

The audience Review

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The photograph on the cover, titled 'Lace Bullet', is from Doug Johnson, who writes, "This photo was taken in my son's room while writing a poem in tribute to Naomi Shihab-Nye. It followed a conversation with my son about bullets and Iraqi children."

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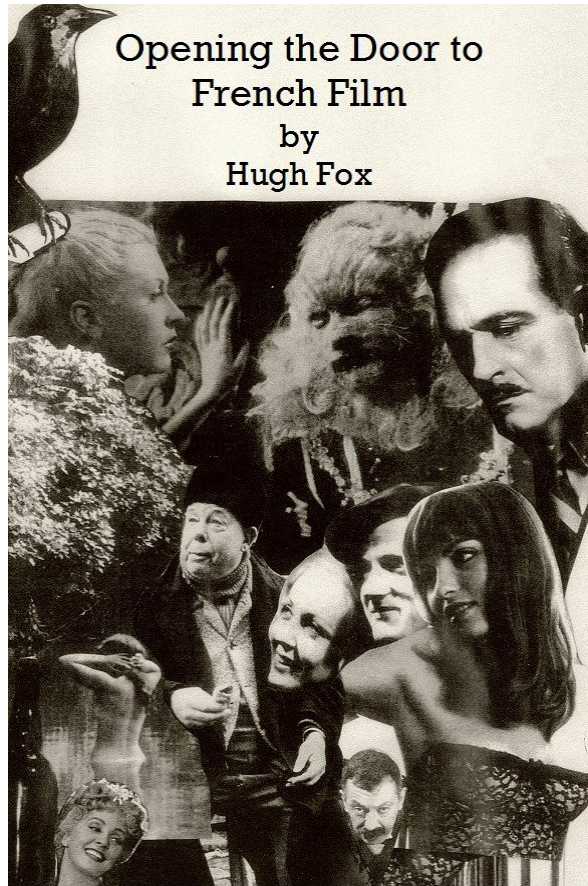
William Harwood

Publisher

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A Comprehensive and Clearly-written Guide,
From Pagnol to Techné, and Many More.

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ths is erth thees ar peopul

ISBN: 978-0-88922-557-2

by bill bissett

A Review by Ernest Dempsey

Renowned counter-culture Canadian poet bill bissett has produced yet another book of cutting-edge verse that grows radially from a dynamic center of individual voice and creative imagination. *ths is erth thees ar peopul* (Talon Books, British Columbia, 2007) comes out as an unconventional form of poetic expression that borders on many dimensions of thought and language: novelty, fancy, argument, glimpses of reality, commentary, criticism, questioning, and more.

The idiosyncrasy of bissett's poetry is grounded in both the novelty of poetic language and the depiction of situations out-of-the-box. Take the end lines of *eeting appuls on jarvis street*:

'laffing our heds off
eeting appuls on
jarvis at 4 in th
morning stars in
our eyez
mine at leest'

No wonder that a first-time bissett reader needs to struggle with the language and essence of every page of the book, more with the language of course. But that is the idiosyncrasy in bissett; his way of keeping the reader engaged.

The style of the author in *ths is erth thees ar peopul* is most nearly conversational. Bissett sounds like addressing both himself and the imagined figure that constantly changes shapes as the sets of pictorial words vary from line to line. This richness of variety is certainly enjoyable; though keeping with the dynamism is stipulated.

With all its ease of thinking and speaking, bissett's concern is tied to things that are of our own 'erth' and its 'peopul'. He asks serious questions with the crystal-clear curiosity of a child:

'why r our leedrs not tied 2 us
old worn out ideologeez teknolojeez
4get oil moov in2 solar energieez'

bissett's reflections sound rather pessimistic as he casts a critical word relating the narrow interests of earthlings:

'guns n blud wer firing evreewher
4 oil
ther ar no happee endings ths is erth
thees ar peopul'

An interesting point, well-qualified to be called thought provoking, is the poet's concern over the dearth of good poetry. In his 'worst nitemare dreem', he describes a nightmare scene of people ravaging bookstores and doing away with junk literature in a failed attempt of finding good poetry books. It takes bissett's quirkiness to ask 'what can I dew to stop th hurt?'

Heart Disease: What Your Doctor Won't Tell You

by Dr. Rodger H. Murphree

ISBN: 0972893857

Availability:

<http://store.drmurphreestore.com/hediwhyodowo.html>

Dr. Murphree's Website: <http://treatingandbeating.com>

A Review by Ernest Dempsey

Defying conventionality in all the disciplines of knowledge is the spirit of our age. Apply this general rule to health science and the first name you come up with is that of Dr. Rodger H. Murphree. While in his book *Treating and Beating Anxiety and Depression With Orthomolecular Medicine*, Dr. Murphree bewares the general reader of the hazardous effects of anti-anxiety and antidepressant drugs, his publication on heart diseases titled *Heart Disease: What Your Doctor Won't Tell You* (Harrison and Hampton Inc., Alabama, 2005) is an asteroid hitting the mainstream medical science in full force.

Dr. Murphree starts with the unaffordable adverse effects of various kinds of prescription medications that are so frequently used by physicians to treat cardiovascular diseases: high blood pressure, angina, congestive heart failure, atherosclerosis, arteriosclerosis, and other problems of the human blood circulatory system. He also denounces the use of surgery to correct the problems in the cardiovascular system, revealing the increased risk of ill health and death with heart surgery.

The later chapters of the book come nothing less than a shock to the reader as Dr. Murphree unveils the 'true' nature of heart problems, the hyped role of cholesterol in causing heart diseases, the horrific side effects of trusted medications for heart problems, and the vested interested of medical practitioners and

pharmaceutical companies in promoting cholesterol-lowering drugs and other prescription medications for heart problems. The author's case against prescription medication is made strong by supporting references of studies and publications given at the book's end. For a person having a basic knowledge of heart and blood pressure problems, *Heart Disease: What Your Doctor Won't Tell You* is certainly a shakeup.

Dr. Murphree takes care of his topic with deep involvement. He has made an impressive attempt of explaining the nature and causes of heart diseases in common language, easy to understand. At times, he even places a satirical comment to reinforce the honesty of his effort in bewaring people of the hoax played by mainstream medicine. He suggests that people in general, and patients of heart diseases in particular, revert to safe and effective medication that is natural and health-friendly, i.e. nutrition and supplements of essential nutrients.

Heart Disease: What Your Doctor Won't Tell You is a great challenge to the claims and practices of mainstream medical science. With its publication, the most responsible profession on earth has been called to enter a new phase of its history: reformation.



Stranger Than Fiction
113 min, 1 February 2007
Written by Zach Helm
Directed by Marc Forster
Starring Will Ferrell, Emma Thompson, Dustin Hoffman, Queen Latifah, Maggie Gyllenhaal, PG13

A Review by Magdalena Ball

Stranger Than Fiction is a film with a heavy dose of the absurd. Harold Crick is an IRS agent who lives a very careful, numeric sort of life. He counts toothbrush strokes, steps, and in a way which is mathematically elegant, ensures that he uses exactly the right amount of steps to get to the bus, and saves time by tying only one Windsor knot. His watch, who also has a role to play in this story, keeps track of everything. But one day Harold begins to hear a narrator describing Harold's actions as he does them. While Harold can hear her, she cannot hear him, and when he hears that his death is imminent, he sets out on a quest to find the narrator and save his own life.

The relationship between Harold's author Karen Effiel and Harold is a complex one. Is Karen Effiel Harold's God? In what sense is Harold real? After all, the whole story is a fiction and both Karen and Harold are characters within it, playing their parts as they spiral around each other. Which came first—the protagonist or the narrator? How about the metacritic English professor who spends his life examining these two? Is his claim to reality any more concrete? All of them will ultimately disappear (including the actors playing their parts). So does art itself have a greater claim to reality than these individual plotlines?

What makes this quirky film so successful is that, unlike many post-modern films, *Stranger Than Fiction* is a humanistic film full of warmth. It never descends into meaninglessness or chaos. Harold's development as he moves from neat precision to love

ridden chaos is one which the reader can identify with. The make-up less Thomson plays the role of Eiffel with beautiful expression and intensity. Ferrell too breaks out of his stereotypical buffoonery and plays Harold with great warmth and integrity. Similarly Dustin Hoffman, Queen Latifah, and Maggie Gyllenhaal are all exceptional, funny, loveable, and strange enough to be completely realistic. Every character has depth, passion, silliness, and beauty.

While the premise of the story is odd and eccentric, and perhaps might raise untenable questions about the nature of truth and narration, the story is so charming, and so well acted, it creates more truths than complications. There are many funny moments—from Hoffman's Professor Jules Hilbert's initial grilling—"I've worked out conclusively that you are not a golem. Doesn't that make you feel good?" (para-quote) to Harold's box of "flours" that he brings to Ana, his love interest (Gyllenhaal).

Aside from the grand scheme of this film, which is definitely feel good, humanistic and positive, there are many tiny features which add to the cleverness and satisfaction. The city of Chicago has never looked so attractive. The parallel between Crick's ordered life, and its representation by the Golden Ratio image, and the ordered architecture of the city is handled with subtlety and power (both seem quite beautiful even as they are being treated with some irony). The characters names are references to great scientists/mathematicians eg Crick, Eiffel, Pascal, and the film is full of meta-references, from Magritte to The Beatles, Monty Python, Calvino, and Escher. This is a wonderful, funny, pithy, and enjoyable film which, despite the lightness of the plot, the romance, and the 'life conquers art' theme, is surprisingly deep, leaving the viewer pondering the questions it raises about life and death long after the film finishes. It's a particularly enjoyable film for anyone who reads a lot. Many are lampooned in this film—the irreverent author with writer's block, the pompous self-obsessed literature professor, the boring 'tax man', and the idealistic anti-government protestor. But every single character in this film, from the office worker in the next cubicle to the personal assistant sent by Eiffel's

publisher, Banneker Press (another mathematician reference) is likeable.

However absurd the premise is, *Stranger than Fiction* is completely believable. However ridiculous the characters are, every one is absolutely realistic and multi-dimensional. *Stranger than Fiction* is a wonderful film, as easy on the eye and brain as any Hollywood blockbuster, but like *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* manages to leave the viewer with more than they arrived with. For the literary minded, *Stranger than Fiction* is near perfect. For anyone else, well, I can't imagine anyone not liking it. It's funny, charming, sweet, but never dips into cliché. The acting is sensational, the script is full of linguistic power, and the film is fast paced and deep.



American Youth
By Phil LaMarche
Random House, 224 pages, \$21.95

A Review by Magdalena Ball

American Youth is one of those novels that seems to touch a chord with its readers—summing up all that hasn't been said about a culture and bringing to light a dirty secret everyone knows but no one had been able to put into words like this. It simultaneously manages to be ultra light and intensely heavy. The story reads quickly, forcing the reader forward, even as the sumptuous prose pulls you back to re-read, and then read again to pull out the subtle nuances, the hints and connections, and the symbols which are everywhere. Ted, the protagonist, initially known as “the boy” is small, insecure and struggling within the confines of his life even before the accident which transforms his life. The local economy is bad, and his salesman father moves 8 hours south to work while Ted and his mother wait for non-existent buyers to purchase their house so they can join him.

Ted is about to start high school and in his summer break, spends time with his larger friend Terry throwing Molotov cocktails at an abandoned development and wrecking the ‘for sale’ signs in front of his house. Ennui and discomfort surround him, and the reader immediately gets the sense that Ted is an observant boy, quiet and uncomfortable in his skin:

As he walked, the din of evening crickets poured in from the surrounding woods. The pavement was old and cracked at the edges. The sand the town spread for traction in winter collected in small

dunes in the ditch. Trees grew close at the sides and reached over the road. Some bore scars from accidents and run-ins with snowplows. Here and there a beer can littered the ditch, sometimes a hubcap or paper coffee cup. (11)

When Ted invites his well-off neighbours, the Dennisons, over to play, the boys are obviously bored with Ted's lack of television stations, lack of soda, and lack of entertainment, so Ted allows himself to be drawn into showing them his rifle. He also allows himself to do something he shouldn't—load the gun, and then guiltily checks to if his mother is watching. In that split second, one of the brothers shoots the other one, an action which changes the direction of the book, and both opens and closes a series of doors in Ted's world.

On every level, the prose in this book is superbly rendered—taut, intense, and forward moving, while at the same time retaining an almost painful sense of introspection that allows the reader to get under Ted's skin:

The book looked at them. Their eyes seemed so eager, so captivated. He held out his hand and Kevin returned the bullet to his palm. He took a breath and drew back the action. He looked at Kevin and Bobby as if to say, *Like this*, and let the bullet into the chamber. He fisted the bal on the end of the bold, slid it forward, and locked it down. It felt beautiful – the slide and clack of steel coupling with steel. He exhaled and looked at them. They smiled. Bobby rocked back and forth from one foot to another. (16)

In the lonely aftermath of an accident that leaves Ted feeling culpable, mainly because of his lie about loading the gun, Ted begins high school, where he is sought after by a group of boys who form a kind of gang which they call 'American Youth.' The story pivots around Ted's coming of age as he tries to find ways to deal with his guilt, his increasing confusion towards the gang, his family, his growing sexuality, and above all, his sense of self.

The morality of the book is clear and becomes clearer to Ted as the narrative develops along with his own maturity, but never does LaMarche allow his fingernail paring narrator to interrupt, nor does he ever tell the reader what to think or how to interpret events. As the gang's brutality, bigotry and anger becomes more apparent, Ted's own anger and pain rise to the fore and he has to confront the inchoate demons that torture him far more than the gang's violence. The myopic dysfunctionality of Ted's world isn't a distopia. It's here and now, as the news makes all too clear. It might not only be America either, although the relationship between political bigotry and widespread gun ownership is something that seems particularly endemic to the US.

Although the story is a deeply troubling one, raising complex questions about a range of issues--from the myopic violence and self-hatred that fills the lives of these hopeless children to the speechless emptiness of Ted's family life--it isn't depressing. Perhaps it's the poetic beauty of Ted's inner world; the correspondences he sees, or the courageous decisions he takes that allows the characterization to rise above it's plot. There are so many subtle symbols, connections and correspondences. The 'American Youth' gang insist that Ted take on the role of hero, forcing him to make a choice that turns him into a real hero. Ted's mother throws a decorative rug over a missing rectangle of carpet, and tells him that the truth doesn't matter. But Ted knows full well that it does; that there are choices to be made in life; that there is such a thing as right and wrong that transcends both the accidents that define us, and the physical pain of scars, beatings and loneliness.

The book is full of rich passages, a deep sense of what is powerful and beautiful in human nature, and a heady dose of symbolism shoring up the desolation of its setting. It's Ted's deep understanding of that desolation and his sense of there being something more, both within and without him that makes this such a powerful read:

The evening air poured through the flimsy walls of his small hut and lean-tos. No matter how tightly he thatched the branches that he broke from the surrounding trees, light from the rising moon and stars poured through the makeshift ceilings. The cold and the solitude sent him shivering home every time. Upon his return, he found his parents glued to nighttime television. They looked up, even greeted him, but never seemed to acknowledge his absence. He felt somehow robbed, unable to drum up their attention—they never even acknowledged the familial strife that had sent him running in the first place. (204)

American Youth is a perfectly rendered novel which manages that difficult balance between absolute topicality—this is a novel for our times—and timeless beauty. This is both a classic piece of literature and an important chronicle of a generation desperate to get out of a downward spiral.



Interview with Phil LaMarch, Author of *American Youth*

Conducted by Magdalena Ball

What were the origins of *American Youth*?

During my first year of postgrad work I was in a fiction workshop and writing short stories about different delinquents/youths, and at some point in the workshop someone said to me, why don't you write a novel about this. This was in the Fall of 2001, so I started. I worked on it throughout grad school and used it as my thesis, working with George Saunders, who was my thesis advisor. I then worked on it for a year after leaving grad school and tried to get it published. It was probably about 350 pages at that point, and I couldn't really get any response. No agent or publisher was interested in the manuscript. So I went back to drawing board for another two years and rewrote it.

Have you been surprised at the wildly positive reception?

Yes. The second time I put it out, I sent it to an agent, and I was expecting it to take months. I heard back overnight, and it all happened pretty quickly from there. It was almost overwhelming.

Do you think that your work has touched a raw chord in the American (and possibly broader) psyche?

I hope so. I think there's been kind of a much stronger focus outside of the US in Australia and Canada for example, on the issue of guns—they've been very keen to probe that, and on the politics in the novel than in the domestic market. In the US the gun debate has been very much on the back burner – there are more pressing issues. Things like the Virginia Tech shooting--like so much in the media – has been a tidal wave passing through to media. It disappeared very quickly in the face of Iraq and the political wrangling between parties.

I don't evaluate it one way or the other. The different perspectives are interesting and fun and in a certain way I did compose the book with certain ideas and intentions.

The US Market has focused more on the characters and their struggle--the dramatic element—relationship between mother and son. I've had a lot of reaction to that.

The .22 (gun) seems almost a character in the book. It's like a thread linking the characters, and like DNA, it goes from generation to generation, ending the book. Why does the boy hang onto it?

I think that part of the reason is the resonance that it has in his own life. Any idea of discarding it would seem odd to him. I stand by the reason given in the text, that it would seem almost sacrilegious to give away such an important artefact. The book starts with the idea of the past – that idea of Cormac McCarthy's that we take the past with us. I think that first and foremost it's important to recognise the truth of the past. Teddy's mother is trying to cover up the truth; to redefine the past. But the past haunts us. Teddy is working towards the truth. This idea of the scars we take with us; his taking

the rifle – he’s never going to be able to forget or change what happened in his life – it defines him as a person in this way. Keeping the gun is his way of honouring the past and moving away from his mother’s approach of pretending that bad things didn’t happen.

Tell me about the American Youth gang. There’s a kind of seductive righteousness about them. Are there parallels between Teddy’s world and Germany before WW2?

I think that the way I wanted to portray them was as representative of a conservative element in the culture that I live in. I wanted them to reflect the inadequacies/fallibility of that approach to the world – to show where that mentality and where that outlook falls short. I hadn’t looked back quite as far as WW2. Of course you can’t have a group of young boys called “American Youth” without calling to mind the “Hitler Youth”, but they were modelled on what I saw in the late 80s and 90s in the US when I grew up. We had another boom after that, and seem to have fallen into another bust. I suppose that there are similarities in the economic patterns. I think when people do feel threatened there is quite a reactionary response to that; when a culture feels threatened or falls back on more conservative values. It goes on the defensive. I think that’s a universal thing.

Why do you refer to Teddy as “the boy” throughout most of the novel?

One of the earliest drafts was written from multiple perspectives/voices. One section in the book was the voice of the grandfather. He always referred to Teddy as “the boy”. I just really enjoyed the sound of it and tone it created, and drew that into the eventual narrative that I used which took on some things that I liked. A lot of people have said that it turns teddy into an “everyman”, and I don’t shy from that. I don’t know that I feel this

now, as it has been a while since I've thought about it, but I in earlier drafts, I imagined the narrator as a kind of older Teddy looking back on a person that he didn't feel he was anymore. There was this dissociation.

Talk to me about teaching. Does it help your writing or conflict?

I was given a lot of time and energy by the writers I worked with as mentors, so I feel that I have a social obligation to give back. I feel like teaching is really plays well into my writing. It keeps me on my toes, and keeps me thinking about writing in analytical and technical ways. Sometimes when I'm working with students I can see some mistakes in their own work which I also have in my work. Teaching has been very productive for me. I have also been in teaching situations where I'm doing four classes a semester, and that's not so good, but when I've got a reasonable schedule it works. Some of my best writing has been inspired by my classes.

Who are your literary influences?

I've been compared to some people who I really respect and admire, and I'm very happy with those comparisons. As a reader, the early writers that I cut my teeth on, where I really felt the power of writing were people like Faulkner. Huxley moved me in strange ways when I was young. Flannery O'Conner. It's hard to be a male writer and not be influenced in some way by Hemingway. Also I got to work with some amazing writers who had a very direct impact on my work. I mentioned George Saunders, who really got down and worked with me, leaving his thumbprint on me a little bit from that mentoring experience. He taught me about the efficiency of voice. Mary Karr does a wonderful job of creating real round working class characters, and helped me with that. I've been very lucky.

Talk to me about the filming process for “In the Tradition of My Family.” Did you get involved in that?

I didn't have a whole lot to do with it. I was living abroad when it was made. I had to see the film as one work of art and my story as another. My thinking was that I made made this piece of art, and that was my contribution. I wanted to allow them to have that freedom. I like to watch movies, but I know very little about film and how it's all put together. I was living in France, and the Todd Davis, the filmmaker was living in the States. The end product was not at all as I imagined it, but it was very interesting; the characters look much different than the ones I had in my mind. Todd had his own vision. We all read a story and have different mental images of what it's like and it was very interesting for me because for a moment I got to see into a reader's mind and how they perceive my work. It was fascinating.

Do you see American Youth as being a project that might translate well to film?

Yes. I do see it as a film. It's very visual to me, and I'm a very visual writer. It's always a visual image that I'm chasing, so I already see it and I think that the style of the narrative would lend it self to a screenplay. It's all in the present tense, and I think it has lots of aspects that would work in film. There's a little bit of violence, a little love interest, some strife. I talked to one person in NY who is interested in optioning, so we'll see.

Is there a landscape you're keen to traverse as a novelist?

I've been kind of infatuated with this concept of the suburban environment. I'm fascinated by landscapes in flux and change. When landscapes are in change there are cultures that are forced to change or to reckon with that change. The landscape of the novel I'm working on now takes place in an old farm where half of the

farm has been sold off as an enormous development and the other half of the farm is limping along. There's this enormous suburban middleclass development which is happening on one side and then a completely different world on the other. The novel takes place between those two spaces.

I've got quite a bit of that done. There's pressure to hurry up, and it can be hard to work through that, and stuff like this – a lot of energy that suddenly goes into promoting. But I've got a respectable draft done, and hopefully it will be ready in the next year or year and a half. My contract necessitates that I get it done within 2 years and hopefully I'll be ready before then. So I'm working on that and am always working on short stories, which give me a little break from the epic project of writing a novel. I've got a collection of stories ready.

Waiting for Kate Bush
by John Mendelssohn
Omnibus Press
2004, ISBN 1.84449.489.6, hardcover

A Review by Magdalena Ball

It's a cold night. Lesley Herskovits perches on the end of a tall tower block in London, ready to jump. This begins a story ostensibly about Herskovits, who has a serious image problem, imagining himself as grotesquely overweight and ugly, cowardly, and pining after the artist Kate Bush, whose next album shows no signs of appearing 11 years after *The Red Shoes*. The novel primarily takes place between the ledge, and the final leap, either Herskovits' only act of courage, or his biggest act of cowardice. Living at a boardinghouse for Kate Bush fans, Herskovits sends Bush e-mails, letters, and regular gifts, bags Tori Amos, a "brazen imitator" and peppers his prose with bits and pieces of biographical information. His suffering is compounded by his perceived fear of confrontation, the ruin of his relationship with his daughter "Babooshka," and his sketchy relationships with his landlady, Mrs Cavanaugh, and a fellow Overeater Anonymous member, the beautiful but overweight Nicola. An interesting sub-plot is formed around a television talent show called *Fab Lab*, a kind of mock *Idol* for the disabled, where winners get voted for by other members and the studio audience.

Waiting for Kate Bush is funny, and an easy fast-paced read. The characters are full of interesting Dickensian qualities, quirky parallels, and twists which tease out the theme—that nothing is quite what it seems. Fame is a fleeting and strange quality, which others seek to feed off, and this is perhaps the thing that ties Herskovit's story to Bush's. Herskovits himself is a former model (the "Marcel Flynn pants bloke" - one thinks of Calvin Klein),

whose sense that he hideously ugly and overweight is countered by the reactions of other people to him—his landlady's shock when he tells her he can no longer fit outside of his door or make it down the steps for dinner because he is so grossly overweight, or the outrage of other truly fat members when he shows up for a meeting at Overeaters Anonymous. Although there is much of Kate Bush in this novel, it isn't really a biography. Kate is ancillary – a missing character that the other's use to offset their own neuroses. Her music surrounds the book, and is hummed, sung, quoted, and analysed. Her life is chronicled, timelined, and surmised. But she never appears, and the only thing we learn about her, is what we glean from interviews, or other people's projections:

“I love Kate Bush,” I blurted. “Being nearer to her, in fact, is one of the reasons I moved to this country.” Their looking at me blankly inspired more blurring. “I find much of her later music inexpressibly beautiful. In my darkest hours, in my moment of peak despair, it gives me a reason to live. A world in which music of such beauty exists can't be intolerable. That's how I look at it.” (21)

That said, this is a book which will certainly appeal to Kate fans. The centre of the book contains attractive photographs of La Bush, moving from grammar school years to her most recent public appearance in 2002. Real die-hard fans will probably know most of what the book contains, but for your average, “I like her music,” fans, the book will re-invigorate a sense of the music, as lyrics, critical appraisals, and performance highlights are detailed in recount by the obsessive Herskovits. Characters like Cyril, Nicola's father, a tiny hired thug who enjoys being brow-beaten by his huge wife, or Mr Chumaraswamy, Mrs Cavanaugh's other lover, a self-proclaimed anti-bullying vigilante. But no one is exactly as they seem. Bully and bullied are often consensual. Self-image isn't the

same as other's perception. Mendelssohn cleverly discredits his narrator early on, and although this is a first person narrative, we can't take the narrator's account as reliable. This creates an interesting tension which leaves the reader wondering about the real relationship between Herskovits and his daughter, or about his relationships with other characters in his life; his wife or his schoolyard experiences:

From the age of 15 until the time the girl who'd become my first girlfriend agreed to go out with me, I was myself a sidekick. Daring to imagine that one of their admirers might notice me, I insinuated myself into the entourages of a succession of good-looking, athletic, confident classmates – hating both myself for having done so and them for having things I hadn't, and perhaps never would have. But I didn't come to be perceived as attractive by association.(186)

Unfortunately, this theme is only lightly touched upon, subsumed into the more overt purpose of ensuring that every opportunity to mention Kate Bush is taken, probably, one imagines, so that the large number of consumer hungry Bush fans will buy the book (a good enough marketing strategy). That is a shame though, as there is a reasonably story here, and the way in which the plot twists and the worms turn is probably enough to make this into a decent quality fiction. However, Mendelssohn sacrifices the story for the biography, and for his own musical cleverness, which does a good job of picking up a wide range of musical and cultural icons, interpreting the lyrics of Bernie Taupin (I never thought about how silly the metaphors in most of Elton John's songs until the press savaged Candle in the Wind post-Princess Diana's funeral), or using his “sharp” American wit to slice through everyone's “crap” but his own. So this isn't literary fiction, and can't really be taken too

seriously, especially with its ridiculous deus ex machina ending. That's okay. *Waiting for Kate Bush* isn't meant to be a serious read. It is, instead, a light, fun, easy piece of summer reading by a writer who is very capable and experienced at writing about popular music. Kate Bush fans will snap this up. The rest of us (even those who like Tori Amos as much as Kate Bush) will enjoy it for what it is, and find themselves listening to the Bush back collection with renewed vigour.

A Spot of Bother
By Mark Haddon
Jonathan Cape
ISBN 0224080466, Hardcover, \$45, October 2006

A Review by Magdalena Ball

Retiree George Hall is in trouble. He has a 'cancerous' patch on his leg which his doctor has 'misdiagnosed' as eczema, his wife is having an affair with a former colleague, his feisty daughter is marrying an unsuitable 'pleb', and his son is not only irresponsible and immature, he's also gay. While the Hall's are a fairly typical dysfunctional family, and perhaps their crises really do amount to no more than a spot of bother (that could easily be the theme), Haddon moves his lens in so closely that they become an 'everyfamily' full of the same laughter, pain, messes, and horror that fill our own lives.

The story begins as George has a 'funny spell' while purchasing a suit for the funeral of a friend. As he notices the puffy flesh on his skin, he instantly decides that its Cancer and equally quickly decides that suicide is his only option. The reader follows George's silent attempts to cope with his 'Cancer', and the ensuing madness which builds partly as a result of George's 'stiff upper lip' and the way he tamps down any desire to bring his fears or desire into the open:

The secret of contentment, George felt, lay in ignoring many things completely. How anyone could work in the same office for ten years or bring up children without putting certain thoughts permanently to the back of their mind was beyond him. And as for that last grim lap when you had a

catheter and no teeth, memory loss seemed like a godsend. (4)

Although in many respects, *A Spot of Bother* is a story of aphasia: the tamping of emotions, feeling and discussion into a nameless dread, George isn't the only character who has difficulty speaking. His wife Jean is also absent in her way. Although her aphasia isn't as obvious as George's, she has an affair without thinking about where it might go, and let's herself sleepwalk through the tragedy of her husband's insanity hardly noticing its impact on him or her children. She is also blind to her own children's pain as they struggle with their identity, and with the balance between neat shallowness and messy love. It's a relatively serious scenario, and George gets progressively worse as his daughter Katie struggles to decide whether to marry a man she doesn't love and his son struggles to commit to a relationship that he does love. It's also a world that many readers would recognise (though perhaps not the scissors scene), which is part of why this book is such a satisfying read. But while the themes are serious, *A Spot of Bother* is anything but bleak, or dour. Right from the first moments of the book, there is humour. For example, when George goes to visit a Psychiatrist about his depression, he tells him he's been taking antidepressants: "He decided not to mention the codeine and the whisky" and Dr Foreman tells him that the side-effects are "Weeping, sleeplessness and anxiety."

Even the grisly scene (perhaps one of the grosser moments in modern literature) where George decides to personally cut out his lesion is quite funny in a teeth gritting way. Haddon's metaphors, such as comparing pinched skin to the white peaks of hot cheese on a pizza, or the utter slapstick of George's thoughtful observations as he fumbles around the house bleeding copiously and wondering about whether to grab a fluffy towel or how to get across the white carpet while his lesion remains flapping against his

hip, leave the reader laughing through the horror. It's a horror that moves between the intensity of George's self-reflection:

He began examining his skin in detail. On his arms. On his chest. On his stomach. Turning round and looking over his shoulder so that he could see his back.

It was not a good thing to do. It was like looking at a petri dish in a laboratory. Every square inch held some new terror. Dark brown moles, wrinkled like sultanas, freckles clumped into archipelagos of chocolate-coloured islands, bland flesh-coloured bumps, some slack, some full of fluid.

His skin had become a zoo of alien life forms. If he looked closely enough he would be able to see them moving and growing. He tried not to look closely. (273-3)

And the expansiveness of Haddon's world, where there is, above all, a kind of family glue that holds everyone together in spite of the dysfunction. Though everything looks like it is falling apart; the weather is bad; George is embarrassing; Jean's affair has been publicly outed (with a headbutt); and the guests are upset, there are still wedding bells, real love, and an upbeat, lighthearted ending that almost leaves the reader cheering. The characters all develop and grow from the one dimensional self-absorbed people that start the novel to the complex and interesting ones that end it: "We don't realise how important it is. This...this place. Trees. People. Cakes. Then it's taken away. And we realise our mistake. But it's too late." (368). Losing face isn't so bad after all. Despite the lesion, the affair, the weather, the disappointing son, and the potato head son-in-law, the things that matter are still in place. There is

still wine and broccoli. And George gets to keep his aphasia, as long as he leaves the scissors alone.

EYE CANDY by Doug Johnson

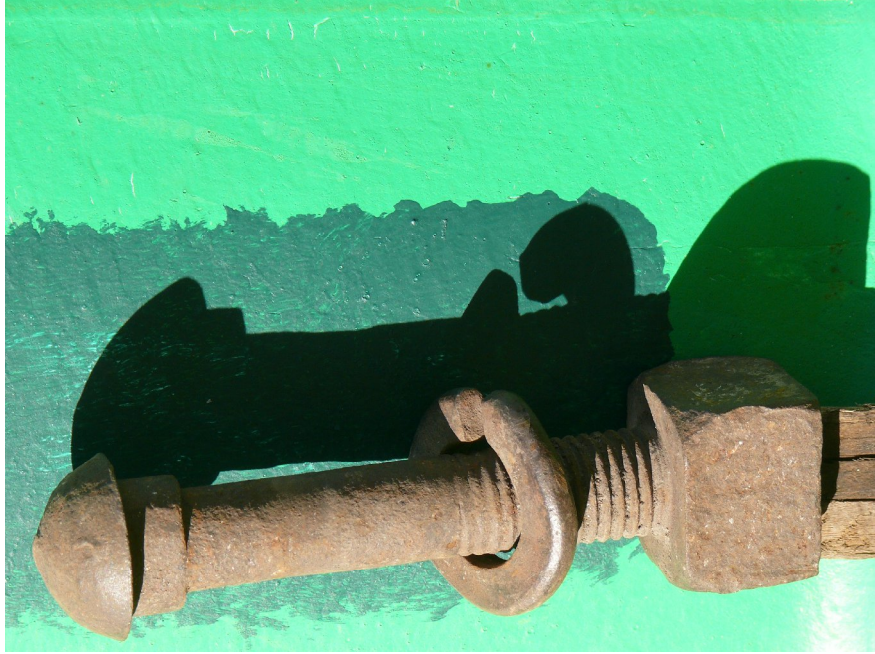
a prayer for Jill

Candy's eye socket has been
empty since birth, and now that cancer
doesn't rule the optic nerve
She has to decide if she looks

out of one eye with two
or one eye with one

Long blonde locks peeking ever so
teasingly over that one eye, look him
down and up at the same time.
No secrets-her name isn't Candy or Victoria

Two weeks ago a full maiden form winked.
Her daughters dance on poles in Spokane
at the Stateline bordering Coeur d'Alene
wondering where lovers really go.
Furious stirring clinks him back.
Dreaming doesn't change the fact that if she orders
the cancer free glass eye, Candy will sip tea and look out the
window—
wondering forever about one lump or two.



Circumcised Shadow by Doug Johnson

A Review of *If Wishes Were Horses*
Produced by Right Down Broadway Productions, Inc.
Appearing at Altered Stages

by M. Stefan Strozier

If Wishes Were Horses, by Kari Floren, is an excellent play, amazingly acted, and finely directed. Seeing it, for me, was a rare joy and it makes me understand a little better, and with renewed hope, the meaning of the phrase “a wonderful night at the theater.” The acting of Suzanne Grodner, Michael McKenzie and Robertson Carricart was out-of-this-world, and the play was captivating and relevant. The characters and the story hit me right between the eyes. I saw it on Wednesday, June 20th.

Allow me to digress. I am writing this for what will be the 6th issue of *The audience Review*, due out September. The reach of this review is steadily expanding, even as it continues to make greater profit. Perhaps, readers of previous reviews of plays and their theater groups that I have written in these pages will recognize that I don't like a lot of plays, and sometimes I don't like the companies producing them. I suppose it's fair to say that I can be a rather ruthless critic.

Let's take off the kiddy gloves, why don't we? And the bozo mask. With rare exceptions, I don't regard the critics writing for the theater industry in New York City as worth a hill of beans. That's right: The theater critics in New York City are light-weights, dishonest, and consistently prone to propagating either unmerited “rave” reviews or their own political vision and discourse in their reviews. Or, they just spew propaganda, eschewing proselytizing their readers. I don't fear them in the slightest. I do not profess to be a theater critic of much regard, and neither is *The audience Review*, yet, and that is just fine with us. I write what I feel, based on my experiences, and from my own unique perspective. However, both

this review and I do have our secret forces. I have talked with many people inside and outside of the theater industry, and asked those people specifically and directly questions like, “What do you think about Ben Brantley?” And, “What do you think about the critical writing of Ben Brantley?” I am here to report that the consensus is that Ben Brantley, who writes for *The New York Times*, is a fraud in terms of being a critic. This assessment was consistent, down to every man and woman that I questioned, and I obtained a wide cross-survey, as I always do in my interrogations about theater or other subjects. Most people I talked to had a genuine disgust for Brantley that seemed palpably personal. I was just as perplexed by this reaction as you might be. I questioned whether or not this might be a phenomenon of Ben Brantley’s newspaper, *The New York Times* that, after all, is dying a slow, lack-of-influence, agonizing death. No, was the refrain; the problem was unequivocally stated to exist with what the man writes—it didn’t matter where he writes it. How does this kind of contempt arise, and exist so strongly? It would seem that one the most grievous and an egregious error that a human can commit is assuming that you are speaking for a group of people, and to do so with pomposity, aloofness, and limited writing skill. This is what Ben Brantley is doing, with every article he writes. It’s similar to what George W. Bush does with the American people.

Conversely, I never heard a negative word against Charles Isherwood. However, I have not heard a positive word about him. When I asked the average New York thespian, “What do you think about Charles Isherwood?” the answer was a peculiar shrug and a strange, awkward silence ensued. In my opinion, this reaction is right in line with the tone, timber and content of Mr. Isherwood’s articles.

Moving down the line then, critics get progressively greener. In fact, in the first essay I wrote for these pages, I covered a few of them and I am not sure I have the patience to return to this topic now. In fact, after writing that article, Martin Denton (www.nytheatre.com) wrote me an aggressive and abrasively angry

email, demanding that I “retract” my article because he didn’t like the way I had truthfully written about the numerous spelling errors that were in his review of my play (see back issues: www.worldaudience.org). Of course I refused, and my article has been posted on this site since I wrote it a year ago, and it was professionally published and distributed. This incident caused me to lose respect for Martin Denton as a critic. The spelling errors did not bother me; his reaction to them did. He had felt it fine to criticize my play; but when I criticized him, in a correct manner, I had committed a grave sin.

So, I’ll just take a quick glance and update the state of New York theater critics. First of all, let me clarify that the critics who write for off-off Broadway are not published critics. The critics who write for *The New York Times* are published. For, even if the *Times* is just a newspaper, as opposed to a book sold in a bookstore, credit must be given to it, for the *Times* is *the* paper of New York City, even the rest of America; perhaps, of the entire world. If you write for *The New York Times*, this is the equivalent (at least) of being published in a printed review of note, and sold for a profit (or perhaps subsidized, as is usually the case with a review housed at a university). Any review should have a targeted readership, focused on a specific geographical area. Thus, the *Times* can be thought of as New York City’s theater review, with authority.

Critics for www.nytheatre.com or www.offoffonline.com are no more than bloggers, and what I call “off-off Broadway critics.” One critic, R. K. Scher (how artistic a name!) came to review my play, *Guns, Shackles & Winter Coats* a half hour after the play had begun. She let herself in the theater and took up a seat right in front of me (I was operating the light and sound board). She missed the first 2 scenes and came in midway through the 3rd scene. When she wrote her review, she wrote about the first 2 scenes, as if she had been there! Back where I grew up, we used to call something like that a fucking lie! And, she quoted some of the lines in the play incorrectly in her review. Even through the critics writing for these entities (that are strangely affiliated i.e. are they

company, non-profit—which one?) review Broadway and off-Broadway shows, when I tried to picture Martin Denton (www.nytheatre.com) sitting next to Ben Brantley, taking notes at *Chorus Line*, my Diet Coke went flying out my mouth! It's a little more relaxing to imagine Michael Feingold, writing for *The Village Voice*, sitting next to Brantley at the same musical. I must clarify that Mr. Feingold is, in fact, a fine theater critic, the rare exception, and he is better than even Mr. Isherwood. Feingold is excellent because he is not just a fine critic; but he is also a fairly good writer. I realize that in America being a good writer means next to nothing; but in reality writing well can be quite a powerful thing. Mr. Feingold has his flaws as a writer. He is never quite "on target". He seems to fly wide, right, by just a bit, because he is timid. But still, *The Village Voice* is a published review, in the same sense as the *Times*, as the *Voice* has earned its place. There are plenty of other critics out there, like David Cote; but I really don't count them as *real* theater critics, in a literary sense, at least. Besides, Cote is...well...I've heard a few stories—let's just leave it at that. Readers: If you ever bother to reply to my blog, perhaps I'll clarify one day (www.blog.mstefanstrozier.org).

Thus, I have provided an update of my assessment of New York City theater critics, originally presented in these pages nearly one year ago. Now back to my review. *If Wisbes Were Horses* is praiseworthy. Perhaps, my largest criticism of this production is the title, also seen in the publicity material (in pictures): it sounds somewhat, well, girlish. I understand what the saying means; but this is almost like a book's title, where there is a message *somewhere* in the text. The point of a play's title is to sell tickets, as far as I'm concerned, and this title lacks oomph. But this is a trifling matter.

I'll start with the salad and appetizers and work my way to the delicious main course. The production was flawless. 29th Street Repertory is where the play appears (between 7th and 8th avenues), and their theater is very comfortable, although it's two long flights of stairs to reach the place. It seats about 60 and is a standard black

box theater, with fine sounds and plenty of lighting. The seats are comfortable, padded plastic, if a bit cramped around the knees.

The set for *Horses* was top-notch, designed by Elisha Schaefer, and could be transferred to Broadway without missing a beat. In fact, at several points in the play, I found myself studying the set in an attempt to decipher what was real and what was built for the play, and I was not able to tell the difference. The set represented the inside of a suburban home, like something from a Neil Simon play (in the suburbs). So, the set had two levels, and the higher level was a wooden floor that must have been constructed only for the play. This kind of attention to detail, and hard work, gives me goose bumps, if not a bit of artistic frustration.

Here's an example of how much I pay attention to details: At one point, the wife, Karen, played by Suzanne Grodner, starts spraying a small TV set with a can that says *Pledge*, in a blue bottle. I am immediately suspicious. Does *Pledge* come in a blue bottle, or has a decal been placed on any ordinary blue bottle to make it appear as *Pledge*? Surely, the bottle must contain water, or the costs of refilling *Pledge* every night would be astronomical. Did *Pledge* exist during the time period presented in this play? And then, after spraying half the house, due to Karen's irritation in this scene, the recognizable odor of *Pledge* wafts through the air, or at least I imagined it did. Okay, I am only half-joking. A set, or its props, has minor impact upon the art created in a play. Oh, one can moan and groan until the cows come home; but sets, props and costumes have little effect on paying customers, compared with the actors and the writing. My plays always consist of a single table and 2 rickety chairs and little else, and I get along famously. Only recently have I gotten into the concept of a "costume," and I was unaware of missing anything when I did. Nevertheless, when a set is done right, as it is with this play, it is fun to observe the actors moving around inside it. Still, when there is no set, the actors' movements are that much more meaningful and powerful, and telling, if placed artistically by the director. A good set is practically "industry standard" these days; I wish it weren't.

The lighting, by Michael Salvas, was excellent. Throughout the play, a window changes its hue with each scene, perfectly in line with the mood of the actors. Maybe the sun was still setting outside; either way, the aesthetic was great. The sounds, by Zach Moore, were similarly precisely in mode with the action and just plain good. The production manager, Emileena Pedigo, has done a truly superb job of pulling all of the play's components together into a seamless work of art. I could continue; but you get the idea.

Moving to the next course, the vegetables, I found the direction of Julia Gibson to be clear and precise. I am forever observing direction, both good and bad, because I have much to learn about it, and having directed 4 plays and 1 Brecht-like musical, I am still a novice prone to mistakes. Here, the actors' blocking and movement were excellent and well-timed. Doug, who is later revealed to suffer from something I can't reveal or it might spoil the play for you, had awkwardness in his movements that I questioned up to the moment I understood why. Perhaps, my only complaint about the directing is that it seemed a bit cautious. And, I think this play could have sustained any amount of risk-taking. The writing was great.

Last is the main course, the steak: The acting and the play itself. As I have noted in previous reviews, it is never a bad night at the theater if I am able to simply watch excellent actors perform on a stage for an hour and change. This is what happened here. However, this time I was also listening to and watching a well-written play! The cast: Suzanne Grodner, Michael McKenzie and Robertson Carricart, are incredibly good actors. Their characters were portrayed simply enough, at first glance. But, the actors and the playwright have given their characters immense depth and poignancy. At several intense moments, I was able to strongly emphasize with the plight of a character on the stage. In some cases, I related to the comedy, as when there is a problem relating to marriage between two characters. But elsewhere, I could relate to events I have no experience with, such as dealing with a wife suffering from Alzheimer's. In this case, the character in question

wasn't present on the stage; she was only talked *about*. It was the power of the acting and the playwright's words that brought these scenes home so clearly to me. Ms. Grodner cries at several key moments, something she must have to do every night. It is such a great thing to watch truly great actors go about their work on the stage, within the framework of an A+ play.

If Wishes Were Horses is a perfect commentary on current American life, à la the suburbs. The characters are suburban; yet, urban, living in New Jersey. Doug is also an on-time, on-target assessment of the modern American male—albeit, a matured one. At one point, Doug is describing how he used to be able to get a job and we can safely assume he means the 1990s, as he says (to paraphrase), “Back in the old days, I used to demand a good job and good pay, and if I didn't get it I laughed at the offer, and said ‘is that all you got?’” I too remember those days; but they are, yes, gone. And our confidence didn't depart simply because of economics; those were times when our country was proud of its leaders. This, and more, is in the play, in no uncertain terms. *If Wishes Were Horses* is not presented through exposition; but in the real-time actions of wonderfully drawn characters. Our fall as a nation, and Doug's, is represented by the metaphor of golf, one winner and another loser. *If Wishes Were Horses* is a prescient play, about summer, 2006, that is itself representational of a much larger event in American history. Kari Floren's dialogue is top-notch stuff and I was impressed by it. But, her real strength is in the telling of a heart-felt, real story. Her timing of events was exquisite. The editing or length of each scene was, for the most part, as it should be. I thought Act One to be a bit long and Act Two could have gone father, or further, than it did. The aspect of the play's craft reminded me somewhat of a farce, where the setup can take a long time—no matter, it all worked expertly. Kari Floren is a great playwright, who I hope keeps writing plays!

The mission of the producing company, Right Down Broadway Productions, Inc., is to (from the playbill), “...[B]ring together disparate elements of the theatrical community (Artists,

Designers and Theatre Companies) to consolidate resources, revenues, experience and talent AND [not my capitals] provide original, quality, theatrical entertainment to the public.” This is a noble goal, and sounds like a good idea. From what I saw, this company has achieved its goals with this play. A “producing company” is a different animal than a repertory company that produces the work of one playwright, or a specific kind of theater: Shakespeare, Chekov, “classical”, etc. (for example, the slogan of 29th Street Repertory Theater Company is “where brutal theater lives”); or, a workshop that exclusively develops new plays. I talked with Kari after the play (she is one of the nicest people in show business) and she explained that her company only produces one play a year so that they can do it real justice. This unique vision strikes me as courageous and admirable. However, it seems that either the theater company or the art required of a play suffers during any given production.

Yet, here is another thing that makes me love theater, even if seeing good plays like *If Wishes Were Horses* is a rare event: The blending of theater art with sound business practices builds an archetype.

In conclusion, I have finally seen a play where everything worked perfectly. I could complain about this or that minor thing; but why bother? It is live theater and it will never be perfect. In fact, I have criticized productions where the artists are reaching for a perfect production precisely because they will never achieve it, and watching them try is comical, unfortunately. Such is not the case with *If Wishes Were Horses*, where the players seem to be genuinely enjoying themselves, both as professional actors and as people. (God, I’ve just realized how much critical writing, for the theater, makes the writer sound like a voyeur.) Yes, seeing *If Wishes Were Horses* was a “lovely night at the theater.” It might not be Macbeth; but again, why even make the attempt? *Horses* understands what it is and wants to be and it achieves that with brilliance, and the precision of a laser beam.

Ah, and this is the end of my review; but is it? For all technical purposes, I am finished; but something leads me on, to rip more out of this opportunity at destroying theatre. I might be cautious in this aspiration, and then again, maybe the New York theater scene needs people like me in 2007 – IMHO it does. It's not so much the expertise I may or may not have – it's the experience.

An Interview with Ida-Rose Mead

Learn more about Ida-Rose Mead's book at:

www.outskirtspress.com/idarosemead.

Conducted by Ernest Dempsey

Ida-Rose Mead is the author of the recently published humor book *Mindful of Madness* (Outskirts Press, Colorado, 2007). The book is a humorous fantasy, telling the story of a guy who is doggedly trying to master his desire by taking the control of things in his dreams. The author exhibits her exceptional skills of creative imagination and fancy as well as an innovative use of language. Following is Ernest Dempsey's interview with Ida-Rose Mead's.

Ernest: Ida, you mind telling us in brief about yourself, as a writer and as a person?

Ida: My real name is Ida Baker. I'm a research coordinator in the field of community public health. I have an academic background in psychology. I also have a passion for creative writing which, admittedly, adds little or no weight to my CV! Research is such an objectively cut and dry profession; but, oh well, it's an honest living. I get to meet a lot of interesting people and help make a difference.

Ida-Rose Mead is my pen name for writing fiction. It is the name I was given at birth. I believe, no matter how many twists and turns I encounter on my walk through this life, I will always be the person I was born to be. Some things cannot be changed. Besides that, the use of my birth name honors the parents I love so dearly.

I straddle two cultures when it comes to 'who' I am. I was born, raised, and formally educated in the United States before I married an Australian and began my adventure in the 'land down

under'. I eventually took on dual citizenship so I could be *where* I was and be *who* I was at the same time. I am proud to call myself an Australian/American now. My creative writing not only reflects my experiences in both cultures, it also reflects 'objectivity' since I am able to *be* in one culture and look at the other culture with a sense of ownership in both.

Pinpointing the beginning of my passion for creative writing is impossible. It has been with me all of my life, nudging me in a truly irritating way to get going and keep going no matter what 'they' say. I started writing in earnest in 1989 and first appeared in print when my short story 'Ripples' was included in an Australian Crime Anthology. I have other short stories published in the crime genre, and I am the author of *In Bloody Vincible*, a crime novel set in Australia. Encouraged by my Muse (every writer should have one), I set my creative writing scope on satire for my latest venture and gave desire a life of its own within the dream world of a mega-rich man named Conrad Buncombe!

My other interests include gardening, cooking, and reading; and I have profound respect for nature and all living creatures. My all-time favorite fiction writer is Jean Auel, and my favorite book is the first in Auel's Earth Children series, *The Clan of the Cave Bear*. Currently, I live in New York with my husband.

Ernest: What sparked the passion of writing in you?

Ida: I really don't know what sparked my passion for writing. It is something I have always liked to do. If I had to choose between nature and nurture for an answer, I'd say nature.

Ernest: How did you choose to write humor?

Ida: I'm not sure it was a choice! I mentioned my Muse. I was living in Australia when I wrote the first draft of *Mindful of Madness* and, most certainly, the humor in the book was shaped by my experience. When my attempts to market a satirical comedy for publication didn't get far, I put the manuscript down and re-set my creative focus on the crime genre. But the idea of the satire didn't want to rest. Up it would pop time and time again, and I would retrieve the manuscript and tweak it in preparation for more publishing queries which led nowhere. This continued for years until I finally decided to use print-on-demand publishing to take the book from concept to reality.

Ernest: Would you tell a little about *Mindful of Madness*?

Ida: There is a golden rule that says: what goes around comes around. It makes you realize that behavior has consequences. We ask, 'would I want to be on the receiving end if someone said or did what I was about to say or do?' We learn to think before we act, but this behavior is an ill fit when it comes to desire as we know it today.

Our culture is driven by desire. It is the foundation of our material world, and the reason why our culture thrives. We want it all! We want it now! Our desire feeds the frenzy that feeds our desire, and so it goes on and on. We're caught in a vicious circle that is best described as madness.

I wanted to convey this madness to my readers in a humorous way because it really is funny when you think about it. We're all caught up in the circle, and those who create the frenzy are in control. They're called 'master tappers' in *Mindful of Madness*, and mega-rich Conrad Buncombe, the main character, is their leader. It is Buncombe who first harnesses desire in, of all places, a dream! Buncombe—the word means humbug or deceit—knows how to discretely and incrementally tap our desires until we cave.

We get what we want in the end! That we are emotionally, and financially, spent by the process is testimony to the genius of the game. No cost is too high if the desire is attained here and now! The gist of *Mindful of Madness* can be summed up in a word: beware!

Ernest: How does *Mindful of Madness* differ from your previous publications?

Ida: My previous work is in the crime genre.

Ernest: Your book exhibits an instance of highly developed creative imagination and unbridled fancy. Do you think so?

Ida: Thank you. Yes, I think the book is highly developed creatively, imaginatively, and fancifully. I aimed to bring Conrad Buncombe full circle with desire, so readers could have a sense of comeuppance and know that what goes around does come around, at least in fiction! I hope I achieved that.

Ernest: Doesn't the use of such out-and-out plot take readers away from reality and they may distract from 'the real' in life?

Ida: The book brings a concept to life. That, in itself, is unconventional! Conrad Buncombe's ultimate desire is to connect or be with the sapphire-eyed beauty of his dreams. He'll do anything to attain this desire. He is on the outside looking in at the beginning of the story, and the setting for the journey he embarks upon to be with her is deliberately vague. It's up to the reader to decide if the connection that brings Buncombe full circle with desire happens in 'dream' time, in 'real' time, or in 'no' time at all.

Ernest: What in your opinion is the role of a humor writer in society? Do you see him/her as a pen-holder aiming at amusing people or is there more to the humorist's talent?

Ida: I think there is room for both types of humor writers in society. Some humor writers produce shallow, amusing literature that can send readers into full belly laughs. Others write deep, satirical humor with undertones that are meant to convey a message. A full belly laugh would be an odd reaction to such humor.

Ernest: Are you a humorous person in real life? (tell a little)

Ida: Ah, humor is so subjective! There have been instances when I've laughed at something or someone... and others did not; and there have been instances when others laughed at something or someone... and I did not. Who knows what strikes a person as funny? Even timing can make a difference! And let us not forget that some people mask sadness with made-up smiles.

In real life, I was more shallow and amusing when I was younger. I still have my moments; but, now, for the most part, my humor tends to be dry and serious. It gets a laugh and gets a message across, too. Who knows? Maybe, one day, the message will make a difference.

Ernest: Any plans for contributing more to the world of literature in near future?

Ida: Absolutely. Passion dies hard! I've already started working on my next novel.

An Interview with Sarah Kocks

Conducted by Ernest Dempsey

Sarah Kocks works as a senior publicist at the *Phenix & Phenix Literary Publicists* in Austin, Texas. A graduate in communications from the University of Texas at Austin, Sarah has secured some of the most notable media opportunities for authors including CBS's "The Early Show," The New York Times, The Associated Press and The Wall Street Journal. As a senior publicist, Sarah manages a variety of tasks that promote the works of talented authors. Following is a brief interview with Sarah Kocks about her field of expertise in publicity.

Ernest: Sarah, please tell us briefly about your duties as a publicist.

Sarah: As a publicist, my day-to-day duties include: creating and implementing media strategies for authors, pitching authors and their books to the media, developing relationships with the media and writing press releases, author bios and other marketing materials.

Ernest: So how did you choose this kind of job?

Sarah: I was excited about the prospect of publicizing authors and their books because it seemed different from the kind of work most of my peers were doing at public relations firms. Also, Phenix & Phenix only represents books that make a positive impact on society, so the fact that I am making a positive impact on the world by publicizing these books is an added bonus.

Ernest: What criteria do you hold for selecting books?

Sarah: Specific to product:

- * Quality of the product (is it well-designed, is it well-written, can we set it apart from competitive titles, how old is it, etc.)

- * Credentials of the author (academic/ professional experience, publishing background, etc.)

- * Timeliness of the message (is the media going to care in the news-cycle that corresponds with the campaign?)

Specific to the author:

- * Realistic expectations

- * Author that is willing to work during the campaign (book signings, contributed articles, etc.)

- * Do we have the opportunity for a long-term relationship (are they a one-book wonder?)

Ernest: What genre(s) do you think are the most marketable these days?

Sarah: Lately we have had a lot of success with religious and true-crime books. For example, we recently represented best-selling true-crime author Philip Carlo. His publicist was able to secure interviews on CNN and the “Montel Williams Show.” Religious

books are great because they appeal, of course, to a Christian audience, but often have the ability to crossover to the mainstream. In the past couple of months, we have secured bookings for several of our religious authors in *USA Today*, *Entertainment Weekly*, and *The New York Times*, among many others.

Ernest: When you receive a book, what expectations do you think the author has in mind regarding your role in promoting his work?

Sarah: We generally deal with two separate sets of expectations. One is focused on results and the other deals with the actual services we provide. Regarding services, while we do spend a great deal of time educating first-time authors during our submission process, most authors we speak with have done their homework and understand the role a publicist plays. We handle media relations (we don't schedule book signings, events, etc.) and each service we provide is focused on running a high-profile launch for the book.

Those services include media training, developing a professional press kit, weekly campaign reports and booking opportunities across all forms of media (radio, TV, print and online). The authors we steer clear of have unrealistic expectations regarding what they can expect the results to be from those services. The bottom line is that while a good publicist is going to be able to show a consistent history of delivering results, no one can ever predict exactly which media outlets will run with a book.

Ernest: What factors determine your success with promoting a book?

Sarah: When we take on a new client we base our goals for the launch largely on the goals that they have set for the campaign. In other words, if we have an author that is interested in using the

book as a marketing tool for their business or as an opportunity to book more speaking engagements, our goals for the campaign are going to be focused on expanding the author's platform rather than focusing solely on the book itself. If we have an author that is interested in saturating print media, the success of that campaign is going to be determined by our ability to deliver results in that sector. We also set goals for ourselves with each client that we take on. If we don't believe the message has the potential to be well-received by top media contacts and it is not something that is going to reflect well on our firm, we won't take on that project. We're only as good as our reputation and that is often dependent on a "what have you done lately" mindset. That mindset is complicated by the fact that, as publicists, we have two clients. The first set of clients are the authors and publishers that hire us to promote their book. The second set of clients we have are the media contacts that we have cultivated as an agency over the past 13 years. If either set of clients don't consider our efforts successful then we're in trouble.

Ernest: What if you get a book that disappoints you? Do you go ahead to promote it?

Sarah: If we review a book that disappoints us we provide constructive feedback to the author and pass on the project. We invest the time to speak with every author that submits a book to our firm, even if we are declining it. Sometimes we offer a referral to another firm if we feel they are more appropriate. Other times when we're talking with an author that really shouldn't be putting money into publicity we try to discourage them from investing in a project that is not likely to pay off in media attention.

Ernest: What are the ethical issues involved in your work?

Sarah: Sometimes we represent authors who have written books where we don't necessarily agree with the author's point of view. At the end of the day, however, we have to remember that we are professionals and while we might not agree with the author's message, there is an audience for everything and that book might make a difference in someone's life. On that note, I have never had to compromise my morals or do anything illegal while promoting our authors.

Ernest: Do you feel any reward in addition to your pay for your work?

Sarah: For me, I really get joy out of seeing our authors succeed – especially an author whose book deals with a societal or health issue. For example, I have represented several domestic abuse survivors who wrote books detailing their experiences, including how they escaped their abusive relationships. I pitched them as experts to the media on how to get out of an abusive relationship and how to heal from the effects of abuse. By getting their voices heard on TV, the radio and in newspapers and magazines, I helped them help other women in similar situations.

Ernest: Do you consider your work as a challenging job?

Sarah: Absolutely. The publishing industry is a hard industry to break into, which is something many authors don't understand. Even harder, is getting top-tier media coverage like *The New York Times* or the "Oprah Winfrey Show." Setting author expectations is part of the job, but sometimes it's not an easy thing to do. After all, every author wants to be a *New York Times* best-selling author and appear on "Oprah." But try telling a science-fiction author that Oprah does not recommend science-fiction books to her Book

Club, or telling a self-published author that *The New York Times* does not review self-published books.

Ernest: Do you remember any times of a great success and/or a slump?

Sarah: My greatest accomplishment over the course of my three years at Phenix & Phenix was probably booking Amber Mariano, the author of *Amber's Guide for Girls*, on "The Early Show." I don't really recall ever being in a slump, per se. Of course there are times when bookings are less steady, but that's often more of a reflection of the news cycle at the time, not my performance.

You see, our ability to secure media coverage depends on what's going on in the news at the time. For example, if all CNN is talking about is, say, a political scandal or natural disaster and I have no authors that can comment on either topic, it would be rather inappropriate for me to pitch my parenting expert who can discuss how to get your toddler past their terrible twos. When it comes to securing media coverage for my clients, it's all about timing.

Ernest: How do you manage your time?

Sarah: I work a full work week (40 hours), and sometimes more, depending on how full my campaign load is (I typically carry between 6-8 clients at one time). I am always accessible to the media via email and cell phone, so even when I'm not at the office I am able to take a call from a *New York Times* reporter who is on deadline and needs to speak with my author ASAP. Part of being a publicist is being accessible at all times. If you don't respond to an email in a timely manner or answer your phone, the media will move on to someone else. With that said, when I'm not working, I

make the best of it. I love spending time with my friends and family and while I'm with them, I try not to talk business.

Ernest: Thank you Sarah for your precious time!

An Interview with Shane Conroy

Author Website: <http://cagedmedia.net.au/>

Conducted by Ernest Dempsey

Shane Conroy is a new voice in the rising beat of humorous/satirical short fiction. Hailing from Australia, Shane proceeded to self-publish his experimental short fiction book *Stand Clear Doors Closing* (Caged Media, Australia, 2007) instead of conforming to the demands of professional publishers. His step in the direction of self-publishing goes hand in hand with the defiant questions that he asks in his short stories. Following is my brief interview with Shane about his book and his views on literature in general.

Ernest: Shane, please tell us a little about your life in brief.

Shane: I'm Australian, born and bred in Sydney. Like most cab drivers and bar tenders, I have an arts degree but in my case have been lucky enough to find full-time work as a magazine journalist. I'm very close to my mum, dad and sister – and my beautiful girlfriend – all of whom are constantly there to remind me what's truly important in life. As are my two cats, one of which is my intrepid writing partner. The other thinks I'm an idiot.

Ernest: When did you start writing and what was the inspiration?

Shane: Writing is something that I've always been drawn towards. I wrote poetry, some good but mostly angst-ridden dribble, throughout my youth and teenage years, which I think was my natural way of dealing with my emotions. While my writing style is

very different, I've read a lot of Steinbeck, Hemmingway, Orwell and Heller, and draw inspiration from J.D. Salinger, the beat poet Charles Bukowski, and the good doctor himself, Hunter S. Thompson. I'm also a huge fan of Jonathan Safran Foer.

Ernest: Is *Stand Clear Doors Closing* your first book?

Shane: Yes it is. I was somewhat disillusioned by the hoops mainstream publishers make submitting authors jump through, so I decided to self-publish. Most publishers here in Australia require the author to identify a market for their work, and seem to pay more attention to the commercial viability of the book than the quality of the manuscript. The truth is that maybe there is no market for my writing, but I'd rather never sell a book than make a million selling something I don't believe in.

Ernest: Did you always like to write in a creative experimental style, like that we see in *Stand Clear Doors Closing*?

Shane: No at all. I started off mimicking my favorite writers, and most of my early work sounded like a poor knock-off of Hemmingway. I used an experimental tone in *Stand Clear Doors Closing* as a method of finding my own voice, and am working on refining it further in my second book and first attempt at a novel, *London Bridge Burning*.

Ernest: Some of the situations in your stories are bizarre, even weird. What in your opinion is the significance of fantasy in short fiction?

Shane: I think fantasy is an effective tool for metaphor and at times can be the strongest way to communicate your character's innermost self to the reader. In *Stand Clear Doors Closing* I use fantasy mostly to help the reader gain an insight into the mood of the character, and in-doing so, hopefully present a clear picture of the complicated and irrational thoughts and fears I feel we all share.

Ernest: Is your work primarily targeted at an Australian audience?

Shane: Not necessarily. I think good writing transcends cultural differences and endeavors to illuminate the human truths that unite us all. While I fear it would be too ambitious to suggest *Stand Clear Doors Closing* achieves this; that is definitely the intention.

Ernest: I feel that the voice of the narrator sounds like coming from someone in a hangover. Do you think it may be my subjective feeling or is it really so?

Shane: I was trying to provide an insight into the confusion of a young man searching for his place in the world, and my character was definitely seeking solace at the bottom of a bottle. So yes, you could say the narrator is speaking through the cloud of a hangover and the added confusion and remorse it brings.

Ernest: Your character asks some defying and almost nonsensical questions. Do they represent your thoughts?

Shane: The questions my character asks in the book most definitely reflect my thoughts and observations at various stages in my life. I think it's important for us all to keep asking questions of ourselves and the world around us, especially when they're difficult.

Ernest: Of particular interest to me is your story *Jesus Loves Me and Other Fairy Tales*. Has Shelley been an inspirational figure for you?

Shane: Shelley has been of great inspiration to me. As I wrote in the story, Shelly was expelled from Oxford in 1811 for writing an essay called *The Necessity of Atheism*. The university board later offered to reinstate him if he repudiated authorship of the essay, but he refused to do so. I admire that level of conviction.

Ernest: Your stories are centered on thinking. Do you agree?

Shane: Certainly. I think most people who enjoy reading spend significant time lost in their thoughts. For me personally, I'm constantly trying to evolve the way I perceive things and draw meaning from the things around me. Writers have always tried to see behind things, and I believe it's important that we continue to do so.

Ernest: There is some quasi-rhythmic repetition of speech in all stories. Has poetry been an inspiration in writing your stories?

Shane: While I never have really been a good poet, I enjoy reading poetry immensely and feel that a similar rhythm is not out of place in short fiction. I'd suggest people read Hemmingway for the best example of rhythmic writing – he's the master.

Ernest: How do you comment on short fiction in Australia?

Shane: It's basically non-existent. While it's incredibly easy to find all those terrible '7 Steps' books by cereal box psychologists, it's very hard to find anything, let alone short fiction, by new Australian

writers. I'm hoping to get some new stuff out there through my publishing company, but it's almost impossible to get into book shops without a million dollar budget. Hopefully online retail outlets are beginning to change that.

Ernest: And what does humor mean to you?

Shane: I think humour has a special way of pointing out our inadequacies without personally insulting us. And there's always a special truth behind every joke. Humour is a very hard thing to write well, and I admire anyone who can pull it off.

Ernest: As a writer, what's your motto?

Shane: In *The Winter of our Discontent* John Steinbeck wrote: "When he was killed all I could think was that his had been a good and effective life. He had taken his pleasure, savoured his love and paid his debts. How many of us even approach that?" I try to remember that when I over-complicate things.

Ernest: Thank you Shane!



The Experience of Leaving: An Interview with Linda Benninghoff
Read my review of *departures* at
<http://bookreviewpot.blogspot.com/2007/10/departures.html>

Conducted by Ernest Dempsey

In her poetry chapbook *departures*, Linda Benninghoff has strummed the string of a tender feeling every one of us experiences once in a while: the feeling of loss associated with the departure of someone or something, including time itself. The nineteen poems in the collection vary in the exact setting and situation of individual poems. But all these share a touching personal voice that calls for respecting the space, time, and living forms that we experience as living and caring inhabitants of this planet. Following is my brief conversation with Linda about her writing and views.

Ernest: Linda, you got a university degree in literature and writing, right?

Linda: I have a B.A. in English and a M.A. in English with an emphasis on creative writing. In my B.A., I majored in English because it came easily to me and I loved it. I waited almost 10 years to get the M.A. I was not sure how the formal setting of the

classroom would affect my writing. I completed my M.A. when I was 35.

Ernest: Had you already started writing when you decided to go for a degree in writing?

Linda: I started writing at age 14, when a teacher encouraged me. I was writing most of my life without receiving much formal instruction. I remember some key classes, one which I took with Jean Valentine, and another with Kendra Kopelke, in poetry, that were very inspiring to me and kept me learning. In my M.A. degree I majored in fiction, so I did not deal much with poetry—although I found poetry easier to write. I later would focus mainly on poetry.

Ernest: What poets inspired you during your early education or in your earlier days as a writer?

Linda: Theodore Roethke was the first poet I read (also when I was 14) and he continues to be one of my favorite poets. In college I read and reread the elegies of Thomas Hardy for his wife. I often write poetry about people who died, and it seems to have tied in with my early reading. Another poet who writes about death whom I liked was Emily Dickinson, although I did not appreciate her fully till I got older.

Ernest: Do you write poetry only?

Linda: I write novels and short stories, but they don't come as easily to me and I am not as serious about them. However, I love reading novels.

Ernest: How long it took you to write the poems that were to be published in *departures*?

Linda: I collected the poems over a twenty year period. Some of the poems were written in my early twenties, the latest in my forties. In my early twenties I lived in Baltimore, and this city forms the backdrop of much of my poetry. It is almost a character in the book.

Ernest: What is so inspiring about the theme of 'leaving' that you wrote several poems on it?

Linda: I think leavings have a great impact on us, and the loss that ensues. I think when I've left people, there's always been indecision involved and some loss. The same thing is true of leaving places. And when people have left me, it has sometimes taken me years to recover. In the opening poem of the chapbook, I leave a relationship. The relationship is comforting in many ways—there is a sense of home, there are salt and pepper shakers on the table, although they are "downcast." And there is a sense that the two people are not getting along. I choose freedom—but there is ambivalence about it. In the poem I began traveling with only a few belongings, and the other people I see traveling have their houses in their cars.

Ernest: Some of the poems appear to be addressed to people who appear to be no more with us in this world. But they are not elegies as such; rather poems that miss the presence of those who left for good. How do you see the departure of friends and family as a subject on which to compose poetry?

Linda: I think death has the greatest impact on us, and good poetry at some point has to address the question of death and what ensues after it, denial, loss, recognition of loss. The people in my poems are unhappy. In *You Wandered* the person who is the subject of the poem is almost a homeless person, although she does not die. Margaret in *To Margaret* is also uprooted, and she does not feel

loved, so she commits suicide. As a young person this was a shock to me. I tried to understand the people I was living with and their reasons for dying or living the way they did.

Ernest: One of the exceptional features of your poetry is the feeling of respect toward the persons, animals, and even inanimate objects and places. Don't you think that it is something very much wanting in most of our day's literature?

Linda: No, I read many poets who feel this also, such as Robert Bly in his nature poems. Frank O'Hara (who died young) certainly has a feeling for inanimate objects—New York City, especially.

Ernest: While nearly all the poems in *departures* are somehow special, *This Cat* is a piece that seems to stand out as a unique composition. How did you happen to relate a stray cat's roaming and your own experience of walking out in rain?

Linda: I have lived in several different places, Baltimore and Long Island, not quite finding a home. I guess I feel like a stray cat, looking for a home. I originally was unsure if *This Cat* fit into the collection, but it is about homelessness, so perhaps it does. It is also about wildness—preferring the freedom of roaming. Many of the people I wrote about preferred to keep their freedom or their wildness rather than settle for less.

Ernest: You mind telling a little about your personal life and the place of writing, especially poetry, in it?

Linda: I live with my mother in a house in the woods. I have had dogs and a family of gerbils for pets. I write in a screened in porch from which I saw (this summer) a nesting pair of cardinals who had fledglings, a variety of birds and chipmunks and rabbits. I've lived in cities too.

Ernest: Do you have any ideas on mind for future publication, in either poetic or prose style?

Linda: My next book will probably be about departure also, because I lost my best friend several years ago and have been writing poems for her. We were friends for ten years before she died of cancer. At first the prognosis looked hopeful, and when the disease metastasized it came as a surprise. After she died, I experience a lot of denial—the feeling that I could still pick up the phone and call Mary, go to visit and find her peeking out her living room window. Even now, almost five years later, I still dream of her and find her death hard to believe. The poems describe a lot of this denial and surprise at her death.

Ernest: How can readers learn more about you or get in touch for sharing views? (your website if any. You may choose to write 'No Answer' and I'll delete this question)

Linda: For any questions or comments about my poetry, I can be reached via e-mail- benningln@aol.com

Impeaching George W. Bush and His Administration;
Essays by Different Writers
A World Audience Book
August 2007

A Review by Lo Galluccio

Hot of the presses is an ample and acute journal of essays, critiques, poems, reflections and treatises on two basic subjects: why the Bush administration should be impeached and why the war in Iraq should end. This journal represents a diverse group of international writers driven by a “focused outrage” on these issues.

The basic idea behind impeachment is that it would show the world that America is willing to investigate a corrupt government and try to save our Democracy against internal abuses of power and the misguided policy which has caused the ravages of war in Iraq because of an American occupation.

In his essay “We, the People” Editor M. Stefan Strozier states:

“Right now, America is facing a lot of trouble. This has been the case ever since President Bush took office. In life, there are different kinds of troubles. The trouble America faces right now is potentially irrevocable. President Bush has 18 months left in office –the perfect amount of time to impeach him. President Bush is leading us down a path from which we might not emerge. The only way to stop this from happening is to impeach President Bush, and soon.”

Strozier goes on to say that impeachment amounts to a form of accountability, a way of taking responsibility for our actions, for our failures in Iraq and Afghanistan, for our failure to have any real impact on the so-called real terrorists (Osama Bin Laden, for instance is still at large, while Sadaam Hussein did finally swing from a noose as a war criminal.) He states vehemently, “Impeaching President Bush would demonstrate to the world, clearly, that we are a good nation of strong people.”

And he goes on to quote Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address – the famous section about not allowing those who have died to have died in vain, in a war where over, compared to Iraq 625,000 American soldiers died in an internal battle over issues of great economic and racial consequence to our country. And then to the futility and failure which the war in Iraq has proven to be over the past 6 years. Ironically, we’ve in fact helped instigate a civil war in that country between various religious tribes that were in some sense held at bay by Hussein’s dictatorship.

The bottom line for Strozier is that if we are fighting in Iraq we must fight for something right and stand for humanity not just democracy. Our history of foisting Democratic governments on other countries by force leaves a fairly poor track record.

Essentially, Strozier states that “a general is not a president” But, the hitch is that the president is, in times of war, the Commander in Chief. The issue it seems to me is that this war was started under false premises, declared won under false premises and continues to be fought without any regard to the clear evidence that it cannot be won. And the cost in human life, over 3,000 American soldiers killed and up to 100’s of thousands of Iraqi’s killed, aside from the financial cost of over \$530 billion in government funds spent, is more than criminal waste. There may be just and unjust wars. This one, it seems to me, cannot be classified as a just one. And that is good enough reason to go along with an impeachment proceeding.

I think it is worth noting that there have been three Presidents within the past 30 or so years who were brought to impeachment by the US Congress and Senate. President Nixon was impeached after the Watergate scandal was leaked and found guilty of bugging Democratic headquarters at the Watergate Hotel. He was essentially put on trial for a charge of wrong doing and before convicted on many counts, including misusing the C.I.A., he resigned from office. Remember the backdrop prior to the Pentagon Papers and the Watergate Scandal in the 1960's under Nixon, was the Vietnam War, the closest equivalent, I think we can find to the current war in Iraq. Nixon's last days in office came in late July and early August, 1974. The House Judiciary Committee voted to accept three of four proposed Articles of Impeachment, with some Republicans voting with Democrats to recommend impeachment of the President.

The final blow came with the decision by the Supreme Court to order Nixon to release more White House tapes. One of these became known as the 'smoking gun' tape when it revealed that Nixon had participated in the Watergate cover-up as far back as June 23, 1972. Around the country, there were calls for Nixon to resign. He did so on the evening of August 8, 1974,

The other President who was called to trial for possible wrongdoing in office was, of course, our charismatic Democratic President from Arkansas, Bill Clinton. On a much less important scandal, at least to most American people and certainly I think, it is safe to say the rest of the world, especially Europeans, Bill Clinton was impeached by the House of Representatives on December 19, 1998, and acquitted by the Senate on February 12, 1999. The charges, perjury and obstruction of justice, arose from the Monica Lewinsky scandal and Paula Jones law suit. While there was an issue of the President having committed perjury in his denial of sexual relations with Monica Lewinsky, a 22 year old White House intern and some division in opinion over the President's culpability, he was not forced to resign from office but reprimanded with a monetary civil suit of some kind.

These are vastly different cases of Impeachment and so it needs to be noted that impeaching a President really means putting him on trial, it does not mean automatically having him/her thrown out of office.

In “The Finger and the Moon” by Tom Frozart, he lists three reasons for impeaching George W. Bush:

- Serial lying; bogus claims about special power, WMD;
- Conducting an illegal war; facilitation of crimes as described in Nuremburg Charter and Geneva Convention on POW;
- Committing/inducing his administration to commit a sizable number of federal crimes against civil liberties.

Under the heading a “A big Step Backwards for Democracy” Tom writes:

“The current situation in Iraq is going a step further with the outsourcing of military prerogatives to private organizations that usually fall into the category of mercenaries. War is more and more a funding of business with public money, and lives; to do so, deals have even been struck with foreign countries to compose a motley alliance mixing formal democracies, authoritarian reigning families, and mafia style gangs. In other words, we are going full-speed in reverse gear; warlords of the medieval age didn’t act differently, and already invented the free circulation of people in chains.”

Franklin W. Liu, an editorial, essay writer, visual artist and reviewer who has traveled the world from his home base in Hong Kong writes a rather lyrical history of his own relationship to

America as the foundation of Liberty, using the famous Statue in the NY Harbor as a pivot point. In one passage of his chronology he writes:

“President George W. Bush, in fact, upon the commencement of the Iraqi War declared that the United States reserves the right to use any weaponry in our military arsenal, including our nuclear weaponry. Thus with this wanton, reckless rhetoric, President Bush opened the floodgate for other countries to rush into nuclear weaponry development and may have pushed al Qaeda to seek suitcase nuclear devices via the black-market. Critics say President Bush a born again Christian, has witlessly brought the world one step closer to the Biblical End Times.”

Of course there are also those who think it significant that our President is also a somewhat recovered alcoholic or one acting like a ‘dry drunk.’”

To interject a few of my own observations: I believe that had Bush tried to enforce a draft as in the Vietnam War in the late 60’s so that more middle and upper class young people were affected by this debacle, many more people would have protested this war in the streets. It also saddens me a great deal that the facts are that most of the American soldiers fighting are on the 3rd, 4th or 5th tour of duty and most are young and from rural areas of the country. In one New York Times article I read, these soldiers, before returning to their regiments, even write in journals of dreaming about their imminent deaths, and can do nothing to stop their fate except writing letters to their children to keep them strong and with faith in God and sacrificing for one’s country. I also read at one point that, while we have virtually destroyed the infrastructure of Iraq, and many soldiers die because jeeps simply

fall off faulty or broken road lanes, there are now over 6 million cell phones in Iraq, up from the under 100,000 pre-War. That was an Associated Press statistic. It really makes you wonder the kind of quality of life that America is bringing to the world. Sure it's great to have a Nokia when you're in a bind, but if you can't reach a doctor or a tow truck or friend who's just been killed by a suicide bomber, is the Nokia worth that much?

And there is the supreme irony that Osama Bin Ladin is still at large and that he, not Sadaam Hussein masterminded 9/11. So, with all our U.S. intelligence and fire-power, why does this man elude us? According to a PBS special that aired some months ago, our invasion of Iraq was a dream come true to him, because since the time that Anwar Sadat was assassinated for being fairly friendly toward the West, Muslims decided that there was a loophole in the Koran and that they could fight and kill each other. Bin Laden hoped that he could provoke American to attack a strong Middle Eastern civilization like Iraq. That was really when the rise of the extremist Muslim movement took hold and Osama Bin Laden visited America and unfortunately, according to this special, didn't really like our manicured suburban lawns or our lindy hops. I could understand the lawns, but I can't really understand who could hate the swooning swing of 1950's high school be bop and rock and roll dances. It makes no sense to me. Then, again I'm not a devout Muslim. The point being, that as an enemy of American wealth and indulgence, Bin Laden hoped that he could provoke America to attack a strong Middle Eastern civilization like Iraq. And that is exactly what George Bush did after the attack on 9/11. The point also being that after the World Trade Towers in NYC were attacked that day much of the world was on our side. They were pretty sympathetic to thousands of secretaries and even CEOs going up in flames and "W" did the exact opposite of what he should have done. He didn't use his little grey cells. He didn't rally international support or wonder what this terrorist movement based in the Middle East was really after. He just went to war against that oil-

producing country whose leader his ole' Daddy had a grudge against. And it created one of the biggest messes in history.

Hugh Fox, poet, writer, review, anthropological scholar and all-around humane visionary has this to say. He sees what's actually happening here in America as a result of Bush's policies and this war:

"I mean they're closing down schools, reducing the sentences of criminals so they can pay less to maintain prisons, raising the tuition at the university, closing down plants, thousands of people out of work, crime up, on some streets most of the restaurants and stores and factories are for sale/lease.

"In the meantime trillions are being spent sending soldiers over to a country at civil war with itself, as if the English had sent over troops to stop the American civil war....

"So, it's not just getting involved with the wrong war and putting the US economy into the worst debt it's ever been in, not just the killing American troops, all the concentration being focused on nonsense (while the bad-guy Arabs are planning their next big massacre!) but *no concentration being focused on the American middle and lower classes, no concentration being focused on manufacturing, on the protection of American foods, toothpastes, you name it.*"

Particularly impressive is a 10 part imagistic expose by a NY based psychologist and singer/songwriter named Dr. Mel Waldman who in a montage of styles describes the horrors of the war. It is poetic, and declarative, psychological and metaphorical.

In his introduction he writes:

“This war is a labyrinth and we are trying to find our way out. But for now, we are lost in a dark dreamscape of unspeakable violence and death, a black hole of despair that is vast and incomprehensible...”

Other parts are titled 1. THE INVISIBLE SOLDIER, 2. WAR IS EVIL – SOMETIMES NECESSARY / THE STREETS OF PLANET EARTH 3. WAR IS INSANE 4. WAR IS FREUDIAN: A REPETITION COMPULSION 5. THE IRAQ WAR SEEMED JUSTIFIED 6. PRESIDENT BUSH SEEMED ENCHANTED BY LADY VICTORY 7. OUR SAFETY IS QUESTIONABLE. 8 SADDAM HUSSEIN’S HANGING SEEMED INFLAMMATORY 9. THE WAR IS LITERARY 10. WAR IS TRAUMATIC

As far as I know Presidential candidate Barack Obama is mounting the strongest drive to impeach President Bush and end the War in Iraq. There will be numerous demonstrations in Washington this month against the war though it is interesting that they are not getting the kind of prime-time coverage one would have thought they deserved. In almost every poll the majority of American voters want the war to end but the Senate and Congress still seem gridlocked about how to ease out of the situation gracefully. Bush, it seems, is just trying to save face.

“My imaginary playmate is more insane than your imaginary playmate,” Republican presidential candidates boast.

by William Harwood

“The Republican presidential candidates sharply escalated their attacks on each other last night, clashing over who is the most conservative.” Thus wrote reporters Michael Cooper and Marc Santora in the *New York Times* on Monday October 22nd, 2007. Apparently, neither the reporters nor the candidates had any awareness that “conservative” is a euphemism for “reactionary, unteachable, dogmatic, morally retarded, theofascist, subhuman throwback to Cro-Magnon man.” Candidates Rudolph Giuliani and John McCain argued that conservatism is about “opposition to the kind of liberalism” espoused by Hillary Clinton, thereby not merely confessing that they were 30,000 years less evolved than the probable next president, but actually boasting about it.

According to candidate Fred Thompson, whose portrayal of a theofascist Republicanazi on *Law and Order* was too sincere and realistic to be anything but a reflection of the actor’s own antihuman philosophy, “Mayor Giuliani believes in federal funding for abortion.... He’s for gun control. He supported Mario Cuomo, a liberal Democrat, against a Republican who was running for governor.” Neither Thompson nor Giuliani recognized those words as high praise, in effect declaring that Giuliani was less antihuman than Thompson. And both indicated that they would probably have emulated George W. Bush in vetoing a bill to save the lives of thousands, perhaps millions of children, since they agreed that such expenditure on trivia would have left less money for bigger and better war toys.

Opposition to granting women sovereignty over their own bodies is based on imaginative readings of bible passages that can only be so interpreted by an undisciplined exercise of the

imagination. Theofascists interpret passages ordering an underpopulated Jewish community 3,000 years ago to, “be prolific and increase in number,” as evidence that an imaginary Sky Führer in Cloud Cuckoo Land supports their position. How could it not? Certainly the deity’s basic concept of morality, “heads it’s a sin and tails it’s a virtue,” was invented by priests whose only motivation was the absolute power that corrupted them absolutely. But the deity has since been re-created over and over out of what persons afflicted with psychotic religiosity see in the mirror. From the time a priestly phallusocracy wrote a bible that declared women to have been created as men’s private property to use as they see fit, even Western society has maintained misogynous laws and customs on the ground that the Western World’s “God” regards women as a slave caste and therefore men are free to treat them as such, including forcing them to bear children they neither planned nor are in a position to support.

Conservatives oppose granting gay couples the same right to marry the partners of their choice granted to heterosexual couples. In support of their homophobia, they cite biblical passages that criminalized gay recreation because the priests who wrote Leviticus believed that gays could thereby be forced to contribute to the breeding of tithe-paying believers. The conservatives simultaneously ignore passages by other biblical authors (Jer. 13:6; 1 Sam. 20:41; 2 Sam. 1:26; Judith 13;9; 16:22-23) who made clear that sexual orientation was no more an issue of morality or taboo than preferring tennis to golf. And because chronic, incurable, homophobic, religious conservatives, at twenty percent of the Republican population, constitute the balance of power that, under the first-past-the-post voting system, can win candidate A the nomination over candidates B, C, and D, even though the sane eighty percent reject everything the Republicanazi Taliban stands for, candidates Giuliani, McCain, Thompson, and Mitt Romney all expressed a willingness to support a Constitutional Amendment imposing a ban on gay marriage in treasonous violation of the First Amendment’s prohibition of any “law respecting an establishment

of religion.” Giuliani acknowledged that he did not consider gay marriage “one of the critical issues.” But he was nonetheless willing to impose a ban if sufficient states with an equal-rights majority legalized it, in order to demonstrate that he was every bit as incapable of telling right from wrong as the insane Mother Goose clone in the sky admired by even tolerant Republicans.

Republicanazis fall over backward to boast that the values of a god too insane and evil to realize that immorality means the unnecessary hurting of a nonconsenting victim are also their values. “My god is more misogynous than your god,” they boast. “My god is more vicious and vindictive than your god.” “My god is more like Hitler than your god.” “My god is more like Torquemada than your god.” “My god is more like Caligula than your god.” “My god is more like the talking chimpanzee in the White House than your god.” “My god is more conservative than your god.” And ultimately, “My god is more insane than your god.”

As of October 2007 it seems highly probable that the Republican presidential nominee in 2008 will be the candidate best able to convince the most insane, subhuman, scientifically illiterate, misanthropic, misogynous, theofascist ten percent of the American population, “I’m one of you.” He will then have to reverse the position that won him the nomination in order to win the votes of the majority of Republicans who do *not* want to turn America into a mirror image of the Taliban’s Afghanistan. Ultimately it makes little difference who wins the nomination or how big a U-turn he makes thereafter. After eight years of the worst president America will ever have, a man who will go down in history as the American Hitler and may become the first president ever to end his life strapped to a gurney with a needle in his arm, the Republican presidential nomination in 2008 will have about as much value as a Confederate one-dollar bill.

The Inconsistency of the Bush Taliban: Homophobic But Not Lobsterphobic. Why the Difference?

by William Harwood

The First Amendment to America's Constitution prohibits the imposition of person A's religion on person B. As part of an ongoing treasonous end run around the First Amendment, America's never-legally-elected President¹ George W. Bush has authorized his White House Gestapo to use taxpayers' money to overthrow State laws granting same-sex couples the right to be legally recognized as married to the partners of their choice, the same right the Bush Taliban endorses when it is demanded by opposite-sex couples.

Why? At first glance, the answer is obvious. The Christian Taliban's "bible," specifically the chapter called Leviticus, pronounces same-sex recreation a no-no, in depraved indifference to the reality that the prohibited actions are consensual and victimless. Bush in his infinite ignorance believes that his bible is nonfiction, even though it states unambiguously in fourteen places that the earth is as flat as a dinner plate.² To a religious dogmatist who can find even a single biblical passage to support his pet doctrine, it is irrelevant that other biblical passages refute it. Since the author of Leviticus 18:22, written between 621 and 612 BCE in the belief that he could force gay men to start breeding tithe-paying believers, wrote, "You're not to tup a man the way you tup a woman,"³ and the author of Leviticus 20:13, written in 434 BCE, added a death penalty, it does not matter to a theofascist that the spokesman Jeremiah (13:6) referred favorably to, "the male lover who means as much to you as your own breath." Similar references to homosexual relationships by bible authors who saw sexual preference as equivalent to preferring tennis to golf include 1 Samuel 20:41, 2 Samuel 1:26, and elsewhere.⁴ And the Book of Judith concludes with the story's heroine, following an

economically expedient marriage, spending the remainder of her life with an intimate female companion. Intentional mistranslations in English bibles conceal the passages' true meaning, but they are unambiguous in the original language.

The only basis for the Bush Taliban's homophobia is the two cited verses in Leviticus. The endorsement of verses in Leviticus simply because they are in Leviticus, and criminalization of their non-observance, is tantamount to a declaration that Leviticus is a part of Christian dogma that must be enforced on Christians and non-Christians alike. Yet in an intervening chapter between the sex taboos, Leviticus also prohibits the interbreeding of species, such as crossing horses and donkeys to produce mules, sowing a field with two different kinds of seed, or wearing a garment made of two different kinds of thread, such as cotton and polyester (19:19).

To be consistent, the Bush Taliban must either legalize same-sex marriage, or criminalize the breeding of mules. If they insist that Leviticus is valid and immutable, they must also criminalize the wearing of mixed-thread clothing, as well as the eating of pork (11:7), lobsters, shrimp, and oysters (11:10-12). Cheeseburgers are presumably legal for Christians, since the source of that Jewish ban is the Talmud that Christians do not recognize. And if the theofascists see the entire Jewish Torah as divine law, then they must legalize abortion and criminalize divorce. Genesis 2:7 makes clear that "the human became a breathing life form" when Yahweh "breathed into his nostrils the breath that is life." Since fetuses do not breathe, then according to Genesis they are not living persons and terminating them does not constitute homicide. The Torah permits divorce but, according to the Christian gospels, the Christians' figurehead did not (Mat. 19:6). But that same figurehead also demanded pure communism, and declared that no capitalist could enter his theocracy (Mark 10:25). If Jesus must be obeyed, then the entire Bush Gestapo must dispose of their wealth and become unemployed parasites living on charity.

The Christian Taliban cannot have it both ways. If their bible is the ultimate source of law, then fathers must be permitted to sell their daughters into sex-slavery (Exod. 21:7), and private property must be abolished. If homophobia is scripturally justified, then so is lobsterphobia. The Bushites cannot enforce some parts of Leviticus and not other parts—or could not if they were sane. But no one has ever accused theofascists of being sane.

- 1 Chris Hedges, *American Fascists: The Christian Right and the War on America*, p. 25.
- 2 William Harwood, *For This We Thank Our Führer*, “The Bible’s Fourteen Flat Earth Passages,” pp, 36-38.
- 3 All quotations are from *The Fully Translated Bible*.
- 4 Harwood, *op cit*, pp 55-63.

Less than Human: Is bachelorhood the next deadly sin in
conservative urban culture?

by

Ernest Dempsey

"Do you have a family to bring?" asks a gruff voice on phone.

"No," I reply, hoping he won't hang up.

"Then I won't rent to you!" Before I can say anything else I hear a dial tone. I sigh with frustration. This is yet another failed attempt at finding a place to rent. I realize it's because I am a bachelor but I can't seem to wrap my brain around the situation.

Two years ago after I graduated with a degree in geology, I got a job at Peshawar University (Pakistan), my alma mater. I was extremely excited by the idea of finally renting my own place in Peshawar. With a full time job, I could now afford to rent a flat or small house where I could pursue my writing without interruption. It wasn't long before I realized that you needed more than money to rent a place—you needed a family too.

A few days after I was employed, I met Wajid, a colleague of mine who had studied Environmental Science in college. Wajid was single too and lived in a bachelor hostel in Shaheen town, about a kilometer for our work.

I had asked Wajid advice on where to rent an apartment and I was surprised by his response. He said, "It's very hard for a bachelor to get a place to rent."

In most cities, being a bachelor simply means you are (usually) a young, single man. According to Wajid, however, here in Peshawar, the locals consider a bachelor to be a "seductive threat" to the females in the neighborhood. The fear behind the stereotype was understandable to a degree. In a conservative, sex-segregated society, where sexualities of people are strongly guarded, a young

male without a legal mate may have potential to be a sexual threat to the overly protected females. In a Muslim, Pakhtoon society, even the exchange of an amorous glance from a male to a female may incur a good deal of punishment by the elders of the family and pre-marital sex is an unthinkable crime punishable by death. It is practiced only in covert ways, mostly through prostitution.

Wajid's words stunned me. I could not come to terms with the thought that all bachelors should be discriminated against by one outrageous generalization. Besides, how could one guarantee the decency of a married man over a single one?

Despite my efforts, Wajid was right. Despite many attempts, it was impossible to rent a place. I was always asked if I were living alone or with a family and once I said I was single the response was always the same. I spent my first seven months in Peshawar in a tiny room at the Khyber Hostel—this was where Wajid had been living for four years. Bachelorhood turned out to be just one of the many problems I came across with when it came to renting. I learned it was customary for tenants to pay in advance at least 10,000 rupees (about \$165) as security deposit to the house owner in addition to the house rent, which usually amounts to about 4000 rupees (\$67) per month for a small house in the area of Shaheen Town. At the beginning of my career, I could not afford to pay this sum out of my 12000 rupees (\$200) monthly salary. I also was limited by trying to find a place in proximity to my work and Shaheen town was really the only place close enough to the institute.

When I finally moved to the hostel of a boarding school in the semi-rural area of Lala Zar Colony, I expected to find an apartment or house to rent there. Stereotypes *may not be very pervasive*; I thought rather foolishly and was once again proven wrong. Here, you were expected to bring female members of your family with you in order to be considered as a tenant. My bachelor friends and I began joking about getting married solely for the purpose of being able to rent a house. Despite hearing that things were the same here

as they were in Peshawar, I continued to call landlords with places for rent. The answer still always was a firm "no."

Here I was, losing hope about finding a place to rent while the shabby and noisy life of hostels kept interrupting my peace. At first, I had thought it was "generous" of people to even let bachelors live in hostels but I quickly had a change of heart.

In August 2006, Wajid and his roommates had moved from Khyber Hostel to a new hostel called the Speen Ghar House (literally 'White Mountain'.) It was located in a residential part of Shaheen Town. This proved to be a very wrong move.

"The neighborhood was very angry that the building was being used to house bachelors," Wajid told me at work one day. "They are holding town meetings to try and purge the neighborhood of bachelors."

This was disappointing news. If young students were coming to Peshawar in the hope of getting a degree and earning a living and were not allowed to get a house because they were single, it seemed that at the very least they had the right to live somewhere, no matter how compromised their living conditions. Afghan refugees living in Peshawar, however, were more lenient in their views about tenants in their neighborhood. They didn't mind much if a bachelor occupied the annexed portion of their house, as long as he remained well-behaved.

In time, the prejudice and hostility toward bachelors became even more heated. Several months after Wajid's relocation to Speen Ghar, head males of neighboring families started complaining to the local governing bodies about the bachelors. They accused the bachelors of making objectionable gestures at the women passing by them in the street. While most of these accusations were false, the case became worse for the residents of Speen Ghar when one resident was caught perched on the wall separating the hostel from its adjacent house. It was reported that he was allegedly spying on intimate acts through a neighbor's window. Because of this, the local prejudice against bachelors turned into fury. With the help of the local administrator of the residential sector and the police, the

hostel was locked up one afternoon when most of the students had left for their native towns for vacation. It was never to be reopened—leaving the bachelor's homeless.

The events were conveyed to me by Wajid whom I found drowsy and red-eyed when I greeted him at his office the following morning. 'What happened to you?' I asked, worried.

"I couldn't sleep the whole night," he told me. "Police raided our hostel and arrested nearly all the residents." I felt a mixed surge of anger and sorrow upon hearing this news. Wajid proceeded to tell me how the local administrator and police had harassed the bachelors. Wajid was spared when he showed the DSP (in charge of the illegal operation) his government service card. The other bachelors were not so lucky. They were violently pushed, jerked, and taken to the nearest police station where they were held under custody till morning. Two guys who dared ask what their crime were physically tortured so badly that the back of their shirts were stained with blood. Wajid wandered along the road helplessly all night, trying to contact people he knew to help his roommates get out of prison.

The police made the imprisoned bachelors sign a document that prohibited their residence at the hostel. The landlord of the hostel had also been arrested. All this happened without any legal authorization, except the order of the local administration backed by the anger and hostility of the local people. The humiliation and torture of the bachelors was intensified by the sad fact that several of the arrested students, who were staying in the hostel in the horribly sultry weather, could not attempt their written exam that was scheduled on 25th July.

The media and general public remained silent about the issue. The other bachelors and I were infuriated about the situation and the lack of coverage and public response to it.

This should be the shameful news story of every newspaper! I thought to myself. The next day, mulling over it, I called the office of *Aaj TV*, a TV channel that claims to be the primary source of current

events. They told me the news was two days old and refused to cover the story.

Upon release from the police custody, bachelors found themselves spread out in other bachelor hostels. The landlord of Speen Ghar filed a case of illegal arrest against police and harassment against the local administrator but the prejudice and hostility against the bachelors remains ignored. Bachelor hostels to this day in Peshawar are vulnerable to unfair treatment by local people and crooked administration at any moment. Everyday, I pass by the road leading to Speen Ghar and think of the injustice that occurred and hope that the youth of our future will have the opportunity to be treated fairly no matter what lifestyle they embrace.

WHY, SWEETIE?

by

Doug Johnson

I wanted it out in the open. No misunderstandings. —Raymond Carver

To Whom It May Concern:

Auntie Burns can't pay this bill. Her ass is frozen. I mean, her assets are frozen. She was so surprised to get the bill and asked how you found her at this house. You see, everything is a Christmas card to her even if she knits and worries about eating Wonder Bread and mayonnaise sandwiches. She thinks they will make her lose her girlish figure. Seeing her name on the envelope put her on concrete clouds. Oh, concrete clouds were Grandpa's invention. Whenever Premix had to wash out the cement trucks, the grey water would spill through our gutters. He'd tell us they were clouds and that all our dreams were in cement. He said it so many times we forget that you don't understand those grey clouds. He said we had to explain every word of it to strangers. That's why I'm writing this letter.

Sometimes Grandpa would dam up the clouds in our gutter and fix a spot on the curb. Other times he'd save up enough to patch the sidewalk. A few years back Auntie Burns broke her hip on one of those patches when she tripped. That's why she can't pay the bill. When Grandpa retired, they gave him the house instead of a gold watch. It was falling down anyway and the chipped teeth of the broken windows smiled at us every morning. The eave sagged and grinned at the joke the windows were telling. When Auntie Burns read the bill, she asked, "Sweetie, did my Jerome really do all those things? He was a good boy except for his

outbursts and that he couldn't tell the truth. I can't give you any reasons...," she trailed off, mumbling while she looked at the cowboy lampshade. Her voice rumbled like Lenny's front loader scraping the parking lot for the bottom of the pea-gravel pile. Forty years of cigar smoking does that to a person. She learned to smoke cigars on Grandpa's breaks. Her job was to take him lunch, so she learned quite a bit at Premix. Grandpa said smokers get more breaks and do less work. He would even pretend to hack once and a while just to take another fifteen minutes.

Looking at your bill in the glow of the lampshade she let out a growling whisper, "Yippee ki-yo!". Her yellow fingertips matched her vacant eyes in the glowing lasso. The lampshade was for Jerome on his tenth birthday. It was the only thing she got from Famous Fabrics.

People at Famous Fabrics asked her how she lived with the noise and gravel dust, but she would just wave her cigar and smile, "Everyone should be lucky enough to have concrete clouds..." winking through the thick black rims of her glasses. They were just reading glasses. She showed up with them one day in her pocket. Grandpa said they made her look smarter than her brother, so she kept them on. Her right eye crossed slightly toward her nose if you looked her straight in the face. Most people stayed just outside the cigar smoke rings she blew and didn't notice. Hacking from the cigar smoke, she would take another fifteen minutes and then clip the conversation short to go back to cutting out quilt pieces for little old ladies half her age.

The day you are billing Auntie for was the Friday after Thanksgiving when Famous Fabrics has one of their biggest days of the year. Auntie didn't mind working it because it put the boss in a good mood. She knew in a couple of weeks the Christmas bonus came and they would get off early from their shift. Jerome was twelve. Up until that time Jerome's temper stayed caged in the back lot at Premix. The rusted front loaders and orange diamonds that said "USE EXTREME CAUTION" were his playground. Auntie

had to work, so Grandpa let Jerome run around Premix and play. When he cut his forehead on the old front loader after falling off the tool-shed roof, nobody else was hurt. Auntie told the lady with the clipboard and the K-Mart power suit that Jerome had a fine home. She told her we would all be more careful. After that it was my job to pull the curtains every time a car drove up. Our place was on a back street behind Premix. We overlooked a park and an empty field. Strangers only found it if they were really looking.

It wasn't Jerome's fault. You have to understand these sand piles look like mountains to a kid, so climbing them would be natural. No harm done. There was this other time Jerome was playing in a sand pile and almost got mixed into Mrs. Flannery's driveway order. Grandpa saw him at the last second and dumped the load off the chute. He lost the load and snapped a rod on the truck. Grandpa had to pay for the damage out of his paycheck. Jerome smashed a mailbox the next day with a rock on the way to school. He still played in the sand piles, but Grandpa made him stick to the shadows after that so Jones, the foreman, didn't know. Jerome would play in the sand and gravel after dark. The swing shift made the plant look like a cross between a moon landing and a football field with all the mercury lights shining on the trucks. The neon logo would blink a red Premix logo on our bedroom mirror. Jerome would sneak back into bed in the middle of the night. Sometimes he made it in right before dawn-with sand covering his shoes. He made it impossible to sleep with all the grit in the sheets. I would have to drag a blanket into Auntie's bed and put out the cigar in her hand. She snored and kept her dinner plate in her lap after she burned too many holes in the mattress.

The morning of this bill, Jones, the foreman, came to the door holding a bloody T-shirt in his hand. With the hardhat barely containing his fist, he cornered me into giving up Jerome. Grandpa was so furious he left marks that time and ordered Jerome to never come by the back lot again. When the dust had settled, Auntie warmed a bowl of chicken and stars soup and set it on a T.V. tray for Jerome.

“Where were you last night, Sweetie?” The foreman had found a cat sliced open in the tool barn and some tools missing. The T-Shirt was a teenage size, and he had used it to try and get the stain out. He was mad because blood stains don’t come out of cement and he’d have to paint the whole floor. It came out of Grandpa’s paycheck. Jerome ignored Auntie’s question. I remember the Premix sign blinking like a flashing stop sign on his face.

To keep him out of trouble, Auntie convinced Curly down at the hardware store to let Jerome work there unloading trucks. He walked there after school and made some extra cash. It seemed fair that he put something back into Grandpa’s paycheck for the damages. Four years later when the school year started, kids stopped teasing Jerome about his clothes and how he smelled. Jerome still smelled, but after spending the summer at Curly’s working, kids just walked around his wide load. Being six foot seven and weighing 270 made a difference. Jerome had a lazy eye and still stared blank at any wall. Teachers let him sit in the back, and since he never talked much, they let him slide. Never a slave to fashion, Jerome’s hair was wild and long. Sometimes he’d pull it into a pony tail if he was working a lift. He needed glasses, and Auntie appeared with a pair of reading glasses from the drug store. The two of them put on quite the show in the grocery store. With vegetables as the audience, Auntie Burns waved her cigar and clucked at Jerome about taking pride in his appearance.

The first day Jerome got his paycheck she beamed with pride. “I’m so proud, Sweetie! How much did you make? Let Auntie count that for you for safe keeping. If you ever need anything, you let me know.” She put the cigar in her mouth and counted it by the light of the T.V. show. Tucking it in her bra under her left breast, she patted her smock and took a long drag.

When your bill came, she mumbled in her sleep, “I don’t know why you lied to me. Jerome, why did you give me 86 dollars? Curly told me he paid you 100 that first day...” She clutched the

bill like her Christmas cards. She liked Christmas because Grandpa would take her out to celebrate at the Little Dutch Inn off of Sixth and Lincoln. That year she showed up wearing a nice dress. Grandpa and I looked surprised. “Jerome gave Auntie an early Christmas present. What are you looking at?” she snapped.

Even with her keeping up appearances in front of Grandpa and the ladies at Famous Fabrics, Auntie worried more about Jerome. He started sneaking back into the house with sand on his shoes and more tools were disappearing from Premix storage.

After not sleeping well for two weeks, Auntie gently squeaked the bedroom door open and gargled, “Sweetie, what happened to your shoes? We don’t want Grandpa to have more taken out of his paycheck because tools are missing.” He just stared at the wall. He was too big to beat any more. She was really just worried that he would smash the T.V. like he had smashed the kitchen chair right after New Year’s Eve.

Jerome was like that. Blank stares. Blow up. Blank stares. Blow up. None of us could really predict when he was going to smash more furniture. She asked him because he was pacing more and more after she found more sand on his shoes. Even with his blank stare, she kept gently prodding him with chicken soup and stars.

He finally roared, “I can’t stand you spying on me!” He plopped down on his bed, laced up his work boots and started to stomp out of the house to cover Grandpa’s graveyard shift. Grandpa was lying in bed and the Vicodin wasn’t doing the trick for his back.

“Jerome! Don’t talk to your Auntie that way! Get me another beer before you go! Stick to the pit and the shadows! Don’t let Jones see you!”

Jerome had to cover Grandpa’s shifts to keep the money coming in.

“Sweetie, how about I make you on of those nice peanut butter sandwiches you like for lunch? I just don’t have more, until pay day. You understand. Now I’m going to leave the crust on the sandwich. I’m not going to spoil you the way Grandma spoiled your father. All that cutting the crust off the bread was a waste. It ruined him. It wasn’t your fault that he...” She rambled on in a baritone sing song story. Jerome slammed the front door so hard the door jamb splintered at the knob. Auntie never saw him again, and Jones came the next morning asking why the graveyard shift wasn’t covered.

Jerome wrote me from San Diego during basic about how he saw in the newspaper that Premix laid off sixty of their finest. His handwriting wasn’t too bad. It was true, and when Premix decided to carve another quarry out of Selah ridge off of I-82, they shut down the plant where we all grew up. They quit delivering mail after a couple of years and that’s really when Auntie started knitting and worrying about mayonnaise and Wonder Bread sandwiches.

I tried to tell her that day-old Wonder Bread is the same price, but she didn’t believe me. There we were arguing in the Safeway just like she used to do with Jerome. Gathering an audience of coupon cutters and frozen peas, our show went from Wonder Bread to where we live. “We can’t keep living there!” I finally screeched.

So right there in broad daylight, she lit a cigar in the front of the frozen peas. Taking a long drag and growling, “Why, Sweetie?” At this point the manager marched up to us wondering if sprinklers are going to be set off on our grocery cart. Auntie spun on him and before his bald head could turn another shade of red, she cut him off saying, “Why, Sweetie? Why can’t we smoke in here? Do you remember when Jerome Sr., my brother, was a baby the butcher smoked cigars in the store. We just thought it was extra pepper in the steaks when Mother unrolled them at home for dinner. Mother loved to go to the butcher to get her meat. She smacked her lips at

dinner and said it was worth the wait. Mother would buy these cuts of roast and lean way over the counter to pick the packages-her pearls dangling on his cigar as his forearm rested on the cash register. You know it was just Jerome and I. A year and a half after he was born, we all moved in with Aunt Mildred.”

The store manager was caught between being polite and disbelief. Auntie kept talking, waving the cigar for effect in the story and blinking through her thick black rims. She barreled on as if the manager was in the front row of her floor show. “Aunt Mildred was never an Auntie, like I’ve tried to be,” she confided. Her and Mother were night and day. Aunt Mildred was cold and never married. She only let us stay with her because Daddy went to Pearl Harbor. She kept making comments about the wrong number of months but I never understood what she meant. She treated my brother horribly and Mother somehow felt like she needed to make up for Aunt Mildred.” Auntie looked at the manager with magnified frog eyes and bragged, ”Daddy made it back and started on as a foreman at Premix. We moved here right after he got back from the war. ‘Concrete clouds!’ he would beam... waving widely at the little house and the quarry. He looked so smart in that hard hat. Mother just didn’t see the potential we had there in the company house. Leaving us just broke Daddy’s heart.”

Ashes spilling onto his tapping foot, the polite manager finally broke in, “You two are banned for life from this store.” “What?”

“If you leave now, I won’t press charges.” Knowing Auntie was about to protest with another life story, he squared his shoulders, crossed his arms and demanded Auntie empty her Famous Fabrics smock. She reached in and pulled out two cans of anchovies and a cream cheese box. Looking me dead in the eye, she replied, “Why would you put that in my smock, Sweetie?” The manager held out his hand and personally escorted us out of the store after Auntie put the fish and cheese in his palm.

So you see, we can't pay this bill. Jerome hasn't lived at this address in six years and his name is listed on the title. They stopped delivering mail here two years ago. You slipping it under the door doesn't count. Premix said Auntie could live here until she died. I showed her the bill. She looked at me through the yellow fog of her lamp and asked, "Why did we get the bill, Sweetie?" I tried to tell her to move but her only answer was, "Why, Sweetie?"

Sincerely,

CONTRIBUTORS

Magdalena Ball runs The Compulsive Reader <http://www.compulsivereader.com/html>. Her stories, poetry, reviews and articles have appeared in many printed anthologies and journals, and have won several awards. She is the author of 3 books: *The Art of Assessment* (nonfiction), *Quark Soup* (poetry), and *Sleep Before Evening* (a novel) which can be found here: <http://tinyurl.com/3crnk5>

Lo Galluccio currently resides in Cambridge, MA, after an eight year residency on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Her poetry chapbook "Hot Rain" came out on Singing Bone Press in 2003 and she's read at St. Mark's Poetry Project, Tapestry of Voices at Borders in Boston, The Mad Poet's Café in Warwick Rhode Island, among many other venues. Recently her poetry was featured on www.strangeroad.com and reviewed by www.litkicks.com. She's served as the Poetry Editor of the Alewife newspaper for several years and frequently reviews books for Ibbetson St. Press; among her favorites, Blood Cocoon by Hugh Fox and Licorice Daugher by Lyn Lifshin. A short memoir piece called, "The Ganesha Factor" was published by Heat City Literary Review in 2005. Galluccio was nominated for a Pushcart Prize for her poem Millennium in 2006 and in 2007 by Abramelin magazine for her poem, What I really Want. Lo's work as a vocal artist includes two solo CDs, "Being Visited" on the now defunct Knitting Factory label and "Spell on You." In 2008 a book-length prose-poem called "Sarasota VII" will be published by Cervena Barva Press. Lo holds a B.A. from Harvard College and also studied at the Berklee College of Music in Boston. www.myspace.com/lolagalluccio.

Doug Johnson is editor of Cave Moon Press a non-profit literary press bridging local and global issues through literary arts. In exploring

William Blake's ideas of blending poetry and image he stumbled upon photography as an integral part of the poem. Doug is published as a poet and appeared recently in Skive magazine with a short story. Doug lives in Yakima Washington and teaches English in the high school where Raymond Carver graduated. The sense of compressed place informs his photography, poems and stories. As a doctoral student in educational psychology Doug has also published articles in Educational Law as well as Psychological education of Hispanics. Cave Moon Press has produced its inaugural title about Federal Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas, "Dear Mr. Douglas: Letters and Poems discovering the life of W.O. Douglas" in an effort to promote justice all the way from Harvard to Yakima. His hobbies include riding Harley Davidson motorcycles, riding his bicycle and learning languages. He is married to an angel and has three kids. Photography, and writing are scribbled in the margins. Doug can be contacted at cavemoonpress@hotmail.com

Abdul Karim Khan (pen name: Ernest Dempsey) was born in Hangu, a small town in Pakistan. As a child, he enjoyed two things: The joyful company of his brother and Khan's best friend, Shais; and, making airy castles with lots of characters in his mind. These two things pervaded through his spirit so much that he has given up valuable scholarships to pursue them. At twelve, he began his career by writing detective stories, horror, thrillers, and whatnot). However, a career in writing held no bright prospects in his society. So he studied geology. But his literary spirit demanded more attention and he started studying classics, alongside writing. The Internet reached his hometown in 2003, whereupon he began submitting his work to literary ezines. In just the last year, he has seen publication of his poems, essays, short stories, and literary reviews. He has been published in audience literary journal, and other literary journals, as well as other magazines. His reviews appear in *The audience Review*, and other places. Email: dempsey87@yahoo.com.

M. Stefan Strozier lives in New York City. He is the founder of La Muse Venale Acting Troup <http://www.lamusevenale.org>. His plays *Guns, Shackles & Winter Coats*, *The Whales*, *The Tragedy of Abraham Lincoln*, and *The Green Game* were performed in lengthy runs, off-off Broadway, and in the Midtown International Theatre Festival. He has also directed five plays, professionally, and produced ten, all off-off Broadway, in diverse theaters and theater festivals. His stories, poems, non-fiction have been published in many online ezines. He has been published in print at *Gallery*, *War Heroes*, *Taj Mahal Review*, op-ed pages of the *Chicago Sun Times*, several poetry collections, self-published short story collection, *Sickness of the Young*, and, he was a journalist for his college newspaper. His former pen name is Mila Strictzer. He is also the co-founder of the ezine *audience* (www.worldaudience.org). His plays, books, and his collection of short stories and essays are available, print-on-demand, at his Web site: www.mstefanstrozier.org.

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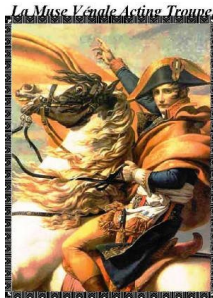
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