

THE REDWOOD COAST REVIEW

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KATHLEEN FLOWERS, 1964-2009

A Poet Who Flowered

Sometimes I wonder how many fine writers and artists and musicians there are whose work is known only to a small circle of appreciative people. Kathleen Flowers, who died in Santa Cruz on Easter Sunday, was one such artist—a poet, to be precise—whose keen senses, fine ear and clear spirit found published form only in one small chapbook of poems before she left our world at age 44.

The little church in Santa Cruz where Flowers's memorial service was held on a drizzly Sunday was filled past capacity with her family, friends, colleagues and admirers; disappointed latecomers had to stand outside straining for a peek at the proceedings. Her family had evidently underestimated the numbers of her well-wishers—so perhaps she was not so unknown after all.

I knew Kathleen only slightly, but like everyone else who ever met her I was struck immediately by her warmth and natural sweetness, so different from the strained personas so many people automatically adopt in the effort to be socially pleasant. Kathleen's goodness was completely artless and evidently effortless, a radiance emanating from what can only be called the soul. Perhaps this had something to do with her diagnosis about four years ago with a rare and incurable cancer—her simultaneous acceptance and defiance of her fate—but even before that, according to her friends, she was one of those high-spirited individuals at whom the more skeptical and cynical among us can only marvel.

She came to a one-day poetry workshop I was leading about a year-and-a-half ago, and of all the writers in that group she was by far the most gifted and attuned to the musical heartbeat and imaginative dimension, the compositional magic, of the poem. The work she brought for our collective critique had a lyric grace and verbal inventiveness that showed she possessed the fire of creation—or it possessed her.

In her poems of recent years she engaged in a lively dance with her own doom, blending her pain and dread with



Kathleen Flowers

a dynamic affirmation of the joy in the days she had remaining to her. Her senses are completely attuned to the beauties of the natural world around her, and her spirit is undiminished by what she knows is inevitable. Friends say that in her final days she was as luminous as ever in her gratitude for the gift of living as fully as she had.

Her chapbook, *Call It Gladness*, was published last year as the winner of the In Celebration of the Muse Chapbook Award in Santa Cruz. The POEMS ON PAGE 10, unpublished at the time of her death, were found in her files by her friend poet Jenny D'Angelo, and are presented here with permission of her husband, Howard Feldstein. For more information, visit www.kathleenflowers.com or www.poetrysantacruz.org.

—STEPHEN KESSLER



THE VOLCANO INCIDENT

A tall tale from the Pacific Northwest

Ron Sackman

I heard this story around a campfire one night while traveling through the Columbia River basin in Washington. It was told by a Northwestern Shoshone Indian, named Joseph, who claimed to be a witness to an extraordinary sequence of events on May 10, 1980: the day Mount St. Helens erupted. Like many folktales, this one may have been slightly embellished by the storyteller, but bears the telling anyway, if only as a reminder that the forces of Nature work in mysterious ways, especially when humans are involved.

In mountain years, the volcano known to the Shoshone as “smoking mountain” is young, only 40,000 summers. The majestic stratovolcano rises more than 8000 feet above sea level. Smoke still rises from a small dome inside the crater formed by the blast that sent ashes as far east as Montana. The view is still spectacular looking across Spirit Lake from the Toutle River, which was altered during the eruption.

On that particular day, the Indian scout was watching a fisherman, who seemed to be daydreaming; no doubt mesmerized by the sound of water rushing over the rocks, the songs of birds in the trees, and the chattering of squirrels gathering pine nuts. Joseph knew this man, Jim Johnson, a local who had helped the tribe build their houses. Jim stood in the river and admired the wavy reflection of his classic 1948 Chevy truck. He had first seen her in the old shed behind his grandfather's cabin in the woods. A beam of sunlight had flashed from one of her chrome parts, and caught his eye. As he brushed a thick layer of dust from her tailgate, her true colors revealed themselves. Over a period of several months, he had meticulously restored the pickup to pristine condition, replacing the old flathead straight eight with a newer small v8 and added some

alloy wheels and new paint. He had christened her “Rosie.” On that beautiful spring day, Rosie was parked on a large flat boulder above the river. Jim was jolted from his daydream by a strong tug on the end of his line, accompanied by the whining sound of his spinning reel. His shout of “wahooo!” echoed through the forest about the same time a large trout leaped high out of the water. Joseph said that although many had tried, no one had ever caught the “old man” of the river until that day.

The great trout was the last to run from the deep pool where he had hatched and spawned and swam with his family all of his life. He had seen ten summers and

winters and had grown to be the center of his underwater universe. No one challenged the regal fish in his domain. The water was warming rapidly, due to a disturbance on the mountain: upstream, a problem with the mountain's ancient plumbing system was developing. Instinct told the trout it was time to move. The farther downstream he swam, the hungrier he got, and annoyance took the edge off his usual keen awareness. By the time he realized what was happening, he was fighting for his life. With a powerful flip of his wide tail, he broke the surface of the water in a graceful arc, trying desperately to throw the hook stuck in his lip. Out of the corner of his eye the fish saw the reflection of a fisherman, a red truck, and the black shape of his enemy the raven diving straight toward him.

At that moment, thunder rolled across the valley. The earth shook. Something black, carrying a heavy weight of silver, landed on his back. Frightened and disoriented, the wolf jumped over the tailgate of the pickup, sat on his haunches, and let out a long, eerie howl.

The Indians of the Northwest say the Raven “brought fire from the sky and was blackened by the thunder and lightning as punishment.” Blackie the raven was true to his kind, dark as a moonless night, noisy, intimidating, and most definitely curious. When he saw the fisherman, he thought it must be his lucky day. He was ravenous, and planned to steal the first trout the fisherman caught. As he poised to launch from his perch, the branch began to bounce wildly, causing him to lose his balance. Instinctively, he spread his wings, lowered his tail, and glided toward the river. Images of a human, and the great trout, filled his vision. A loud thundering sound startled him, as the sky filled with smoke. He swerved just in time to avoid crashing into the fisherman's hat, banked right and acrobatically speared the trout with his beak. All this maneuvering exhausted the bird's strength; he was too tired to notice when

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EDITOR’S NOTE

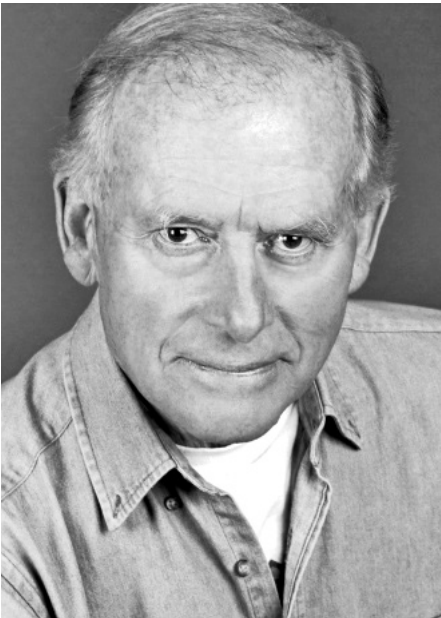
California Realist: The dream life of Jim Houston

Stephen Kessler

One afternoon about 30 years ago I was browsing in Logos, the great used-book store in Santa Cruz, when I bumped into novelist James D. Houston. Houston, known as Jim to friends and acquaintances, was easily the best-known writer in town, and had been since my arrival in 1968 to attend graduate school at UCSC. At that time he had already published a couple of novels and was placing stories in big-time national magazines like *Playboy*; he was, in his mid-30s, a model for aspiring younger writers like me who had dreams of one day being authentic authors with books of our own. By the time of our encounter in Logos, Jim had several more titles to his credit, both fiction and nonfiction, and as we exchanged greetings and inquired about one another’s latest projects, he cheerfully reported that he’d just turned in a manuscript to his publisher.

I don’t recall exactly how the conversation came around to the protocol of working with editors, but on that topic Houston told me he always included a number of minor errors in his manuscript so the editor would feel that he had something useful to do—and would be distracted from more meddlesome and substantive changes to the author’s prose style.

When Jim Houston died, at 75, in April, I thought of this anecdote as emblematic of his consummate professionalism, from his meticulous attention to every sentence in his writing to his feeling for the subtleties of the publishing business. He was a working writer, consistently attuned to the art, the craft and the business of his profession, moving easily from fiction to nonfiction and back, steadily dreaming up new projects and completing them, all the while staying true to his personal vision of his job as a chronicler of the life and culture and history of his native region of the Pacific Coast, and the Pacific Rim. His intimate knowledge and cultivated study of all things Californian, especially Central and Northern Californian; his literate immersion in the surfing, historical and musical universes of his beloved Hawaii; and his difficult but ultimately liberating investigation, with his wife,



James D. Houston, 1933-2009

Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston, of her family’s experience in a Japanese-American internment camp during World War II, in their co-authored book, *Farewell to Manzanar*, all add up to a body of work with regional roots but national and international reach.

Santa Cruz poet Morton Marcus, Houston’s close friend since their days together in the early 1960s as Stegner Fellows at Stanford, told me that back then, at the start of their writing careers, he and Jim would have intense and endless conversations about what they were reading, and that Nathanael West’s short 1939 novel *The Day of the Locust* struck Houston “like a bolt of lightning.” West’s caustic take on Hollywood is one of the earliest classic California narratives, and Houston was evidently captivated by its cultural and regional specificity. It took him several years to sort it out, but by his third novel, *A Native Son of the Golden West*, Houston had found his subject, and in subsequent books like *Continental Drift*, *Gasoline*, *Love Life*, *The Last Paradise*, *Snow Mountain Passage*, *Bird of Another Heaven*, and such nonfiction works as *Californians: Searching for the Golden State*, *In the Ring of Fire: A Pacific Basin Journey*, and *Hawaiian Son: The Life and Music of Eddie Kamae*, he ceaselessly explored the subtleties and intricacies of what it meant to be rooted in such a watery and geologically volatile yet gorgeous and seductive realm.

His last book, *Where Light Takes Its Color from the Sea*, a gathering of essays and short fiction written over the last 45 years, is a fitting coda to his career and a good introduction for those unfamiliar with his work. In this volume, published last year by Berkeley’s Heyday Books, the reader will find examples of Houston’s journalistic skills, his fine eye as a portraitist, his ear for many styles of vernacular speech,

He was a working writer, consistently attuned to the art, the craft and the business of his profession, moving easily from fiction to nonfiction and back, steadily dreaming up new projects and completing them, all the while staying true to his vision of his job as a chronicler of the life of his native region.

his strength as a descriptive writer, flights of lyricism, wry wit, grounded spirituality and deep understanding of the California ethos. He reaches back to his Scottish and North Carolinian ancestors, and to his father’s migration from Texas to San Francisco (where Jim was born), to show how even the most Western of writers in his case is connected by blood and history to far-flung parts of the planet. Add to this his half-century-long marriage to Jeanne, whose parents were Japanese immigrants, and their three multicultural California kids, and you have a picture of the worldly scope that informed Houston’s grasp of the local.

Another 1939 California classic, John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, as well as other Steinbeck books set in the Salinas Valley and Monterey, provided a model for Houston’s blend of reportorial and imaginative narratives of the West. Steinbeck, along with Robinson Jeffers, Wallace Stegner, Jaime de Angulo and William Everson are all cited by Houston as setting the standards of regional insight and artistry he sought to emulate.

Yet even the success of *Manzanar*, and the internationalization of his and Jeanne’s fame that came with that book’s translation into many languages and its canonization as required reading in schools and colleges (not to mention their adaptation of it into a television movie seen by millions), never seemed to have any effect on his down-to-earth, regular-guy personality. Big as he was (both physically, at six-foot-three, and in terms of literary accomplishment), it never went to his head. In his supreme self-confidence he was able also to be truly humble, never taking his local stardom too seriously, always content to be just one among many in the lively and varied community of Santa Cruz writers.

When my book of poems *After Modigliani* came out in 2000 and I gave a reading

from it at Bookshop Santa Cruz, Jim and Jeanne were in the audience. I read a poem called “Strangers in a Strange Night,” an account of a rather sordid sexual episode that begins in a bar on the eastside of town and whose opening line is “What was the name of that dive near the beach on Seabright . . .” Out of the shocked or bemused or disgusted silence following the poem, Jim’s deep voice could be heard to say: “Brady’s.” Of course—“that dive” was just across the harbor from the historic house where he and his family had lived since 1962, and true to his sense of historical accuracy combined with knowledge of the neighborhood, he was naturally moved to offer the name of the bar.

Houston’s memorial event at a large public venue in Santa Cruz drew, by my estimate, at least 600 people, many of them family or friends or associates or former students (he had taught writing, on and off, over the years at UCSC), but others, I expect, had been casual acquaintances or admiring readers or simply locals with a feel for the momentous import of his death. There were Scottish bagpipes and Hawaiian singers and testimony by such stars of California literature as Maxine Hong Kingston and Al Young. The recurrent theme of everyone’s remembrances was what a dream of a great life Jim had led, rich not only with prolific and successful writing but with surfing and music (he was an accomplished guitarist and standup bass player, not to mention the ukulele) and family and friends; his warm voice, sparkly eyes and resonant laugh were repeatedly invoked. The wealth of sincere and affectionate tributes reminded me not only of how well he was loved but how well he had lived, and with what integrity. The reception that followed, with plenty of food and drink and a Hawaiian string band, was a festive reunion of long-time veterans of local cultural history, with Houston himself about the only missing dignitary.

As I moved toward the exit of the sunny courtyard after a couple of beers, I paused to survey a display of photos: Jim as a boy, as a young sailor, as radiant husband with his beautiful bride, as a dad with his growing family, as a celebrated author in his signature white suit. We’d never been close friends, just casually friendly as fellow writers and denizens of a shared habitat. Yet somehow those pictures really got to me, and suddenly I felt his loss as acutely personal. Surely this had to do, more than anything else, with his quality as a person.

Stephen Kessler’s newest book, a translation, is Desolation of the Chimera: Last Poems by Luis Cernuda (White Pine Press). Books by James D. Houston can be found through Coast Community Library.

THE REDWOOD COAST
REVIEW

STEPHEN KESSLER
Editor

BARBARA L. BAER
DANIEL BARTH
DANIELA HUREZANU
JONAH RASKIN
Contributing Editors

LINDA BENNETT
Production Director

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On the Web: stephenkessler.com/rcr.html
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he landed on the back of a wolf. Joseph spoke reverently as he continued his narrative about his friend, the gray wolf.

The wolf was looking for a cozy lair in which to catch up on some much-needed rest. Suddenly, in the middle of his usual path, near the black road where the night monsters roared and sped past with their glowing white eyes, he stopped dead in his tracks and stared in wonder. Never in all of his wanderings had he seen one of the road monsters up close. His instinct was to run, but his curiosity was stronger, and he crouched behind a gray boulder to conceal himself. The monster was the color of the fire from the mountain, had four black paws, and was ten times the size of a fox, and twice the size of his largest and most ferocious neighbor, the grizzly bear. It was resting on the top of a large rock. The oddest

thing about it was how quietly it was standing, and its eyes were not glowing at all, but had a soft sparkle, like diamonds reflecting the sunlight. The red giant seemed to be looking at something below in the river. So intense was the wolf’s concentration, he almost failed to notice the man fishing in the river.

At that moment, thunder rolled across the valley. The earth shook. Something black, carrying a heavy weight of silver, landed on his back. Frightened and disoriented, the wolf jumped over the tailgate of the pickup, sat on his haunches, and let out a long, eerie howl. Jim Johnson couldn’t believe his eyes or ears. He ran for his truck, started her up, pressed the gas pedal to the floorboard and left the scene, trailing a cloud of dust.

The blast from the volcano traveled several miles in a matter of seconds, carrying

everything in its path to another time and place.

Lately, visitors to the Columbia River basin say that when the moon is full, they sometimes hear the sound of an old truck shifting gears, driven by a grinning fisherman shouting “wahooo!” Others who claim to have seen the specter describe the vehicle as old and red; a large gray wolf rides in the back, and a raven stands on the wolf’s shoulder, pecking at something silver—possibly a large trout.

Ron Sackman is a painter living in Manchester. “The Volcano Incident,” winner in the adult division of the 2009 Gualala Arts Creative Writing Contest, is his first published story.

BOOKS

The Last Book Seller

Larry McMurtry’s grand obsession

Daniel Barth

BOOKS: A MEMOIR
by Larry McMurtry
Simon & Schuster (2008)

SACAGAWEA’S NICKNAME: ESSAYS ON THE AMERICAN WEST
by Larry McMurtry
Simon & Schuster (2001)

**WALTER BENJAMIN AT THE DAIRY QUEEN:
REFLECTIONS AT SIXTY AND BEYOND**
by Larry McMurtry
Simon & Schuster (1999)

**THE FLOWER AND THE LEAF: A CONTEMPORARY RECORD
OF AMERICAN WRITING SINCE 1941**
by Malcolm Cowley, edited by Donald W. Faulkner
Viking (1985)

Larry McMurtry is one of the most prolific and successful modern American writers. Primarily a novelist—*The Last Picture Show*, *Terms of Endearment*, *Lonesome Dove* and 27 others—he has also written eight books of essays, a biography, numerous book reviews and, by his count, 70 screenplays (most notably, with Diana Ossana, the Golden Globe and Academy Award-winning *Brokeback Mountain*). But to hear him tell it, in *Books: A Memoir*, all this scribbling has been merely a sideline to his primary pursuit—the buying and selling of books.

From his early days as a graduate student at Rice University and as a Wallace Stegner Fellow at Stanford—in the famous class with Ken Kesey, Wendell Berry, Peter Beagle and others—McMurtry was in the habit of “book scouting,” prowling local used-book shops for bargains he could sell elsewhere at a profit. Malcolm Cowley, a visiting professor at Stanford in the fall of 1960, writes about this in his memoir *The Flower and the Leaf*:

“It was a pretty brilliant class that year, including as it did some professional writers already launched on their careers. Larry McMurtry, for instance, was working on what I think was his second novel, *Leaving Cheyenne*. He was a light, sallow, bespectacled cowboy who wore Texas boots and spoke in a pinched variety of the West Texas drawl. . . . Larry supplemented his Stanford fellowship by finding rare books on the ten-cent tables of Salvation Army outlets and reselling them to dealers; *Book Prices Current* was his bible.”

Over the years, this habit became an occupation and a business. In 1970, with partner Marcia Carter, McMurtry opened Booked Up, in the Georgetown neighborhood of Washington, DC. This store would operate for the next 35 years, until ever-rising rents forced a move. With the Welsh book village of Hay-on-Wye as a model, McMurtry moved his inventory to his old hometown, Archer City, Texas. Book lovers who visit there today can browse 300,000 books at several locations, and a lucky few may even get to see McMurtry’s private 28,000-volume library at his nearby home. Writes the author, now in his early seventies, “Forming that library, and reading it, is surely one of the principal achievements of my life.”

In *Books*, all this history—“the many stages of my life as a reader-writer-bookman”—along with plenty of anecdotes, tidbits and gossip about books and book people, is told in an offhand, conversational manner, in 109 short, readable chapters. McMurtry explains the method that has made him

so successful as writer and book dealer: “My method of writing a novel was, from the first, to get up early and dash off five pages of narrative. That is still my method, though now I dash off ten pages a day. I write every day, ignoring holidays and weekends. . . . I was studying for a doctorate in English, but I didn’t have to get it, and the reason I didn’t was that I had the energy to get up early and write those five pages.” Finishing his writing work early enabled him to spend the rest of the day in bookstores. In this way his dual career proceeded.



Larry McMurtry

With the Welsh book village of Hay-on-Wye as a model, McMurtry moved his inventory to his old hometown, Archer City, Texas. Book lovers who visit there today can browse 300,000 books at several locations.

Those five-page installments added up to some very good early novels, among them *Horseman, Pass By* (which was made into the movie *Hud*), and the somewhat autobiographical *All My Friends Are Going to Be Strangers*, which contains hilarious passages set in Texas, and in California among a group of “New Americans” based loosely on Kesey and company. (I love this novel but have always thought it would be better titled “You Can’t Go Home Again Until Semester Break,” or possibly “Danny Deck in Search of What.”)

For “energy” some might read “Type A personality.” McMurtry might be thought of as the Woody Allen of modern writers—a new book every year. As with Allen’s movies, it has become somewhat difficult to keep up, and his later work doesn’t always match the quality of his early efforts. In particular, post-*Lonesome Dove*, many of McMurtry’s novels have taken on a facile quality which makes them quick, forgettable reads. The four books in the “Berrybender” series are a good example of this, light western entertainments in which the characters have no depth. He all but admits as much in discussing the development of his two careers:

“One reason I’ve hung on to bookselling is that it’s progressive—the opposite of writing, pretty much. Eventually all novelists, if they persist too long, get worse. No reason to name names, since no one is spared. Writing great fiction involves some combination of energy and imagination that cannot be energized and realized forever. Strong talents can simply exhaust their gifts, and they do.

“Book selling, though, being based on acquired knowledge, *is* progressive. At least, that seems to be the case with the great dealers. The longer they deal and the more they know, the better books they handle.”

I can think of some exceptions. Oakley Hall had an excellent late run with his five Ambrose Bierce detective novels and *Love and War in California*; octogenarian Elmore Leonard is still writing strong novels; and Wendell Berry’s recent fiction has not diminished in quality. But it’s a point well taken.

McMurtry’s career, early and late, presents a viable model and alternative to the many writers who graduate from university writing programs and find themselves stuck in teaching careers that hinder their efforts to get their writ-

ing done. As he points out in *Walter Benjamin at the Dairy Queen*, which covers some of the same ground as *Books*, writing and teaching involve similar energies, whereas writing and bookselling can be complementary and mutually informing. Whether one agrees wholly with this view or not, it is worthwhile for writers to consider careers outside of academia to help support the writing habit. Another model worth considering is collaboration. Some of McMurtry’s best later work, the novels *Pretty Boy Floyd* and *Zeke and Ned*, and the already mentioned screenplay, have been done with writing partner Diana Ossana.

Success as artist and businessman has not been without its price. McMurtry admits to stretches of depression, and he developed serious heart-health problems, leading to quadruple bypass surgery in 1991. The sketch of his life offered in *Books* remains a bit murky. He’s in San Francisco; he’s in Houston; he’s in LA; he’s in Tucson; he’s in Washington, DC. Transitional details are mostly lacking. We also never learn much about his love life or domestic life. He was married to Jo Scott, but that ended in divorce in 1966. He lived with their son James—now an Austin-based singer-songwriter—in a DC suburb for a number of years. Not that a book about books should necessarily be autobiography, but in McMurtry’s case, with his relative fame in mind, the few details he does give leave the reader wanting more.

There *are* details provided about antiquarian bookselling, auctions, auction catalogs and the private libraries of the monied elite that may not be of interest to all readers. Some of the arcana of the book trade is certainly over my head. But, as with second-hand stores, one person’s junk is another’s treasure. The reader can pick and choose, and most will find plenty of gems. Maybe it’s shop talk, but for readers and book people it’s very interesting shop talk. McMurtry’s enthusiasm for all things bookish will make most readers value their own books more, and want to get out and browse used-book stores.

There is a good section of several chapters recounting book scouting in Northern California in the 1960s. McMurtry credits San Francisco poet David Meltzer, who worked part-time at Discovery Bookstore, next to City Lights in North Beach, with turning him on to the term “book scout” and introducing him to the Bay Area scene. There are anecdotes about bookstores and book people in San Francisco, the East Bay and the South Bay, with digressions about bookstores in Austin, Houston, Dallas, New York, Cincinnati and the Isle of Wight. It’s a lovely bit of time travel to these bookstores past, a bit *triste* because all but a few are now gone.

Reviewing this book in *The New York Review of Books*, Michael Dirda found the tone to be overwhelmingly nostalgic and melancholy. It did not strike me that way. (The tone is certainly a good deal lighter than *Walter Benjamin at the Dairy Queen*, in which the author ponders the aftereffects of heart-bypass surgery as he meditates on the death of storytelling.) Real estate prices, gas prices and Internet bookselling have forced most big urban bookstores out of existence. Booksellers are adapting in various ways. In McMurtry’s case, as with Powell’s in Portland, they are getting bigger, buying up the stock of former colleagues and competitors. In other cases they are getting smaller and/or finding niches. McMurtry’s presentation of these facts seemed to me more anthropologically detached than melancholy. It was encouraging to learn about people who, in these days of tweet and twitter, are passionately involved with books and literature. I came away feeling—as McMurtry puts it nicely in one of the essays in *Sacagawea’s Nickname*—that it is still “possible to organize one’s life around literature.”

It will be interesting to see if his mega-bookstore in a small town can survive for long. After all, the flip side of high urban rents is the large population base. I had to look in my road atlas to find out where Archer City, pop. 1848, is located. If you go northwest from Fort Worth a hundred miles or so you will find it, on Highway 79. I can’t remember ever being through that way, and don’t anticipate making Archer City a primary destination any time soon. But one never knows. One of these days I may find myself in north Texas with a little time to kill. It would be interesting to walk around the town where *The Last Picture Show* was filmed, maybe stop for a dip cone at the Dairy Queen, and then look for something good to read.

Daniel Barth, an RCR contributing editor, lives and teaches in Ukiah. His latest book is Fast Women Beautiful (poems, Tenacity Press). Books by Larry McMurtry are available through Coast Community Library.

From *Books: A Memoir*

Over the years Marcia and I did a certain amount of appraising. Sometimes it was just work, but sometimes it had interesting results.

One day we were out in northwest Washington, appraising a library that had a lot of good ballooning books in it.

At some point I picked up a hefty book called *The Whale*, our old friend *Moby-Dick* under its English title. *The Whale* is usually found in three volumes, published by the venerable firm of Bentley.

The fat creature I held in my hand was the whole *Whale*, but it appeared from a note in the book that this copy had been the working copy of the once acclaimed, now forgotten author Charles Reade, famous for *The Cloister and the Hearth*, whose job was to edit *The Whale* down to a handier and possibly more salable one-volume edition.

We were unable to buy this book, but we did note that Charles Reade was not a man to be intimidated by a mere American classic.

He began his editorial work by drawing a bold line through “Call me Ishmael.”

MEMOIR

Sheila Golburgh Johnson

One thing led to another so gradually that I never realized, until I found myself pausing in the middle of the lake, that the excursion was a bad idea. I think the situation was partly caused by my seventieth birthday just a few months before I flew to Washington, DC, to attend a friend’s wedding. I would not have gone to the wedding, except that I have a cousin, Ellen, who lives in Falls Church, Virginia, which is only a 20-minute drive from Washington. I hadn’t seen Ellen for four years, but that doesn’t matter with cousins. We had grown up five miles from each other near Boston, and although we now live far apart and seldom see one another, we consider ourselves close family and have an ongoing, lively conversation that we fall into immediately when we do get together.

The thing about turning seventy is that the further in time you travel from your childhood, the more present it is. In the last few years my mind had been turning frequently to my early years, especially to the summers I spent with my family at Sunset Lake in New Hampshire, my own particular Garden of Eden. From Boston, where we lived surrounded by cement sidewalks and stone buildings, we would pack the car every June and drive to the country, where my parents rented a cabin beside the lake. As soon as I jumped out of the car in front of the cabin I inhaled the delicious pine-scented air that grew stronger with every step I took on the springy carpet of pine needles beneath my feet.

There were four cabins full of other families with children, and since most of us came every summer, we all became good friends. My father would drive to New Hampshire on Friday evenings to spend the weekend with us and back to Boston every Sunday night. My cousin Ellen came to visit us at the lake a few times over the years, although she spent summers with her mother and father at Gloucester, a seaside community north of Boston known for its beach of smooth white sand. It was Ellen’s mother who taught me to swim. My aunt had a bad hip, and her doctor had told her the best thing for it was swimming. She had taken lessons and knew how to do it right.

What I especially loved about the country was that we children were relatively unsupervised and roamed at whim through the grass and pine woods, and especially the beach. There were three rowboats pulled up in the sand with oars in them, and we were free to row out on the lake whenever the mood struck us. In those days, of course, nobody wore life vests or what are now referred to as “flotation devices.” We were always safe. The lake was smooth all the time except during an infrequent storm, and we stayed in the cabin at those times, afraid of lightning. The wooden rowboats were buoyant; not one ever capsized in the six summers I spent at Sunset Lake, and we all knew how to swim if it did. Some of my best times were rowing out on the glittering lake, burnished by the warm sun and relishing the smooth tension the pull on the oars caused in my shoulders as the boat glided through clear water.

I flew into Reagan Airport from California on a Friday night. The wedding was the next day, and after that I had three days to spend with Ellen. Her daughter lived a few blocks away, and she was going to spend the weekend with friends while Ellen’s granddaughter, Fief, stayed overnight with us. Nimrod, Ellen’s husband, took us all out to eat at a Thai restaurant on Sunday night, where I got to know Fief and chatted with her as if she were an adult. I found her remarkably knowledgeable for a 12-year-old, already involved in community projects through her school and active in basketball. We also discovered that she and I were vegetarians, which was in immediate bond. The next morning I had breakfast with Fief after she and I both slept late. Again, we found something in common as we devoured the sweet, ripe mangoes that Nimrod kept cut-



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ting up for us in the kitchen. We finished a whole case of them.

After breakfast, we chatted for a few minutes in the living room, where she decided we should do something together. The boat idea was hers, and when she suggested we go for a row on the lake, I thought of the long-ago summer days in New Hampshire with pleasure. I looked over at Ellen, who nodded her approval.

This needs a word about my cousin Ellen’s house. The back yard slopes down to a lake, although it isn’t the kind of natural lake I was familiar with from New Hampshire. This one in Virginia used to be a reservoir, and then a developer came in and built homes on the shores around it. As the city grew and developed other sources of water, it no longer needed the reservoir, and the residents adjacent to the water petitioned the city council to let them use it as a recreational lake. Every home had a boat pulled up on a ramp or a rope descending to the rather murky water; Ellen’s back yard had a steep, wooded slope that dropped off abruptly about a foot above the water. The light, aluminum rowboat was pulled up on the slope and tied to a tree.

Fief, having rowed on this lake many times, showed me the ropes, literally as well as figuratively. On our way down the hill she turned off on a path that led to a little shed where she retrieved the oars, and we continued to the water. She dropped the oars, untied the boat with one swift pull on the rope, and together we heaved the craft over into the water. She held the rope while I clambered in, relishing the familiar lurch of the boat under first one foot, then the other, then held on to the side until it steadied. She tossed the rope in and with a quick, light jump was in the stern. I suggested that I row first (not knowing if I could still row at all) and sat down, slid the oars through the locks, and set out. After four or five strokes I was delighted to find that rowing, like riding a bicycle, was an art once learned, never forgotten.

I rowed out of the little inlet where Ellen’s yard was, to the wide lake that stretched away from us on both sides. Fief showed me a small sandy beach that had been made in a clearing that had no houses. I asked which way we should head, and she pointed to the left and told me there was a waterfall we could see there. Not wanting to get caught atop or under a waterfall, I turned right and continued to row. With no forewarning, Fief jumped up with a soft “Ooooh.”

I looked at her quizzically. “There’s a snake in the boat!”

I stopped rowing. “Where? I don’t see it.”

“It went under my seat.”

I pulled in the oars and stretched myself flat on the floor of the boat. Under the seat in the stern was a sharp black shadow, but I was so blinded by the pouring sunshine I could see nothing at all in it. I lifted myself onto my seat again.

“Fief, are you sure you saw a snake?” “Mmm-hmm,” she said. “It was a small snake and moved fast.”

I rested my arms on the oars for a few seconds, but it might have been several minutes. My thoughts ran to something like this: *You mustn’t scare the child, whatever you do. What if it’s a cottonmouth? Or a rattler? Don’t panic. Why am I out in the middle of a lake with a child and an unknown snake? Why didn’t we check the boat before we got in? Why haven’t I learned some sense in my seventy years? Don’t panic. You are the adult in this boat, so act like one.*

I smiled at Fief, who was watching me from her seat in the stern. I looked at both the left and right shores. I was about equidistant between them.

Could I swim that far if worse came to worst? Land didn’t seem too distant; but I had learned from hiking that distances are often deceptive. *Don’t panic.* I haven’t had to swim seriously in years, but maybe that is like riding a bicycle, too. But I have clothes on, which might pull me down. I’ve never swum fully dressed. I could drag Fief, in case she didn’t know how to swim, but she probably did. *Why aren’t we wearing life vests?*

Unable to deal with this line of thinking, I decided Fief was probably seeing things that were not really there. Still, one couldn’t be sure.

“You know, Fief, snakes like it better on land. Why don’t we head back and let him out of the boat?”

“Okay,” she said, “but I want it. I want to keep it for a pet.”

“Let’s talk about that when we get back to your grandmother’s house,” I said, feigning cheerfulness. I turned the boat and headed back toward the inlet where Ellen lived, checking carefully, and I hoped unobtrusively, below the stern seat every few seconds.

Fortunately, we had not rowed out too far, and within about 10 minutes I had pulled up alongside the little bluff below the house. Fief jumped out and turned toward me to hand her the rope.

“Oh, there it is,” she cried. “It’s standing on its tail!”

Now I knew she was hallucinating. I had never seen a snake stand on its tail; and I’ve seen my share of snakes, although always from a reasonable distance. I tossed her the

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rope and clambered out onto the slope. I had a full view of the boat, and I’ll be damned if there was not a snake behind the seat, standing on its tail and looking over the side.

“I want it, I want it!” she said. “Well, run up to the house and ask your grandmother for a big jar.”

Now that I was on land, blessed land, with several directions to run, I could afford to be magnanimous. “I’ll stay here and watch the snake.”

She started off in a rapid lope up the hill, but after a few steps, the snake slithered up the side of the boat and down into the lake.

“Fief! Fief!” I called. “It’s gone!” She walked back slowly. “Where did it go?”

“It went back into the water. Not a good snake for a pet,” I improvised, “you’d have to keep it in the bathtub, and it might not like that.”

I handed her the rope, and silently, she tied the boat to a tree trunk. Together, we walked up to the house, stopping only to store the oars again.

Ellen was waiting on the patio above the water, and must have heard us talking, or shouting, down by the water.

“There was a snake in the boat?” was her first greeting as she wrinkled her brow.

I laughed. “It was only a small snake,” I said, “and I knew Fief would protect me if it were dangerous.”

“Yeah, and I wanted to keep it, but it jumped off,” Fief offered.

I thought of all the things I might say to Ellen: *Why didn’t you suggest we wear life vests? Do you even have any? What’s the idea of letting me go out in a boat with a 12-year-old child? With a snake in the boat? What if I’d forgotten how to swim?*

I didn’t say anything. “Let’s have lunch,” Ellen said, turning towards the house. “I’ve got some great leftovers we can have, including stuffed artichokes.”

“Sounds good,” I said, and took Fief’s hand. As we followed Ellen into the house, she turned for a moment and looked at me over Fief’s head.

I met her eyes and smiled into them, from the heart. We both realized that girls raised in New England, surrounded by lovely lakes and ponds and close to the great blue Atlantic, didn’t need to wear life vests or even practice rowing. It was like riding a bicycle, something her mother also taught me to do.

Sheila Golburgh Johnson lives in Santa Barbara. This is her first appearance in the RCR.

TRAVELS

Troy, Kansas

Ancient shadows in the American heartland

Renée E. D’Aoust

US 36 cuts across the top of Kansas, and Troy is the first town of note after one enters the state from Missouri. Troy is announced, as most western towns are properly announced, by a water tower; the letters are painted blue, towering above the town itself. Signage is important in a place of endless sky and far horizons; on the no longer futuristic-looking structure are enormous bold, capital letters: TROY.

Troy, Kansas, has no Trojan horse. Yet a marker, which looks like a gravestone, along US 36 explains that Troy is named after Troy of antiquity.

A McMansion stands on the top of a nearby hill across the highway from where this small cement marker stands. The super-sized dwelling looks like a place worthy not of King Priam but of his stupid son Paris, especially if Paris were a hedge fund manager in the 21st century who happened to get out before the economy tanked.

“WELCOME TO TROY” banners greet us as we turn off US 36 and into town. John’s Market helpfully declares that we are in “TROJAN COUNTRY.” Obviously John owns the store, or he did at one time, but I’m not sure if Trojans refers to the name of the high-school football team or the local favorite condom. I’ve no need to purchase any right now, so I bypass the store and drive up the cobblestone street to the center of town.

The Last Chance Saloon has a window display designed for a Midwest department store—not for a drinking hole. Several statues stand about 3 feet high: a cowgirl, a cowboy, a carousel horse, and an Indian. Behind the figures, two Longhorn cattle skulls with horns still attached hang on a fake wall. In front of the figures, a series of empty beer bottles line the window. They are nothing special, no microbreweries here; only the standard cheap American rat piss people call beer.

The Last Chance Saloon is directly across from the two-story red-brick town hall with turrets, a place where I could easily imagine King Priam holding forth. Every time I read *The Iliad*, I want Priam to yell at Paris: “Stupid boy!” Paris caused all that trouble because he stole a woman. And, really, what did Helen see in him? She seems too smart to get involved with a wimp like Paris. All that honor for what? An epic full of dead men.

There is a totem pole outside the doors to Troy’s elegant City Hall. I’ve seen the same totem pole in other towns—it is the same design everyplace, carved in honor of Native Americans by a guy whose goal is to have a totem pole standing in all fifty states. By my count, it looks as if he

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is succeeding. His heart is in the right place, I think; or is it? For a West Coast woman who grew up admiring carved poles, the real thing, this pole sure is ugly and hardly looks authentic.

In the basement of City Hall, I use the restroom. Taped inside the woman’s bathroom stall, a plastic laminated sign: “PLEASE USE TOILET PAPER ONLY IN STOOLS!!” I cannot imagine Helen of Troy allowing such language.

Helen, the beautiful woman who caused war when she forsook Menelaos, her first husband, son of Atreus, brother of Agamemnon, lord of Lakedaimon, for the limp and flaccid Paris, son of Priam and Hekabe, seems forgotten in Troy, Kansas. I look in vain for references. In modern-day Troy, they celebrate the Trojan warriors. Do they forget that in Book Twenty-One of *The Iliad*, the Trojans freeze like fawns, even in the tenth year of the war, in front of Achilles’s wrath? And why is Achilles so mad? First, Agamemnon steals his woman, Achilles pouts, his buddy Patroklos goes to battle for him, and dies. Again, the woman. And dead men.

I’m hung up on *The Iliad* because in Troy, Kansas, I’m remembering a solo backpacking odyssey across Europe, in 1989, almost sixteen years earlier from my current adventure across America with my hound dog Truffle. In Turkey, I visited the rolling plain where the Trojan War supposedly took place. A Mercedes cross-country bus dumped me off in front of an enormous wooden horse. The sign, in English, claimed it was the famed Trojan horse from Homer’s epic. I remember feeling incredibly relieved that a country other than the United States could fabricate some big, gaudy tourist attraction.

Inside the Trojan horse, the innards smelled of urine as if all those hidden Greeks had just relieved themselves. Accompanied by the pervasive odor, I climbed up the stairs to the top of the horse and looked out through his eye sockets.

Stretching ahead were the rolling plains where I imagine Achilles still rides strong, propelled by vengeance for the death of his friend Patroklos. “There, Patroklos, the end of your life was shown forth,” I then said out loud, quoting *The Iliad*. And swift-footed Achilles, the end of your life is also there.

Now, sixteen years later, I’m wishing that travel didn’t mean nostalgia. I remember when I could take a journey and not remember all the other journeys, metaphoric or emotional or actual. Now I think of everything—the per-



Truffle with Lady Liberty in Troy, Kansas

petual quest to know myself, the Madonna “Like a Prayer” song that takes me back to 1989 and dancing in a nightclub until 4 in the morning, the fresh Turkish bread I ate every day with goat’s milk feta cheese, cucumbers and tomatoes. And I think of my older Danish friend Niels, whom I met on another Turkish bus, and who follows United States politics better than any friend my age.

I think of Niels’s frantic emails when President Bush started bombing Iraq: “What is going on in your country? Can you tell me why Bush thinks he can ignore all the protests?” I wrote back: “Because he thinks he is ordained by God.”

In Troy, Kansas, I am glad that the legions of people who suffer as a result of war are found, however subtly, in the “Restore Our Liberty” dedications to the replica of the Statue of Liberty “donated by Harriet Drummon Lamb 1950”:

WITH THE FAITH AND COURAGE OF THEIR
FOREFATHERS WHO MADE POSSIBLE
THE FREEDOM OF THESE UNITED STATES
—THE BOY SCOUTS OF AMERICA—
DEDICATE THIS REPLICA OF
THE STATUE OF LIBERTY
AS A PLEDGE OF EVERLASTING
FIDELITY AND LOYALTY
—40TH ANNIVERSARY CRUSADE TO STRENGTHEN
THE ARM OF LIBERTY—1950.

Below those words, another plaque has been attached:

REDEDICATED ON THE 4TH OF JULY, 2005
TO HONOR THE DONIPHAN COUNTY, KANSAS
VETERANS AND THEIR FAMILIES FOR THEIR
SELFLESS SERVICE IN THE DEFENSE OF FREEDOM,
LIBERTY AND THE PEOPLE OF
THIS GRATEFUL NATION.

Selfless service and gratitude replace loss and lamentation. The lower plaque had been dedicated four years after September 11, 2001. During the ongoing Afghanistan war. The ongoing Iraq war. I wonder what Niels would think of this town.

Although it is November, the temperature rises to 80 degrees; my shirt is drenched in sweat. Truffle pants continuously. We make another trip back to the car, so I can give him some water. Then we walk across the red cobblestone street to mail my postcards.

A black man bends over a garbage can. He wears black sneakers, matching blue sweatpants and sweatshirt, and an open beige-colored wind jacket. He pulls on the sides of the clear plastic garbage bag around the rim of the metal garbage can and neatens the edge of the plastic bag so it hangs evenly.

He straightens up, quickly moving his hands to his sides, and says, “Hello.”

I stop. “Hello.”

We stare at each other for what feels like minutes. Truffle stands in between us, wagging.

“Bye,” I said.

The man waves his hands, both of them, just a little. It looks like his wrists are attached to his hips, like he is pretending to open two jars at once.

Truffle and I walk down the sidewalk. I pause to turn around. The man is leaning over the garbage can, continuing to sift through the refuse. He lifts up something and puts it carefully back in the can.

The next time I look around to look at him, the man has moved on to another garbage can. Although it hurts to see the obvious, I realize he is looking for food.

My friend Niels would have taken the man to John’s Market and bought him a sandwich, but I don’t. I’m not sure why. Am I worried about embarrassing him, or am I simply weak spirited? It doesn’t matter.

But I know King Priam would have fed him, taken care of him. Maybe Paris wouldn’t, though, since he was the sort who was able to take only one stand in his life. You know, the kind of person who has one great claim to fame, but otherwise does nothing with his life. His greatest achievement was stealing Helen, but that was it for him. With that, he pretty much shot his wad; I don’t care what you think, I don’t think Paris was capable of anything else. And look what fame. There are those dead men.

Driving out of Troy, Kansas, I pass an elderly gentleman walking by the side of the road. He is tall, thin, and wears a cowboy hat with a brim so wide and so white I don’t think it can get any wider or whiter. Truffle hangs his head out the back window, tongue lolling, and the man lifts his huge cowboy hat up and bows at us.

The man and I catch each other’s eye, and I wave, probably a little too enthusiastically, and open the window even wider so Truffle can stick his head all the way out. I open my window, too.

The Kansas wind feels good, the bright sun clears my mind, and, finally, nostalgia leaves me. I am here, in America, on the road.

Renée E. D’Aoust’s most recent publication is an essay in Robert Gottlieb’s anthology *Reading Dance (Pantheon)*. She lives in Idaho and Switzerland.

AN EGGCENTRIC MAN

He is an eggcentric man. I’d ask him, “What’s cooking?” and he’d answer, “Don’t play balls with me.” I’d ask, “How do you like your eggs?” and he’d say, “Hard up” or “Side over” or “Siam-easy.” I’d ask, “Fried, boiled or scrambled?” and he’d say, “Foibled” or “Broiled” or “Scrabbled.” I’d ask, “Would you care for an eggcup?” and he’d say, “Egghead is your mother’s daughter, egghead.” I’d ask, “Salt or pepper?” and he’d say, “You’re such a pest, sister.” I’d ask, “How about an omelet?” and he’d say, “Let me beat your eyewhites first.” I’d ask, “Have you lost your season?” and he’d say, “Save your eggeracks for your wisetimer. Crack your time with wisecracker. Time your cracks with wise off.” I’d ask, “Are you nut?” and he’d say, “A nutcracker for a woodpecker. Crack your wood and peck your nut.” Finally, eggsasperated, I’d ask, “Do you like polenta with eggs?” and he’d say, “Your legs drive me woods. If you egg on my pen into your nut, I’ll let you plant your egg in my woods.” And then I’d say nothing, for he is truly a most centric eggman.

—ALTA IFLAND

POP CULTURE

Danger in the *Twilight* Zone

Valerie Ross

As almost everyone with a teenager knows by now, the *Twilight* saga is much more than an average teen vampire romance. All of the four books in the series (*Twilight*, *New Moon*, *Eclipse*, and *Breaking Dawn*, published by Little, Brown) have held audiences in thrall since the first book hit the stands in 2005. A major motion picture of *Twilight* grossed over \$35 million in its first weekend last autumn, the second film will open this November, and the other two books are in queue to follow suit.

Author Stephenie Meyer has hit a nerve in today’s youth readership (and in quite a few adult readers too), but it is time to analyze the darker side of why her books are so obsessively compelling. A recent article in *Ms.* magazine (Spring 2009) criticizes the *Twilight* books for representing a female protagonist who is such a blank slate that she is essentially a passive receptacle for others’ actions, and an empty screen onto which Meyer can project an insidious agenda of conservative, retrograde female stereotypes in the midst of a nouveau-gothic romance novel.

But these claims, however accurate, do not explain why people still can’t put the books down.

The *Twilight* saga is not “literature” by any stretch of the imagination, but kids read the series at a furious and fervent pace many times over: the books are guilty pleasures, not very well written or profound, but Meyer spins a good yarn, the life-and-death stakes are always dramatically high, and she aims straight for both the acknowledged and covert longings of her teenage female audience.

Twilight’s heroine, Bella Swann, whose name symbolizes the virtues of beauty and grace, is the archetypal outsider—an awkward, rebellious high-school girl who sees

herself as a perpetual ugly duckling, unworthy of the attentions of the angelically handsome vegetarian vampire Edward Cullen (the Cullen family of vampires drink only animal blood in their efforts to protect humans; to them, this counts as vegetarianism).

Bella loves Edward and wants to join his vampire family not only due to her longing for his eternal companionship; her desire to become a vampire herself is also fueled by the desire she shares with most humans: the longing to be immortal. However, Bella does not fear dying, just the indignity of aging. She flies into a fury whenever faced with the fact that while she is getting older every day, Edward will stay perfect and 17 for eternity. Interestingly, the only thing that Bella fears more than aging is getting married.

Fearful of repeating her mother’s “mistake” of getting pregnant and married right after high school, Bella is terrified of being perceived as “*that* kind of girl,” a label burdened with value judgments based on stereotypes of working-class behavior. Compared to being an uneducated teen mother, Stephenie Meyer seems to be saying, becoming a vampire is a preferable lifestyle option. The immortal Cullen family, after all, has amassed centuries of unlimited wealth.

What does it mean to become a vampire in these books? Beyond the horror-genre “realities” of joining the ranks of the undead, in the *Twilight* series becoming a vampire offers Bella (and in turn, Meyer’s readers) an escape fantasy of emotional imperviousness (Bella has the gift of being a mental “shield” for herself and others), impossible beauty, immortal youth, instant wealth, and transcendence of the petty drudgery of “normal” life. Once Bella is a vampire, she’ll never have to warm up



Stephenie Meyer

another depressing microwave meal for her divorced dad again.

Bella actually has two love interests in the novels’ romantic triangle—Edward the vampire and Jacob the werewolf—who represent interesting reworkings of classic social and mythic archetypes. Edward, cold as ice and graced with Old World manners and courtly hauteur, is the Prince from European fairy tales: he is noble and pure, not sexual; a devoted protector and defender, but emotionally remote. Vampirism as embodied by Edward is an aristocratic fantasy that is always slightly out of reach.

In contrast, Jacob is a working class hero with an edge of threatening ethnic rage: a Native American whose earth-based spiritual heritage has resulted in his transformation into a wolf at will, caused not by a full

moon, but by the anger of an oppressed tribe of people and a sense of protective civic duty. Being a werewolf in the *Twilight* series means racial pride, at the cost of socioeconomic privilege.

When faced with the choice between Jacob’s hot-blooded passion and Edward’s cool devotion, Bella chooses Edward. She insists that his claim on her heart and soul is complete, but the reader also knows that only Edward can offer Bella youthful immortality and upward mobility; choosing Jacob would mean staying mortal, aging, living in relative poverty on the Reservation, and driving old refurbished trucks and motorcycles instead of gleaming new Volvos and Porsches.

To her credit, however, in many ways Stephenie Meyer has simply reworked ancient Eastern European legends of vampires and werewolves to offer her teen readers alternative models and metaphors for unconventional heroism. All of the Cullen family members have powerful gifts (mind reading, seeing the future, extraordinary strength and speed). Outsiders with special powers will always interest us, it seems (see *Harry Potter*).

But in other ways Meyer’s books (unlike J. K. Rowling’s) have simply packaged—along with their insidious antifeminist agenda—an alluring escape fantasy of immortality and predatory elitist values in a seductively romantic narrative. And *this* is what keeps people reading them. *Caveat lector!*

Valerie Ross lives and teaches on the San Francisco Peninsula. The Twilight books can be found through Coast Community Library.

BIBLIOTECA

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

PRESIDENT’S DESK

Working with What We Have

Alix Levine

Some of *The Redwood Coast Review’s* readers are distant from our community and are more interested in its literary offerings than its local library news. I’m pretty sure it is literary merit, under editor Stephen Kessler’s direction, that has garnered awards in the library-newsletter field. Local readers receive their copies folded into the weekly *Independent Coast Observer* newspaper each quarter. It is this local community, from Stewart’s Point to Irish Beach, from which Coast Community Library draws its dedicated body of volunteers.

It was the efforts of volunteers that raised the money to buy and remodel our building, and their labor and donations that created the light and modern facility we have enjoyed for the past five years. The Mendocino County Library picks up the bill for utilities, supplies, some materials, insurance, and 32 hours per week of paid county library staff and a few other things. Volunteers give their time to put on the summer reading program for kids, shelve books, conduct adult classes, make repairs, sort donated materials, prepare acquisitions to add to the system, put on book sales, maintain the building, serve patrons at the circulation desk, do the bookkeeping, and generally keep the library operating at a level impossible with only 32 hours of our paid, professional librarian’s presence each week.

A number of the Friends of Coast Community Library attended a budget session of the Mendocino County Board of Supervisors in Ukiah on June 2. Several of the CCL contingent and people representing other branches spoke in favor of preserving all our county libraries with as much service available as possible in the face of inevitable budget cuts. The county’s library system already has been pared to virtually skeleton staffing and reduced hours over years of previous reductions in funding. Now one of the two Bookmobile positions has been eliminated, and two half-time positions have been cut at other branches. CCL still has our librarian, Terra Black. At this time the Mendocino County Library has run out of money for certain book-covering supplies and the like. CCL has taken on that expense so we can process new acquisitions for our patrons to borrow.

California’s counties are having a hard time budgeting because the state’s financial crisis makes it difficult for them to predict exactly what funds will be flowing their way in the coming year. Very likely, Friends of Coast Community Library may expect future calls upon our funds and volunteer time to keep our library providing its services as funds available to Mendocino County diminish. We must still depend on Mendocino County Library’s partnership in providing the connection to the wider cooperative public library system that allows interlibrary loan of materials from within and outside our own county system. Without that, we would have only the books, CDs, videos, DVDs, magazines and newspapers in our own collection available to borrow.

A free public library is a bastion of civil society, and its net must be spread wide for best results. So far, thanks to Mendocino County and Friends of Coast Community Library, such a library exists in the heart of downtown Point Arena. We count on the continued support of our South Coast community for advocacy with county government and for donations of time, money and materials to keep our library a welcoming and vibrant resource serving the public in these challenging times.



Aleksander Hemon

Neither Here Nor There

Daniela Hurezanu

THE QUESTION OF BRUNO
by Aleksander Hemon
Vintage International (2001), 230 pages

NOWHERE MAN
by Aleksander Hemon
Vintage International (2004), 242 pages

As a Bosnian who now lives in the States and writes in English, Aleksandar Hemon has been compared to Nabokov, Conrad, Kundera and even Hrabal. While these comparisons are, certainly, flattering, it is obvious that they are made simply because these are the cultural references the reviewers or the blurbers associate with the part of the world Hemon comes from. This is a rather pathetic situation that occurs over and over with writers from other parts of the world, especially when their “exoticism” goes beyond Western Europe or Latin America. It seems that in order to place them, American reviewers can only use the token touristy data they have about the writer’s so-called “background,” relegating the writer’s *makeup* to ethnic picturesqueness.

What makes a writer is less the accident of his birth than the books he’s read. From the very first line of “Islands,” the story opening *The Question of Bruno*, I was struck by its Proustian echoes: something

Unlike solitude in other societies and at other historical times, in today’s America solitude is degrading. It is not the solitude of the one lost in thought before the open sky or an open book; it is the solitude of the obese person with a can of beer or a pint of ice cream in front of the TV.

in the sentences’ rhythm, a melancholy or a hard-to-define longing for a lost world, in spite of its bloody history. My intuition was confirmed 200 pages later by the beginning of the last story, “Imitation of Life”: “For a long time I used to go to bed early”—the exact words that open Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*. But Hemon continues, “but then my parents finally bought their first TV set.” This sentence, with its reference to one of the most nostalgic moments in the history of literature (Marcel’s remembrance of the paradise lost of his childhood when his mother used to kiss him goodnight) is emblematic of Hemon’s tightrope walk between romantic nostalgia and literary parody.

The tone and atmosphere change in the second story, “The Life and Work of Alphonse Kauders,” whose irony and dark humor bordering on the absurd represent what one could call an Eastern European sensibility. The story is written in small paragraphs of two to three lines, such as: “Alphonse Kauders said: ‘Literature has nothing human in itself. Nor in myself.’” Reading Hemon one can understand that this dark humor and this awareness of the absurd often manifested in a dismantling of language are not gratuitous but are rooted in Eastern Europe’s blood-soaked history. The more insane its history, the more permeated with dark humor it is. One can find this humor in Mikhail Bulgakov’s or Daniil Kharm’s musings on their daily life under the Bolsheviks, as well as in many other writers virtually unknown in this country, who at the turn of the 20th century were writing a literature that was more Kafkaesque than Kafka.

The third in a collection of eight stories, “The Sorge Spy Ring,” is centered on Sorge, a spy the narrator has read about as a child in *The Greatest Spies of World War Two*. This book may have existed, and Aleksandar Hemon the author (not to be confused with Hemon the character) may have read it; what is certain is that “The Sorge Spy Ring” mixes “real” events with fiction, and uses photos as complementary artifacts for storytelling, as in the books of German writer W. G. Sebald. It also uses footnotes as a sort of parallel story or as a corollary. The text above the footnote describes the “real life” of the Yugoslav little boy fantasizing about Sorge’s adventures and about the possibility that his own father might be a spy, while the text in the footnote is Sorge’s story as described by the “objective,” impersonal voice of the author. A literal representation of day-life versus nightlife or the underground, one might say. “Reality” and fiction are thus two parallel universes that converge when fiction catches up with reality, and the boy’s father is thrown in prison for political reasons.

“Blind Josef Pronek and Dead Souls” (a story whose main character is also the main character in most of the pieces collected and published two years after *The Question of Bruno* under the title *Nowhere Man*, with the subtitle “The Pronek Fantasies”) offers a Balzacian solution to Hemon’s two main characters, Pronek and Hemon, by allowing them to cross paths and meet, and thus uniting two separate universes into one encompassing world. There is something in Josef Pronek that makes me think of Charlie Chaplin (if Yugoslav TV was as fond of Chaplin as Romanian TV, Hemon must have watched his films as much as I did): his demeanor of a “sad forklift” in his shirt one size too small, his childish clumsiness, the exchange of “bilingual silence” he has with Hemon. Pronek is atypical and yet, the description of the emptiness and the degrading poverty of immigrant life could be recognized by anyone who has lived it. Not as much poverty in itself as poverty lived in utter solitude. Unlike solitude in other societies and at other historical times (there was a time when solitude was the prerogative of aristocracy and of “noble souls”), in today’s America solitude is degrading. It is not the solitude of the one lost in thought before the open

See HEMON page 8

LIBRARY LINES

Jump-Starting Readers

Laura Schatzberg

Having your very own book may not seem so special to some, but to others who have not had that opportunity, the day you receive your first book is an occasion to remember. For singer Dolly Parton, owning books was not a possibility as a child, so she has set up a foundation, The Imagination Library, that makes getting books to children *before* they can read and up to five years of age its mission. Our library is one of the many entities across the US that has participated in this project. It is easy to fill out the form and send it in to the foundation. No proof of the child’s age is needed—just an address where a book a month can be sent. Reading to children has been proven to jump-start the learning process and begin a lifelong habit of reading.

The library also tries to encourage children to read with our Summer Reading Program. For six weeks beginning June 24 there is a program on Wednesdays at 1pm. This year the theme is *Get Creative at Your Library*. We have lined up an impressive roster of local talented folks who will share their creativity with the children. Books on each area of expression will be available to check out and peruse. Local businesses will sponsor healthy snacks. See the ad on page 9 and the flyers around town, for the next program

And don’t forget our ever-popular Storytime with Marilyn and Linda on Tuesday mornings at 10:30 throughout the year (with occasional breaks to regroup). These programs make reading and everything connected with it fun and entertaining. If the recent attendance of toddlers and their caregivers is any indication, this generation will be avid readers.

Sometimes it seems as if getting children to read is a lesson in futility. The older kids come into the library, but it is mostly to log on to a computer or socialize with their friends. Yes, they are reading online but that is not the same as following a book from start to finish. But, let’s not despair! Humans are surprising creatures. When you look at a teen or preteen you may see what you imagine to be disaster in their future and in some rare cases that may be what happens, but in most instances they will turn out just fine and probably read at least the occasional book. There are a few youngsters who frequent the library and virtually devour what we and the entire three-county system have to offer. I am sure some of the Storytime attendees will be just like them. I was not a reader until my mid-20s. I could read but didn’t read much unless it was for school, and then I often resented it. Now see where I end up most of the time—in the library!

And for those who also listen to music and watch DVDs: we have received a grant from the Community Foundation of Mendocino County to purchase a media display unit. By the time you read this it should already be in place and making your search for music CDs and DVDs a lot easier. Having it will also give us more room on our shelves, which we hope to fill with tasty literary treats.

SUBSCRIBE

See page 9

HEMON from page 7

sky or an open book; it is the solitude of the obese person with a can of beer or a pint of ice cream in front of the TV. More than that, Pronek’s solitude is the solitude of the one who once belonged to a community (no matter how problematic or fragile, as history has proved it), and now belongs nowhere.

Nowhere Man is published as a novel, yet the seven stories comprising it do not necessarily create the coherent whole we have grown accustomed to calling “a novel.” But the book’s epigraph, a quote from *The Age of Genius* by Bruno Schulz, might give us a clue to the novel’s structure and inner logic, that is, to the author’s vision of space and time. If narratives are by their nature built upon the continuity and successiveness of events, what happens, Schulz asks, “with events that have no place of their own in time; events that have occurred too late, after the whole of time has been distributed, decided and allotted; events that have been left in the cold, unregistered, hanging in the air, errant and homeless?”

“Passover,” the first story in the novel, takes place in Chicago on April 18, 1994; “Yesterday” happens in Sarajevo between September 10, 1967, and January 24, 1992, and it describes Pronek’s life in his home country from birth up to the last day before his departure to the States. As in the presumably mythicized version of Aleksandar Hemon’s autobiography in “Exchange of Pleasant Words” from *The Question of Bruno*, Pronek’s family is Bosnian Ukrainian. When he goes for the first time to Ukraine, he meets a woman “he would one day visit in Chicago”—a visit described in “Blind Josef and Dead Souls” where we find out that he arrives in the States on January 26, 1992 (*The Question of Bruno*). Since Hemon appears to share Sebald’s quasi-mystical fascination with numbers, I suspect that this might be the very date of his own arrival in this country.

The coherence between, and precise matching of the important dates in the characters’ lives is uncanny given the fact that we are dealing here with two different

His technique of mixing artifacts with the fabric of the story has the effect of blurring the line between the real and the fictional.

books. Is it possible that the arrangement of the stories in these two books was done by Hemon in a different way than what his editors ultimately decided, and “Blind Josef Pronek” was initially part of “The Pronek Fantasies”? Or is this shuffling of stories deliberate—as the quote from Schulz suggests? If the latter is true, the mastery of such complex structures as that of Hemon’s books is extraordinary. The technique in which a story from one book complements another book’s events and characters, thus giving the illusion of a three-dimensional reality, was invented by Balzac in the *Comédie Humaine* in the desire to compete with reality itself and to create a self-sufficient fictional universe. Hemon has more modest and more modern aspirations, as his desire for the whole is paralleled by a desire for the interrupted and the fragmented. His Sebald-like technique of mixing artifacts (photos, some of which are of “real” people) with the fabric of the story has the effect of blurring the line between the real and the fictional, and the fiction acquires what Roland Barthes called “the effect of the real” (i.e., a lifelike feeling).

“Fatherland” takes us to Ukraine in 1991, where the narrator, an American of Ukrainian origin meets Pronek, a Bosnian also of Ukrainian origin. “Translated by Josef Pronek” takes place in Sarajevo in December 1995—a sober and minimalist rendering of war violence, sparing us the exotic spice some authors feel obligated to add when writing about wars. The last

piece, “Nowhere Man,” a hilarious parody of spy stories, spans over a hundred years, from 1900 in Kiev to 2000 in Shanghai. Here, Pronek appears episodically as one of the names of the Spy known as Captain Pick. “Nowhere Man,” which gives the novel its title, is emblematic of the structure of the entire book. This is not a return to Pronek’s roots, since the Pronek in this story was born in September 1900 in Kiev, while the Pronek in “Yesterday” and presumably all the other stories was born in Sarajevo on September 10, 1967. The two Proneks are two different incarnations at different times and places of the idea of Pronek, of Pronek as a possibility. Moreover, one of the men in Pronek’s circle in Shanghai is Alex Hemon, “a former member of the Purple Gang in Detroit, a hit man who has to kill somebody every time he gets drunk.” Pronek is also the man who turns in to the police Sorge from “The Sorge Spy Ring” (*The Question of Bruno*). Both Hemon and Sorge are mentioned only in passing, as if they were familiar members of a family the reader is acquainted with. (Incidentally, Sorge also reappears in the last story of *The Question of Bruno*, “Imitation of Life.”)

It is, of course, possible that Josef Pronek from “Nowhere Man” is the father of Josef Pronek from “Yesterday” since they are both of Ukrainian origin. It is up to the reader to fill in the blanks, since the author only gives us apparently disconnected stories in which the characters cross paths and reemerge under new incarnations. What distinguishes Hemon from other writers is not that his books break with the linear structure of storytelling—there is nothing new about that, as numerous contemporary American films and novels do it; but in doing so, these movies and books tend to follow a predictable pattern: they either start with the end of the story and then go back until the last scene/page is the same as the one at the beginning; or else the story moves back and forth in time between the moment of storytelling and the past when the events occurred. Hemon, on the other hand, builds parallel

universes whose characters intersect. The main character from one story makes a brief appearance in another story, thus creating a common universe stitching together the stories that exist out there as broken fragments. It is a paradoxical desire for a *total* world— paradoxical because Hemon has been described as a “postmodern writer,” and if “postmodern” means anything, the desire for any kind of totality is its very opposite.

Since any creation is ultimately about recreating space and time, a writer’s essence resides in his vision of space and time. From this point of view, Hemon realizes the incredible performance of reconciling Balzac and Schulz. In this, he is entirely postmodern, a writer of multiple origins, a “nowhere man” who may be one of the world’s greatest writers.

Daniela Hurezanu is the translator, with Stephen Kessler, of Eyeseas, poems by Raymond Queneau (Black Widow Press). Books by Aleksander Hemon can be found through Coast Community Library.

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BOOK BOX

Some Recent Arrivals at Coast Community Library

Adult Books

Adams, Alice. *Medicine men*
Baldacci, David. *Divine justice*
Baricco, Alessandro. *Silk*
Barnes, Linda. *Flashpoint*
Beaton, M.C. *Love, lies, and liquor: an Agatha Raisin mystery*
Berger, John. *From A to X: a story in letters*
Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *The cost of discipleship*
Browning, Sinclair. *Rode hard, put away dead*
Buchanan, Edna. *Nobody lives forever*
Canetti, Elias. *Crowds and power*
Cannell, Stephen J. *Final victim*
Carter, Jimmy. *A remarkable mother*
Child, Lee. *Killing floor*
Coomer, Joe. *One vacant chair*
Corsi, Jerome R. *The Obama nation: leftist politics and the cult of personality*
D’Amato, Barbara. *Hard case: a Cat Marsala mystery*

Einstein, Gilles O. *Memory fitness: a guide for successful aging*
England, Pam. *Birthing from within: an extra-ordinary guide to childbirth preparation*
Finstad, Suzanne. *Sleeping with the devil*
Fuller, Alexandra. *The legend of Colton H. Bryant*
Gimenez, Mark. *The color of law*
Goleman, Daniel. *The meditative mind: the varieties of meditative experience*
Grippando, James. *Born to run*
Hall, James. *Bones of coral*
Hansen, Ron. *Hitler’s niece*
Hitchens, Christopher. *God is not great: how religion poisons everything*
Honervogt, Tanmaya. *Reiki for emotional healing*
Jung, C.G. *Four archetypes: mother, re-birth, spirit, trickster*
Kellerman, Jonathan. *Time bomb*
Kingston, Karen. *Clear your clutter with feng shui*
Koontz, Dean. *The door to December*
LeGuin, Ursula. *The wind’s twelve quarters: short stories*

Muench, David. *Anasazi: ancient people of the rock*
Murdock, Maureen. *The heroine’s journey*
Nestle, Marion. *What to eat*
O’Connell, Carol. *The man who cast two shadows*
Palmer, Parker J. *The courage to teach: exploring the inner landscape of a teacher’s life*
Papazian, Charlie. *The new complete joy of home brewing*
Parker, Robert. *Night and day*
Perry, Anne. *Pentecost Alley*
Picoult, Jodi. *Handle with care*
Rollins, James. *Sandstorm*
Sarton, May. *Kinds of love*
Shinn, Sharon. *Jenna Starborn*
Shulman, Seth. *The telephone gambit: chasing Alexander Graham Bell’s secret*
Simmons, Kelly. *Standing still*
Stabenow, Dana. *A cold day for murder*
Weintraub, Pamela. *Cure unknown: inside the Lyme epidemic*
Zahn, Gordon C. *In solitary witness: the life and death of Franz Jagerstatter*

Miyazaki, Hayao. *Laputa: the castle in the sky*
Browne, Anthony. *Little Beauty*
Stewart, Paul. *Midnight over Sanctaphrax*
Kirk, David. *Miss Spider’s tea party*
O’Brien, Robert C. *Mrs. Frisby and the rats of Nimh*
Jones, Carrie. *Need*
Ford, Bernette G. *No more diapers for Ducky!*
Frasier, Debra. *On the day you were born*
Frankel, Alona. *Once upon a potty: boy*
Frankel, Alona. *Once upon a potty: girl*
Hapka, Cathy. *Pony crazy*
Ackerman, Karen. *Song and dance man*
Singer, Isaac Bashevis. *Stories for children*
Coatsworth, Elizabeth Jane. *The cat who went to heaven*
Gaiman, Neil. *The graveyard book*
Gregorich, Barbara. *The gum on the drum*
Wooding, Chris. *The haunting of Alaizabel Cray*
Lurie, Alison. *The heavenly zoo: legends and tales of the stars*
Swanson, Susan Marie. *The house in the night*
Collins, Suzanne. *The hunger games*
Warner, Gertrude Chandler. *The mystery at the Alamo*
Riordan, Rick. *The Titan’s curse*
Patterson, Nancy Ruth. *The winner’s walk*
Cossi, Olga. *The wonderful, wonder-full donkey*
Cuyler, Margery. *We’re going on a lion hunt*
Claremont, Chris. *X-men, visionaries*

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FRIDAY 12 noon - 6 pm
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Lippman, Laura. *Another thing to fall*
Lynch, Sarah-Kate. *Blessed are the cheese-makers*
Maitland, Arnaud. *Living without regret: growing old in the light of Tibetan Buddhism*
Martinez, A. Lee. *A nameless witch*
Mayle, Peter. *Chasing Cezanne*
McCarthy, Cormac. *The road*
McGraw, Robin. *Inside my heart: choosing to live with passion and purpose*
McLaren, Kaya. *Church of the dog*
Morris, Sylvia. *Rage for fame: the ascent of Clare Boothe Luce*
Morton, Brian. *Starting out in the evening*
Moynahan, Brian. *Rasputin: the saint who sinned*

Juvenile Books

Kneece, Mark. *Batman: other realms*
Hoban, Russell. *Best friends for Frances*
Shusterman, Neal. *Darkness creeping in: twenty twisted tales*
Osborne, Mary Pope. *Earthquake in the early morning*
Willems, Mo. *Edwina, the dinosaur who didn’t know she was extinct*
Pittau, Francisco. *Elephant elephant: a book of opposites*
Clements, Andrew. *Frindle*
Brown, Margaret Wise. *Goodnight moon*
Guarino, Deborah. *Is your mama a llama?*
Martin, Bill. *Kitty Cat, Kitty Cat, are you waking up?*

BOOKS

Frederick Lapisardi

MISFITS COUNTRY
by Arthur Winfield Knight
Tres Picos Press (2008), 217 pages

Arthur Winfield Knight fictionalizes real people. In *Misfits Country*, Marilyn Monroe, Montgomery Clift, Clark Gable, John Huston and Frank Taylor play major roles while Arthur Miller, Paula Strasberg, Eli Wallach and Thelma Ritter all have “walk-ons.” Knight develops his major characters in short, two- or three-page chapters, each focused within the minds of the players, a little glimpse at a time, first Marilyn, then Clark, Monty, and John, occasionally Frank (the producer).

With this chronological series of linked vignettes, the novelist reveals the deep concerns, strengths and weaknesses of each major character while he deftly paints in the minor figures as seen through the eyes of the other five. As though he’s building a mosaic, Knight pieces shards of informative insights together until we feel like we know each of these “misfits” more intimately than we ever could through the press clips and pulp film-magazine stories about them.

Part of that sense of reality comes through the novelist’s strong treatment of place, his knowledge and use of settings familiar to him in Nevada. For example, Knight depicts the fictional Marilyn and Monty on a “small bridge overlooking The Truckee River” where Clift tells the actress about the trout who push upriver to spawn in such great numbers that “thousands of them are killed when their bodies hit the rocks.” Marilyn’s reaction to Monty’s story parallels that of the person she plays in the film. It calls to mind Roslyn’s deep-rooted repulsion to Gay’s (Gable) brutal struggle to capture the wild mustangs that he expects will be sold for dog food.

Knight sets a scene with Frank Taylor and Marilyn Monroe in Virginia City’s Country Inn. “Marilyn,” he writes, “said she liked the monastic feel of the inn. It was built on the topmost ridge of Virginia City, but the main dining room was windowless, a couple of steps below the street. The walls were made of rough cut stone.” Monroe and Taylor may well have dined in the Country Inn, but their exact conversation could have been very different from the one in the novel. Still, the scene feels right, and we



Clark Gable and Marilyn Monroe in *The Misfits*

almost believe that over dinner the producer told the film star, “I love you.”

Love scenes between Monroe and another ill-fated actor, James Dean, probably never happened, but the way Knight tells them makes us think they may have. Again, the settings for these memory clips woven into the surface story appear so real, so faithfully drawn, that the fictional event becomes believable. They represent an earlier pairing of misfits. And in a slightly more twisted way, parallel the unlikely bond that Knight builds between Monroe and the homosexual Clift.

Obviously, the novelist has researched his characters and understands the individual strengths and weaknesses that make each a misfit. John Huston liked to gamble. Knight puts the director and problem-prone actress together at a craps game. Marilyn holds the dice in something of a daze: “What should I ask for, John?” He tells her: “Don’t think, honey, just throw. That’s the story of your life. Don’t think, do it.” That’s how Knight depicts her. The more she thinks, the more messed-up she gets.

He follows this scene with Monroe’s well-documented collapse.

Seen through Clift’s eyes, the episode deals with Marilyn, after her breakdown, being taken from an ambulance and loaded onto a charter plane that will fly her to a Los Angeles hospital. The fictional Monty thinks that “someday he’ll be the one they carried down.” Fans at the airport hold signs: “WE LOVE YOU, MARILYN,” and through Clift, Knight observes: “Fans, God bless them. At least they cared. Worried about you. Even loved you—or thought they did.” Knight uses the scene to bring the point home that we know these people only as film images and material for gossip columnists. It’s all fiction, and his version in *Misfits Country* seems at least as believable as anyone else’s.

Knight’s skill as a novelist also comes through in his weaving dramatic incidents together so they build toward a series of minor climaxes, break approximately midway, and then continue to build toward the obvious conclusion, the push to finish making the film. The midpoint break serves

Gable refused to use a double, and the physical effort may have been the final bodily abuse that led to his fatal heart attack.

as a bit of a comic interlude, while Monroe recuperates in Los Angeles.

Gradually the novelist stacks short scene on top of short scene as the filming of *The Misfits* struggles toward completion despite the heavy drinking and personal doubts of everyone up to and including Arthur Miller, who, in Knight’s story, seems to annoy Huston no end. Old age keeps coming up in Gable’s vignettes, but he’s not alone. Clift approaches his fortieth birthday. Marilyn wonders where she will be in ten years, but all three of them will be dead well before that.

Even a reader unfamiliar with the film would feel the irony. But if one knows the film, scenes such as Gable being hauled behind a truck at 35 miles an hour as he hangs on to a rope that supposedly has a wild mustang on the other end of it, increases that sense of doom. The real Clark Gable refused to use a double for that scene, and the physical effort in the scorching heat of the Nevada desert may have been the final bodily abuse that led to his fatal heart attack almost immediately after the filming wrapped up.

Arthur Winfield Knight’s *Misfits Country* makes an important difference in something beyond the book itself. Standing alone, as a novel, it’s a good read, a story well told, but as a third of a triptych including the film itself and the more recent *Making of Misfits*, Knight’s novel offers an intriguing package. The film, the novel and the documentary each offer a different slant to heighten our interest in the other two. Grouped, they make an extremely rewarding experience.

Frederick Lapisardi is a professor emeritus of English at California University of Pennsylvania. Misfits Country is available at Coast Community Library.

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