safe:
 He is free from the shabby filth-house,
 And being sensible,
 He is free from the envy of a palace.

More often it is the mighty pine
 That is shaken by the wind;
 The collapse is graver
 When tall towers fall,
 And it is the peaks of mountains
 That lightning strikes twice.

In unhappy times,
 The well-prepared mind hopes
 For the opposite
 And in prosperity, fears it.

If life is bad now
 It will not always be so:
 At the worst of times,
 Be spirited and brave
 And wiser still to shorten your sail
 When it swells
 Before a breeze too favourable.

Anabella Pomi

The H Word

Tom Wolfe & bad education

If Tom Wolfe's latest novel, *I am Charlotte Simmons* (2004), is not as good as his first two, it is not due to sloppy writing or a wit too prone to caricature, but because he fails to engage with his eponymous protagonist—the novel's title is a promise Wolfe fails to keep. His failure is not on his reviewers' terms, but on his own. The fictional universes he has created in each novel correspond so closely that one can conclude that for Wolfe, every human interaction is a status consideration and secondly, that every human interaction is a potentially mortifying one. The problem is that Wolfe is interested in male humiliation far more than he is in the forms that female humiliation takes.

This claim is unusual, because all the reviews of *I am Charlotte Simmons* so far have taken up where reviews of *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987) and *A Man in Full* (1998) left off—that is, debating whether the book is sophisticated entertainment or literature, whether Wolfe's argument that realism is indispensable to the modern novel is true, and whether journalistic research ought to count for anything. Let me put this another way: in all of Wolfe's novels, men are obsessed with their muscles. They silently name their muscle groups with benedictory monotony (*triceps, deltoids, latissima dorsae, pectoralis major*); they flex and fan out the *latissimi dorsi* in their backs when they want to make an impression. Muscles count. They count so much (literally—the text is peppered with pecs, abs, delts, traps, lats, tri's, bi's and obliques) that the reader is forced to make a decision. Is this obsession an indication of our age, or a reflection of Wolfe? Is our age one that is dominated by women with pineapple-coloured hair, one in which men often moan to themselves the words 'loamy loins'? (Look to yourselves.) The problem with the reception of Wolfe's novels is that reviewers have tended to get stuck on metatextual questions like these. If we keep the question of theme in mind when reading Wolfe, what becomes immediately obvious is that his fictional universe is an overwhelmingly humiliating one, so filled with mortification that one could even hypothesise a physics for it. And if we look at these laws of humiliation in detail, it becomes clear why Wolfe's latest novel, *I am Charlotte Simmons*, is weaker than his other two, *The Bonfire of the Vanities* and *A Man in Full*.

Although *I am Charlotte Simmons* is about education, Wolfe's attention isn't on teachers or unions, but firmly focused on the bottom feeders of the modern university system—undergraduates. The novel, heavy with field research, is predictably drawn to education of the extracurricular kind. Why can't white basketball players completely shave their heads? Who keeps on giving sports jocks SUV's? And why are Diesel jeans so necessary? Following the trials of Charlotte Simmons through her first term at Dupont University (a fictional ivy-league college in North Carolina), the reader quickly realises that this isn't life as an academic knows it but rather as an undergraduate *struggles* with it—and as Tom Wolfe researched it. The acknowledgements page of the novel thanks those (from multiple American universities) who took him clubbing; consequently, in *I am Charlotte Simmons* we get undergraduate nightlife as an octogenarian New Yorker sees it—a perspective clearly considered to be equivalent to Charlotte Simmons's intellectually idealistic take on Dupont University. Charlotte is from a remote county and her family is poor and devout. Playing to two readerships, the narration blends her shock and his amusement—Wolfe's generation gets an eyeful (this is what your children *really* do at college) and students feel the proud flush of being generational grist to a writer's mill. As a journalist and a novelist, Wolfe has always demonstrated an almost anthropological fascination for

**Tom Wolfe**

I am Charlotte Simmons
 Jonathan Cape, 2004.
 676 pages
 ISBN 0-224-07486-5

idiomatic expressions, and here he gets to really let the beast off the leash. He has repeatedly argued that his reliance on 'fieldwork' research sets him alongside nineteenth-century realist novelists like Dickens, Zola, Balzac or Dostoyevsky.

Most reviewers don't let Wolfe get away with this. Aside from the charge of sloppy writing, the one thing that critics love to hate in a Tom Wolfe novel is his tendency towards unkind caricature. Wolfe's characters are cartoons of real human beings, critics argue, and as such, are very unlikely to provoke the reader's sympathy. Reviewers can't seem to help themselves—faced with a new Wolfe novel, there is something compulsive about posing the question of whether cheap characters make for cheap writing. As such, the critical debate each time he publishes a novel revolves around the question of whether he has a social conscience and, if not, whether he should get one. We expect him to flesh out the characters with a little kindness, nuance his writing by recouring to morality.

But now that we have three novels, perhaps it is time to turn our attention to the thematic conditions that make such (supposed) unalloyed cheapness possible? The similarities in narrative structure between the three novels are striking. Each attempts to capture a milieu by assessing its impact on a particular individual. This impact is always in terms of a fall from grace—financial, social or moral. *Bonfire of the Vanities* is about New York, bond bankers and the fall of Sherman McCoy; *A Man in Full* is about Atlanta, property development and the fall of Charlie Croker. Not surprisingly, *I am Charlotte Simmons* runs along the same lines—though this time, the fall is less impressively financial and more moral. All three novels depict how an individual comes to terms with institutions whose purpose seems only to dehumanise them (predominantly jails and universities). But most importantly, all three focus on one particular human activity to the exclusion of everything else—that is, the act of humiliating others. Wolfe's fictional universe is an overwhelmingly humiliating one. There are creative and casual humiliations that stimulate (and possibly tire) the reader in their anthropologically voyeuristic tone. Wolfe's nuance lies not in morality but in varying shades of humiliation. There is the humiliation of not knowing that every Hyatt hotel has an atrium; of being sexiled; of being given a 26 cent tip for delivering fifty dollars worth of pizzas and feeling too physically intimidated to ask for more; of running the gauntlet of Saturday night dormitory troglodytes; of being kicked off the starting team for the year's first basketball game.

Power in Wolfe's universe comes from prestige or status. Power is diminished by humiliation. All three novels document the machinations of a particular society by observing closely how the social order can crush an in-

dividual. Humiliation, then, is anthropological. Nearly all of the supporting characters will stand to gain prestige by the protagonist's decline. Plot lines from 'high' and 'low' society will converge on each other in order to emphasise the rise and fall of this prestige. There are always multiple love-interests, and the protagonists are not so much concerned about this fact as with the possibility of this multiplicity being made public. In fact, publicity is the key indicator of humiliation in a Wolfe novel—you aren't humiliated unless everyone knows it. What better way to demonstrate the frisson between public and private spheres than the airing of dirty laundry?

Humiliation and prestige are subject to an endless process of redistribution. Wolfe's universe only seems entropic because his narrative is geared towards demonstrating one half of the process. Charlotte, Sherman, and Charlie all fail at doing that on which they pride themselves, but for each of them Wolfe hints at ways in which they can gain prestige by reassessing their priorities. Sherman McCoy loses his money, job and wife, faces a future in jail, but becomes proud of being a professional Defendant. Charlie Croker renounces his wealth and tours the country, preaching the wonders of Epicurus' *The Stoics*. Charlotte becomes basketball star Jojo Johanssen's girlfriend, pointed out and feted at basketball games, though dismissively greeted by her professors after flunking her midterm exams. The humiliations they suffer change them substantially—Wolfe's caricaturist's wit *does* at least allow for character development. It's just in Sherman and Charlotte's cases, we aren't particularly sympathetic to what they've become.

Wolfe even waxes poetic on the matter of humiliation. A third of the way into the novel, Wolfe shifts gear (the previous chapter ended with two characters discoursing in 'Fuck Patois') and begins Chapter 12 (entitled 'The H Word') with this oration:

Where is the poet who has sung of that most lacerating of all human emotions, the cut that never heals—male humiliation? Oh, the bards, the balladeers have stirred us with epics of the humiliated male's obsession with revenge... but that is letting the poor devil off easy. After all, the very urge, Vengeance is mine, gives him back a portion of his manhood, retaliation being manly stuff. But the feeling itself, male humiliation, is unspeakable. No man can bring himself to describe it... A word, an image, a smell, a face will bring it flashing back, and he will experience the very feeling, every neural sensation of that moment, and he will drown all over again in the shame of lying still for his own unsexing.

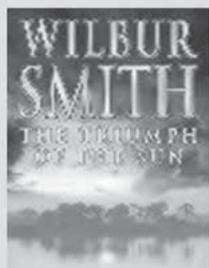
This passage is key to understanding why *I am Charlotte Simmons* is generally a weaker novel than Wolfe's first two: the Proustian recollection of the humiliating moment is specifically gendered. The mortifications that Sherman and Charlie suffer are breathtaking in their psychological ingenuity, but with Charlotte, they are predictable. Sherman sets off the court metal detector with his fillings, Charlie's jet is impounded in front of him—but Charlotte's crowning humiliation is the familiar story of losing one's virginity to someone who boasts

about it. Furthermore, Charlotte's forms of retaliation are very different from Sherman and Charlie's. For the two men, it is a question of revenge, of male pride. In all three novels, male vengeance is considered analogous to baiting a dog so fiercely that the dog will overcome its training and bite back.

But Charlotte never bites back (there's not even a metaphorical dog in her vicinity)—as one reviewer complained, she doesn't have enough vinegar to her. She cringes and cringes. Her only alternative is to remind herself that it is just a matter of time before her brilliance is acknowledged by the Dupont world at large. The status she does gain by the end of *I am Charlotte Simmons* is through being an acquisition. More than a few reviewers have noted Wolfe's lack of interest in women. It is not that this lack of interest that is, in itself, objectionable. But it does pose a problem when one's protagonist is female. Charlotte can't lovingly recite the terms *triceps, deltoids, latissima dorsae, pectoralis major* to herself (though I wish she did). All she can do is use the running machine and focus on how good her legs look: '...showing off her athletic legs was the main thing. She no longer thought of it as vanity. It was a necessity'. There is a type of girl that the boys at Dupont University call a 'Monet'—that is, she looks great twenty-five feet away, but not so great close-up. The idea behind *I am Charlotte Simmons* was a great one—it's just a shame that Wolfe's characterisation of his protagonist doesn't survive similar scrutiny.

Jenni Quilter is a former 'Bad-Ass Rhodie' (see chapter 12) and a New Zealand DPhil student in English Literature at St John's College.

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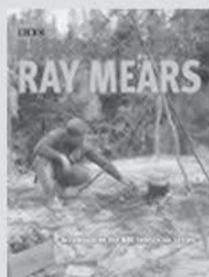


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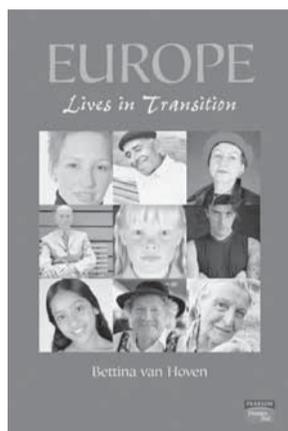
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Central & Eastern Europe

Transition from within



Bettina van Hoven (Editor)
Europe: Lives in Transition
Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2004.
208 pages
ISBN: 0130910902

When the Berlin Wall fell, euphoria swept both East and West. Many dreamed that communist dictatorships would be transformed overnight into capitalist democracies. Fly-in-fly-out advisers such as Harvard economist Jeffrey Sachs advocated radical reform to jumpstart the 'transition', a term coined by Western economists and quickly embraced by Central and Eastern European politicians. Progress seemed guaranteed, and at a rapid pace: in 1989, Sachs promised that if Poland followed his recipe of instant privatization and liberalization, inflation would vanish and the standard of living would begin to rise within six months.

In reality, of course, transition was nasty, brutish, and long—both for countries that experimented with Sachs' 'shock therapy', and for others that delayed reform. Throughout the 1990s, all Central and Eastern European

nations subscribed to the goal of democracy and free markets, but their trajectories diverged. As the decade drew to a close, Slovenia's GDP per capita was three times that of Romania, and while Lithuania consolidated its democracy, in neighbouring Belarus opposition leaders and journalists 'disappeared' routinely.

Such disparities and failures were often misunderstood by external commentators: for a long time, the English-language academic literature on transition was dominated by outsiders with preconceived notions. Only recently did Western scholars begin to seek the insights of people who actually experienced transition firsthand. *Europe: Lives in Transition* contributes to this trend by presenting the thoughts of Central and East Europeans about their everyday lives after communism. Editor Bettina van Hoven, a lecturer in cultural geography at Groningen University in the Netherlands, has compiled several studies drawing on interview and focus group research.

The book is original in organizing chapters not by author but by theme: identities, relationships, production, consumption and power. The contributors to the volume have translated and contextualized quotations by Eastern and Central European respondents, adding flesh and blood to the theoretical skeleton. Thoughtfully sprinkled throughout the text, the quotes succinctly expose the transition's contradictory nature:

Well, of course things have improved, because before I had a Russian television and now I have a better one.

— *Polish electrician in his 50s*

Most people don't go anywhere to meet with others or do something. They hang in front of the TV mostly. But there is nothing to go to either. And if you go into town, you are always harassed into buying something.

— *unemployed East German in her 40s*

Because now I see what opportunities there are, I eat at McDonalds, go around in jeans, and don't... I don't know... stand there in queues for vinegar. It's another world, it's America, ha, ha.

— *Polish teenager*

Unfortunately, the spontaneity of such quotations is sometimes overshadowed by needless justifications for including them. It is commendable that the editor admits her own cultural and ideological baggage as a Western feminist seeking to 'empower' East German rural women. Van Hoven moralizes at length about 'giving a voice' to the neglected. She and the other contributors—all from the West—self-consciously raise questions about how researchers position themselves as insiders or outsiders. While valid, such post-modern introspection takes up too much space, sometimes interfering in the effort to allow locals to speak for themselves. In the end, it is the original words cited in *Europe: Lives in Transition* that make the book worth leafing through—especially for readers curious about the paradoxes of post-communism.

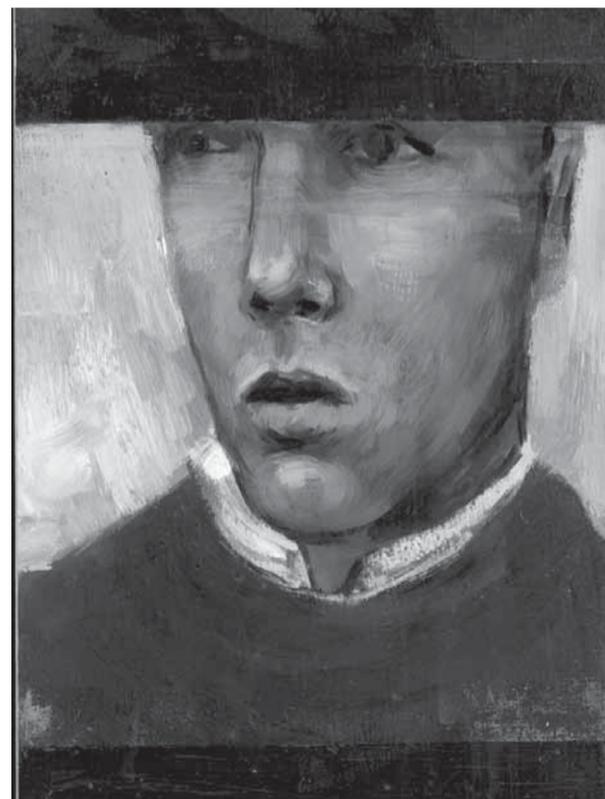
Kalin Ivanov is a Bulgarian DPhil student in International Relations at St Cross College.



Francine quand elle etait un enfant, 2004. Oil on panel



Two at the wedding of Marie (detail), 2005. Oil on panel



Some of the things we may never know, 2004. Oil on panel

Three Portraits

Steven Stowell, Balliol College

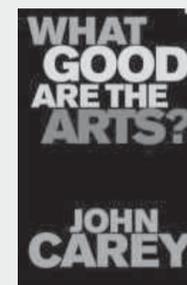
Oxford Authors in Print

Featured writers

Christopher Butler
Pleasure and the Arts
Oxford: OUP, 2004.
236 pages
ISBN: 0199272484.

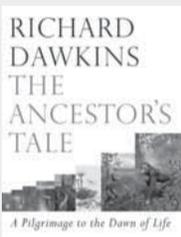


When *What Good are the Arts* is published in June, John Carey will be the second wizened custodian of the Oxford English Faculty to intervene in debates about the personal and social value of art in as many years. Christopher Butler's wide-ranging study attempts to re-establish enjoyment as a criterion for aesthetic interpretation and evaluation, whilst Carey's work will offer a subjective defence of the superiority of literature over the other arts. Opinions will be divided; some readers will welcome these books for shrugging off the hyper-politicised shackles of literary theory, whilst others will berate them for similar reasons.



John Carey
What Good are the Arts
Faber and Faber Limited, 2005.
204 pages
ISBN: 0571226027

Richard Dawkins
The Ancestor's Tale: A Pilgrimage to the Dawn of Life
London: Weidenfeld Nicolson, 2004.
520 pages.
ISBN: 0297825038.



Fellow of New College and holder of the Charles Simonyi Chair of Public Understanding of Science, Dawkins established his international reputation as an evolutionary biologist with *The Selfish Gene* (1976) and *The Blind Watchmaker* (1986). In *The Ancestor's Tale*, Dawkins narrates human evolution with the privilege of hindsight, shaping the random mutations of natural selection into a reverse teleology where the human storyteller is joined by his merry band of common ancestors on the route back to the source of life. Each rendezvous becomes the occasion for a lavishly-illustrated digression into that species; unfortunately, the Chaucerian conceit starts to vegetate long before our encounter with 'The Cauliflower's Tale'.

This collection of stories is Matthew Kneale's first book since his novel *English Passengers* scooped the Whitbread Prize in 2001. Kneale lives in Oxford, though these stories are a testament to his itinerant imagination – their locations range from China to Columbia and from Ethiopia to the Middle East as the author examines the ethics of crossing borders and transgressing norms in an increasingly globalized community. The collection comes to a brave conclusion with 'White', in which a suicide bomber is the first-person narrator who uncannily demands and challenges the reader's empathy.



Matthew Kneale
Small Crimes in an Age of Abundance
Picador, 2005.
288 pages
ISBN: 0330435345

Kate Fox
Watching the English: The Hidden Rules of English Behaviour
London: Hodder and Stoughton Ltd, 2004
424 pages
ISBN: 0340818859



Kate Fox is co-director of the Social Issues Research Centre in Oxford, an independent organisation that conducts research on human behaviour and social relations; her previous publications include *The Racing Tribe: Watching the Horsewatchers* (1999). In *Watching the English*, the popular anthropologist turns her gaze on 'the most repressed and inhibited people on earth'; diagnosing the nation with social 'dis-ease', she discusses English behaviour codes – from weather-speak to reflex apologies - as variant strains of social embarrassment.

Poet and critic Tom Paulin is a fellow at Hertford College, a lecturer in the English faculty, and an infamously opinionated commentator. 'You find the poem's title/ But not the poem' he writes in 'Une Rue Solitaire', the epilogue to this volume of assorted translations from Classical and European poets. What you find most frequently is Paulin himself – characteristically agitated short-lines, clauses that jerk between dashes, and frenetic phonetics that all contribute to the irreverent energy of these poems.



Tom Paulin
The Road to Inver
Faber and Faber Limited, 128 pages.
ISBN: 057122119X.

Thomas Marks, Magdalen College

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