

# THE REDWOOD COAST REVIEW

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## HABITAT

# Fire Season

C. Kevin Smith

*My house is made of wood so old, so dry  
From years beneath the pilot-light blue sky  
A stranger's idle gaze could be the match  
That sends us all to blazes—Where was I?*

—JAMES MERRILL, “Home Fires”

I am standing before my shelves of books—hundreds of books. A lifetime of books. Hundreds more nestle in boxes in the basement. My eyes race across the rows of spines. I must be fast for we are evacuating, the fire is uncontrolled and is burning this way. My mind feels laser-sharp, focused and clear, almost empty. I scan the familiar titles, speed-reading my floor-to-ceiling shelves. My fingers pull out three volumes. I exit my office, books in hand, turning once to let my eyes rest upon the shapes of its many objects, the walls and windows, the unfinished projects on my desk, the books on my desk, the stacks of books on the floor. I look at the chair, the table, the lamp. I leave. I shut the door behind me. I do not know when, or if, I will return.

Earlier that morning, a Wednesday, I had sat at my desk and sent an email to my worried family about the fires in Big Sur. I told them what the authorities had told us the previous evening at the community fire meeting, that there was no immediate danger, no evacuation foreseen. Highway 1 would remain open, businesses would remain open. Thirty minutes after my reassuring email, we were notified that our side of the highway, the west side, was under an advisory evacuation. (The fires were burning only on the east side of the highway.) Within a few hours the advisory would be changed to mandatory. By the end of the day we would be miles from home, unsure if we would ever see it again.

We: myself, my partner Jeff, two cats, Misha and Pearl, and Emile, the 90-year-old artist and friend we take care of. We: my notebooks and journals, boxes of letters, family photographs; Jeff's computer and camera equipment; our art, so much of it created by people we know; Emile's art, as much as we could pack in the time allowed. Two trips to Carmel, first with Emile and the cats, then with a car and a U-Haul we'd rented several days before, in the event, which seemed unlikely at the time, we would have to evacuate.

Evacuate: *e* = out + *vacuus* = empty. To evacuate is to empty your home of yourself. This is physically possible; it is emotionally impossible. It is not possible to empty “home” out of your self—the home that lives inside you. Even if everything remains intact, there is breakage. What once was whole—the constellation of objects and bodies and memories and desires that comprise your experience of home—is split apart into pieces, into the piecemeal fragments of your evacuation. You take what feels most precious and leave behind the rest, abandoning the suddenly haunted shell of your household to the gods of fate or fortune. You hope your home survives whatever catastrophe has precipitated your evacuation so you can feel whole again. You promise yourself that when—if—you return home, never again will you take its shelter for granted.

I felt the first premonitory brush of danger the Sunday before we evacuated. The fires had been burning a week, one week since a savage wave of summer solstice lightning had touched down across

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Jack London at Bohemian Grove, Sonoma County, August 1904

COURTESY GEOFFREY DUNN COLLECTION

## Lone Wolves *The many lives of Jack London*

Geoffrey Dunn

In *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* (1994), Janet Malcolm brilliantly illuminated the constructive nature of biography and called into question both the arrogance and intellectual duplicity of any claim to packaging human life so neatly between two covers, be they paper or cloth. “Biography can be likened to a book that has been scribbled in by an alien,” she observed. “After we die, our story passes into the hands of strangers. The biographer feels himself not to be a borrower but a new owner, who can mark and underline as he pleases.”

So it has been with the life of the American novelist and adventurer Jack London. For nearly a century now, various strangers have marked and underscored his life as they pleased. Indeed, some have ripped out entire passages, while others have speculated—and even fabricated—what may have appeared between the lines of his life. It makes for an interesting, if troubling, biographical mosaic, which from a distance takes on something of shape and definition, but from close-up bears little resemblance to the life at all.

Certainly no literary legacy in the history of American arts and letters has been more distorted, more diminished, than London's. While he was America's (and perhaps the world's) most popular novelist, short story writer and journalist during his lifetime, his reputation has been reduced over the years to being the author of juvenile “dog stories” and “Klondike tales.” While London's two canine classics, *Call of the Wild* (1903) and *White Fang* (1906), have undoubtedly contributed to that reduction, his collected oeuvre of more than 50 books and hundreds of essays and short stories spans a remarkably wide range of subject matter and locales—from the barrooms and oyster beds of his native San Francisco Bay Area, to the down-and-out streets of London, to the Russo-Japanese war on the Korean Peninsula.

London wrote about love and sport, literary ambition and alcoholism, betrayal and political assassination. He wrote travelogues and futuristic potboilers. In his brilliant maritime epoch, *The Sea Wolf* (1903), he paid personal homage to Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. And in a series of books like *The People of Abyss* (1903), *War of the Classes* (1905), *The Road* (1907), *The Iron Heel* (1908) and *Revolution and Other Essays* (1910), London laid bare the evils of “predatory” capitalism, promoted the possibilities of democratic socialism and warned against the coming tyranny of centralized government. He was as revolutionary as he was prolific, a legacy that has been lost on many of his conservative biographers, but which has been superbly reclaimed in *The Radical Jack London: Writings on War and Revolution* (2008), edited by Sonoma State University professor Jonah Raskin [see review, page 9].

London's was a life full of Whitmanesque contradictions. In spite of his social-

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ist politics, he was the wealthiest writer of his era and he owned large tracts of land in Sonoma County. Breast-fed and raised by an African-American nursemaid (the ex-slave Daphne Virginia “Jennie” Prentiss), he was an unabashed white supremacist capable of churning out the crudest formulations of racial bigotry.

It's often been said that historical figures attract the biographers they deserve, but I'm not so sure that is the case with London. His is a unique situation in which many of the artifacts of his life were long sequestered not only from the public, but from scholars as well. Although a veritable academic industry has risen up around London and his writings over the last three decades, there has not been a definitive biography published in the 90-odd years since his death. Jack London has yet to meet his match.

London was born to an unmarried mother in San Francisco in 1876. It is believed that his father was William H. Chaney, an itinerant writer, lecturer and astrologer, who lived with London's mother, Flora Wellman, in the year preceding his birth. Before her son's first birthday, the troubled Flora married Civil War veteran John London, who raised the young boy as his own, along with other siblings from his previous marriage. The London clan moved throughout the Bay Area, living at various locales in the East Bay and as far south as the San Mateo Coast, then finally back to Oakland, where “Jack” attended grammar school and sold newspapers from street corners to help his family make ends meet.

London's childhood poverty may have been somewhat exaggerated by the author in later years, but the young London most certainly worked various jobs in canneries, jute mills and laundries. He cleaned saloons and shoveled coal, worked as a ship hand and became an oyster pirate on San Francisco Bay. Later, he hoboed across the country, was imprisoned in Buffalo for a month, returned to Oakland High School, dropped out, went back to try college at the University of California, then dropped out from there, too, before embarking on a yearlong venture in search of gold in the Klondike.

Through it all, London was a voracious reader, as literature and historical texts provided him with imaginary escapes from the tedium of his workdays and the emotional vacuum of his family. He had returned to California from the Yukon in the summer of 1898, essentially broke, yet determined to become a writer.

By then, London had also become an ardent advocate for socialism. He had joined the Oakland chapter of the Socialist Labor Party as early as 1896 and had become a well-known regional figure on the stump for socialist causes, twice running unsuccessfully for mayor of Oakland on the socialist ticket. The *San Francisco Chronicle* dubbed him “the boy socialist of Oakland” and reported that the handsome and athletic London was “holding forth nightly to the crowds that throng City Hall park.”

London's work ethic matched his ambition. He adhered to a rigorous writing regimen of one thousand words per day. By the spring of 1900, the 24-year-old author had already landed several of his stories in leading literary magazines, including *Harper's Weekly*, *The Atlantic Monthly* and *McClure's*. In April, his first book, *The Son of the Wolf*, a collection of short stories set in the Klondike, was published by Houghton, Mifflin & Co., to both critical and popular acclaim.

London was also exploring the complex dimensions of turn-of-the-century romance and sexuality. He would later

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EDITOR’S NOTE

Movie Lust: Woody Isabel Philip Barcelona New York

Stephen Kessler

American movie critics and a sizable slice of the filmgoing public have evidently been seduced by Woody Allen’s latest effort, *Vicky Christina Barcelona*, in which the great Javier Bardem and the half-baked Scarlett Johansson and the cute newcomer Rebecca Hall and the mercurial Penélope Cruz join forces to act out the *auteur’s* fantasies of a hispano-bohemian four-way ménage set against the scenic background of the Catalonian capital. Every romantic, sophomoric and touristic cliché—from the Latin lover to the existential dialectic of freedom vs. security to the postcard-worthy vistas of Gaudi’s melting architecture—is squeezed for every last drop of its sweet juice, and the audience, bathing in the Mediterranean light, laps it up with belief-suspended pleasure.

I must admit I too enjoyed the movie. It satisfies any escapist voyeur with its vision of easy love and guilt-free sex, and the actors’ individual and collective beauty is a gift to behold. Bardem is a suave Adonis, Cruz is a hot-blooded nightmare of desire, Hall is sexy in a reserved intellectual way and Johansson—though she can barely act—has a soft radiance adored by the caressing camera. Like Marilyn Monroe without the talent, Johansson’s curved body and lovely face unspoiled by experience are a screen on which almost any man’s fantasies can be effortlessly projected. Allen certainly enjoys projecting his, and for the third time in as many movies he casts her as his female lead and unobscure object of desire.

The problem with this movie is the writing. From the opening moments the voice-over narration spells out the story’s exposition rather than embody it in drama. And the so-called philosophical questions raised by the characters’ speeches are the kinds of things my friends and I were talking about in high school, or maybe early in college. This is no doubt because Woody Allen, now in his low seventies, is still in nearly every way an adolescent. His arrested development has been evident in most of his movies of the last 20 years, some more embarrassing than others, but none showing much maturation beyond the

entertaining comedies of his middle period, most notably *Manhattan* and *Annie Hall*. It is as if in his compulsion to make a film every year he can only return obsessively to an eternal theme we all love to explore but into which we also expect our artists to offer some original insight, not just the jokes of 14-year-old boys.

The theme is desire and what to do about it, and obviously there are no easy answers. But some kinds of questioning penetrate more deeply into the mystery than others, and those deeper questions are the kinds I find most satisfying, even as entertainment. As it happens, another recent film provides a striking contrast to *Vicky Christina* in several interestingly symmetrical ways. The

*It is perhaps unfair to compare Woody Allen to Philip Roth—it’s like comparing a woodpecker to an osprey—but in this case the parallels are too obvious to ignore. Both are about the same age, both are neurotic Jewish boys from greater New York, and both have recurrently explored with varying degrees of comic genius the sexual fixations of their youth.*

Spanish or more precisely catalán director Isabel Coixet of Barcelona has, with a screenplay by Nicholas Meyer, adapted Philip Roth’s 2001 novel *The Dying Animal* into a most involving movie called *Elegy*. While Allen the grizzled New Yorker imagines a sun-washed Barcelona (a city which, in my experience, for all its architectural beauty is rather dark and grimy, at least in its most interesting parts), Coixet the 40-something catalana evokes a gloomy yet sensuous New York City where her protagonist, Rothian doppelganger David Kepesh, a minor intellectual celebrity, faces his mortal twilight with a lusty effort to seize his last chance at sexual satisfaction. Ben Kingsley plays Kepesh with smoldering desperation and rage at his aging body, and the body against which he hurls his with last-ditch passion and possessive obsession is that of Penélope Cruz, who in this incarnation is a rather reserved cubana of upper-class descent.

Consuela, Cruz’s character, is Roth’s idea of an object of desire, but she has a complexity that makes her more than a blank blonde screen or stereotypical tantrum-throwing fire-breathing Latina. In addition to being beautiful in an unconventional way, Cruz is a fine actor and invests Consuela with persuasive depth. Kingsley is extraordinary as a not-very-sympathetic character whose existential distress, beneath his hedonistic surface, allows the viewer to see him as a suffering human being facing the end of his erotic road with a kind of dread that elicits sympathy. The chemistry between Kingsley and Cruz is intense, and while their story plays out more gently and softly than in the novel (an adaptive decision of the filmmakers to which some critics have objected, as if a movie can ever replicate the texture of a text), its drama kept me riveted right to the end.

It is perhaps unfair to compare Woody Allen to Philip Roth—it’s like comparing a woodpecker to an osprey—but in this case the parallels are too obvious to ignore. Both are about the same age (Roth is two years older), both are neurotic Jewish boys from



Ben Kingsley and Penélope Cruz in Isabel Coixet’s *Elegy*

greater New York (Roth grew up across the river in Newark), and both have recurrently explored with varying degrees of comic genius the sexual fixations of their youth—and in Roth’s case the more grave fixations of older age. During my own neurotic Jewish yet darkly rebellious youth I would have nothing to do with either of these guys because from everything I heard and read about them they sounded like the kind of *schlemiels* I wanted to get as far away from as I could. The smash bestsellerhood of Roth’s 1969 novel *Portnoy’s Complaint* was not enough to make me want to read it; it sounded to me like the self-lacerating lament of some kind of Woody Allenish *untermensch*.

Imagine my amazement, then, when I finally picked up a copy in 1990 from a sidewalk paperback vendor in New York, to discover on reading *Portnoy* that it was the flat-out funniest book I’d ever read. Poor Woody—Phil outdoes him even when it comes to jokes about masturbation! Seeing Allen’s Barcelona movie and Coixet’s Barcelonese adaptation of Roth’s New York a week apart, I couldn’t help noting the resemblances and contrasts—not just the presence of Cruz and Patricia Clarkson in both casts but the thematic overlaps (mainly sexual hedonism vs. the alternatives) and the obtuseness with which some critics managed to look at the two films.

Stephen Holden of *The New York Times* (normally someone whose angle of critical vision I respect) was most egregious, and perhaps representative, in his knee-jerk reactions. Holden described *Vicky Christina* as a “warm-blooded” movie “set in the happy European city of Barcelona” where the triangular relationship between the Bardem and Johansson and Hall characters “gives off heat.” I don’t know what makes Barcelona happier than any other big city—perhaps its exotic difference from Manhattan where both Allen and Holden reside—but the only real heat in the movie is Cruz’s temper. The sexual tension is flaccid and the “sex” scenes, such as they are, are more like pantomimes of seduction than anything truly erotic—although Bardem is arguably sexier than all the women combined.

About *Elegy* Holden wrote of Kingsley’s character as “a selfish, entitled rat” who “manipulates the affections” of women and “is the morally repulsive embodiment of masculine privilege.” Now, if someone wants to trot out this kind of boilerplate feminist rhetoric to denounce a fictional character, fine; but between Kingsley’s Kepesh and Bardem’s Juan Antonio, it is the latter who is by far the more manipulative and privileged and morally dubious in his free and breezy fucking of—and with—come who may. Perhaps because Bardem is young, handsome and Latino and lives in the wonderland of happy Barcelona, he is exempted from the moral scrutiny and judgment applied to late-middle-aged New York Jewish Casanovas like Kepesh (and Roth and Allen for that matter) who can’t keep their minds or hands off nubile young women. The problem with Holden’s reductive criticism is that its simpleminded self-righteousness shrinks the character to a mere type, obscuring his psychic anguish and the true pathos of his situation.

While Allen, with admittedly admirable lightness of touch, in this case toys with his

creations as two-dimensional embodiments of stock ideas (the prude, the adventuress, the libertine, the hysteric), Roth and Meyer and Coixet take the vaguely unsavory character of Kepesh and infuse him (via Kingsley’s superb performance) with a sad humanity, one too interesting for him to be dismissed out of hand as merely a randy geezer. Could it be that Kepesh/Kingsley’s advanced age disqualifies him from the hedonistic pursuits of Juan Antonio, with whom the moralizing Holden seems to have no problem? Is there a whiff of ageism embedded between Holden’s otherwise politically correct lines?

Critics like Holden give Woody Allen a pass on such questions—except when Woody himself plays the dirty old man—surely because Allen is merely a writer of comedies, light entertainment to be simply enjoyed and not taken too seriously. Besides, we love him for being so lovably Woodyish all these years, spreading his neuroses across the screen with self-deprecating charm but no apparent shame. Woody is even more screwed up than we are, and we adore him for letting us off the hook. Roth, on the other hand, laugh-out-loud funny as he can be at his most manic, forces us to face uncomfortable truths—like the moral ambiguities of sex and the unjust finality of death—with no easy escape. Meyer and Coixet have taken some of the hardest edges off Roth’s source material, yet they have retained the moral and philosophical gravity of Roth’s investigation into late-life adult male lust. The maturity of this inquiry into a problematic topic naturally makes the average moviegoer squirm, but you’d think a critic from *The New York Times* would be tough enough to deal with such discomfort.

What really gets to me about all this is that a promiscuously prolific and intermittently funny filmmaker like Woody Allen is taken so seriously and indulged as some kind of creative genius no matter how hackneyed and superficial his work, while an obviously earnest and skilled director like Isabel Coixet—whose feminine empathy and compassion allow her to find and reveal the soul of her hypermasculine protagonist—can be dismissed so casually by those who should know better.

The rampant inanity and mindless mayhem that dominate the cinematic landscape and marketplace may never be superseded by thoughtful mature drama of Chekhovian, or even Rothian, subtlety. The masses of people enjoy explosions and violently choreographed chases and pretty faces and silly situations more than they do the nuances of great drama or the soul-cleansing catharsis of tragedy. But unless movie critics can see what’s in front of their eyes and defend real art over frivolity and kitsch, what’s left of truly sensitive filmmaking will be more and more marginalized, and the prospects for credible human stories onscreen increasingly diminished.

*Stephen Kessler is the author, most recently, of Moving Targets: On Poets, Poetry & Translation (essays, El León Literary Arts), which will be launched with a reading and booksigning Thursday, November 6, 7 pm, at City Lights Books, 261 Columbus Ave., San Francisco.*

THE REDWOOD COAST  
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MUSIC

# Late Bloomer

## At 100, Elliott Carter keeps on

Marc Hofstadter

December 11, 2008, will be a very special day in our country’s cultural history: classical composer Elliott Carter will turn one hundred years old. Elliott Carter is not a household name. The United States does not value its great classical composers as it does rock and roll singers or rap artists. Being a contemporary classical composer involves swimming against the current. To be a major figure in this rarefied world one must have the intellect to grasp the technical demands of complex modern composition, the aural skill to hear pattern and meaning in it, and the heart to feel deeply and move the listener. These qualities Elliott Carter has in spades. Who is he?

Well, for one thing, he was a late bloomer. He wrote his first great works—the *Piano Sonata* (1946), *Cello Sonata* (1948) and *First String Quartet* (1951)—when he was already in his late thirties and early forties. But he has more than made up for that by continuing to compose energetic, exciting pieces well past the age of ninety. Never in the history of Western music has a major composer created so prolifically at such a late stage of life. Carter’s wonderful *Dialogues* for piano and chamber orchestra (2003) was written at the age of ninety-five, his *Boston Concerto* (2002) at ninety-four. At ninety-nine, he continues to compose every day. The man has a phenomenal vitality.

*Carter’s music is an almost ideal mix of intellect and feeling, complexity and beauty, richness and tenderness. Few twentieth-century composers are as expansive and deeply searching.*

Not only has Carter’s creative output increased over the years. His music has become more innovative, colorful and joyful. Carter began, at the age of forty or so, to be heavily influenced by the expressionist music of Schoenberg, Berg and Webern, and his subsequent work often embodied an anguish and strangeness characteristic of those composers—though always with a slightly optimistic, open, American twist. Some of his works—for example, the *Variations for Orchestra* (1953-5) and the *Second String Quartet* (1959)—are full of discord and suffering. Yet much of his recent music, while atonal as ever, can best perhaps be described as “ebullient”—light, lively, witty—in somewhat the way Mozart’s music is. Here is a man for whom life, with advancing age, has become happier and happier!

I am not a professional musician. My mother was a concert pianist and my father briefly studied musical composition before deciding to give it up for philosophy but, apart from studying the piano from age seven through age thirteen, and taking one college music class, I have no musical training. I mention this because I want to suggest that it doesn’t take special education to appreciate dissonant modern music like Carter’s. All it takes, truly, is familiarity. The first work of Carter’s I heard, back in 1965, was his *Double Concerto for Harpsichord and Piano*, which had been composed in 1961. On first hearing I was baffled. The piece seemed chaotic, fragmented, unsatisfying. But, as I continued to listen, the work came alive for me and is now one of my favorite pieces of music—vital, beautiful, bristling with



Elliott Carter

energy. One doesn’t need to be a musician to enjoy Carter. One only needs to be open and give him a chance.

Music is at once the most technical and most emotional of art forms. It has a mathematical side, being based on scales of notes physically related to one another, obeying strict rules of harmony and/or counterpoint, being written down in special notation. (It’s perhaps for this reason that mathematicians are often talented at music.) It also has a very emotional side, and can be thought to exist primarily to convey deep feeling. Elliott Carter’s music, if approached technically, is extremely sophisticated, complex, and demanding. But, listened to over and over, it yields great emotional and sensuous rewards. Carter’s notes move me as only a couple of other recent composers do—the late Russian composer Alfred Schnittke and French master Pierre Boulez. You don’t have to understand the professional aspects of Carter’s work to be touched by it in your heart.

Carter’s music is deep. Aaron Copland, by comparison, seems simple and superficial. Samuel Barber appears too easily Romantic. Milton Babbitt seems dry, over-intellectual. Carter’s music is an almost ideal mix of intellect and feeling, complexity and beauty, richness and tenderness. Few twentieth-century composers are as expansive and deep as Carter. One characteristic of his music—the fact he often has different instruments play different melodic lines, rhythms or timbres at the same time, so that the piece resembles a discussion or even an argument—makes for complexity and drama. Another side of his music—the way it embodies change, process, metamorphosis—means that his notes are transformed from second to second, rarely repeating themselves, forever evolving, just as life—modern life, especially?—moves rapidly from one moment to the next. It takes a lot of listening, and ideally some study, to comprehend the structure of a Carter composition, but one can, as I’ve said, enjoy this music even without grasping its formal attributes. One can live in the moment of his works if one is sufficiently open and receptive, can thrill and move to it. It soars, grumbles, screeches, bubbles, scrapes, moans, providing a seemingly endless flow, like that of a churning, rushing river. It is, as the author of the wonderful book about Carter by David Schiff called *The Music of Elliott Carter* (Cornell University Press) has put it, “color, gesture and motion.”

Carter’s *oeuvre* has evolved over the years. His *Piano Sonata* is a bit reminiscent of Debussy and Copland. His *Variations for Orchestra* echo Schoenberg and Alban Berg in their expressionist dissonance. His *Piano Concerto* (1965) is dense, prickly, contentious, his *Night Fantasies* for piano (1980) free-ranging, associative, inventive. His *Violin Concerto* (1996) is lyrical and passionate, his *Symphonia: Sum Fluxae Pretiam Spei* (1997) alternately exuberant, brooding and airy, his *Dialogues* dramatic and terse. Transformation and metamorphosis are key in Carter’s music, both within each work and within the arc of his career. This makes his music quintessentially of our time. Differently from the music of, say, Bach, Schubert, or Wagner, Carter’s work does not embody a vision of order, a stable structure. It bod-ies forth movement and change. Every motif, every chord cluster, every rhythm is in a continual state of variation, and the listener finds him- or herself constantly surprised. This doesn’t mean that Carter’s music is chaotic or disordered. He creates his own, very modern versions of traditional forms—sonatas, quartets, fugues—and, in fact, when one studies them, one sees his works are very carefully struc-tured. (Schiff describes these structures brilliantly in one section of his book.)

Elliott Carter’s place in musical history is assured. Famous and frequently performed in Europe, he is by now, finally, the most highly regarded classical composer in the United States. He has won the Pulitzer Prize twice. He is often considered a major figure in the tradition of modern music which began with Schoenberg, Bartok, Stravinsky, Ives and Webern, and was continued by Schnittke, Gubaidulina, Boulez, Stockhausen, Berio, Nono, Ligeti and others. Some schools of contemporary classical music are unlike these composers in being melodic, harmonious, conserva-tive—I’m speaking notably of the Minimalists John Adams, Philip Glass, Steve Reich, Terry Riley—so that Carter, a great innovator, may seem paradoxically a relic of the past. Yet he has proven to be still at the forefront of contemporary music. His recent works embody what writer Italo Calvino (cited by Carter in some program notes) has elsewhere called “a lightness of thoughtfulness,” a quality that puts me in mind of Shakespeare’s late, great comedy *The Tempest*, in which a master similarly treats light, even humorous themes with poise, depth, a perfect touch. I know of no other music of our time with the somber poetry of *90+* (1994) or the improvisational fecundity of the *Oboe Quartet* (2001). This modern genius is a national treasure, an icon of the twentieth century who has marched vibrantly into the twenty-first, blessing us all with his brilliance and humanity.

Marc Hofstadter is a poet living in Walnut Creek whose lat-est book is *Luck* (Scarlet Tanager Books).

## DAVE MUSIC

Back when we lived on the island  
There was a house in back  
Made entirely of stone  
And in this house  
Lived a black man  
And his name was Dave  
The windows in the house  
Were covered by boards  
Nailed together and arranged so  
They could swing open in good weather  
The tarantulas liked our front porch  
So I had to leave the house running  
Every time I wanted to go outside  
One other thing was  
There was a bridge there  
So we could ride in my father’s car  
Back to America  
But we never went with him much  
To America I mean  
It was mostly just me and my brother  
And my mother and the tarantulas  
And Dave in the stone house out back  
The old man was a sign painter and so  
We moved a lot and after about a year  
We moved back to Alabama or Florida  
I forget  
But every  
Time blues  
Came on  
The radio  
I would  
Tell my  
Mother that’s  
Dave  
Music

—GREG HALL

## BLOOD DANCE

The way Indians do a Rain Dance hoping for rain  
Earthworms do a Blood Dance hoping for blood,  
Hoping for blood to drain down to them from above  
Not realizing it’s from human warcorpse carnage,  
thinking it’s just a different kind of rain—  
For the corpses on the battlefield are like clouds  
blood comes from instead of rain  
and there’s so much blood  
it trickles down  
and drips through the ceilings  
of underground worm tunnels  
And the worms don’t see the corpses  
but hear bombs and guns and groans  
and think it thunder  
and gorge and engorge themselves  
in the blood-soaked loam  
And drunk on the blood of youngmen  
war has turned to dung  
worms become cannibals  
and devour each other  
and the shit of worms that ate blood  
and that ate worms that ate blood that ate worms  
that ate blood  
for them is a delicacy,  
While for days on end, for weeks on end,  
For months on end, for years on end,  
For centuries on end, for millennia on end,  
For geologic ages on end, for Big Bangs on end,  
millions of war wounds  
make a small newspaper article  
or a sentence in a history book  
no one reads anymore,  
While enough blood from war dead through time  
floats all the battleships ever built,  
Yet the entrance and exit wounds of every bullet  
still haven’t been photographed  
and shown to gradeschool kids  
so they can identify them  
and draw them with craypas  
from memory—  
What other ways are there  
to keep Death young?  
Every time a young soldier is killed  
Death thanks God and is happy  
For the more corpses the merrier,  
For the more corpses the more blood for worms,  
For the more corpses the younger Death gets,  
Till Death becomes a child  
who no longer remembers  
dead men envy maggots in cheese,  
Till Death becomes a baby  
suckled by the war wounds  
of all time,  
Till Death becomes a fetus in the womb  
not knowing blood or bombs or bullets or worms  
or rain  
and having no idea in a million years  
tomorrow it will be born.

—ANTLER



FIRE from page 1

California. In those first days of the fire, from the vantage of our roof, the plumes of smoke still appeared as distant phenomena, faraway smoke signals of warning. Then on Sunday we awoke to find an enormous mass of smoke rising up behind Mt. Manuel and rapidly moving north. This was the first time we saw flames. We stood on the roof as planes and helicopters filled the sky with the shrieking sounds of emergency and we watched a persistent band of bright orange fire lick a long edge of the mountain horizon. We knew a dozer line had been plowed there, knew the fire was on the other side of the mountain. But it no longer felt far away.

Even more worrisome were the smoky “hot spots” scattered throughout the vegetation to the southeast of us, in the dense, brushy slopes around Ventana Inn. Where the smoke on the mountain was stark, monumental, a single massive shapely column of gray and pink and yellow, these thin, isolated hot spots buried in the woods were more insidious, steadily crawling their way to the highway. In the end, both fire areas would burn west, burn clear through the oaks and redwoods, the bay laurels and pines and madrones, through the weedy undergrowth and across the tan-colored hillsides, burning up the scrubby chapparal plants, burning all the way to Highway 1 and in the direction of hundreds of homes and businesses.

Having so little time to evacuate did force us to choose quickly what to take and what to leave behind. As I hurried from one room to another, I felt myself move through a strange awareness of time. What, from my deepest past, could I not bear to lose? What belongings and supplies would I require to get through the days or weeks ahead? All day long my mind was swept back and forth, between the long shadows of the past and a brittle, uncertain sense of the immediate future. Present time was almost nonexistent. During such trauma one is not aware of the present moment except as deadline. We had a few precious hours. We had to get out.

Some of my evacuation choices surprised me. Days before, I had made a mental checklist of what to gather, should the order to evacuate come, but as Jeff and I moved things to the car that Wednesday morning, I found myself reaching for things that were not on my checklist, items I rarely used, looked at, or even thought about.

Some of these items had belonged to my maternal grandmother, then my mother, and now me. For example, a Metlox china plate with a loopy, Jackson Pollockish fifties design, which recalled for me the story of how my grandmother, aware of her teenage daughter’s unhappiness, bought an odd-looking Metlox china plate shaped like a lopsided V (my mother’s name is Vievea). My mother had declared how dull, how square, her parents were; that evening, her mother served her dinner on a plate that was meant to convey, for she could not bring herself to say the words, that she understood her daughter’s unhappiness, and wished she could make things better.

I also brought the two heavy volumes of Beethoven piano sonatas edited by Artur Schnabel that my grandmother had given to her husband as a Christmas gift in 1940, a little over a year before my mother was born. My grandfather was passionate about the piano to the point of unhappy obsession, and was burdened all his life by what he perceived as his failure as an artist, a burden that poisoned the atmosphere in which my mother breathed the first twenty years of her life. “May this volume bring you much happiness,” my grandmother wrote to a man who did not know how to be happy. Why did I save these piano books? They are impossible to play from. Overbearing footnotes in three languages crowd nearly every page, long paragraphs of editorial remarks heavy with a certain type of Prussian spirit—rigid, unyielding, unforgiving—that leaves little room for spontaneity or kindness or compassion or wit.

And yet I could not bear to let these pages burn, for as miserable as that part of my heritage is, I grew my own love of piano, my own passion for music, from that same family plot of rich, troubled soil. And, too, there is my grandmother’s distinctive signature below her hopeful dedication, and in this signature I admire her spirit of patience and strength, bigger than her

husband’s fury, bigger than Artur Schnabel, bigger even than Beethoven.

But not bigger than a wild-fire. I needed to protect it from the fire—all of it, the signature, the footnotes, the unhappiness, the passion, the aspiration, the deep love of music that flows through my family’s blood like a creek that will never run dry.

We were evacuated a week. Already that time is blurring across my memory, days of numb blankness, a flat mental space hazy with smoke. I was physically exhausted from the packing and loading of boxes of fragile art all day; the morning after the evacuation I awoke with every muscle sore, as if I had trekked up a tall mountain. Worse was the mental exhaustion, the stress of displacement, the constant anxiety about the safety of our home. There were rumors of looting. Our caretaker, his son, and two other men had remained on the property, to protect its structures with fire retardant gel, if necessary. They had to deal with power outages, a dwindling food supply, and

*What, from my deepest past, could I not bear to lose? What belongings and supplies would I require to get through the days or weeks ahead? All day long my mind was swept between the long shadows of the past and a brittle sense of the immediate future.*

a sheriff’s department pointedly hostile to the small number of residents and business owners who chose to defy the evacuation order. Controversy about this aspect of the firefighting effort continues to smolder in Big Sur.

But the fire never crossed the highway. The firefighters held the line. Our house, and countless others, remained safe. Everyone in Big Sur will be forever grateful to the firefighters for their hard work.

The day after we returned home, I went for a walk in the woods near our house. Everything was littered with a fine coating of ash, even the spider webs, white flakes of soot suspended symmetrically between the crooks of twigs and branches as if floating in air, as if part of nature’s design. Every few hundred yards I would bend over to pick up a burned leaf, fragile yet perfectly whole, burned to a shiny mahogany brown. These leaves had been crisped on the other side of the highway and hurled into the air by smoke and heat, to fall finally into the shade of unburned trees. I have saved many of these leaves. In them I glimpse some dark essence of the fire, preserved and as if baked into their veins and fibers, as if nature were one enormous kiln. Someday these frail relics will help me remember the fire.

After the fire, we drove past mountains scraped raw by flame, mountains gray with sooty ash. In some places the effect was lunar, unworldly, except that it was not another world, it was our world, our familiar surroundings, leveled and transformed by fire.

We were transformed, too. How could we not be, when the ashes continued to fall even after the fire was out, finer and finer grades of snow-like particles that still carried the acrid scent of char? Ash of earth, ash of bone . . . What is not made of ash? Ash fills the sky, always. Ash rains down upon us even when we do not see it or smell it or taste it. It is the ash of what we must lose, the ash of our lives, our possessions, our stories. The governor of California tells us to acknowledge that every season has become a fire season in our state. He is right. Every season of human life is a season of



OIL PAINTING BY BARBARA MEDAILLE

loss. Somewhere, right now, a fire is burning in someone’s life, and the ashes of what is lost rise and blow and spread across the skies and fall upon us all.

Every day our lives are full of danger, though we do not like to think so. Time passes, trees fall, objects break, people die. Mountains burn. James Merrill, whose lines introduced this essay, wrote a lifetime of poems about the danger of living. *A Scattering of Salts*, his last book, came out one month after his 1995 death of a heart attack resulting from AIDS. The book’s title echoes a scriptural concern with time, memory, and mortality, and serves as the dying poet’s epitaph. Yet even when Merrill was a young man and AIDS not yet a rumor from the future, he sounded the persistent theme of loss. One of his best poems, “An Urban Convalescence,” from his 1962 collection *Water Street*, begins:

*Out for a walk, after a week in bed,  
I find them tearing up a part of my block  
And, chilled through, dazed and lonely,  
join the dozen  
In meek attitudes, watching a huge crane  
Fumble luxuriously in the filth of years.  
Her jaws dribble rubble. An old man  
Laughs and curses in her brain,  
Bringing to mind the close of The White  
Goddess.  
As usual in New York, everything is torn  
down  
Before you have had time to care for it.  
Head bowed, at the shrine of noise, let me  
try to recall  
What building stood here. Was there a  
building at all?  
I have lived on this same street for a  
decade.*

Merrill’s *Collected Poems* (2002) is a favorite of mine, but I did not take it with me when we evacuated. Like most books, it is replaceable. When I stood before my shelves and scanned its rows of titles, I gathered as if by instinct the three books I could not bear to lose. This act was unplanned. All my books are precious to me (well, most are), but on the day of the evacuation I did not have time to think of them. There was only time—my mind only made the time—to think of three books. If the house should burn down, I knew I would have this: my doctoral dissertation, a collection of Shakespeare’s sonnets, and an inscribed copy of the *Collected Poems* of Edgar Bowers.

The choice to rescue my dissertation from the approaching flames surprised me. When I left academia, in 1999, I was eager to put the structured formality of those years behind me. I wanted to write, to write a novel, to grow wings and become what I thought of as “a real writer,” to evolve into a new and better version of myself. Yet finishing a novel, one that meets my impossibly anxious standards, has proved a larger challenge than I anticipated. As the

years pass, the solid fact of my dissertation, as a complete work, begins to grow in my estimation. Perhaps I will learn to heed its subject—how stability of meaning eluded the monuments of nineteenth-century Paris—and accept the unfinished, the unsettled, the imperfect in my own work. Perhaps all those years of study still have something to teach me. It turned out I could not bear to lose my dissertation to the fire.

There was another change in my life in 1999, when Jeff and I moved into an apartment together. For Valentine’s Day that year I purchased a handsome volume of Shakespeare’s sonnets, in order to memorize a sonnet I would speak aloud to my beloved on that special day devoted to lovers. I have done this every year since, the atmosphere and feeling of each year finding its own appropriate sonnet. And in the upper corner of the page, I note in black ink the year. For ten years, the sonnets have been a living testimony to our love for each other. I could not bear to lose this volume to the fire.

Edgar Bowers was a rare and cherished friend. Winner of the Bollingen Prize in Poetry, he died in 2000 of lymphoma; I spent the last month of his life caring for him in his beautiful San Francisco apartment that looked out onto the Golden Gate Bridge, onto the glassy blue water of the bay and the pale brown hills of Mt. Tamalpais. I treasure the memory and still vital presence of his friendship as much as I do the remembered joy of loving my grandmother. Both her and Edgar’s ashes lie in California earth; their spirit remains vivid in my life. I could not bear to lose this book, its poems, its signature, its witness to an irreplaceable friendship, to the fire.

Many of Edgar’s poems are about the act of witness, about fragile stories surviving the ceaseless rush of time. With every reading the poems reenact that survival, as a place where the myths we invent about our lives are rescued and preserved from the fire of our mortality. In “Chaco Canyon,” he imagines Plato’s presence in the New Mexican desert, where the poet and a lover and the young sons of friends are camping amid ancient ruins. “Though Plato’s eyes were open,” the poet writes,

*in a dream  
Remembering the canyon, he foresaw  
That, in the time to come, a man, encamped  
For years beside a ruin once a city  
Exposed to the indifference of the sun  
And moon, inquiring of the breathless dust  
That covers all things made of it, one day,  
Among the ashes, bones, and sherds, will find  
Preserved by an egyptian air a memoir;  
And, bringing it to the light, will read of us,  
Dazzled by time and by what time provides.*

C. Kevin Smith is a fiction writer who lives in Big Sur and contributes often to the RCR.



WRITING NATURE

# ETERNAL SUNRISE

## *John Muir’s love affair with wilderness*

William Zehringer

*Just before the alpenglow began to fade, two crimson clouds came streaming across the summit like wings of flame, rendering the sublime scene yet more intensely impressive; then came darkness and the stars.*

—JOHN MUIR, *The Yosemite*

American literature has been enriched, from its very beginnings, by the writing of gifted observers of nature. From the hazardous sea voyages and awestruck encounters of Walter Raleigh in the Age of Exploration, and the pathbreaking expeditions of Lewis and Clark in the nineteenth century, to the impassioned explorations of a much-diminished natural world by Rachel Carson, Edwin Way Teale and Annie Dillard in the twentieth, the descriptive power of their narratives has given form to the wonder they felt as they found their own paths into the heart of the American wilderness.

In the long series of tales that serves to preserve for later generations the adventures of our poet-naturalists, the journeys and testimonies of John Muir (1838-1914) have an enduring value. For that Scottish immigrant has also the honor of having successfully preserved much of the landscape that he wrote about so indelibly.

John Muir, who seems to have lived awake through what William Blake once called “the lost traveler’s dream under the hill,” was changed forever by his many startling encounters with the wild and vivid splendor of the North American continent.

We know, from the marvelously crafted pages of his journals, that Muir, who waded through marsh, prairie grass and bogs, and ascended mountains, came back to the haunts of men with a singular and determined vocation: to save from all spoliation that untamed, vibrant country which had enthralled his heart.

How did he go about painting that land for all those who wished to view, if only in his books, the most splendid vistas of their country? Here, as one example of his “rough magic,” is John Muir, ensconced among the towering Sequoias, as he fuses precise powers of observation with a wonderful sense of place: “Imbedded in these majestic woods there are numerous meadows, around the sides of which the Big Trees press close together in beautiful lines, showing their grandeur openly from the ground to their domed heads in the sky. For every venerable, lightning-stricken tree, there is one or more in the glory of prime, and for each of these, many young trees and crowds of saplings.”

Muir’s ability to capture and hold in mind such a well-focused picture of the teeming world before him was, apparently, already present in his early life. In his memoir *The Story of My Boyhood and Youth*, as he recalls growing up as a young man on a Wisconsin farm, he tells how, after hearing the songs of the birds, “We boys often tried to interpret the wild ringing melody and put it into words.” Such brief and telling vignettes, placed beside his most inspired musings and his unrivaled views of lofty pines and soaring peaks, can present us with a fairly accurate idea of John Muir’s way of approaching the natural and human world. We may also gather further insight into his thought from his correspondence, as in the following letter, quoted by one of

his biographers, Frederick Turner: “I suppose I must go into society this winter,” he wrote to his beloved sister, Sarah, adding that “I would rather go back in some undiscoverable corner beneath the rafters of an old garret with my notes and books and listen to the winter rapping.”

Perhaps Robert Burton, had he known a man with John Muir’s personality, would have found a secure place for him in the pages of *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, along with scholars and sundry other lovers of solitude. Indeed, Burton affirms, “from these melancholy dispositions no man living is free.”

Nonetheless, it could only have been sheer joy that animated Muir, that tireless, solitary walker, when he first viewed the lush reaches of the great forested valleys and crystalline cascading streams of Northern California.

How else may one explain John Muir’s ability to capture in words, time and again, the supernal beauty of unbounded nature, as he does here, in *The Yosemite*: “Now and then one mighty throb sends forth a mass of solid water into the free air far beyond the others, which rushes alone to the bottom of the fall with long streaming tail, like combed silk, while the others, descending in clusters, gradually mingle and lose their identity.”

In such a manner did John Muir offer his readers stunning portrayals of a still wild and unblemished American landscape, which he set out to save for all generations to come. And so he did, throughout his long life, working with unceasing labor to protect such natural wonders as the Grand Canyon, the redwoods and the Petrified Forest, and winning over his friend and woodland companion Theodore Roosevelt to the cause of national conservation.

*To read these musings of the aged naturalist, recalling his changing cast of mind as a young man, is to become aware that Muir, almost from the beginning, “had begun to discover for himself a way of living not on the land but with it, so that he might receive its gifts of the spirit.”*

From his own testimony, it is possible to gauge that Muir must have possessed an extraordinary inner strength in order for him to pursue such a dedicated and austere vocation, despite many setbacks and considerable opposition. For, then as now, a number of powerful special interests had little sympathy for Muir’s spirited, pugnacious defense of our imperiled natural heritage. In fact, the long, protracted struggle that Muir and like-minded allies waged to win over leading public figures to policies of conservation and wise stewardship of land and resources finally drove him to affirm that the virtually unspoiled tracts that, at that time, still lay across America, should be placed off limits to public use, even for camping and recreation.

That view, in the end, was to put John Muir at odds with one of his most cherished confres, Gifford Pinchot. Although, to be sure, theirs was but a merry quarrel, after all, between two far-seeing men, who had shared many a campfire under the stars.

Judged by Stuart Udall, John F. Kennedy’s Interior Secretary, to be among the most distinguished of all the men who have held that office, Pinchot knew, from his hard but successful struggle to have nature preserves set aside in his home state of Pennsylvania, that the public must be enlisted in the cause of conservation.

And so they should certainly have access to our great natural sites, under the responsible vigilance of those charged with the care of preserved lands.

As an inspired but practical bureaucrat, Gifford Pinchot foresaw that, were that not so, then the entire enterprise for which they had so long toiled could come to be viewed as the genteel hobby of an elite leisure class, “tree-huggers” in current parlance. In saying so, Pinchot surely must have had in mind the terrible reverse for the cause of natural conservation that he, Muir and others had suffered in the catastrophic flooding of the pristine Hetch

### SKELETONYDIPPING

As we delight in skinnydipping  
in the wild lake at night under the moon  
Stripping off clothes in a rush  
and taking a dip in the dark  
So the skeleton wants to take off the flesh  
and inner organs covering it  
And be naked and free at last  
in its pure white birthday suit of bone  
And plunge plunge plunge  
into the still lake at night under the moon  
And lie on its back and float  
and dream  
How all skeletons should be free  
and wild and naked at last  
And plunge in the cool dark lake  
under the moon alone  
And emerge a shivering skeleton free and naked and wild  
in the moonlight  
For when a skeleton goes swimming alone in the dark  
it feels great  
To have water sluice between the ribs  
and around all the bones  
and in the empty eye sockets  
little affectionate whirlpools  
and where the brain was  
inside the skull  
to feel minnows  
swimming and nibbling—  
Yeah, in the mind, skeleton goes boneydipping  
skullydipping skeletonydipping  
So hot when it took off its flesh and organs  
and leapt into the lake  
it hissed and a big cloud of steam went up—  
As you dip an apple into caramel  
to make a caramel apple  
Or a cherry in chocolate  
to make a chocolate-covered cherry,  
So you dip your skeleton  
in wild lake night cool water alone  
And float on your back with your skull  
looking up at the stars  
So when your skeleton gets out at last  
and lets the wind dry it off  
It shivers and glistens in the starlight.

—ANTLER

Hetchy Valley in California, a decision made at the highest levels of government.

If we wish to fathom John Muir’s sense of what was (and is) truly lost by the promotion of such calamitous policies, we need only look at the exquisitely rendered remembrances that he set down of his early life. There he demonstrates a remarkable appreciation of the qualities that inhere in creatures of the field and woodland, and a fascination with the teeming, multifaceted life he saw disporting along the riverbanks, in the swamps and on the prairies. Of the oxen on his father’s farm, he wrote, “We recognized their kinship, by their intelligent, alert curiosity, manifested in listening to strange sounds; their love of play; the attachments they made; and their mourning, long continued, when a companion was killed.”

To read these pensive musings of the aged naturalist, recalling so well his changing cast of mind as a young man, is to become aware that John Muir, almost from the beginning of his *career* as a defender of America’s imperiled natural treasures, “had begun,” as his biographer notes, “to discover for himself a way of living not on the land but with it, so that he might receive its gifts of the spirit.”

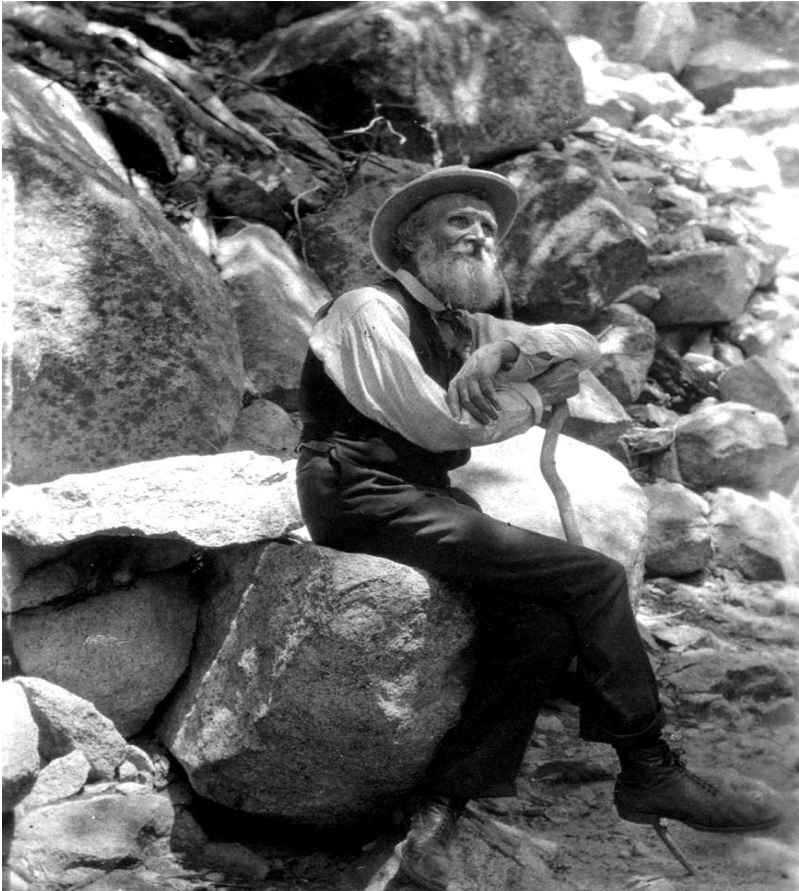
Thus, of John Muir it can justly be said that he anticipated, far in advance of Aldo Leopold in *A Sand County Almanac* (1949), the valuable and far-seeing concept of a “land ethic.” Here is yet another example of his reverent regard for the sylvan realm that lay in his all-encompassing view: “When I entered this sublime wilderness the day was nearly done, the trees with rosy glowing countenances seemed to be hushed and thoughtful, as if waiting in conscious religious dependence on the sun, and one naturally walked softly and awe-stricken among them.”

So did John of the Mountains strive, with his finely crafted prose poetry, to engage his contemporaries, and later generations to come, in saving the patrimony that is part of our “goodly heritage.”

“This grand show is eternal,” Muir wrote. “It is always sunrise somewhere; the dew is never all dried at once; a shower is forever falling; vapor is ever rising.

“Eternal sunrise, eternal sunset, eternal dawn and gloaming, on sea and continents and islands, each in its turn, as the round earth rolls.”

*William Zehringer, who lives in Pennsylvania, is the author of Paths to Writing, a college textbook, among other works of fiction and nonfiction.*



John Muir in Yosemite



BOOKS

Under the Boardwalk

Daniela Hurezanu

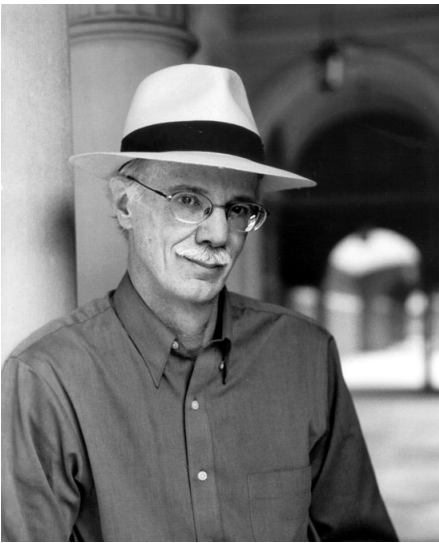
**THE KNIFE THROWER**  
by Steven Millhauser  
Phoenix (1999), 200 pages

**IN THE PENNY ARCADE**  
by Steven Millhauser  
Washington Square Press (1987), 164 pages

Several months ago I found at a book sale of the Santa Cruz Public Library a marvelous (in all the senses of the word) collection of short stories, *The Knife Thrower* by Steven Millhauser, probably the biggest discovery I’ve made since I read W. S. Merwin’s *The Miner’s Pale Children*.

Millhauser’s technique is very particular in that it uses a realist-psychological approach only to better thwart it by infusing it with elements of fantastic fiction. For example, in “A Visit,” the narrator is introduced to his friend’s wife, who happens to be a gigantic, ugly frog. A different writer would have described the scene in a surrealist style, but Millhauser’s character ponders with a straight face the implications of his friend’s marriage to a frog. This encounter between the means of psychological realism and fantastic literature creates a disruptive tension and provokes in the reader a feeling that transcends the literal description.

Millhauser has the very rare genius of giving us the pleasure of reading that captivating stories usually arouse in us, while *reflecting* and engaging the reader in a reflection not only on the story itself and on the act of storytelling, but also on some serious topics, such as the relationship between technology and morality, the American obsession with technological progress and the extremes to which this obsession is carried. Yet he does this in such an oblique way that the reader may not



JERRY BAUR

Steven Millhauser

even notice that the stories “The Dream of the Consortium” and “Paradise Park” are essentially two critical essays on American lifestyle done in the guise of storytelling. He manages to weave his ideas so smoothly into the fabric of the story—indeed the ideas *are* the story—for two reasons: 1) the narrator doesn’t judge from the outside, but is himself one of the crowd and, like the crowd, goes through a series of conflicting feelings, from nostalgia for the charm of the old department stores to being seduced by the new world of mega-malls, in which the old stores and pretty much everything on the planet is copied and transformed into a replica that can be purchased and sold; 2) the child in Millhauser is fascinated by all the incarnations of amusement parks, which, in turn, are incarnations of old fairs and freak shows—a magic world reminiscent of an

*Whether realist or fable-like, all Millhauser’s stories seem to be born out of a desire to re-create the world.*

Oriental bazaar, which is best represented in the story “Flying Carpets.”

It is no accident that the dream store in “The Dream of the Consortium” and the dream amusement park in “Paradise Park” are extremely similar. Both utopias are built on the desire to replicate life, that is, to transform everything into a copy that ends up taking the place of the original. For the business people in the dream store there is no distinction between a wristwatch and a Roman villa. In the dream store one can order and buy an entire European city, which is, of course, more convenient than traveling all the way to Europe. Sound familiar? A cross between Las Vegas and Disneyland, Millhauser’s dream store and paradise park remind us of Jean Baudrillard’s reflections on technology and simulacra. In “The Dream of the Consortium,” the entire world, or rather its replica, can be bought, sold and possessed by consumers. In “Paradise Park,” the consumers of increasingly titillating forms of entertainment descend into labyrinthine structures that imitate the real world from which they are trying to escape. But the search for ever more titillating amusements eventually turns on itself like a snake biting its tail, and Paradise Park becomes a sort of Devil’s Park in which the ultimate pleasure is pain.

If one wants to find out more about Millhauser’s understanding of art one should read the story “The New Automaton Theater,” an *ars poetica* that should be compulsory reading in all so-called “writing” classes. The narrator distinguishes between a “Children’s Theater,” built on a naïve realism that wants to keep the illusion of fiction at any price, and a theater for adults—the “new automaton theater”—in which the artifice of fiction is exposed for what it is, and the realist characters become “automatons.” The new automatons lack the grace of the realist ones from the Children’s Theater, but they are “profoundly expressive in their own disturbing way.”

After discovering *The Knife Thrower*, I found in a small used-book store with the picturesque name Westside Stories another book by Millhauser, *In the Penny Arcade*. Published in the early 1980s, this is a collection of short stories that prefigures *The Knife Thrower*, though it’s more eclectic, as it includes both parables and stories written in a more realist vein.

The first story, “August Eschenburg,” is a variation on “The New Automaton Theater” (or rather, the other way around, since “August . . .” was written first)—a reflection on the act of creation written from the perspective of a late-19th-century artist. It also includes elements present in “The Dream of the Consortium” and “Paradise Park,” in which the utopias of the mega-market and the amusement park are conflated into a Magic World that is as close to hell as it is to heaven. The tone of this story and the reflections on creation are reminiscent of certain German novels of ideas by early-

See **MILLHAUSER** page 8

# BIBLIOTECA

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

PRESIDENT’S DESK

## My Library Journey

Judy Hardy

My connection to libraries started many years ago as a page shelving books at the Shaker Heights Public Library in Cleveland, Ohio. I worked there from the age of 14 and continued through high school, college and finally after college while earning a Master of Library Science degree from Case Western Reserve University. I then moved to Washington, DC, and worked at the National Institutes of Health Research Library. Then, back to Cleveland and the Allen Memorial Medical Library and work on the first Regional Medical Library Program in the country. After many years of being a mother and volunteer I returned to Shaker Heights Public Library as a cataloguer and eventually head of Technical Services.

Since retiring to The Sea Ranch almost four years ago, I have volunteered at Coast Community Library, primarily doing collection development and database work, eventually becoming a member of the Operating Committee, Finance Committee and the Friends of Coast Community Library Board of Directors.

As I begin my term as President of the Board, I would like to thank the three previous presidents with whom I’ve had the most contact—Pearl Watts, Beth Knoche and Laura Ishimaru—for their leadership, dedication and commitment to Coast Community Library. I would also like to voice my appreciation for their friendship and support as I have discovered the wonders of a small public library on the California coast.

There have been significant changes in the library during the tenure of these three past presidents. Most particularly, Coast Community Library has become a branch of the Mendocino County Public Library, which has meant giving up some of our independence but has brought us a wealth of materials available through the Horizon System. It also brought us Terra Black, our wonderful branch manager, and her terrific assistant, Laura Schatzberg. Their hard work and positive approach to everything help make it all work.

In future columns I’d like to introduce you to some of the many volunteers who make Coast Community Library the special place that it is. Without them we would never accomplish the things that we do—Fionna and Richard Perkins, whose vision and support helped found the library and sustain it for many years; Greg Jirak and his hardheaded, warmhearted approach to finances; Bea Aker, our hospitality chairman, who truly cares about volunteers eating well; Ruth Cady, also a retired librarian, who is a voice of experience and wisdom to all; Jeff Watts and his helpers who keep our building in such good shape. Something also should be said about the town of Point Arena and the entire coastal community, which have so wholeheartedly supported the library since its inception 19 years ago.



Gerald Haslam

## Pride of Place

Marek Breiger

HASLAM’S VALLEY  
by Gerald Haslam  
Heyday Books (2005), 320 pages

*In my heart, in the deepest part of me where I really live, I remain very much a product of my family and my region . . . I found that the Great Valley grasped my innards like tree roots wrapping around and through so that it is difficult for me to tell if one exists independent of the other . . .*

—GERALD HASLAM

*People are places.*

—WILLIAM SAROYAN

Many of my students are first-generation Americans. Their parents are from China and India, from Pakistan and Afghanistan, from Russian and Korea and Vietnam.

They are now Californians, children of the Bay Area, whose earliest memories are of Fremont. Their ancestral roots are both thousands of miles away and embodied through their parents in a specific California place. Immigrants and first-generation Americans now define Fremont as much as Saroyan’s Armenian immigrants defined Fresno, as much as Gerald Haslam’s Texas- and Oklahoma-born neighbors defined the Oildale and Bakersfield of the Great Depression and World War II era.

The power of regionalism in literature is that the writer’s immersion in a specific time and place and people allows the reader to find meaning in his or her own locality. If the regional writing has depth the student reader will find essential meanings in his or her own surroundings.

Gerald Haslam is a major regional writer in the tradition of Steinbeck and Saroyan. Yet Haslam is in the line not only of those California giants but also of other regionalists—the Sherwood Anderson of *Winesburg, Ohio*, as well as William Faulkner, Eudora Welty and Flannery O’Connor.

In *Haslam’s Valley* Heyday has collected nearly forty years of quality writing set in Haslam’s terrain, the Oildale of Okies and Mexicans and blacks and Asians who work hard for a living and struggle for respect and dignity. As always, Haslam illustrates that to write with love of one’s region is not to be uncritical.

Powerful regional artists like Haslam are not cheerleaders. They look at their home place and can see, in that place, the cowardice as well as the courage of a whole world.

When Haslam exposes prejudice, as in a powerful early story called “The Doll,” it would be a mistake to think that he is pointing a finger only at Central Valley bigotry. For Haslam’s writing, which is in the tradition of Mark Twain, punctures human hypocrisy wherever it is found, and hypocrisy is, of course, found everywhere.

“The Doll” is about all of the comfortable and self-righteous who are insensitive to the suffering of others. In the story two

Oklahoma migrants, a boy and his mentally retarded uncle, who is small and delicate as a “doll,” look for work. They offer to do chores for an Oildale matron of the comfortable middle class. The Oildale summer is sketched flawlessly and we are immersed in the intense summer heat, while we hear the voice of the needy migrants and hear also the thoughts of the respectable Mrs. Hollis, who cannot understand what is in front of her eyes.

Haslam writes: “The day was oppressively hot, even in the shade of the porch, but the Okies stopped in full sunlight on the front lawn. The larger boy, lean with dirty looking yellow hair that contrasted with his deeply sun-browned skin answered in a flat nasal voice: ‘Lookin’ fer work lady. Kin we mow yer law of anythang?’”

Haslam continues: “Although her lawn was indeed shaggy, she didn’t want this drippy-nose Okie near her any longer than necessary . . .”

When she relents and hires the pair, she refuses to let the boy and his uncle use her bathroom. When the uncle can no longer hold his urine and “pisses himself,” the woman, who ironically considers herself to be religious, shows no humanity or compassion.

Haslam’s ending is devastating because he bases his short stories on character and thus allows the readers to draw their own conclusion: “Jesus didn’t mean them,” raced through her mind. “He didn’t. He wouldn’t. He didn’t.”

Mrs. Hollis does not understand Christianity. And thus Haslam’s exposure of hypocrisy could not be more exact.

Writing in the years after *The Grapes of Wrath*, Haslam refuses to see the “Okies” as mere stereotypes. Of Anglo and Latino background, and a Roman Catholic, Haslam is very aware of the prejudices of his hometown—against blacks and Asians as well as Mexicans and Jews and Catholics. He also

***Gerald Haslam is a major regional writer in the tradition of Steinbeck and Saroyan. Yet he is in the line not only of those California giants but also of other regionalists—Sherwood Anderson, William Faulkner, Eudora Welty and Flannery O’Connor.***

is aware of working-class whites who belie the easy categorizing of too many educated people who talk about “Okies” in a dismissive way they would never employ when talking about African-Americans or Asians or Hispanics.

In “The Great X-Mas Controversy” a drinker at the Tejon Club discovers a Hmong family living as his family once had—in tents and in poverty. He realizes that the Hmong father, in his dignity and desperation, is only looking to find work in order to feed his hungry wife and children.

The narrator of the story, thinking of his own past, grows articulate. The vernacular, recorded at perfect pitch, exposes great depth of understanding and an empathy that is both understated and totally sincere.

“They also looked real familiar. Whenever my folks come out here from Oklahoma, and I wasn’t but a little kid, we’d camped right here in these same woods. We’d built a shelter outta whatever we could find, just like these folks done, and me and my brothers and sisters we was hungry a lot, just like these kids. I have to tell you, it grabbed me damn deep to see folks livin’ like that in California in the 1990’s. And me with a well fed family, two cars, two

See HASLAM page 8

LIBRARY LINES

## Libraries Gone Digital

Lori Hubbart

The give and take between good, old-fashioned books and advanced information technologies can be strangely beguiling. The pundits still can’t figure out what it means for libraries.

Public libraries were created to support democracy by making information easily available and free to all. The concept of “information” has grown wings, scales and multiple arms, but libraries remain steadfastly true to their founding principles.

In practice, though, providing information technology to the public can be tricky. If librarians can’t agree on what services the public might need or want, neither can the business leaders who provide the technologies.

Steve Jobs of Apple famously declared, “Forty percent of the people in the US read one book or less last year.”

Responding to the debut of a digital reading device from Amazon (known as the Kindle), Jobs went on to say, “It doesn’t matter how good or bad the product is, the fact is that people don’t read anymore.”

Amazon’s Jeff Bezos obviously thought the other 60 percent would appreciate a portable reader on which they could easily download some 6000 titles from Amazon’s Web site.

As for that putative 60 percent, library staffers in rural or economically depressed areas can tell you one thing: The readers among us can’t all afford the \$300-plus price tag for a Kindle, much less the ongoing expense of downloading books.

If the economic downspin continues, that unknown percentage of high-tech shutouts will just keep growing. There we have a built-in library constituency, for whom downloadable books may be in the library’s future.

The information in books and periodicals used to be slanted toward accomplishment and progress. Even the women’s fashion magazines were self-improvement tracts in the guise of fluff. Today’s information exchanges are more often about entertainment and socializing.

An article in *Libraryjournal.com* tells us that librarians have “adapted social networking tools to their library catalogs, e.g., enabling patron reviews and LibraryThing tags . . .” Now social networking I can understand, but LibraryThing? I’d like a demo, please.

If our patrons start demanding this service, our staff and volunteers will have some learning to do. Sometimes Coast Community doesn’t attempt to offer the latest digital services because patrons don’t request them. Maybe patrons don’t ask because they don’t know about them.

Still, there need not be a dichotomy between books and digital information. I read of an old American Indian woman explaining her simultaneous belief in the old religion and Christianity: “The two run together. When one fails, the other helps.”

It’s not digital technology per se that worries librarians and their cohorts, but the potential for the diminishment of language itself. Languages do change, sometimes rapidly, but we hope there will be no net loss of richness, of colorful words and evocative phrases. Today’s libraries must be keepers of language—but then, they always have been.

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HASLAM from page 7

TVs , a nice house, a good job. It got me to thinkin.”

J.B., the narrator, organizes the men at the bar and their wives to help the migrant family with food and offerings of friendship.

“Well, I felt funny, like my throat has went soft and my eyes were warm. But to tell you the truth, I was semi-proud of myself.”

Other stories in *Haslam’s Valley* include much-anthologized classics. One such piece is “Mal de Ojo,” about an Armenian poet and his wildman “one eyed” brother and a half-Mexican, half-Anglo boy and his suspicious grandmother. The story is both a nod to Saroyan and a literary slice of California that is entirely Haslam’s own. For Haslam, one of so many Californians who are both Anglo and Hispanic, has not chosen one ethnicity at the expense of the other. He has embraced an identity that is inclusive and real for thousands of Californians.

The essays that conclude *Haslam’s Valley* are especially meaningful. Haslam’s tribute to his mother and father and his wife, Jan, are a reminder of Saroyan’s statement that “people are places.” In Oildale Haslam grew up with a mother who read to him and who encouraged him to explore the realm of literature. Just as important, Haslam’s father, a former All-American football player, taught the potential author to never give up, on the playing field or in life.

Now, over 70 years old, a grandfather many times over, Haslam writes of his father Speck, and his suffering at the end of his life. “A rabbi once observed, ‘Not to know suffering means not to be a man.’” Haslam continues, regarding his father: “Afflictions purged him of many things but not of tenacity or valor . . .” Haslam, too, who with his wife took care of his parents in their final years and illnesses—and who himself has battled prostate cancer—is a brave man. He is also a courageous literary artist who decided early in his career to

write, come hell or high water, about what he named the “Other California.”

He has been true to his place and his people: “As a result my stories are about individual characters who are not generalizations. I want those creations to be faithful to their times and places and to the human condition and to be distinct. If that is accomplished, I’m satisfied.”

Someday writing students in places all over California and the West will no longer be talented beginners. In five or ten or fifteen years, they will write of their place and our regions. Out of their published stories and essays and poems, readers will encounter a region on the map that, like *Haslam’s Valley*, will also be a place of the human heart.

*Marek Breiger’s essays about California literature have appeared in The San Francisco Chronicle, California English, Inside English, Western American Literature, and the critical anthology* Updating the Literary West*. He teaches English at Irvington High School in Fremont.*

MILLHAUSER from page 6

20th-century writers, in particular Thomas Mann and Hermann Hesse.

If “Paradise Park” dealt with the insatiable desire for ever more spectacular and thrilling forms of entertainment, and “The Dream of the Consortium” focused on finding a total replica of the real world and ultimately transforming the latter into an object for sale, “August Eschenburg” is about the transformation of modern art into ever more erotically titillating means of catching the attention of the masses. Almost seamlessly, Millhauser recreates for us the modern history of this phenomenon in the Western world—basically, the beginning of mass entertainment, which coincides with the advent of a human category that Mill-

hauser calls, in opposition to Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*, “the Untermensch” (the Underman). It is gratifying to see that there are still writers, like Millhauser, who believe in such naïve things as Beauty (as passé as that might seem for the Untermensch). There is a character, Hausenstein, who reminds me of (let’s call him) The Academic (though he could very well be the Successful Artist or Publisher), who is intelligent and talented enough to see August’s genius, can analyze his art in a way that he would never be able to do so himself, yet Hausenstein would always embrace the latest fashion against August for the simple reason that the latest fashion is always right. Thus, in what appears to be a paradox but is in fact quite logical, Hausenstein, who could write a brilliant paper on the corruption of the masses and the Untermensch, is himself an Untermensch: a man of the here and now, for whom anything that transcends the present, like Beauty, has no other value than its use for his personal success.

Even the stories written in a more realist style have something uncanny, like the ugly women described in “Cathay”—a fabulous universe modeled, one might say, on Henri Michaux’s imaginary worlds—whose ugliness resides in a disturbing element that triggers the Emperor’s desire just as much as his beautiful women do. Whether realist or fable-like, all Millhauser’s stories seem to be born out of a desire to *recreate* the world, to take the pieces scattered across the universe after the original cosmic catastrophe when the vessels carrying the divine light broke, and to piece together whatever sparks of light might be left.

*Daniela Hurezanu’s essays and translations appear regularly in magazines and journals in the US and Europe. She lives in Northern California and is an RCR contributing editor.*

LITTLE AMERICA

We stopped for the night at Little America. It was nothing more than an expensive motel with a small restaurant, a bar, and a post office so it could call itself a town. I drank a beer, watching Kit swim the length of the pool, away and back, away and back, her blonde hair shining in the straw colored light. Gradually, the light faded, until she was only a shadow, but we refused to be lost in the vastness of the prairie, groping our way toward each other, one in the water, the other poolside, in the darkness. Finally, I helped her, dripping, out of the water.

—ARTHUR WINFIELD KNIGHT

WILD CARD

There is another me  
A mystery me  
Watching myself live and die.

—GREG HALL

BOOK BOX

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Barr, Nevada. *Winter study*  
Campbell, James. *The ghost mountain boys*  
Child, Lee. *Nothing to lose*  
Clark, Mary Higgins. *Where are you now?*  
Coben, Harlan. *Hold tight*  
Collins, Billy. *The trouble with poetry and other poems*  
Dalton, David. *A year in the life of Andy Warhol*  
Davidson, H.R. *Scandanavian mythology*  
Deaver, Jeffery. *The broken window*  
Fielding, Joy. *Charley’s web*  
Gloss, Molly. *The jump-off creek*  
Goudge, Eileen. *Domestic affairs*  
Green, Bob. *The best life diet*  
Gudmundsson, Einar Mar. *Angels of the universe*  
Hall, Parnell. *With this puzzle I thee kill*

Hart, Carolyn. *Death walked in*  
Heimann, Judith. *The airmen and the head-hunters*  
Henderson, Harold (translator). *An introduction to Haiku*  
Hillerman, Tony. *Finding moon*  
Howard, Linda. *Death angel*  
Hughes, Ted. *Tales from Ovid*  
Isay, Dave. *Listening is an act of love*  
Jackson, Lisa. *Whispers*  
Jardine, Lisa. *Worldly goods: a new history of the Renaissance*  
Johansen, Iris. *Quicksand*  
Johnston, Joan. *A stranger’s game*  
Jordan, Neil. *Shade*  
Kellerman, Jonathan. *Compulsion*  
Kinsella, W.P. *Brother Frank’s gospel hour and other stories*  
Langton, Jane. *Steeplechase: a Homer Kelly mystery*  
Martin, Roger. *The responsibility virus*  
McKenna, Terence. *Food of the gods*  
McLoughlin, Tim. *Heart of the old country*  
Meyer, Stephenie. *The host*  
Michael, Todd. *The twelve conditions of a miracle*  
Parker, Robert. *Stranger in paradise*  
Patterson, James. *Sail*  
Perkins, John. *Confessions of an economic hit man*  
Rendell, Ruth. *End in tears*  
Rice, Christopher. *The snow garden*  
Salvatore, R. A. *The orc king*  
Schell, Orville. *Virtual Tibet*  
Sedaris, David. *When you are engulfed in flames*  
Spangle, Linda. *Life is hard food is easy*  
Steel, Danielle. *Amazing grace*

Stein, Garth. *The art of racing in the rain*  
Stewart, Marian. *Mercy street*  
Thayer, Nancy. *Moon shell beach*  
Urrea, Luis. *The hummingbird’s daughter*  
Vertosick, Frank. *The genius within: discovering the intelligence of every living thing*  
Weinreb, Michael. *The kings of New York*  
White, Jenny. *The sultan’s seal*  
White, Stephen. *Kill me*  
Williams, John. *Stoner*  
Woodruff, Lee & Bob. *In an instant: a family’s journey of love and healing*  
Yehoshua, A.B. *Mr. Mani*  
Young, Sara. *My enemy’s cradle*  
Young, William. *The shack*  
Zweig, Stefan. *The world of yesterday*

Juvenile Books

Barrett, Judi & Ron. *Cloudy with a chance of meatballs*  
Boynton, Sandra. *The going-to-bed book*  
Brown, Lisa. *Baby fix my car*  
Carle, Eric. *Have you seen my cat?*  
Dungy, Tony. *You can do it!*  
Fegredo, Milligan. *Enigma*  
Grant, Alan. *Batman: the abduction*  
Grell, Mike. *Green Arrow: The long bow hunters*  
Horaced, Petr. *Beep beep*  
Jimenez, Francisco. *Reaching out*  
Katz, Karen. *Ten tiny tickles*  
Kesel, Barbara & Karl. *Hawk & Dove*  
Landau, Elaine. *Alligators and crocodiles: hunters of the night*  
Levine, Gail Carson. *Fairest*

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O’Connor, Jane. *Fancy Nancy*  
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Penn, Audrey. *The kissing hand*  
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BOOKS

Jack Outside the Box

Daniel Barth

THE RADICAL JACK LONDON:  
WRITINGS ON WAR AND REVOLUTION  
edited and with an Introduction by Jonah  
Raskin  
California (2007), 285 pages

Jack London was born in 1876 and died in 1916. For the second twenty years of his Roman-candle life he wrote religiously, 1000 words a day, six days a week. By anyone’s standards that is really cranking it out. For most literate people London’s name will immediately bring to mind *The Call of the Wild* and *White Fang*, and after that maybe *The Sea Wolf* and *Martin Eden*. But how many have read or even heard of *The People of the Abyss*, *The Road*, *Iron Heel*, *Burning Daylight* and *The Star Rover*, much less his numerous stories, essays and articles on socialism, war and revolution? This new anthology of London’s work is a reminder of just how prolific he was, and an opportunity to explore aspects of his life and work that have been underplayed or forgotten.

As he did with his books on B. Traven and Allen Ginsberg, editor Jonah Raskin digs deep to find material that has been buried or overlooked. He does not reinvent London here, giving credit to biographers, scholars and anthologists who have preceded him. In fact Raskin continues a tradition of Sonoma State University professors writing about and collecting London. Clarice Stasz is the author of *American Dreamers: Charmian and Jack London* and Gerald Haslam edited *Jack London’s Golden State*.

*The Radical Jack London* has a good deal in common with the latter, and with another anthology, *Fantastic Tales*, edited by Dale L. Walker. All three use some of the same material, intersecting and complementing one another in quite a few places. But in focusing on London’s radical socialist activities and writings Raskin finds an organizing principle that opens new windows on a writer whom almost every commentator paints as complex and contradictory.

The book starts with Raskin’s useful Introduction. Marked by careful scholarship and an ability to digest a mass of material and write about it clearly and convincingly, he traces London’s brief and varied life, highlighting his radical activities, but not ignoring his many faults and contradictions, his racism and social Darwinist beliefs

*During his most radical phase, London wrote the essay “Revolution,” which calls for assassination and other acts of violence when necessary to bring about the overthrow of the ruling class.*

and his suicidal tendencies. He also places London in his time and among his contemporaries, making connections to many other writers and socialists, Ina Coolbrith, George Sterling, Upton Sinclair, Eugene Debs and Anna Strunsky among them.

Raskin also mentions some of the subsequent writers who have written about London: H. L. Mencken, George Orwell, Anatole France, Jorge Luis Borges and Jack Kerouac. To this list add Philip Jose Farmer, Loren Eiseley, E. L. Doctorow, Eugene Burdick, Primo Levi and Carl Sandburg and you get an idea of London’s ongoing influence.

He perhaps overstates his case a bit when he writes: “Throughout much of the second half of the twentieth century, London’s American biographers and critics belittled or ignored his radicalism.” He goes on to find fault with the editors of *The Portable Jack London* and the Library of America edition of London’s work, taking them to task for not including enough of London’s radical writings. This seems a bit unfair. In fact these and other books do acknowledge London’s radicalism and include representative writings. One can just as easily question Raskin’s exclusion of “The Mexican,” “South of the Slot,” “A Curious Fragment” and other stories that are very much in the radical vein. Any anthologist has constraints of space, permissions, costs and other editorial concerns unknown to most readers.

The entries are arranged chronologically and are comprised of essays, journalism, stories and novel excerpts. It is manifest that London’s great strength was fiction and first-person nonfiction narratives. The



Jack London, 1876-1916

CLASSIC IMAGES INC.

essays and polemical pieces, sometimes with a marshaling of statistics, can be a bit difficult to wade through. They come off as 19th century—overwritten, stilted, dated—though they often show acumen in reading the signs of the times, and they do provide insight into London’s development as a writer and socialist.

London’s fiction, on the other hand, has Lenergy and power, and is almost always written in concise sentences. It points the way to Hemingway. In reading the stories and novel excerpts I get the same feeling that I often do from Hemingway stories, almost as if I am dreaming as I’m reading. I think it has to do with the writer tapping deeply into mythic and archetypal elements. The story “War,” included here, is a good example of this. It reads like an Ambrose Bierce Civil War story, but never gets specific as to time and place. It’s war in the dreamtime—timeless and powerful.

London’s first-person narratives such as *The People of the Abyss*, *The Road* and “How I Became a Socialist” also remain very readable a century after they were written. “One might well call London the father of gonzo journalism,” writes Raskin, making connections to Hunter Thompson, Ted Conover, Norman Mailer, Tom Wolfe and Joan Didion.

During his most radical phase, London wrote the essay “Revolution,” which calls for assassination and other acts of violence when necessary to bring about the overthrow of the ruling class. It is his strongest, most direct and coherent radical statement, his manifesto. “The comradeship of the revolutionist is alive and warm. It passes over geographical lines, transcends race prejudice, and has even proved itself mightier than the Fourth of July, spread-eagle Americanism of our forefathers. The French socialist workingmen and the German socialist workingmen forget Alsace and Loraine, and, when war threatens, pass resolutions declaring that as workingmen and comrades they have no quarrel with each other.”

Of course World War I proved this wrong, and it can’t be an accident that London’s socialist activities waned as the Great War dragged on. His late solution to the problems of industrial society was not political but agrarian. He and his wife Charmian (1871-1955) retreated to their Beauty Ranch in Sonoma County where London became a respected agricultural experimenter.

The shame is that London died so young. It would have been more than interesting to see what phases his thinking and writing would have entered in the 1920s and 30s. But he was apparently played out at age 40. Though photos taken only a few days before his death reveal a seemingly robust individual, his kidneys were failing to the point where uremia and a large dose of morphine caused his death.

*The Radical Jack London* is a timely and valuable book. It reminds us not only how prolific London was, but how successful both commercially and artistically. How many writers have work in print and still being read and discussed a hundred years on? London is among the few, and with good justification. His variety of subject matter and his vigorous prose style make his work as readable and relevant in this century as in the previous two.

Daniel Barth, an RCR contributing editor, is the author of Fast Women Beautiful, a book of poems recently out from Tenacity Press. He lives in Ukiah.

THE MEXICAN CIRCUS

I went to a one ring Mexican circus in a tent yesterday afternoon. There were some trained sheepdogs and ponies and one horse that stood there while the ponies ran beneath it. Five men and a woman who was probably in her 50s or 60s did everything. They doubled as clowns, jugglers, musicians and magicians. It lasted just over an hour. It wasn’t the greatest show on earth, but there was something very sweet about it.

I remembered going to see the Clyde Beatty Circus when it came to Petaluma in the early 50s. It had three rings and a live band, and Clyde was in the center ring wearing his bwana suit and pith helmet, snapping his whip at the lions and tigers in the cage with him. There were elephants and trapeze artists and clowns with baggy pants and big shoes, and the ring smelled of popcorn and cotton candy, sawdust and sunlight. The women were young and beautiful and they wore spangled costumes that were molded to their bodies. I’m sure they thought they were never going to grow old. Some of them rode the elephants, and the band played on.

You could apply what one of the characters at the end of *The Wild Bunch* says about changing times to the circus. “It ain’t what it used to be, but it’ll do.”

—ARTHUR WINFIELD KNIGHT

Arthur Winfield Knight is the author, most recently, of Misfits Country, a novel (Tres Picos Press). He lives in Yerington, Nevada.

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## LONDON from page 1

recall many of his early encounters with women in a pair of delightfully rich, quasi-autobiographical novels, *Martin Eden* (1909) and *John Barleycorn* (1913), but by the spring of 1900 he had forged a peculiarly utilitarian view of love and marriage. He had developed strong feelings for a brilliant young Stanford student with socialist leanings, Anna Strunsky, with whom he was to write *The Kempton-Wace Letters* (1903), in which he boldly (if not naively) declared that “I am not impelled by the archaic sex madness of the beast, nor by the obsolescent romance madness of later-day man.”

It’s arguable that in Strunsky London had found the love of his life. But he kept his romantic feelings for the Russian-born—and Jewish—beauty in check (it’s believed that their relationship was never consummated), and in April of 1900 he announced with sudden notice that he was marrying the self-effacing and undemanding Elizabeth “Bess” Maddern, only a few months his junior. Maddern had been a platonic friend of London’s for the past three years and had tutored him in math for his University of California entrance exams. As Sonoma State professor emeritus Clarice Stasz has noted in her intriguing work *Jack London’s Women* (2001), both London and Maddern “acknowledged publicly that they were not marrying out of love, but from friendship and the belief that they would produce sturdy children.”

It was a bad idea from the get-go. The couple quickly had two daughters, Joan and Becky, but within only a few short years London’s marriage to Bess would be in shambles, and the ensuing divorce and matrimonial transition would be devastating to both parties. He had fallen in love with another woman, Charmian Kittredge, the niece of a close friend and five years his senior, and they would eventually marry in 1904, immediately after the contentious legal battles that dissolved his union with Bess.

London traveled the world with Charmian, embarking on a two-year journey to the far reaches of the South Pacific aboard his small sailing vessel, *The Snark*. They had a complex, yet by most accounts, loving and egalitarian relationship (they called each other Mate-Man and Mate-Woman), although they had no children. One child died at birth, while Charmian lost another to miscarriage—surely a disappointment for London, who wanted desperately to have a son.

Jack and Charmian pursued their agrarian dream together in rural Sonoma County, at the famed Beauty Ranch, more than a thousand acres of rolling hills and meadows in Glen Ellen. The land became a passion for London. “Next to my wife,” he wrote, “the ranch is the dearest thing in the world to me”—though by most accounts it was an economic failure throughout his lifetime.

London would die in November of 1916, at the age of 40, of causes that are still clouded in controversy. His death certificate identified the cause of death as “uremia,” but others have wondered what role he played in his own demise. He drank heavily for much of his life, and had taken to self-injections of painkillers—strontium sulphate, strychnine, and morphine, among others—to curb the physical anguish from a variety of ailments that plagued him in his later years.

Charmian London kept a diary during her entire relationship with her Mate-Man, and less than two weeks after her husband’s death, while she was busy answering a huge pile of letters that had accumulated in his wake, she expressed the rather peculiar desire to “jump right into a biography of Jack.” She was absolutely despondent in the aftermath of his death—“Widow! Widow! Widow! How can it be?” she wrote a few days later—and perhaps the project of writing a biography consoled her with the idea of bringing London, at least in her mind, back to life.

But she also wanted to control London’s legacy for reasons of self-interest. There were a myriad of controversies surrounding London during his lifetime—his paternity, his divorce with Bess (and Charmian’s role in same), repeated charges of plagiarism, his estranged relationship with his two daughters, his alcoholism and drug use, whispers of extramarital affairs and, perhaps most important, rumors of suicide and a will that left most of his estate to Charmian at the virtual exclusion of his daughters—and these controversies would shape and define London biographical research for nearly a century.

Charmian surely wanted to come out with her own biography first, before anyone else could, so that she could shape and refine what was then the wet cement of London’s life. She most certainly didn’t want anyone sully London’s reputation with charges of excessive drinking or drugging or philandering or taking his own life—all of which might well impact the value of London’s literary estate in both the immediate and distant future.

Less than a year after his death, Rose Wilder Lane (the daughter of Laura Ingalls Wilder of *Little House on the Prairie* fame) published a serialized biography of London in *Sunset Magazine*. For all its flaws (and there were many), Lane broke through the established façade of London’s life, and questioned his paternity, portrayed him as a ruffian and delinquent in his youth, and challenged the official version of his death. Charmian, who had originally taken Lane into her confidence, was livid. She called the first magazine installment “charming fiction” and then threatened to sue Lane and *Sunset* throughout the serialization.

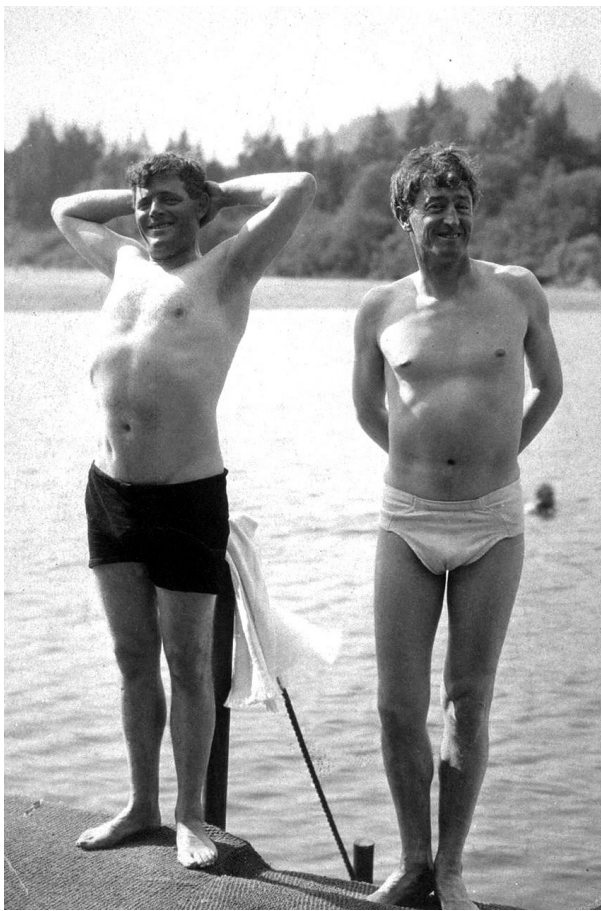
Soon thereafter, Charmian took matters into her own hands. Her sprawling two-volume *The Book of Jack London*, published in 1921, tried to push the unwashed London, including his questionable paternity, back into a tidy box. Although there are moments of clarity and even revelation in *The Book of Jack London*, it is poorly written, uneven and often self-serving.

If London has yet to get the biographer he deserves, Charmian surely got hers in the form of Irving Stone, fresh on the heels of his success as the author of *Lust for Life*, the best-selling biography of Vincent van Gogh. Infatuated with the younger Stone, Charmian flirted to the point of embarrassment and gave the author virtual access to all of London’s letters, manuscripts, photographs and personal library. As her reward, Stone cast Charmian in *Sailor on Horseback* (1938) as childlike and self-absorbed, broke the story yet again of London’s paternity (only in far greater and sordid detail), and asserted that London had committed suicide with a calculated dose of morphine.

From that point on, Charmian dug in. Along with his stepsister Eliza London Shepard, she closely controlled London’s literary estate. Access to materials was denied and the right to publish from letters and book passages severely limited, even with London’s own daughter, Joan London, whose well-received portrait of her father, *Jack London and His Times*, was published in 1939.

Following Charmian’s death in 1955, control of access to London’s archives reverted to Eliza’s son, Irving Shepard, who maintained the same vigilance as Charmian. Even the distinguished California historian Franklin Walker was forced to knowingly falsify London’s paternity in exchange for permission to publish passages from London’s works in his otherwise superb *Jack London in the Klondike* (1966). But the intellectual and financial quid pro quo demanded by Shepard, including half of all royalties, led Walker to abandon his larger biographical project. His first four chapters of that unfinished biography remain unpublished in the Jack London Archives at the Huntington Library in San Marino. This shameful, even scandalous, arrangement has compromised London scholars and biographers to this day.

A little more than a year ago I entered the London biographical fray when I began preliminary research for a biography of London’s best friend, the poet George Sterling (1869-1926), who met London in San Francisco in the



Jack London and George Sterling, Russian River, 1915

early 1900s and remained his closest male companion until London’s death in 1916. While virtually all of the London archive has now been transferred over to public institutions, primarily the Huntington, much to my surprise many of the divisions and petty rivalries that marked early research of London’s life remained firmly in place. Even more surprisingly, a good many of those divisions find a vortex in Sterling.

The colorful scion of a Long Island whaling family who had come west in 1890 to work as a secretary in his uncle’s East Bay real estate firm, Sterling was handsome, athletic and rakish. He was an extremely popular and beloved figure throughout Northern California and would come to be known as the “the poet laureate of San Francisco.”

By 1905, Sterling began addressing London as “Wolf,” with London addressing Sterling as “Greek,” in all matters of correspondence. Indeed, I don’t think that I’ve encountered any subsequent letters by either of them that did not invoke these two nicknames. To read the breadth of their correspondence—the letters as well as their presentation inscriptions to one another—is to encounter two men who held a mutual respect, admiration and deep abiding love for one another. London also made several literary acknowledgments to his “Greek,” including portrayals of Sterling as Mark Hall in *The Valley of the Moon* and as Russ Brissenden in *Martin Eden*.

In the London biographical canon, however, Sterling is systematically disrespected and/or dismissed.

Of all the London biographies, I favor Clarice Stasz’s *American Dreamers* (1988) as the one that best captures London’s spirit and persona. It also treads where others have

not, by taking the London-Sterling friendship seriously. “Often emerging from behind their bombastic veneers were the sweetness and gentleness of their kindly temperaments,” Stasz writes. “Both were known for their generosity and loyalty to friends and soon became most generous and loyal to one another.”

Later on, however, Stasz characterizes Sterling in 1916 as “turning into a bitter, cynical, malicious man, more than a little envious of Jack’s apparent successes.” She recounts the oft-repeated story that Sterling had stood London up for a rendezvous in Glenn Ellen in October of 1916, a month before London’s death, eliciting a written rebuke from London, which he signed, “your loving but Sore-grieved, Wolf.”

According to Stasz “George took undue offense and never responded” to London. All of the London biographies make the same assertion, implying that Sterling left him to die without patching up their friendship. The comprehensive three-volume *Letters of Jack London* (1988), edited by Earle Labor, Robert C. Leitz III and I. Milo Shepard, ends its Sterling-London correspondence on that “sore-grieved” note.

This past spring, however, in the papers of the late Carey McWilliams held at UCLA’s Special Collections, I found a copy of a letter to Sterling, written by London on the day before his death, Tuesday, November 21, 1916, in which London proposes dinner with Sterling on the upcoming Saturday, November 25, and concludes, “I am yours to do with what you please.”

This letter fully betrays any claim to the contrary that Sterling had not repaired the friendship in the month leading up to London’s death. Indeed, it puts an entirely different closing crescendo to the denouement. But we know this only because the meticulous McWilliams had begun research for a biography of Sterling and had kept files on him long after he decided to abandon the project. Had he not, we would have never known that a rapprochement between the two close friends had taken place. And Sterling would have been perpetually portrayed as bitter and cynical towards London in those critical days and weeks leading up to his death.

This is but one small, albeit telling, example of the inherent problems in London biography. What of other letters and archival materials that have been lost or intentionally destroyed? I recently discovered in the archives of the Huntington Library a notarized document stating that on April 13, 1938, Charmian London allowed many such materials to be burned at her direction. There is no record of what was lost.

Other pieces of the London puzzle continue to show up on the open market. Only last November, at a remarkable auction hosted by the PBA Galleries in San Francisco and presented in the fine auction catalog *Jack London and his Circle: The Collection of Donald Bauer* (2007), several intimate letters from London to Charmian in 1905 were placed on sale that revealed new details about their early relationship. Were these letters that Charmian thought were destroyed in 1938? I’ve been told by London family sources who prefer to remain unnamed that more critical correspondence will surface in the next few years.

Just this past month, I received an email from my friend Dr. Joanne Lafler. She is working on a biography of her late father-in-law, the California journalist and poet Henry Anderson Lafler, who was a friend of London’s (and even closer to Sterling), and a central figure in the colorful Bohemian scene in the Bay Area during the early 1900s. Dr. Lafler is a careful and dutiful historian and I am eagerly looking forward to her completed work.

Lafler asked me if I had seen the recent allegation made by Alexander Waugh, in his best-selling family portrait *Fathers and Sons* (2004), that “the American novelist Jack London” had raped a woman by the name of Ruth Morris (nee Wightman) “in her youth.” Waugh’s great-uncle, the travel writer Alec Waugh, had conducted a three-year affair with the married Mrs. Morris in the 1920s. Alexander Waugh provided no footnotes nor any other documentation for this claim.

The charge of rape against London rather startled and upset me. Not only is this accusation never raised in any of the London biographies, I have never seen it alleged in any of my primary research at more than two dozen academic institutions across the country, nor in any of the private collections of London’s correspondence to which I’ve had access. More curiously, there’s no mention anywhere of a Ruth Wightman or Ruth Morris involved in London’s life, though London gave the name “Ruth Morse” to a central character in *Martin Eden*.

I found myself troubled by the fact that nearly a century after his death Jack London was absolutely defenseless against this heinous charge. Janet Malcolm was right: biographers can mark up the book of our lives however they please.

I went through my massive London archive for any clues. Finding none, I decided to email Alexander Waugh directly requesting documentation for this disturbing allegation. I explained to him my scholarly interest in the matter and provided web links to my published works on London. I received no reply.

A few weeks later, a bit more irritated, I sent Waugh a second email, indicating that I was writing an article about this matter and would appreciate some clarification.

I have yet to hear back from him.

*Santa Cruz writer and filmmaker Geoffrey Dunn is working on a biography of George Sterling and on a book about the literary traditions of the Central California coast. His latest film is Calypso Dreams.*







