When Worlds Collide

Special Double Issue


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and WU Professor of Chemistry William is publishing in adult life. The easier children's access to the world of adults, the more we are subjecting them to marketplace pressure) and (the more we want our children to be gifted and excel in school, the more we expose them to the world of market competition.

In the most fundamental ways, adults create the world of children, partake of one another in healthy and disturbing ways. First, in

driven competition and unbridled desires of adults, actually to prevent children from gaining greater access to adult things. And the frustration that arises from a highly imperfect ability to protect children has been a cause of considerable anxiety in adult life. The easier children's access to the world of adults, the more we expose them to the world of market competition (the more we want our children to be gifted and excel in school, the more we are subjecting them to marketplace pressure) and unbridled desire through consumption (no audience is more targeted to buy things than children), the more anxiety we have created in our children. It cannot be said that this failure to protect children well is simply a sign that adults are hypocrites, although clearly adults are hypocrites in virtually everything we do. That, as the old folk might say, is the homage we pay morality: that it is at least worth preaching, even if we can't quite screw ourselves up to practicing it. This failure to protect children as well as we want to points to a basic contradiction in human life: the more freedom we demand, the more we enslave ourselves to what we have liberated in ourselves.

This issue features two book reviews related to children's books: children's poet Constance Levy reviews Anita Silvey's 100 Best Books for Children and WU Professor of Chemistry William E. Buhro and his assistant, Carolyn Jones Otten, review several well-known and well-regarded children's science books. Professor Margaret Finders interviews two leading scholars on the meaning of childhood. Also, for the first time, Belles Lettres is publishing a work of fiction: Suzanne Richardson, a graduate student in my Writing for Children and Young Adults class, produced an effective story, "The Legend of the Birdman," probably for a junior high audience, that I thought deserved some exposure. Please expect more children's oriented publications from the Center in the not-too-distant future. On the adult side, we have local attorney Michael Kahn, a member of the Center for the Humanities Advisory Board, discussing the history of obscenity law in the United States. Washington University Assistant Dean Jami Ake reviews several recent works that deal with rape. Finally, I have the first portion of a two-part essay about exploitation and pornography in America.

Additional pieces in this issue include WU Associate Professor of History Max J. Okenfuss's review of Marshall T. Poe's The Russian Moment in World History; WU Associate Professor and Director of Film Studies Jeff Smith's review of Joe Eszterhas's Hollywood Animal: A Memoir; an interview with biographer Geoffrey C. Ward about his new book on boxer Jack Johnson, based, in part, on Ken Burns's new documentary for which I was a consultant; and, finally, WU Associate Professor of Jewish, Islamic, and Near Eastern Studies Nancy Berg's address on the life of Isaac Bashevis Singer that she delivered at the Schlaffy Branch of the St. Louis Public Library. Both Professors Smith and Berg are members of the Center for the Humanities Advisory Board. I thank all of our contributors. Please enjoy and don't forget to write. Your friendly, neighborhood humanists want to hear from you.
Learning About What Children Should Read
And Maybe What You Should, too


What chutzpah, you might declare, for someone (even an expert) to pick only 100 titles from the past 100 years of children’s literature and call it 100 Best Books for Children. But suppose that expert, here in the person of Anita Silvey, feels strongly that new developments in the field of publishing and book selling warrant such an effort. Indeed, the children’s book industry has mushroomed, with countless books of all types for all ages being published each year. Such an indiscriminate abundance can make book shopping a time-consuming chore for those who want to do it right. As discussed in Belles Lettres last year (May/June 2003 — “A Canon for Children’s Literature” and “Children’s Literature”) the task of choosing wisely is daunting. To assist us in making these important choices, Anita Silvey has compiled this guide, 100 Best Books for Children, a selection and discussion of enduring children’s books published from 1902 to 2002 by American publishers.

Former editor of the The Horn Book Magazine (known as the “bible of children’s literature”), reviewer, publisher, and a recognized expert in the field of children’s books, Silvey is also the editor of The Essential Guide to Children’s Books and Their Creators, a more extensive resource containing thousands of titles. Here she has trimmed her list and added additional information to create a very readable book that will entertain as well as enlighten while divulging all sorts of pertinent information that you didn’t know you were dying to know. Going behind the scenes, often right to the editor’s desk, she gives us glimpses of the publishing process and the lives of the authors and illustrators. We read of some amazing coincidences and stories of creative brilliance, courage, luck, and adventure in the world of those who bring us children’s books. Do editors matter? I have had people ask me that question. This book will leave little doubt in anyone’s mind of their important role. All this is condensed into thoughtful, rich essays on each selection.

Speaking to us from the heart in her introduction to 100 Best Books for Children Anita Silvey cites three real life scenes as examples of the powerful connection between children and books. One tells of a young girl who loved Goodnight Moon so much she tried to climb into it. Another of a 10-year-old boy who is bored with books until he discovers Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone and then intensely reads it plus four other Potter volumes. The third is of a child who asked a parent to read Harry the Dirty Dog for the twenty-sixth time in one day.

Silvey stresses the impact books have on a child’s intellectual development and adds: “Reading books to and with children is the single most important thing a parent, grandparent, or significant adult can do.” There are books in our heritage, she states that every child should know, and it is of the utmost importance that they reach adulthood with this literary heritage that is due them in youth. Silvey writes: “The canon of children’s books remains the best gift we could ever give our children.”

To this end Anita Silvey has produced a thoughtful, convenient, entertaining guide in 100 Best Books for Children.

It is not too surprising, considering her 35 years deeply involved in children’s literature, to learn from the introduction of 100 Best Books that she has read 125,000 children’s books and re-read many to prepare this book. In addition she conducted personal interviews with writers, illustrators, editors, publishers, librarians, teachers, and professionals in the field, parents, children and other lovers of children’s books. She employed many printed guides including “Best” lists to assist her selection. The process required three years and much frustration in deciding which of the fine books had to be left out. Among those cut were a number of her favorites, but she followed a guideline of only one book per author. However, Silvey does include a list in the back of the book with many more titles for additional reading.

Anita Silvey sees three stories for every book. There is, she tells us, “...the one the book tells, the one behind the book, and the story of what happens when a child or family reads the book.” Some of the fun of reading 100 Best Books comes with the fascinating stories behind the book such as the story she tells of Dr. Seuss (Theodor Geisel’s pen name) who was on his way home to burn his first manuscript after 27 rejections. He happened to meet an old college classmate who had just become children’s editor at Vanguard Press and was looking for manuscripts. That was how And to Think that I Saw It on Mulberry Street was accepted for publication. Those were the days when editors made the final decisions; now, as Silvey points out, they must bring it to committee for approval.

It is difficult not to give away too much in this review, but there are so many more stories to tell. Robert McCloskey, author...
and illustrator of *Make Way for Ducklings* kept ducks in his bathtub to be sure his drawings and texts were authentic. Gary Paulsen, author of *Hatchet*, wanted to experience the events he wrote about in the book, including eating raw turtle eggs. Two generations of children would have been without their beloved *Curious George* books if the creators, Hans and Margret Rey, German Jews living in Paris, had not escaped when the Nazis invaded that city in 1940. In dramatic and creative fashion, Hans scrounged up some bicycle parts and assembled two makeshift bicycles. Carrying with them only a few book manuscripts and their winter coats they evaded capture and pedaled to Marseille where they were able to secure passage on a boat to Lisbon and eventually on to America.

A peek behind the curtain of Newbery Award procedure and a bit of gossip is included in the essay on *Charlotte’s Web*, which was published in 1952 and is one of my own favorite children’s books. Its editor, Ursula Nordstrom, claimed it needed not a word of alteration when she received it other than the change of a chapter title. I often wondered why it did not receive the Newbery Award, rather than an honorable mention. Silvey says that many believe one of the judges (mentioned by name in the essay) played a significant role in denying *Charlotte’s Web* the medal because of her disapproval of author E.B. White’s inclusion of such heavy subjects as death and loss. The judge wrote in a review that she found it “hard to take from so masterful a hand.” In 1952 when the book was published there was controversy over those “heavy” portions that *Charlotte’s Web* handles so well with sensitivity and honesty. Publishers now know that children can handle such subjects, and they are accepted when properly done.

*100 Best Books* succeeds in accomplishing its stated goals on many levels, including the organization of the chosen titles. Silvey went about this difficult task in a thoughtful and efficient way, finally deciding to include six categories of books beginning with Board Books (from birth to age two), with age ranges for each category, some ages overlapping as such delineations are not naturally precise; for example, Picture Books are suggested for ages two to eight with the next category, Books for Beginning Readers, suggested for five to seven years. Books for Young Readers are listed for ages seven to nine, Books for Middle Readers suggest ages eight to 11, and Books for Older Readers for 11 and 12 years. She notes that even these are not static numbers; children differ as to their readiness and interest levels at any age and adults should take that into consideration. Most of the chosen books have already stood the test of time and are still in print and read today, but Silvey also includes some more recent books that seem poised to become classics. She has even gone so far as to recommend a specific edition when a book has had more than one.

Of course, there is personal judgment involved at the end of all the deliberations and research, but I can’t imagine anyone more qualified to make the decisions. I think she has done it with clarity, care, and a very readable style. If you have any interest in the subject you won’t be bored for a minute, and you just might not want to put it down. In the list of additional books provided in the back you will probably find, as I did, some favorites not included in the 100. As Anita Silvey suggests, this book presents a core of fine books with which children can achieve a rich cultural literacy and which will whet their appetites for more of the best. Quoting poet Walter de la Mare she repeats, “Only the rarest kind of best in anything can be good enough for the young.” *100 Best Books* helps caring adults make those best choices for children and, as Anita Silvey suggests, “I truly believe... *100 Best Books* encourages the reading of hundreds more.”
Today’s science books for children have undergone a remarkable evolution since the genre’s introduction in the 1940s, when, according to children’s book historian Leonard Marcus, they more closely resembled “grim government publications” than typical bedtime stories. These days, many criteria apply to the writing of a successful children’s science book, such as a substantial science content, support of generalizations by facts, care to avoid oversimplification, accessible and logical presentation, compatible illustrations, and freedom from gender, socioeconomic, and ethnic bias. Arguably, the most important criterion for rating a science book for children is the presentation of up-to-date subjects and information. Additionally, there is at least one important intangible; the book should draw young readers into the subject matter and incite in them a thirst to learn more.

The four books reviewed here are a sampling from a list of 18 or so “top-ten” science books for children, as compiled from librarians from the Berkeley, CA, Public Library, the University of Wisconsin, and the Bank Street College of Education.


A Drop of Water presents stunningly beautiful photographs of one of the world’s most abundant molecules—water. Wick investigates fundamental principles of physical science such as surface tension, adhesion, molecular motion, and phase changes by capturing water in the act. Wick’s camera lens “freeze-frames” aqueous events in time and also functions as a magnifying glass to give readers a close-up view of what is happening. The color scheme of blue, white, glassy, and metallic chosen in the photographs reinforces the wet, cold, and reflective properties of water in its various forms. For better or for worse, one can almost hear the kitchen sink dripping with the book in hand.

A Drop of Water teaches children an investigative approach to a substance of everyday familiarity. The book encourages readers to perform scientific experiments using water and provides examples that focus on familiar situations that children have noticed before, but describes them in scientific terms. The non-exotic subject matter helps to emphasize to the reader that science is around us all the time.

A Drop of Water describes different behaviors of water and analyzes them to demonstrate specific scientific phenomena. But the book is more than just a “how to” collection of experiments—it can stand alone as a descriptive teaching tool without one even turning on the tap. The photographs will appeal to a wide audience; both a seasoned scientist and a child who has not yet learned to read will marvel at their beauty. A section at the back of the book offers the hands-on learner the detailed instructions to carry out experiments described in the main text. Refreshingly, these sections pose questions to children that they can answer as experimenters. However, the book is careful not to spoil the fun by giving the answers away. Through this approach, A Drop of Water challenges kids to perform experiments to test out ideas and teaches them that they have the ability to answer scientific questions for themselves.


This is an exploratory book that covers the major sensory organs of different animals from around the world. Jenkins and Page pose their “what do you do . . .?” question in each section and tease readers with six sets of anatomical features—one of eyes, one of ears, one of noses, one of feet, one of tails, and one of mouths—peeking out from all sides of a page. But wait! Why is there a leg on the ears page? Read on and learn that the leg belongs to a cricket, and that crickets actually “listen” with their knees. Jenkins’ trademark cut-paper-collage animals convey a sense of texture, color, and shape that are reminiscent of children’s own construction-paper creations, with bits of cotton and other materials that simulate fur, feathers, and scales. Jenkins and Page choose a representative sample of the animals of the world, ranging from a water strider and a chimpanzee, to the more exotic platypus, horned lizard, and bush baby.
The main text of the book is simple and intended for young children. The pages are dominated by close-ups of a featured limb or organ, with the remainder of the animal strategically hidden from view. “What does that tail belong to?”, one wonders. Turn the page and the identity of the animal, often shown cavorting in its own habitat, is revealed. The book is designed to grow with the child; the last four pages are composed of paragraphs for more mature readers that contain all the important animal “stats”: height, weight, continent of origin, habitat, preferred menus and eating techniques, and physical defense methods. The given physical dimensions of the animals allow readers to make mental comparisons about relative sizes of the various creatures, with occasional references to humans for emphasis.

The book uses sophisticated descriptions of some of the animals’ behavior, explicating for children concepts of physics, such as the platypus using its bill to detect electrical impulses of prey, bats emitting ultrasonic signals that echo off cave walls to aid navigation in the dark, and crickets serving as primitive temperature thermometers (based on the number of times they chirp per minute). What Do You Do With a Tail Like This? demonstrates that it is a science book, and not just a cute fuzzy animal book, by accurately describing how animals kill others for food and ward off other animals to ensure their own survival. It also identifies the chimpanzee as human’s closest relative, teaching the young child and reminding adults that we, too, are animals and possess behaviors that date back to our more primitive origins. This idea is also an excellent lead into future discussions of evolution.

What Do You Do With a Tail Like This? is successful because it introduces children to ideas that pique their curiosity and then provides them with information to help answer their questions.


This gripping tale is just gory enough to mesmerize most children in the target age group and many adults as well. Fleishman recounts the 1848 story of a terrible construction accident, a massive brain trauma, and a miraculous complete recovery. Or was it? The story is used as an effective vehicle to introduce several scientific and medical developments of the time and thereafter. This is a serious book for children, written with a full vocabulary and addressing complex issues. Yet it is accessible and captivating and unlikely to be relinquished until read.

In Cavendish, Vermont, 156 years ago, Phineas Gage is the foreman of a track-construction crew working for the Rutland & Burlington Railroad. A momentary lapse while setting an explosive charge results in the propulsion of Gage’s spear-like tamping iron through his left cheek, behind his left eye, and out the top-center of his skull just behind his forehead. The 4-foot, 13.5-pound tamping iron clangs down about 30 feet away. Surprisingly, Gage remains conscious and continues chatting with his men as they cart him to the doctor. After a 10-week convalescence, Gage appears to have made a full physical recovery, and he attempts to return to work a few months later.

However, as his doctor notes, “Gage is no longer Gage.” His personality is dramatically and permanently altered, by so much that his employers are compelled to fire him. Whereas the pre-injury Gage was a “most-efficient and capable foreman” and “good with his men,” the new Gage is impulsive, unpredictable, irresponsible, nasty, and profane. He is physically able, and his motor, logical, and analytical-reasoning skills are intact. He has no impairment of speech, learning, or memory. But, he has acquired a tendency to irrational, risk-all decision making, and can no longer process emotion normally, which has deprived him of his social abilities. Gage’s post-injury personality changes are now recognized as common symptoms of a specific type of frontal-cortex injury, and the Gage story has become a well-known textbook example.

Cleverly interwoven with the story are introductions to numerous relevant scientific and medical theories, concepts, and discoveries. These include the antiquated theory of bodily humors, microscopy, biological cells, bacteria, germ theory, anesthesia, the anatomy of the brain and nervous system, epilepsy, and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI). The author also introduces young readers to scientific controversy in the differing viewpoints of brain organization held by the “Whole-Brainers” and the “Localizers” (phrenologists). These discussions add much value and interest to the book.

The images and diagrams are generally helpful and abundant. However, there are some deficiencies in the use of such figures and in their captioning. An old medical illustration of the four bodily humors is included, in which the humors are labeled differently in the illustration than in the text, without clarification. An intricate discussion of brain anatomy is greatly aided by a nearby diagram, yet the diagram is not explicitly referred to. A corresponding description of dendrites, axons, and synapses lacks a diagram that explicitly depicts and identifies synapses. The MRI figures are presented in beautiful color, with no explanation of the meaning of the color. Fortunately, these are relatively minor issues that do not severely detract from readability.

Fleishman has used the compelling story of Phineas Gage to frame much valuable educational content. The book is well pitched for the 9–12-year age group but will entertain adults as well, and would seem an ideal choice for children and adults to read together. Intrigued adults might also wish to read the more scholarly treatment by Malcolm MacMillan (An Odd Kind of Fame: Stories of Phineas Gage, Bradford, 2000), which is an important source for this work.
This book highlights the activities of six persons engaged in entomology at various levels: a university professor, a teacher, a fifth-grade student, a forensic entomologist, an insect handler for Hollywood movies, and a research scientist working at the Smithsonian Institution. The professional entomologists are accorded the greatest coverage, and their early fascinations with insects and career paths into entomology are profiled. One surmises from the book's structure and emphases that Jackson aims to introduce young readers to interesting career opportunities in entomology while providing some basic education about insects.

Unfortunately, the author's success in achieving these goals varies significantly from profile to profile. The sections describing the forensic and Smithsonian Institution entomologists are the strongest, containing engaging career descriptions and compelling insect information a child would not gain from an elementary textbook. However, the remaining sections are significantly weaker, suffer from lack of clarity and factual inaccuracies, and are thus of limited value to young readers.

Most egregious is the profile of a professor at a major research university, which is placed first in the book. The children are informed that the professor, a self-identified insect ambassador, hosts an annual "Bug Bowl" featuring a cricket-spitting contest and cockroach races, adorns himself in insect-related costumes while lecturing to his undergraduate students, serves his students "Caterpillar Crunch" and "Chocolate Chirpy Chip Cookies," and regales his students with insect poems, stories, and songs. As justification for the cricket-spitting contest, in which humans spit crickets in a distance competition, the professor declares that it attracts newspaper and television reporters. Young readers are not informed if the professor engages in any real scholarship or serious teaching, and thus are presented a very distorted model—indeed a regrettable caricature—of an academic career.

Equally distressing are the colloquialisms and incomplete, ambiguous discussions presented to the children. The professor states, "Insects have been given a bad rap." The children also read that the professor "believes bugs deserve a break." What precise meanings are young readers to take from such statements? After learning that grasshoppers can jump distances 10 times their height and 20 times their length, the children are asked to imagine what the human high-jump and long-jump records would be if humans could jump like grasshoppers. The analogy is attractive, yet incomplete because these hypothetical human-record values are not explicitly given and compared to the actual human records for context. Few readers in the target age group are likely to comprehend and fully appreciate this analogy without additional guidance. The children subsequently learn from the professor that, "Insects are extremely creative," as evidenced by their various camouflage strategies, ability to mimic dangerous animals, and other defense mechanisms. However, the children are not informed that this apparent creativity is a feature of the natural-selection process by which the insects acquired their traits, and not the insects themselves. These examples typify some of the defects in the weaker sections of the book.

There are also errors in fact. The children read that insects have lived on the earth for 350 million years, whereas humans have for only 10,000 years. However, the current research consensus indicates that hominids evolved about 5 million years ago, and modern humans emerged about 120,000 years ago. This unfortunate timeline mistake is repeated on the dust cover and in the publisher's book description. The young readers are also informed in a figure caption mistake that the firefly's light is produced by a chemical reaction that generates no heat. In fact, the chemical light generation is only 88 percent efficient, which is remarkably high, but 12 percent of the chemical energy is released as heat. While the context suggests these errors may have derived from the professor's interview, the author is responsible for basic fact checking.

The value of The Bug Scientists is severely damaged by imprecision, factual errors, and some distinctly poor choices in the entomologists profiled. The approach taken by the author has produced a work that is part science education, part career information, and part public-relations puffery. Except for the two strong sections noted above, the combination is unsuccessful and disappointing.

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1 "And Out Went the Whales" by Eric Nagourney, Section F; Column 1; New York Times, December 16, 2003. Late edition - Final
In a recent *Belles Lettres* article, Gerald Early notes that children’s literature is hard to define, poorly understood, and frequently underestimated. In “What Is Children’s Literature?” he notes that the question of just what constitutes “children’s literature” seems blurrier than ever. Both of you have been working with that stage of life we call “childhood.” And I think that you would claim that childhood, like children’s literature, is hard to define, poorly understood, and frequently underestimated. Your work addresses the cultural construction of childhood. Starting with something as simple as toys, children’s books, animated videos, can you briefly explain what is most often taken as a given when we talk about children and childhood?

**Cynthia Lewis:** Through the work of historians such as Philip Aries and anthropologists such as Joseph Tobin we have replaced the notion of childhood as something natural, universal, and ahistoric with the idea that what is taken-for-granted about childhood actually varies tremendously across history and across and even within cultures. We can think of toys and literature or popular culture produced for children as both reflecting adult ideas of what children are like and as performing ideas of childhood that children reject or take up as part of creating and naming their own identities. There are an incredible number of ideas of what is “true” childhood or of what childhood might like that circulate in American culture, ideas that are often in fact at odds with one another. We can see these in toys, books, and popular media culture. For example, in *Little Red Riding Hood*, we see the image of childhood as innocence but also as vulnerable and in need of protection, whereas in *Where the Wild Things Are*, by Maurice Sendak, we see childhood as a kind of wildness or lack of civilization that is tamed through imposed means such as education and “natural” matters of maturation and development. Childhood is sometimes understood through an idealization of what adults have lost, a kind of naturalness or closeness to nature. Consider *The Polar Express*, by Chris Van Allsburg, for example. This is Rousseau’s *Emile*, a more vital version of the innocent child. This child is in many ways similar to Piaget’s child. They both are possessed of natural reason and developmental processes that will assure a strong, rational course of maturation if only provided with the right kind of environment. These children are the promise of the future.

At other times childhood is a force of peril, something that is endangering our future, a fact that we signal as we bemoan “Kids these days” and rhapsodize about how much better things were in our own childhoods. Our discussions of childhood become further complicated when we realize that these ideas are not applied evenly to all children. Coming from the dominant culture, there is often a distinction made between “our children” and “other children.” Here, as Buckingham, Patton, and others have shown, there is often a notion of contagion, of good childhoods imperiled by other, “improper” childhoods. These often represent ideas of children who possess “adult” knowledge or desires and prey upon or corrupt otherwise innocent or virtuous children.

One thing all these models share in common is that childhood is conceived of as a time and way of being that is separate and distinct from, and in many cases “other” to adulthood. More recently, we’ve seen models emerging that portray children as having their own agency, as savvy readers of culture, as sharing many of the same desires and engaging many of the same mechanisms as adults. This perspective is present in some of the recent work in critical psychoanalysis and in cultural studies perspectives on childhood. A good example is Tobin’s new book, *Pikachu’s Global Adventure: The Rise and Fall of Pokemon*.

**How does one define childhood? In spite of this deceptively familiar terrain, childhood defies simple definition. What is raised to visibility that was previously taken for granted, when we begin to examine the meaning of “childhood” as a construct?**

**Cynthia Lewis:** Like race, gender, or sexuality, childhood is an identity category, and like these other identity categories, it is something that its objects first have pressed upon them and that they then, in many different ways, come to make their own. In saying this, we are not, of course, denying that there are biological realities in infant and toddler development, just like there are biological realities as we age throughout our lives. But we do believe that the meanings that are read onto the eras of our lives are socially constructed. To argue that we use childhood
as a kind of blank screen onto which adults project multiple meanings makes it possible to ask questions differently. Rather than asking for example, “Why or how is childhood different than adulthood?” we can ask, “Why do we say that childhood is different than adulthood?” This opens up the possibility of exploring how economic, religious, and cultural factors came together in given moments and locales in defining childhood. It also moves us from thinking about “childhood” to “childhoods” across time but also across place in any given time.

What led you each to this work of examining childhood?

Gail Boldt: I taught elementary school in Honolulu for seven years. During most of this time, I was also working on my Ph.D. in Curriculum Studies at the University of Hawai‘i. My initial interest was in feminist pedagogy, but after reading Judith Butler’s Gender Trouble (1990) and Bodies that Matter (1993), my interests shifted to understanding children’s performances of gender and sexuality in elementary classrooms. This kind of work assumes that perspective on gender and sexuality is socially constituted. I developed most of the work in the context of conferences and publications organized by an international group of early childhood scholars called Reconceptualizing Early Childhood Research, Theory, and Practice. This group frames early childhood from a childhood studies perspective, and my Ph.D. advisor, Joe Tobin, is a founding member of the group.

CL: I came to this work through my teaching of a graduate course called “Reading Race and Gender in Children’s and Young Adult Literature.” As I prepared to teach the course, I read work by Perry Nodelman that historicizes constructions of childhood and challenges monolithic assumptions about children as naïve, innocent, wild, etc. At the same time, I read Carmen Luke’s post-structural critique of the Western ahistoricized construction of childhood and Barrie Thorne’s work on the sociology of childhood. All of this led me to understand children’s literature in terms of the child it envisions and textually inscribes and this changed my teaching of children’s literature.

Cynthia, as a literacy researcher, recently you have been working internationally. In what ways has international collaborative work shaped your understanding of childhood?

CL: I spent a month last summer as a research consultant for the Center for Research on Pedagogy and Practice at the National Institute of Education in Singapore. This experience helped me to see firsthand that childhood and adolescence are constructed categories shaped by context, culture, and history. The research I was involved with there was related to adolescents, so I’ll focus on that. Here in the U.S., as you have noted in your work, we tend to construct adolescents as out of control, resistant of adults, and seeking independence. As you have pointed out, this version of adolescence naturalizes middle class white adolescence, a particular version of adolescence that depends on having free time and disposable income, for instance.

Similarly, particular conditions and contexts shape a particular version of adolescence in Singapore as well. The social control built into the political system, the highly streamed school system, the control of adolescent bodies (school uniforms, for instance), the close watch and rigorous expectations of parents, the high-tech economy demanding high degrees of technological knowledge, the fact that school meets on Saturdays … all of these factors result in a very different construction of adolescence. Adolescents are not assumed to be out of control, hormonally or otherwise. They are constructed as connected to their families. Schoolwork demands much of their time. They simply don’t have the free time that middle class kids in the U.S. have. They tend not to spend the hours chatting online or watching TV that U.S. kids spend. That said, they find their own ways to communicate with peers and enjoy their interests in popular culture. For instance the use of short messaging (sms) on cell phones is widespread, perhaps because it is a form of communication that can happen on-the-fly between appointments and obligations, on buses, etc.

Of course, here I am constructing the monolithic Singaporean adolescent, and that, too, is a construction. The three main ethnic groups in Singapore are Chinese, Indian, and Malay and each group has religious and cultural practices that shape constructions of childhood and adolescence. One study I worked on that did involve young children compared the home and school literacies of Malay children. The home literacies of these children were very much shaped by their religious Islamic studies, practices which were not carried over to school. So, the way that the category of child or adolescent is constructed is very context-dependent.

The current structure of education in the U.S. absolutely depends upon the assumption that we do not need to gain children’s consent for subjecting them to curricular interventions eight hours each day, because they have no legitimate perspectives on what they might need.

The fields of psychology, education, social work, and juvenile justice among others all create policies and practices designed to support children’s development. Can you share how common-sense ideas about children may have helped to keep in place a range of policies and actions in schools and community organizations?

CL: Perhaps the most blatant example is that simply by positing childhood as a phase that is incomplete, adults are positioned as necessary experts in determining what is necessary and right for children. Because children’s perspectives are viewed as partial and immature, children are positioned as the legitimate objects of supervision and intervention, while adults are positioned as experts in what is best for children. Even when they express considerable distress about the ways they are being represented or the things they are supposed to do, their perspectives are often ignored with the explanation that, “It is for their own good.” The current structure of education in the U.S. absolutely depends upon the assumption that we do not need to gain children’s
consent for subjecting them to curricular interventions eight hours each day, because they have no legitimate perspectives on what they might need. It amazes us that when we ask our teacher education students to assess the effectiveness of a lesson they have taught or to plan a way to work with a particular student, they so rarely think to ask the children, let alone be influenced by what the children have to say. We also see this in adults’ conversations about media and books; we decide what is “good” or “bad” for children without ever asking children for their opinions or inquiring into the ways that they receive these materials.

Both of you work in education. So I’d like to talk about some of the specific projects you have been involved with and their implications for teachers, parents, and community members.

GMB: Currently I’m completing a manuscript (and I hope to shift soon to a book on the same topic) that starts from the assumption that in many ways, child and adult subjectivity are fundamentally the same. Working from a narrative of a child who was resistant to the demand that he learn to read, I ask the question of what his resistance might tell us about literacy as it is structured in school and society. In other words, I start from the premise that he might be right in certain ways to resist the demand that he learn to read.

CL: My work focuses on early and late adolescents, but as you have written about in your own work, adolescence is as much a constructed category as is childhood. The question I always ask myself is who is the adolescent that is being hailed or addressed by any social (including pedagogical) practice. For instance, I’ve been studying representations of youth identity and popular culture that circulated in a long-term teacher and researcher study group focusing on the reading and teaching of multicultural literature in a rural middle school setting. These representations are important to unpack because the way that teachers of adolescents envision their students’ identities and cultures relative to that of other adolescents is fundamental to how they interact with their students, choose texts to share with them, and raise issues relevant to them. So, whether they construct adolescents as naïve, dangerous, savvy, in need of protection, etc. has everything to do with what books they are willing to share with their students. This is just one example, but there are ways in which all the research and teaching I do are shaped by constructions of childhood and/or adolescence.

Can you elaborate a bit on the struggles you faced as an elementary school teacher committed to challenging sexism and gender inequity by raising the consciousness of your students?

GMB: I had a naïve idea that if children just knew better, if I simply introduced them to notions of gender equality, for example, that they would adopt these stances as their own. In other
words, I conceptualized it as a matter of better education. What I realized was that like adults, children use the cache afforded by notions of “what is normal for boys and for girls” to claim privileges. Both the boys and the girls in my classroom staked out positions for themselves by claiming that they were doing what was normal to them for their gender. I also realized, however, that in positioning myself as the “enlightened one,” I was claiming that my own relationships with the children were unproblematic. For one thing, I was ignoring all the times that I too used gender to get the kids to do things or to explain to myself what was happening in the classroom. It also helped me to ignore all the ways that my own position of “adult” in the classroom created problems for the children. In other words, to be the enlightened gender queen set me up in a heroic position, as the one who would save them from a lifetime of oppression or being oppressors, when in reality privileges shifted across all sorts of identity categories and it was often the case that as “adult” and “teacher,” I was the one who was causing the most trouble.

It is critical to see that there are multiple childhoods and that what we pose as best for some children is often at the cost of other children.

Can you give us some examples of how an understanding of childhood as socially constructed has shaped research in early childhood?

GMB: This research is really broad ranging. There is research into discourses of child development for example and also public policy related to children and families. There is research based in childcare, preschool, and elementary school. Then there is the material that explores conceptions of childhood. In May I chaired the Reconceptualizing Early Childhood conference, which was held in Oslo, Norway. We had sessions that dealt with discourses of early childhood in immigration, language, conceptions of quality day care, ideas of childhood competencies, the gendered history of childcare, national policy in numerous countries, poverty, welfare, research methodology, psychoanalysis, race, teacher education, play and curriculum, post-colonialism, special education, and much more. The childhood studies perspective, as these topics demonstrate, move childhood out of naturalized questions of, for example, “best practice,” and place it firmly in the arena of politics. At the same time, of course, we are ourselves early childhood teachers, caregivers, and parents, and share a passion for the quality of children’s lives. The next Reconceptualizing conference, by the way, will be held in Madison, Wisconsin, in October of 2005 and the conference theme will be “The Language(s) of Childhood.”

Cynthia, how do common-sense views of children play out in children’s literature, young adult literature, and the media and how do children play with such views?

CL: I may have already answered this question, but I’ll answer it in another way by referring to another study this time. In studying 5th and 6th graders’ responses to literature, I found that the kids were very savvy about the “child” or “adolescent” that was inscribed in the literature they read. They understood and comprehended about the fact that children’s book most always have happy, or at least uplifting, endings. They understood also that feminist teachers (and researchers like me) wanted them to see through the manipulation of series books that place females in subservient or precarious positions. When it came to the series books read most often by girls, the boys would deride their predictability and the girls’ willingness to be duped by them. This put the boys in good stead with the teacher who also found the books to be worthless. The girls, however, had the formulas down. They would recite the boy-saves-girl-from-dangerous-boy scenario but then talk about their desire for the books in terms of their complex identifications, the ways in which the books sustained them, and the things they learned from the texts. The boys used horror stories in similar fashion, animating their readings with spontaneous dramatic interpretations and figuring out the versions of masculinity available to them. Kids (and all the rest of us) use popular culture at least as much as it uses us, I’d say. The fact that horror and romance series books are created through an economy that benefits from the production of particular versions of gender does not diminish the generative improvisation and dialogic complexity that kids experience when they interact with the texts and with each other.

And finally, what advice might you give us as policy makers (whether we are making policy in the federal government or just in our own homes) as we will likely continue to be bombarded with images of children as innocent, naïve, or malevolent?

CL: I suppose the simplest answer I can give to that is to begin with the assumption that it is unethical to adopt a stance of “I am doing what is best for children.” We always have to ask the question, “What child are you talking about?” It is critical to see that there are multiple childhoods and that what we pose as best for some children is often at the cost of other children. I think it is incredibly important to acknowledge that we sometimes mistake, willfully or with good intentions, what is really best for ourselves with what is best for children. I think it is important to assume that we need to show as much respect to children’s perspectives as we would to those of an adult colleague. We need to be as careful, self-critical, and humble in making decisions for children as we would in making decisions for other adults. Of course, this all assumes that we commit ourselves to talking to children and to learning from them.

Interviewed by Margaret Finders, Associate Professor and Director of Teacher Education in the Department of Education at Washington University.
Legend of the Birdman
(A Children’s Story)

It is early summer and the birdman has sprouted wings on either cheek. Brilliant red, delicate. They are all I can see. I am too mesmerized to feel the chill of his eyes.

He stalks forward, barking words I neither hear nor care to hear at the seven others who have gathered to see his collection. Pulling Mama’s hand, I hang behind.

“How can he grow wings, Mama?” I wonder. From behind he is like any other man, tall, black haired, slightly stooped. He has a strange lurching walk, legs long like a heron’s legs.

“Shh, Nina,” Mama hisses. “Remember your manners.”

Daddy stoops down to my level, whispers, “Lightning. He was struck by lightning and it left its autograph on his skin.”

We follow the others through the dirt yard and into a low, dark lodge made of pine logs. I pretend that Mama and I are two sides of a stone sculpture, joined at the hands. There are no lights in the lodge, no windows. We are in a long corridor, flanked on either side by walls of chicken wire. Skylights run the length of the ceiling, caked with grime. The light that pushes through is thin.

The nine of us stand expectantly before one mesh wall. Shadows stir in the gloom. I press up against the wire. Eyes like glass shards flicker in my direction; a sharp beak parts, a throaty croak emerges. I back away, search the crowd for my father, and push my head beneath his arm. Peering back at the door, I see the birdman, leaning up against the wall. His pebble eyes track our every move.

* * *

What was that place?” I ask Mama and Daddy, safe now between them in our pickup truck. We have just moved here, to the country, a place where trees grow thick as hair and where the land has buckled into mountains on all sides. We have a small house surrounded by spindly pines and graceful birches.

“The bird sanctuary, Nina,” Daddy says. “We told you that earlier.”

A bird sanctuary, Mama fills me in, is a place where sick and injured birds can go to heal. The lodge we’d toured had been their infirmary. Falcons, eagles, hawks, and osprey who’ve broken their legs or wings are taken to the bird sanctuary by kind people, and the birdman cares for them until they’re well.

“Don’t call him the birdman, Nina,” Mama says. “It’s rude.”

* * *

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* * *

Weekends, we travel into town. I love to go with Daddy in the pickup truck. He drives so fast it feels like flying. Sometimes, on the dirt road leading from our house to the highway, he lets me take a turn—he works the brakes and gas, but I control the steering wheel.

“I’m driving toward town on the day we meet the birdman for the second time. He’s crouched in the gravel, right in the center of the road. Daddy slams on the brakes and rolls down the window.

“Any trouble?” Daddy calls. The birdman looks up; his eyes catch like hooks on the skin of my face.

“Loose raptor,” he grunts toward my father, eyes on me.

“Tough luck,” Daddy says. It’s funny to me, how they use such short phrases, like they may not speak the same language and have to keep it simple.

We get out of the car and crouch down beside the birdman. “Need help?” Daddy asks. All three of us peer into the brush built up along the road side.

“Nah,” replies the birdman. “These birds are particular. Can’t tolerate a man ’cept me.”

“What does a raptor look like?” I ask, because I can’t see a thing in the brush. Birches and lodgepoles crowd together behind the mes of weeds and grass. They grow so thickly here that even the white bark of the birches looks black. Fire fodder, Daddy would say, but he’s being polite. He makes sure our house has only species trees nearby, which means he and my Uncle Teddy went through and chopped down all the scrawny lodgepole pines, leaving behind only the cinnamon trunks of Ponderosa and bright stalks of birch. This way, we’ll be safer in times of forest fire, but I don’t like to think that way.
The birdman returns his gaze to me. “All them birds back there is raptors, missy,” he says, gesturing behind us to his property. I turn to look and can barely make out the shape of his lodge amid the lines of the trees. “This particular raptor, he’s called a ‘Merican Kestrel. Comes from Canada. Broke his blessed wing, this ‘un.”

I stare at him. “How’d the Kestrel break his wing?” I wonder, trying to imagine a bird falling from the sky.

“Lived up in the barn rafters,” the birdman said, the blood pulsing in his feather veins. “Musta fallen in his sleep.”

“I could go get him,” I offer. I’m small and good with animals. A broken bird should be no different.

The birdman’s eyes glint in sunlight. “Can’t touch ’im,” he says. “Dangerous. All raptors is dangerous.”

He has my full attention. “Birds is wild things, an’ mean as wolves. I try to help ’em, patch ’em up and teach ’em how to fly again, and still they treat me bad.” The birdman holds up one arm. Ruby ropes of skin loop around his wrist and upper arm. My eyes feel like they might separate from my skull.

“That’s an osprey, all right,” the birdman says. “Poor gal had a tussle with a mountain lion, mangled ’er wing somethin’ awful. I tried to get to ’er, to bring ’er on in, fix ’er up, but she’s not havin’ any of it. Scaped my arm up pretty good with her talons, got some good nips in with ’er beak.”

I feel like I can’t move. The birdman throws a grin toward my Daddy, but I want to hear more. “This, here, comes from a bald eagle,” he continues, holding up his other hand. “Difficult little bugger, that ’un. Somehow caught ’imself between some boulders near the hiking trail. Had to fend off lots of nosy folks, I s’pose, by the time I got to ’im. Bit my little finger clean off.”

Sure enough, his hand has only four fingers. He isn’t grinning anymore. “So stay away from birds, missy. They don’t like you, don’t like no one, so keep yer distance.”

We squat together in the road in silence after that. The Kestrel makes no sound or movement from his hiding place among the trees. My heart begins to gallop every time the wind jostles the leaves in the trees. I can’t wait to get into our pickup and drive into town where I’ve never seen a raptor. More than that, I can’t wait to get home to Mama, to our sturdy house amid the lines of the trees. “This particular raptor, he’s called a ‘Merican Kestrel. Comes from Canada. Broke his blessed wing, this ‘un.”

I open my eyes. Three deer—a mother and her two fawns—stand in the road in front of us. The six of us are still, as though we are posing for a photograph. The smallest fawn nudges his mother with his shiny black nose, and the stillness caves in. They dart toward the birdman’s lodge, leaping over his fence one after another as though pulled on the same string.

I follow them with my eyes. They are dark shapes against the buttery sun settling into the mountains. Another movement catches my attention, but Daddy is driving once again. I turn to look out the back window of the pickup. There is the birdman, whirling in a clearing. He is tethered to some bird of prey, testing its mended wings against the advancing evening.

Most days in July I tell Mama I’m going down to the meadow, but instead I sneak west toward the birdman’s lodge. First, I hold tall sticks near my ears and pretend to be an elk looking out for hunters. Then I drop to my knees and wraddle forward like a bear. Soon I arrive at a clump of lodgepoles, huddled close together like gossiping ladies. There is a pocket of earth between the trees that grows no grass, only wiry moss that crumbles when touched. From here I can see the clearing where the birdman exercises his birds.

His voice may be gruff as thunder, and his eyes as cold as river rocks, but with his birds he is gentle. He keeps their beaks closed with a strip of leather, but their talons throw the sunlight back at him to demonstrate their sharpness.

One day the birdman comes into the clearing with a giant bird at the end of a leather line. The bird hops ahead of him, dragging one wing wrapped in white. I recognize the bird—she looks like the golden eagle who once watched me from the pines. This bird is larger than I ever imagined a bird could be. Her head reaches to the birdman’s waist, and her wings are easily as long as the birdman is tall.

The eagle circles the clearing on foot as the birdman crouches in the center holding the leather leash. I think of a rodeo I once saw, clowns in bright patchwork pajamas scrambling away from a bull as he charged.

The birdman is making soft sounds at the eagle. She finishes her inspection of the clearing and returns to him at a rapid pace, loping like a large dog. I dig my fingers into the mossy ground, afraid she will tear at him with her talons.

She stops a few feet from the birdman, and he coaxes her close with pink slips of meat that might be raw chicken. She cannot eat the chicken with her beak tied shut, but she plays with it with her sharp claws. While she is distracted, the birdman reaches for her injured wing.

The eagle makes an angry noise deep in her throat. She jumps back and beats at him with her good wing. The sound of feathers against air is heavy and full of malice. The birdman kneels in the clearing as though he is praying to this goddess of the sky. As she quiets, he reaches for another slip of meat.

They do the same dance several times: he approaches, she becomes enraged; he retreats, she calms. Finally he gets close enough to pull the bandage from her wing. She stretches, holds her wings open in a mimicry of flight. She takes two bounding
steps and then is in the air, makes slow arcs around the birdman’s head. She is a monster of the sky and I feel small to be rooted as I am to the earth.

The birdman is smiling. The veins that look like feathers pulse with blood. He stands on his toes and spins beneath the eagle. The bird is so huge that I am sure she will lift him up and take him with her on journeys through the clouds.

Suddenly she is an arrow pointed straight at me. I flatten my body against a tree and will myself invisible. But she is not after me—using her talons as spears, she pierces the gray body of a field mouse and returns to the air.

Mouse blood leaves two spots on the moss and I run all the way home.

* * *

August closes around us like an oven door shutting.

The leaves of the birches wrinkle early and refuse to toss about in the hot winds. The tall grasses of the forest have been bleached of all color and crackle feebly against one another. Moisture-less clouds jerk heat lightning through the sky, day and night.

Fires that began in far-off mountain ranges have moved leisurely our way. I grow used to late afternoons spent outside with Mama, rocking together in her rocking chair. We face west and watch as smoke jumpers drift like dandelion fluff into pockets of untouched woodland. The planes from which they fall are invisible in a sky gritty with ash.

We wait until we cough inside as much as we do outside, until firemen mark our house and trees with red paint that means “try to save.” The fire chief says “preventative measures” and “foam retardant” and “we’ll do the best we can,” things that deepen the crease between Daddy’s eyebrows and make Mama sob into his shoulder.

We’re the last family to leave this place. Our neighbors to the east stopped by to wish us well last week, and the road’s been crawling with cars headed north, toward town, away from the looming flames. Surely our western neighbors, like the birdman, have long since packed up their lives and gone away. I think about the birdman, trying to wrestle frightened, wild things from their hutch into a van to carry them to safety. I picture his hands, what they would look like with other fingers missing.

We wait until the western sky is an endless sunset, until the fire is so close we can see its spikes against the smoke. “Our game of chicken is over,” Daddy tells me sadly.

We pack Grandmother’s maple cabinet, Mama’s wedding china, our clothes, and a painting Daddy loves into the bed of the pickup and leave our little house behind.

The drive down the gravel road is loud with the cracking of trees as they fall behind us, some to the firemen’s hatchets, some to the greedy teeth of the fire. Daddy’s eyes stay glued to the road in front of us; Mama is crying softly, her forehead against the window.

We reach the birdman’s property line, and I crane my neck around Daddy to see what’s happened to his lodge.

The birdman stands in the clearing as a ribbon of flame unfurls at his back. With care, he unwraps his birds, strips of bandages coiling at his feet. The birds, their half-healed wings tasting the fire-rimmed air, are silent as they lift skyward, a cloud of leaving him behind.

Suzanne Richardson grew up in a small town in north-central Montana. She earned the Bachelor’s degree in English at Princeton University, is currently pursuing an MFA in poetry at Washington University. She has published poems in the Nassau Literary Review and Margie: The American Journal of Poetry and was the recipient of the 2003 Bain-Swiggett prize for formal poetry. She wrote this piece as a class exercise in English 401: Writing for Children and Young Adults. Belles Lettres is pleased to offer it here.
Flesh and Fantasy:
Some Notes on American Pornography

Because of space limitations, the essay has been broken apart. This portion has a good deal of historical discussion about sex in films, culminating with the arrival of hard core films. It ends with a review of the documentaries about porn stars John C. Holmes and Ron Jeremy. The second portion will run in spring 2005 issue of *Belles Lettres*, covering the rest of the material listed below.

*How to... Make Love Like a Porn Star: A Cautionary Tale* by Jenna Jameson with Neil Strauss, ReganBooks, 2004, 579 pages, no index, $27.95 hardcover

*Underneath It All* by Traci Lords, HarperEntertainment, 2003, 286 pages, no index, $23.95 hardcover

*Lights, Camera, Sex! An Autobiography* by Christy Canyon, published by Christy Canyon, 2003, no index, $19.95 softcover

*Wadd: The Life and Times of John C. Holmes*, directed by Alan Smithee, 1998, DVD

*Sex: The Annabel Chong Story*, directed by Gough Lewis, 2000, DVD

*The Girl Next Door: From Housewife to Porn Star*, directed by Christine Fugate, 1999, Video

*Porn Star: The Legend of Ron Jeremy*, directed by Scott J. Gill, 2001, DVD

1. When Words Collide:
Childhood and Sex Images

The first pornographic art I ever saw was a Tijuana Bible when I was in the seventh grade. Tijuana Bibles were published anonymously from the 1930s through the 1950s, 8-pagers featuring pornographic versions of famous comic strips, as well as pornographic send-ups of famous celebrities. I was 11 years old or maybe 12 and I knew very little about sex, having no idea, despite my passion for comic books, that anything like Tijuana Bibles existed. I suppose I suddenly learned a great deal more about both sex and comics as a result of a girl in my homeroom class bringing in this hard-core version of “Moon Mullins,” a comic strip that I read regularly in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*’s Sunday Supplement.

I was, of course, shocked to see famous comic strip characters graphically performing sex acts, but I found it also a bit thrilling, too, I felt as if, for the first time, I was getting a glimpse into adult life, that some mystery had suddenly been explained, or revealed. But it was, overall, unnerving to see sexual passion displayed. To see Moon Mullins and some woman panting in the throes of sex made me think sex was not so much alluring as bizarre and even a little frightening. If this was sex, then people doing it seemed so dangerously uninhibited as hardly to resemble adults as I knew them. As a child, I felt uncomfortable seeing adults that way, even as drawings. The girl who showed me the Tijuana Bible laughed about it, finding my unease a sign of how sheltered I was. Other kids who gathered around either snickered or tried to talk in some brazenly dirty way. (I think I heard more obscene language in junior high than I was to hear ever again in my life. Many of the working-class kids I grew up with, once they reached junior high, swore that they had had sex sometime shortly after they were born or some such exaggeration. People lie a good deal about many things in life, but they lie more about sex than anything else. People lie to get sex, they lie during the act itself, and they lie about it afterwards. An act that generates that much dishonesty ought to be handled with extreme care.) I asked the girl where she got the Tijuana Bible and she said her uncle had lots of them, along with a lot of magazines with dirty pictures of naked women and people having sex. Some of the kids asked her to bring in more stuff, but she never did, except the *National Enquirer*, which she read religiously, and which is not pornographic. She let me read that, too.

A year or so later, a boy I knew named Vernon told me in a junior high art class about a movie called *All Men Are Apes*. It was an adult movie that was then playing at a theater in Philadelphia called The Studio, which specialized in that sort of fare, which I guess, at the time, I thought was pornographic, having, by this time, finally learned the word. Sometimes, when I was downtown with my friends, we would stroll by the theater, right on the fringe of the shopping district, stopping to look at the stills of whatever current movie was playing, mesmerized by the words on the marquee: ADULTS ONLY. We could tell there was a lot of nudity in the films because often the women in the stills would have bikinis drawn on their bodies with a magic marker. If we stood around too long, gawking and cooing, the woman in the ticket booth would tell us to go away or otherwise she would be forced to call a cop. We ran like rabbits.

Vernon bragged that he had seen *All Men Are Apes* but I wondered how, as one had to be over 17 to see movies like that. But he talked about the movie in such vivid terms that I was sure that he had, and his bragging made me feel very young and inexperienced. He was going to see dirty movies, and I was still watching films like *Goldfinger* and *Thunderball* and thought that sort of thing was really grown up! Vernon said the movie was about a woman who had sex with a lot of men but she finally got tired of men because they couldn’t satisfy her, so she wound up at the end of the movie having sex with an ape. I couldn’t believe it.

“Not a real ape,” I said. “A woman can’t have sex with an animal.”

“Where have you been?” Vernon said, with disdain at my ignorance, “A lot of women do that all the time. Dogs. Horses. They can’t get enough. At the end of this movie she’s in jail being screwed by an ape, a real ape, too. And it was real sex.”
continued from p.15

I found this so disturbing that I could hardly think of anything else for the next day or two. How can they make a movie with a woman having sex with an ape? All Men Are Apes haunted me for a while. Then, of course, I never thought about it, until, finally, I saw this obscure film a few years ago, quite by accident. I was curious to know if what I had been told so many years ago was true, although by the time I saw the movie I should have known better; indeed, the movie couldn’t have been what Vernon described.

All Men Are Apes (1965) is a movie about sex and the city; and New York, its skyline and its streets are as much a character in this film as any of the actors. It is a cheap, sleazy movie about a woman who is living a cheap, sleazy life, a combination of noir, bad art house, and social satire, with bad actors, bad directing, and bad dialogue. (The film is what it depicts.) Diane, the main character, catches her mother in bed with a sailor whom she herself has sex with shortly after, much to her mother’s chagrin, who, in fact, inexplicably, poses as her daughter’s sister. Diane, who had been working at a Five-and-Dime store, winds up a stripper. (The strip scenes in the movie have to be among the worst ever filmed.) There is no graphic sex, no nudity, except a scene at a wild party where a waitress walks about showing her buttocks. Diane is generally mistreated by the men in the film, most of these sexploitation films had nudity. In fact, female nudity was their selling point but the early ones had very little of the kind that the films of Doris Wishman are. If anything, the film depicts sex as a form of misery or self-delusion or psychopathology. This is the real sex and the city, the underbelly of sex—leering and catcalls; casual, meaningless encounters with strangers; and commercialized depravity—and the underbelly of the city—cheap apartments, tawdry bars and nightclubs, and, finally, jail. I might go even further to say that the film virtually says that sex is the city; that is, the city as a form of degenerate culture.

A member of Diane’s stripper act is a gorilla named Harry (clearly, an actor in an ape suit). By the end of the film, fed up with human beings, and arrested for trying to kill her gangster boyfriend, Diana is locked up, happily, in the cage with Harry. There is no sex scene with Harry, although I suppose one can imagine what one wishes as Diane is sitting on Harry’s lap. All Men Are Apes is not the film Vernon described. It is not a good film—a good deal of it is boring—but it is actually far more interesting than the film I had imagined it to be. As it is a film that shows men and sex in such a disgusting light, it could be said that Diane’s domestication of the ape (who always symbolizes in films the savage, insatiable masculine libido) is finally her triumph over men. After watching it, I felt guilty about harboring for so many years silly expectations of bestiality and nymphomania. Sex truly is all in the mind. And I guess sex films can be about one’s own mind as well, about what one hopes or wishes sex to be and what one wishes oneself to be. Sex films are so much projections of personal fantasies that they may be solipsism as a form of virtual madness. What is sex, I wonder.

2. Sexploitation: How Cinema Stole the Strip Tease and the Girl Show

Films like All Men Are Apes were not considered pornographic by the film industry. They were called exploitation films. They were actually the forerunners of what we call today hardcore or pornographic films. These exploitation films today would be rated R, some might even be PG-13. Hardly any would be NC-17. None of them would be judged pornographic by today’s standards or lack of standards, as the case may be. We have changed in what we are willing to accept or tolerate as artistic or even wanton depictions of sex on the screen and some might say we are not the better for it. We are simply seized and shaken by the sensation of spectacle. Some may argue that our taste has matured; others that our taste has simply coarsened.

Most of these sexploitation films had nudity. In fact, female nudity was their selling point but the early ones had very little depiction of sex, although some had a great deal of talk and drama about it. Some of the movies at The Studio had titles like Sinderella and the Golden Bra (1964), Goldilocks and the Three Bares (1963, in “Buffocolor” and “Seemoresco”), The Beast That Killed Women (1965), The Naked Venus (1958), and the like. Most of these films were set in nudist camps, which structurally explained why the characters were nude. Although making films with nudity goes back to the very early days of cinema, as entrepreneurs sought new ways to commercialize sex for public entertainment, it was director Russ Meyer (1922–2004) who made the nude film commercially viable as a mass art, instead of a mere underground phenomenon, with The Immoral Mr. Teas, released in 1959, and which survived legal challenges for being obscene. (For more on the history of the law and obscenity, please see Michael A. Kahn’s “Bulls in the China Shop” elsewhere in this issue of Belles Lettres.) What Meyer did with his inane plot about a man who, when he wore special glasses, could see people without their clothes, was to update and transform as a cinematic experience, the strip show and old carnival girl shows that peddled female flesh to the yokels but which were, in effect, holdovers from a popular culture without electronic technology. Cinema
could actually make the experience of seeing a naked woman as a sensual object better, more vivid, more arousing than seeing a live show. The virtual trumps the real.

Another early pioneer in nudie films was autodidact filmmaker Doris Wishman (1912–2002), one of the very few women in the sex film trade of the time, who made such films as Diary of a Nudist (1962) and Nude on the Moon (1959). The nudie craze, launched by Meyer, in a few years fizzled as audiences, of course, wanted newer and fresher thrills. Seeing nude women, “unclad cuties,” as they were called, jumping on trampolines, playing volleyball, riding horses, or sunbathing had grown routine. Audiences wanted to see them do something more. Wishman was among those who switched over to “roughies,” films that combined sex and violence, like Bad Girls Go to Hell (1965) and Another Day Another Man (1966). Meyer himself began to make films with more sex and violence as well, including his most famous, Beyond the Valley of the Dolls (1970). The king and queen of roughies were husband-and-wife team Michael and Roberta Findlay whose Flesh trilogy (1967, 1968) remain among the most depraved sexploitation films ever made, along with their legendary Snuff (1976). Other sex films, with stronger sex depictions, although still not hardcore by any means, became notorious during this period such as Radley Metzger’s soft-core spin of the Carmen story, Carmen, Baby (1967), where fellatio and cunnilingus abound but only in reaction shots.” Metzger had made, a few years earlier, an attractive sexploitation film, complete with art house effect, called The Dirty Girls (1964), technically far superior to anything by Wishman or any of the other trash film makers. Metzger made a well-received but controversial soft-core lesbian love film in 1969 called Therese and Isabel. (One can always have a commercially successful exploitation or hardcore film with two pretty girls making love. That sort of thing is very popular with male audiences. The hardcore industry releases a large number of lesbian films, not aimed at a lesbian audience but for men.) Two things to be considered here about sexploitation in the 1960s: Limits were being pushed, and somehow the art house impulse and the drive-in trash impulse were working separately and in concert to transform how sex was presented on the screen.

In the 1950s and 1960s, there emerged another type of sexploitation film that dealt with race. These films were made mostly by Europeans and thus, once again, we have the crossing of the art house with exploitation trash. They were always about inter-racial sex between black men and white women, a persistently perverse fascination in American culture that the civil rights movement intensified, as the social implications of integration were on everyone’s mind. The final heterosexual taboo was about a young white girl who is pregnant by a black sailor. So, regarding film, My Baby is Black (1965) and Born Black (1969) are about white women giving birth to black babies—the first as a result of an affair with a black woman who also loves him. In one ending, they are both killed trying to escape the town. In the other, they succeed in escaping. Other racial sexploitation films of this period include Free, White, and 21 (1963), an actually quite good dramatization about a white woman from Europe who comes south to join the civil rights movement and is seemingly raped by a black man. A great deal of ambiguity surrounds the rape. The black defendant is ultimately acquitted. The film is striking because the black defendant is not especially admirable; the woman is portrayed more sympathetically but she, too, is flawed in her naivety and her racial innocence that borders on being a form of racism itself. Murder in Mississippi (1965), directed by J. P. Mawra, who also directed All Men Are Apes, is another racial sexploitation about the civil rights movement that features murder, castration, and a brief relationship between a black civil rights worker and, again, a naïve white woman drawn to the Movement. It is as lurid as All Men Are Apes, although it tries for an uplifting ending as the white woman, tempted to leave the Movement, returns to the south to register black voters. The film ends with footage from the March on Washington of 1963.

Two other films, both set in Europe, My Baby is Black (1965) and Born Black (1969) are about white women giving birth to black babies—the first as a result of an affair with a black man (one of the first films to show a black man kissing and sleeping with a white woman), and the second, as a result of a mistake. The wife gave birth to a black child but had not had an affair with a black man. (The film is something of a reworking of Kate Chopin’s short story, “Desiree’s Baby.”) In the second film, the wife’s rich husband has an affair with a white woman who is also the lover of a black jazz musician. As a result, the rich white husband becomes a “carrier” and basically impregnates his wife with a black man’s sperm. Unlike the first film, where the couple goes off happily, strolling down their street with their baby, in Born Black, the white wife, traumatized by giving birth to an “alien,” tragically dies. In an odd moral note, the husband pays nothing for his adultery, which is the cause of all misery in the film. Born Black has the added feature of showing the viewer footage of an actual birth, to make the idea of a white woman giving birth to a black child all the more lurid.” Earlier in the decade, British filmmaker Tony Richardson made the highly regarded film, A Taste of Honey (1961), not a sexploitation film, about a young white girl who is pregnant by a black sailor. So, Other sex films, with stronger sex depictions, although still not hardcore by any means, became notorious during this period such as Radley Metzger’s soft-core spin of the Carmen story, Carmen, Baby (1967), where fellatio and cunnilingus abound but only in reaction shots.” Metzger had made, a few years earlier, an attractive sexploitation film, complete with art house effect, called The Dirty Girls (1964), technically far superior to anything by Wishman or any of the other trash film makers. Metzger made a well-received but controversial soft-core lesbian love film in 1969 called Therese and Isabel. (One can always have a commercially successful exploitation or hardcore film with two pretty girls making love. That sort of thing is very popular with male audiences. The hardcore industry releases a large number of lesbian films, not aimed at a lesbian audience but for men.) Two things to be considered here about sexploitation in the 1960s: Limits were being pushed, and somehow the art house impulse and the drive-in trash impulse were working separately and in concert to transform how sex was presented on the screen.

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once again, this theme is being broached from both art house and trash perspectives during this time. Also, One Potato, Two Potato (1964) was a fine arthouse film about interracial marriage.

It is in the early 1970s that the hardcore sex film explodes upon the scene in the United States with several films that attract a considerable mainstream audience including Deep Throat, which made actress Linda Lovelace, for a short season, a pop culture personality; Behind the Green Door, made by the Mitchell Brothers of San Francisco, starring Marilyn Chambers, who, after being fired for advertising “Ivory Snow,” would become a major porn star; The Devil in Miss Jones, starring Georgina Spelvin, among the most artistically accomplished early hardcore films with a remarkable soundtrack; and Melvin Van Peebles’s Sweet Sweetback’s Badass Song, which would change the face of black cinema and usher in the age of blaxploitation films. (Van Peebles wanted to make a violent political film, which he did, but he disguised it for his backers by making a porn film overlay.) All of these films were made for very little money but became huge hits. Deep Throat, for instance, made for $25,000, grossed over $10 million during its time in the theaters. Why did these kinds of films appear and why did the mainstream, bourgeois public go see them, which they never did with sexploitation films, which largely played to more specialized audiences as did early hardcore films that were made as short scenes and loops (stag films) and played in dives, brothels, and on the projectors of private collectors like Hugh Hefner and Sammy Davis, Jr. and at bachelor parties?

First, mainstream American and foreign filmmakers were making more sexually explicit films during this period such as I Am Curious Yellow (1967), Midnight Cowboy (1969), Carnal Knowledge (1971), and Last Tango in Paris (1973). The film-going public simply accepted graphic sex and obscene language as part of the standard film experience, as sophisticated film-watching. Second, the sexual revolution in America made casual sex easier and more acceptable. Venereal disease was controlled by antibiotics, the birth control pill was very effective in preventing unwanted pregnancies, and abortion had been legalized. There could now truly be an age of sex without consequences. Even ordinary people could explore sex now in ways they couldn’t have dreamed of 20 or 10 years earlier. Third, there was a sense among porn filmmakers and actors as well as among a good portion of the public who saw these hardcore films that they were defying conventions, liberating themselves from a repressive culture, shaking off their puritanical upbringings, being hip. Casual drug-taking, like casual sex, was popular and seemingly easy, and this intensified the sense of living in an era of liberation and self-discovery, of overcoming “hang-ups” and inhibitions. If the old liberalism of Victorianism was moral duty and self-improvement, the new liberalism of the 1960s was self-fulfillment and taboo-breaking, for taboos limited the range of possibilities, the range of expression available to a human being. But are taboo-breaking and self-fulfillment lesser goals for the human spirit than the old Victorian ideals? Are they merely reflections of living in a lesser, consumption-crazed society?

Porn represented a post-modern world where appearance and reality could not be distinguished; films in which the actors were acting but, because they were really having sex, were not acting. But, of course, they kept claiming they were acting. Read any porn star autobiography or interview, and they will talk at some length about everything they must do to prepare for their scenes, how difficult it is to have sex before a camera and crew; that is, they talk like actors. But they are not actors in the conventional sense. After all, in films, when actors fight, they aren’t really fighting; when they kill someone, no one really dies; when actors marry in a film, they aren’t really married. So, why, when representing sex, should actors really have sex in a film? Eroticism in a film can be evoked without real sex. So, what purpose does real sex serve? Can the performance of sex be an art as porn actress Annie Sprinkle asserts in her book, Post-Porn Modernist: My 25 Years as a Multimedia Whore (1998), in much the same way that singing and dancing in a musical film is or in the same way the Kung Fu performances are in Jackie Chan and Bruce Lee movies? Are porn movies an extension of sexploitation and art house movies or an entirely radical way of making cinema?

Hardcore films are both art and filth, degrading yet arousing because they eroticize everything, distorting reality through a prism of pleasure that is completely disconnected from any social context or any sense of social responsibility. Other films do this as well, but porn films are structured like musicals and Kung Fu movies where plots are built around moments in the film that are set-performance pieces that have little to do with moving the plot along. Porn gave us the penetration shot (men entering women or women entering men or women with objects) and, more famously, the male climax scene called the Money Shot, like pay-off scenes in musicals and martial arts films. But this similarity does not make a porn film art; it admits only to saying that porn imitates an art structure that we know. Musicals and Kung Fu movies are about how stylized they are. Porn is stylized, too, but rooted in a complex verisimilitude because the sex is real. And even if porn were an art, might it not be like William Hazlitt describing the Indian Juggler maintaining four balls in the air? “Is it then a trifling power we see at work, or is it not something next to miraculous?” Maybe it is art; maybe, it is the spectacle of freakish dexterity. And if pornographic films can be art, it does not mean that they are now or that they ever have been art. Maybe the artistic potential of real sex on screen has not yet been realized or captured.

Sex without anxiety, of course, in some measure, which is what pornographic films give us, is sex without meaning. And maybe sex has become so aestheticized—so entrapped by what it is as a performance, as a ritual of pleasing techniques—that it is folly to think it has meaning beyond the moment when it happens. In a spontaneous society of kicks, of living in the moment, of being “beat,” to use Kerouac and Ginsberg’s phrase, sex has become the final expression of existentialism, not grasping meaning from meaninglessness but, just the opposite: sex has become the story of how we have grasped meaninglessness from something that once meant something in an absolute sense. (However much we reject the idea of sex being confined to procreation or the institution of marriage, it did, however flawed, give sex an absolute value and a non-relativist meaning.) If sex has any
meaning in the modern world, it is understood that the meaning is not applicable to anything outside of the immediacy that generated it, so it is a meaning that must always be renewed, a contingent meaning in a postmodern world that is nothing more than a maze of contingency. It is no wonder that Julia St. Vincent entitled her brilliant hardcore documentary about John C. Holmes, *Exhausted*. That word, even better than “beat,” sums up exquisitely how sex makes its own meaning in the moment of the act. Sex is now the repetition of sensual spontaneity. The state of exhaustion is a state of heroic transcendence of, or complete tragic submission to, the limitation of contingent meaning we now give sex.

As years have gone by, pornographers have made hardcore films that feature morbidly obese people, women in their 70s and 80s, midgets, anatomically over-endowed people, and the like. In true postmodern uncertainty, it is unclear whether making such films with these people that one has humanized them (nearly all people need and want sex no matter how they look) or further degraded them by making them the object of a perverse spectacle where they have been made to be even more freakish by being absorbed by the larger freak show of hardcore pornography. It is striking that some hardcore filmmakers complain about this phenomenon as a form of declension in their art, as, indeed, a form of decadence, when, in fact, hardcore pornography is itself an expression of decadence, that decadence has always been the essence of its appeal. How can an art form that prided itself on making people look at something that they shouldn’t look at complain about newer filmmakers deconstructing porn art to make people look at even more things they shouldn’t look at in order to achieve an even purer form of decadence? The roots of hardcore porn are not only in the nudie flicks of the 1950s and 1960s, stag films, carnival girl shows, the buffet flats (live sex performance) of brothels, but in the “roughies,” “slashers,” and in films like *Mondo Cane* (1963) and other mock documentaries (called shockumentaries) that mixed the sexual with the bizarre.

Whatever the case, with the advent of hardcore classics like *Deep Throat* (1972), *The Opening of Misty Beethoven* (1976, directed by Radley Metzger under the name of Henry Paris), and other such films in the early and mid-1970s, postmodern America had really become, to borrow a porno title, “Sex World.” The marriage of commercialized sex with technology had been perfected in a way no one could have imagined, and the flow of explicit sex into the mainstream had gone from a trickle to a flood. But was mainstream bourgeois culture improved by it, liberated by it, or merely fascinated and appalled by the objectification and commodification of its own infantile fantasies?

With the emergence of videocassette players in 1979, the porn industry took another step into the mainstream. Now, hardcore porn could be watched in the privacy of one’s home, not at some run-down theater in the tenderloin part of town or an arthouse. The more enraptured in privacy, the more accessible porn became and the more uncontrollable. The internet, which has over 60,000 hardcore porn sites (to visit a porn site is literally never to escape without turning off the machine), has only confounded the problem. There is virtually no hotel in America where one cannot order porn on the room television. Cable channels are offering more and more of it. We seem to cry out in one voice saying how much we hate pornography and its widespread presence in our culture yet our financial support of it is an odd way to display our loathing. The pornography industry in America—including everything from films to phone sex to magazines to clubs—has a bigger piece of the American entertainment market than all sports events and all live music performances combined.

It was nearly a year after *Deep Throat* was initially released that I saw it at a reputable art house theater in Philadelphia, a place where I had seen films by Bergman, Welles, Eisenstein, Renoir, Truffaut, Gillo Portocorvo, Bertolucci, and Hitchcock. I was about to graduate from college and was quite excited about seeing a hardcore movie, feeling myself pretty sophisticated for doing so. The theater was packed. The film had been doing nearly capacity business for several weeks. Strangely, I walked out about mid-way through. I have, in fact, never been able to watch a hardcore film all the way through. It is partly because, after awhile, they seem boring. But they are also disturbing. It is not that I am a prude. I am not immune to the effects the films are trying to achieve with their audience. I am willing to concede that pornography is an art. I am willing to concede that several of the people who perform in the films do their art well. But pornographic films were nearly the only art I ever experienced that, instead of renewing me, simply offered a set of images from which I felt I had to recover. In the end, the only message I ever got from a pornographic film is this: that while God appeals, the devil drives.

3. Money Won’t Change You But Time Will Take You Out

The stars of pornographic films are the women performers. They are paid more than the men, although it is impossible for a man to fake an orgasm or climax while a woman easily can, and it is the man’s orgasm that is the essence of the films and the men are more stressed about performance. The women, however, are advertised far more than the men. Yet the biggest name in the history of porn films is a man: John C. Holmes. He has been the subject of two Hollywood films: P. T. Anderson’s *Boogie Nights* (1997) and James Cox’s

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Exhausted.
Wonderland (2003). Both are based on documentaries about Holmes: Anderson's film on Julia St. Vincent's Exhausted (1981) and Cox's film on the latter part of Alan Smith’s Wadd: The Life and Times of John C. Holmes (1998). St. Vincent's documentary may be among the most impressive ever made. A former girlfriend of Holmes, she succeeds in totally mythologizing him not simply as a porn actor but as a porn auteur, and even more as a kind of icon of cool. Imagine Beat personality Neal Cassady in the porn industry and you have something like this version of Holmes. According to Exhausted, Holmes is a true cross-over star. He is well known beyond the porn-buying public. He is admired for his sexual prowess and his detachment about it and even his detachment about his life, for his lack of guilt and shame, for his lack of confusion about what he wants from life, and for his sense that he is, above all, something of an artist. Exhausted makes Holmes into a unique hipster. He is almost a perfect embodiment of Norman Mailer’s “White Negro”, after all, he has huge genitalia, an enormous capacity for sex, and a highly stylized sociopathic flair. He seems a cauldron of desire fully conscious of nothing else but the consciousness of his desire as an aesthetic, an attitude. If that doesn’t make you a “Negro” who has learned to live and thrive on the margin, then nothing does.

Everything Holmes says in Exhausted is a lie: he never attended UCLA, he was not single when he entered the porn business or after, he did not block his own scenes, and so forth. Wadd unravels Exhausted, deconstructs it with its parade of friends, family, and associates who tell us who Holmes really was, more or less. An Ohio farm kid with an abusive father who did a stint in the military after dropping out of high school. Holmes married young, seemed relatively happy, and then, one day, comes home to tell his wife that he is going to become a porn star, something that, understandably, she didn’t take well, as she wasn’t a swinger. She thought pornography was a form of prostitution, which it would be hard for any porn performer to deny: sex for money, after all, although some argue that marriage is that, too. But they remained married for many years, during his years as a major porn star, despite the fact that they ceased to have sex. She became as she put “his mother, his sister, his nurse,” in short, an enabler, the worst kind of passive-submissive role a woman can play for a man who has the infinite need to use people as Holmes did. She winds up taking in Holmes’s 15-year old mistress and even inadvertently suppressing evidence of Holmes’s involvement in the killing of his drugged-out gang of thieving friends in their Wonderland Ave, apartment in Los Angeles, a crime for which he was acquitted when tried.

Numbers are important in the porn business as they are in many sports. For Holmes, it was always what size was his penis. The myth about his size made him. The other number, which Holmes proudly announced in “Exhausted,” was that he had had sex with 14,000 women, which is debunked in “Wadd” by his agent and other people. It is, of course, as impossible a number as basketball star Wilt Chamberlain’s claim that he slept with 20,000 women. For even if Holmes had sex with only half that number or a third or even a tenth, it would still mean that, at the least, he had 1,400 women. To put that in perspective, if the average man has had 50 or 100 different women during the course of his entire life, he is considered to have been very promiscuous. Holmes slept with well over 1,000 or 2,000 or 5,000 women in a matter of 10 years. But everything about Exhausted is meant to exhaust the viewer. How could anyone ever have had sex with 14,000 women without being afflicted by mind-numbing boredom long before ever getting close to that number? How could someone waste that much time or why would anyone want to? (Exhausted reflects our secret fear that sex is boring.) Wadd is not as good a documentary in style and technique as Exhausted, which nearly rivals Triumph of the Will as a piece of mesmerizing propaganda, but it does give the entire story of this strange, pathetic man’s life. It is thorough and well-made. Boogie Nights gives us a success story biopic. Wonderland is essentially a brutal crime story. In the first, Holmes is the bumpkin stud who rises and falls; in the second, he is the drugged-out hustler who will do anything, even turn on friends, in order to score. Wadd tells the entire story of Holmes’s role in the 1981 Wonderland killings, which occurred at exactly the same time as Exhausted was made and when Holmes was flamed out as a porn star. But Holmes, long before the drugs, was never an admirable character: during his early days in porn, when making such movies was illegal and when the police in Los Angeles were constantly busting the actors and the crews, Holmes became an informant and told police where porn locations were set up, and who was shooting. Holmes eventually started drinking and taking drugs, as many in the entertainment film industry, both mainstream and porn, do. He became addicted to cocaine and lost his ability to work because the drugs made him sexually dysfunctional. Eventually, he contracted AIDS, which killed him in 1988 but not before he went abroad to make porn films without telling anyone that he had the disease. O Dark Fallen Hipster!

If Holmes is the self-destructive, tragic “genius” of porn, porn’s version of Charlie Parker or Edna St. Vincent Millay, then Ron Jeremy is, as he is called in the documentary Porn Star: The
Legend of Ron Jeremy (directed by Scott J. Gill, 2001), “the clown prince” of adult films. Jeremy is over 50, overweight, hairy, certainly not a handsome man, although he was rather handsome when he was young, who has managed to be in porn for over 25 years. He has made over 1,500 adult films. Porn Star; like Wadd, gets into numbers as well. The viewer gets what I suppose is the obligatory discussion about the size of Jeremy’s genitalia, and about the number of women with whom he has had sex, which is in the thousands.

If Holmes was the hare, Jeremy is the hedgehog. He is probably now the most well-known male star in this business simply because of his longevity and his incredible productivity. He is willing to appear in virtually any sort of porn. He has had sex with old women, fat women. He was the last in line to have sex with Annabel Chong when she set a record for having sex with 251 men in 10 hours. Holmes came from an abusive home; Jeremy, we learn in this skillful, if predictable, documentary, came from a middle class, Long Island Jewish family (real name: Hyatt). His father is a physicist. And both his father and sister have been very supportive of his career. Jeremy wanted to be a legitimate actor; in fact, that is still a desire that eats at him, an obsession. He will do anything to be in a standard Hollywood film and he has had bit parts in a few but he has suffered many humiliations trying to get in the door. Porn stars are stigmatized. He is as star-struck as a backdoor stage girl. He would try to use people if only he were in a position where he could. But regular Hollywood finds him amusing, an oddity, something interesting to have at a party. He is not taken seriously as an actor or even as a person. He is nothing but his stigma as a porn star.

And he has paid the price for being in porn. He has never married because what wife would put up with a husband whose work is having sex with other women. He would like to have children but that seems unlikely. He is, as a result, lonely, so he is constantly moving, on the road, trying to make it as an X-rated comedian, showing up on anybody’s talk show, doing sex scenes wherever there is pay, showing up at any party to which he is invited, operating, pushing, hoping for a break to become legitimate. He must also take an AIDS test once a month.

Unlike other porn stars, Jeremy is not a drug addict, an alcoholic, a sociopath. He is, as people go, fairly well-adjusted. He has made a lot of money in porn merely by accumulation and because he is intensely frugal. He says in the film, in effect, what Jew isn’t obsessed about money? Of course, like Woody Allen, he seems obsessed with his own inadequacies and insecurities, which may explain why he became a porn star; he made himself different in the sense that he is not insecure about the one thing that most people are, their sexual abilities.

Both Wadd and Porn Star are good films, although I do not like the technique that each uses to show clips from their subjects’ films as ways to illustrate the narratives of their lives, giving their illusion that their lives were filmed, as if their porn films were biographical documents. Both are good films for learning about the nature of the porn industry and the kinds of personalities that inhabit that strange world. But the porn world of Holmes and Jeremy is not an alien world. It is, in fact, the mirror for Hollywood, for, as one porn executive put it, “we put our sex and immortality on the screen, while Hollywood puts all of theirs behind the camera.” Even more, porn is the mirror of the entertainment cosmos of America. If we don’t like what we see, it must be remembered that we made it possible. The porn culture of America is not only the culture we want, but the culture we deserve. Or, as the women would say at the carnival shows, at the end of a raunchy strip tease, a kiss-off to their male audience: “Thanks for coming, if you did.”

Next Issue: Stag Films, Women and Porn, and Prostitution

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1 Within less than six years after “All Men Are Apes” was made, porn actress Linda Lovelace starred in a short sex film called “Dogarama” in which she performed actual sexual acts with a dog. She devotes an entire chapter to this incident in her autobiography, Ordeal (1980), saying that her husband, Chuck Traynor, had a gun to her head and forced her to do this. Other people in the porn industry dispute her version, saying she wasn’t forced. But these people also did not like her book, which was a stern indictment of the porn industry. In any event, in her autobiography, Lovelace writes at length about Traynor’s obsession with seeing women have sex with animals. According to her, Hugh Hefner, founder and publisher of Playboy, had the same obsession, asking Lovelace if she would have sex with a dog again for him while she and Traynor were guests at the Playboy mansion. Apparently, she found ways to avoid doing it again. Underground stag films occasionally featured women having sex with animals. According to him, Stag Films, Women and Porn, and Prostitution

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2 Something Weird Video has amassed the best collection of old exploitation films. Many of their DVDs include, as extra features, rare, old nudie films such as “Bring ‘Em Back Nude,” made in the 1920s, about nude white women in Africa who are goddesses of a tribe, surrounded by nude black women. They capture the wife of a white African hunter who is fleeing a gorilla. The white goddesses force
the wife to strip as well. The white hunter kills the gorilla and takes the nude women, black and white back, to an African village, after his wife has re-robed. The strangest aspect of this is that the white hunter is accompanied by a male African guide who is standing around in scenes with naked white women. Quite taboo-breaking in a number of ways for the 1920s while also re-enforcing certain ideas about Africa, female sexuality, and primitivism.

* Wishman made two films in the 1970s that featured a stripper with no acting skills named Chesty Morgan who had a 73-inch bust line. In these films, Morgan played a spy whose breasts were weapons. Morgan’s figure evoked far less passion than it did pity. I remember, during my teenage years, Morgan as a frequent act at Philadelphia’s old burlesque theater, the Troc.

* For a fascinating account of the sexploitation era from one of the genre’s major filmmakers, see A Youth in Babylon: Confessions of a Trash-Film King by David F. Friedman with Don De Nevi, (Prometheus Books, 1990). Also see Michelle Clifford, Sleazoid Express: A Mind-Twisting Tour Through the Grindhouse Cinema of Times Square, (Fireside, 2002) and Randy Palmer, Herschell Gordon Lewis, The Godfather of Gore:The Films (McFarland, 2000).

* The idea of a black man seeking revenge against whites by having sex with white women is not usual in sexploitation or pornographic films. Melvin Van Peebles used a variation of this idea with his black stud as revolutionary in his landmark independent film, “Sweet Sweetback’s Badass Song” (1971). More recently, in the hardcore arena, JM Productions has put out over 25 volumes of “White Trash Whore.” In each film, one or two white women are gang-banged by five or six black men in scenes that are nearly unwatchable for anyone who does not have a strong stomach for the most tasteless, savage depictions of sex in what is advertised as “revenge against whitey.” This is tantamount to a glorified dramatization of a hate crime. Nearly all hardcore pornographic interracial films are advertised in blatantly racist ways—“horse-like,” “monster” black men cavorting with “little white girls”—even those made by black pornographers like Jake Steed. I have yet to find pornography, in this regard, to have any uplifting qualities or even any measure of self-respect. For more on Boris Vian’s novel and the film I Spit on Your Grave, see James Baldwin, The Devil Finds Work (Dial Press, 1976), pp. 37-43.

* Sexploitation films loved the gimmick of using controversial or tasteless “documentary”-type footage to spike the taboo-breaking nature of the film. Live births, footage of car accidents, and scenes of real medical operations are common. Doris Wishman, for instance, in her 1978 film on trans-genders and sex changing, “Let Me Die a Woman,” shows footage of sex change surgery that is nearly impossible for the average person to watch. She also has footage of a man who, after his sex change to woman, had sex too soon after his surgery. It is stomach-churning to see.

* For more on the business of pornography, see Frederick S. Lane, Obscene Profits: Entrepreneurs of Pornography in the Cyber Age, (Brunner-Routledge, 2001).

Money

Money is a kind of poetry.
– Wallace Stevens

Money, the long green, cash, stash, rhino, jack or just plain dough.
Chock it up, fork it over, shell it out. Watch it burn holes through pockets.
To be made of it! To have it to burn! Greenbacks, double eagles, megabucks and Ginnie Maes.
It greases the palm, feathers a nest, holds heads above water, makes both ends meet.
Money breeds money.
Gathering interest, compounding daily. Always in circulation.
Money. You don’t know where it’s been, but you put it where your mouth is. And it talks.

from The Gods of Winter
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Bulls in the China Shop: Obscenity Law in America

I met my wife in high school. For our first date, I took her to an X-rated movie. She loved it. I took that as a good sign. So did the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, which gave the movie an Oscar for best picture.

The story of Midnight Cowboy’s X rating is a benign lesson in cultural history. What shocks one generation may very well be mainstream to the next—whether it’s Stravinsky’s Rite of Spring or the Claude Monet paintings that art critics of his era dismissively labeled “Impressionism.”

In the realm of obscenity law, though, the same lesson is chilling. In earlier eras, men and women have gone to prison for the crime of selling Ulysses, Lady Chatterley’s Lover, and other novels that today you can find in the literature section of your local bookseller.

Pornography resides along the border between the rights protected by the Bill of Rights and the powers reserved to the states. The constitutional challenge for government is to formulate a definition of obscenity that includes only obscene materials. As Justice William Brennan explained, due process demands that obscenity be defined with sufficient clarity “to provide fair notice to persons who create and distribute sexually oriented materials, to prevent substantial erosion of protected speech as a by-product of the attempt to suppress unprotected speech, and to avoid costly institutional harms.”

Even if society were static—even if Midnight Cowboy had not been re-rated R a year after its release—the quest to define obscenity would be daunting. Justice Potter Stewart was hardly alone when he confessed in one case: “I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within [the] shorthand description [hardcore pornography]; and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I know it when I see it, and the motion picture involved in this case is not that.”

The New Hampshire Supreme Court concurred, comparing the problem of defining obscenity to the task of “nailing custard pies to trees.”

To understand the current state of American obscenity law, we need some of what Hollywood calls “back story.” Ours begins in 1663 with Sir Charles Sedley, gentleman and rake, who’d had a few too many pints on the night in question at a tavern preciently named “The Cock.” Sir Charles proceeded to strip naked, climb out on the tavern’s balcony, and exhibit his nether parts while shouting obscenities, offering for sale an aphrodisiac guaranteed to induce nymphomania, and heaving into the crowd bottles that were, according to the court reporter, “pist in.”

conviction marked the origins of Anglo-American obscenity law. As one legal scholar commented, “a flimsier, more appallingly pointless foundation for the superstructure of law that was later erected could hardly have been deliberately laid.”

Two hundred years later, that foundation received a jolt with publication of a spicy pamphlet entitled, “The Confessional Unmasked,” which featured “Questions put to Females in Confessional.” The case, Queen v. Hicklin, produced the first definition of obscenity:

Whether the tendency of the matter charged as obscenity is to deprave and corrupt those whose minds are open to such immoral influences, and into whose hands a publication of this sort may fall.

The Hicklin test crossed the Atlantic to receive the blessing of the United States Supreme Court in the 1896 case of Rosen v. United States. Lew Rosen had been convicted for publishing a girlie magazine entitled Tenderloin, whose pages included lovely females that, according to the Court, were “partially covered with lamp black that could be easily erased with a piece of bread.”

When members of the Court, slices of bread clasped in their hands, erased the lamp black, they were shocked to find “pictures of females in different attitudes of indecency.” Affirming the trial court’s use of Hicklin, the Court stated that the test was “quite as liberal as the defendant had any right to demand.”

Missing from that decision—and from others during the first half of the 20th century—is even an acknowledgment that any free speech concern is raised by a legal test that allows an entire book to be banned if a judge concludes that an isolated passage might “deprave and corrupt” a particularly susceptible person. Among Hicklin’s many casualties was Theodore Dreiser’s An American Tragedy, found obscene by the Massachusetts Supreme Court in 1930.

First Amendment concerns remained inchoate until the Roth decision in 1957. That’s when the Supreme Court finally acknowledged that sex and obscenity were not synonymous, and that sex “is one of the vital problems of human interest and public concern.” The Court held it essential “that the standards for judging obscenity safeguard the protection of freedom of speech and press for material which does not treat sex in a manner appealing to prurient interest.” The solution came to be known as the Roth test:

Pornography resides along the border between the rights protected by the Bill of Rights and the powers reserved to the states. The constitutional challenge for government is to formulate a definition of obscenity that includes only obscene materials.
Whether to the average person, applying contemporary community standards, the dominant theme of the material taken as a whole appeals to prurient interest.”

The Roth test corrected two flaws in the Hicklin test by requiring the material at issue to be “taken as a whole” (instead of focusing on an excerpt) and by making the audience “average” folks (instead of “particularly susceptible” ones). But new gaps emerged, especially absence of guidance for handling works of art that treated sexual topics in an explicit manner.

As a result, the Roth test soon lost the support of most of the Justices. During the 1960s, attempts to define the line between obscenity and the First Amendment produced, in the words of an exasperated Justice John Harlan, “a variety of views among the members of the Court unmatched in any other course of constitutional adjudication.”

The predictable result was unpredictability. For example, in a two-year period, the highest court in New York declared Henry Miller’s Tropic of Cancer obscene while the highest court of Massachusetts, applying the same constitutional test, declared it not obscene. Two years later, those courts reversed roles: Fanny Hill was banned in Boston but survived in New York.

By 1967, unable to forge a majority position, the high court introduced a new verb into the obscenity lexicon: to Redrup, named after the case in which the Court first unveiled it. A Redrup occurred whenever at least five members of the Court, each applying his own test, found the materials at issue to be protected by the First Amendment; when that occurred, the Court would reverse the conviction without an opinion. The mounting number of Redrups only emphasized the Court’s failure to give the lower courts coherent constitutional guidelines.

By early 1973, however, observers sensed that a major new obscenity decision was in the offing. The facts of two pending cases—both of which involved hardcore porn—presented the possibility of a radical new approach to the problem. The complaining witnesses in the first case—Miller v. California—were a mother and son who had received in the mail unsolicited advertising brochures for pornographic books, including Sex Orgies Illustrated. By contrast, the second case—Paris Adult Theatre I v. Slaton—involved the showing of pornographic films to consenting adults inside a movie theater whose exterior had no pictorial displays or descriptions of the contents of the movies and prominently displayed “adults only” warnings.

Thus one solution was to shift the focus from content to audience—to draw the boundary between consenting adults and the rest of the population. It was a solution the Court could anchor in its emerging body of privacy law.

On June 21, 1973, the Supreme Court handed down its decisions in Miller10 and Paris Adult Theatre11. Chief Justice Warren Burger, writing for the 5-4 majorities in both cases, rejected the privacy route: “This much has been categorically settled by the Court, that obscene material is unprotected by the First Amendment.” Instead, he outlined a new constitutional test for obscenity in Miller:

1. Whether the average person, applying contemporary community standards, would find that the work, taken as a whole, appeals to the prurient interest;
2. Whether the work depicts or describes, in a patently offensive way, sexual conduct specifically defined by the applicable state law; and
3. Whether the work, taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value.

Burger’s opinion placed the emphasis on “contemporary community standards.” “It is neither realistic nor constitutionally sound,” he wrote, “to read the First Amendment as requiring that the people of Maine or Mississippi accept public depiction of conduct found tolerable in Las Vegas or New York City.”

An important innovation was the second prong of the test. Most obscenity statutes failed to define what types of content were obscene, instead falling back on “shameful,” “morbid,” and other vagaries. Miller required that the patently offensive sexual conduct to be proscribed must be “specifically defined by state law.” Burger’s opinion gave examples of such definitions.

The Miller test caused consternation among free speech advocates, who viewed the state courts and legislators as bulls in the china shop of the First Amendment. And to be fair, there was a chilling early post-Miller misstep. Just two weeks after the announcement of the Miller test, the Georgia high court affirmed an obscenity conviction against a theater that had shown the critically acclaimed Mike Nichols movie Carnal Knowledge. But the U.S. Supreme Court not only reversed that conviction in Jenkins v. Georgia but did so with a stern reminder to the states that the “specificity” requirement in Part 2 of the Miller test established “substantive constitutional limitations” on the types of materials subject to a finding of obscenity.

And with that, the Justices withdrew from the obscenity wars.

Twice since then—first in 1979 and later on the 15th anniversary of the Miller decision—I had occasion to take a state-by-state review of what those bulls were doing in the china shop. And both times I was relieved to discover that they were doing a diligent job of policing the border between protected and unprotected expression. The highest state courts have applied the Miller test faithfully and vigilantly with deference to free speech concerns.
Ironically, the past three decades have seen the silent ascen-
dancy of the “privacy law” approach that the majority in Miller
thought it had rejected. Prosecutions involving access to hard-
core porn by consenting adults have dwindled to a trickle.

Then again, there may be a different explanation for the
transformation of American obscenity law—and the watershed
event may have occurred two years after the unveiling of the
Miller test. In 1975, the Sony Corporation introduced the video-
cassette recorder. To say the least, the VCR has transformed the
adult film industry. A sexually explicit film could now be enjoyed
in the comfort of your den instead of the discomfort of a seedy
theater filled with creepy men in raincoats.

The VCR was soon joined by cable television, satellite television,
and—finally—the Internet. By the year 2000, according to
the New York Times, pornography—and the attendant “commu-

nity standards”—had gone mainstream. Americans were renting
more than $4 billion of graphic sex videos a year. General Motors
Corporation, through its pay-per-view Direct TV subsidiary, was
selling more graphic sex films than Hustler founder Larry Flynt.
And one of every four Internet users—or approximately 21 mil-

lion Americans—visited one of the more than 60,000 sex sites
on the Web at least once a month.

And thus here we are, 30 years after Miller, with a decent
set of obscenity guidelines for a society that has gradually turned
from regulation of pornography to focus on costume malfunc-
tions during halftime shows, toilet humor by radio DJs, and
other examples of what the FCC has decreed to be “indecent.”
While America is a safer place for publishers of Ulysses, it is a
more dangerous place for broadcasters of glimpses of Janet
Jackson’s breasts. After more than three centuries, we have
come full circle to the realm of Sir Charles Sedley and his
“pist in” bottles.

Michael Kahn is a trial attorney specializing in intellectual property
and First Amendment matters. The author of Trophy Widow and
six other novels, he also teaches entertainment and media law at
Washington University School of Law.

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2 Jacobellis v. Ohio, 378 U.S. 184 (1964)
3 State v. Harding, 320 A.2d 646 (N.H. 1974)
4 The King v. Sir Charles Sedley 1 Sid. 168, pl. 29 (K. B. 1663).
6 161 U.S. 29 (1896)
8 Id. at 489.
(October 23, 2000).
Thanks largely, perhaps, to the success of a few generations of after school specials, nighttime docudramas, and Lifetime Television, stories of rape have become all too familiar. The conventional plot line in recent years typically follows a sympathetic young white woman through the ordeal of sexual assault and its aftermath; viewers or readers cheer on the young protagonist as she inevitably finds the road to physical and emotional recovery, often by pursuing and eventually winning a difficult courtroom battle against her attacker. The all-too-common final scene of these stories discovers the rape survivor emerging victoriously and newly strong from a courtroom, having (apparently) overcome the trauma of the rape itself and having been vindicated from any lingering doubt that the rape was somehow her fault. On one hand, the insistent retelling of stories of sexual assault in the popular media has made the subject of rape less taboo, a victory for rape survivors. On the other hand, fiction and the popular media have also given the story of rape a set of oddly comforting expectations that tend to assure the inevitable triumph of victims as they regain a sense of normalcy and strength as survivors of violence. Three recent additions to a growing array of rape stories—Alice Sebold's *Lucky* and Trisha Meili's *I Am the Central Park Jogger*, both autobiographical accounts of violent rape and its aftermath, and Gough Lewis's documentary film “Sex: The Annabel Chong Story”—test the conventional narrative to varying degrees. While Meili's story most readily conforms to the comforting narrative of trauma and recovery, Sebold's book and Lewis's film demand that we notice the constraints that attend the one-size-fits-all story of rape and its aftermath.

Of these stories, Meili's seems the most familiar. The subtitle to her book—“A Story of Hope and Possibility”—certainly promises a comforting narrative. After being violently attacked and left for dead in Central Park in 1989, Meili, known to the world only as the Central Park Jogger, won almost instant universal sympathy for her ordeal, particularly with the mainstream media. As a well-educated, white, upper-class young woman who was allegedly attacked by a gang of African-American men she had never met, she became a prominent—if strangely anonymous—figure in a call to confront violence in New York City and a symbol of hope for victims of violence everywhere. Her narrative charts her truly difficult road to recovery, beginning in the weeks after the attack (which she still cannot recollect), slowly emerging from a coma and persevering through numerous painful surgeries and grueling rehabilitation. As promised, Meili emerges triumphant from her ordeal. Against all odds, she eventually regains her physical and emotional strength, bravely testifies at the trial of her alleged attackers, heroically runs and finishes the New York Marathon, and—in near fairy-tale fashion—even finds true love. Meili's story is certainly worth reading not only for its inspirational account of the healing process, but also for its insistence on the sheer difficulty of overcoming the physical and emotional trauma of her brutal attack. She reminds us that after such an attack, life is never again exactly the same and recovery may never be truly complete.

More contentious, however, are the recent developments in the case against her alleged attackers, most of whom have been exonerated from the rape charges following the confession of prison inmate Matias Reyes, a man whose DNA matches evidence collected from Meili after the attack. Meili insists throughout her book that the story she tells is not about race, but rather about healing and recovery. However, by focusing exclusively on her personal journey, she avoids lingering questions about the underlying reasons for violence in general and sexual assault in particular. Casual readers captivated by Meili's intensely personal narrative might not recognize, for example, just how unusual her case is—how rare interracial rape is (only 3-4 percent of all rapes) or how infrequent stranger rape is (only about 20 percent of all rapes). Indeed, for many, the story of the Central Park Jogger is very much about race and a city's inability to own up to its prejudices. (New York Times reporter Don Terry has asked, for example, why Meili received vast media coverage when hers was but one of 28 rapes—some quite violent—reported in New York, 2003.)
York City that week.) For others, the story is also one about violence against women and the society’s reluctance to address rape as a crime of misused power that emerges from women’s unequal position in society.

Alice Sebold’s *Lucky*, by contrast, insists upon the anomalousness of the circumstances surrounding Sebold’s rape as a Syracuse freshman. Sebold, too, begins with an account of her violent rape, but quite unlike Meili’s pieced-together accounts, Sebold recounts her attack in graphic detail. The ensuing narrative traces the events surrounding the expected court battle—the prosecution and eventual conviction of her assailant—and highlights Sebold’s struggle to come to terms with her assault, including the painful process of disclosing it to family, friends, and others. Her book, however, goes out of its way to impress upon its readers the incredible difficulty involved in prosecuting even the most seemingly clear-cut of rape cases. (He was a stranger. She was a virgin. There was clear evidence of violence.) As it details the tremendous difficulty of even a case such as hers, Sebold’s story implicitly reminds us of how much more difficult the typical rape case—one that involves little physical evidence and acquaintances rather than strangers—is to prosecute. Sebold’s cynical assertion that she is “lucky”—both because she survived her attack and because she becomes an ideal victim in the eyes of the legal system—calls much-needed attention to the potentially devastating consequences of investing too readily in the closure and recovery promised by conventional courtroom dramas. Sebold’s own “Aftermath” section, with its admissions of depression, failed relationships, and substance abuse, also reminds us that the aftermath of rape doesn’t necessarily make for tidy narrative conclusions.

But what is perhaps most powerful and most tragic about Sebold’s book is the sheer number of other stories of sexual violence that emerge as Sebold shares the experience of her attack with others in her life. It seems as if every time Sebold recounts her trauma to someone else, another even more shocking account begins to surface. If Sebold is indeed the fortunate one who can reveal her rape and eventually be believed, others she meets—a society woman too ashamed to go public, a classmate raped throughout her life by family members, students who suffer repeated acts of violence, and family members compelled to remain silent—are not so lucky. At a time when many people respond skeptically to statistics reporting that one in four women will be victims of rape or attempted rape, Sebold insists that we notice the stories of rape that cannot be squeezed into the comforting narrative expectations many of us have come to hold. She begins to account for the many stories that cannot be fully told and that, as a consequence, remain tragically unheard.

If Sebold’s and Meili’s stories of sexual assault and its aftermath generally conform to the familiar, hopeful trajectory of trauma followed by recovery, Gough Lewis’s documentary, *Sex: The Annabel Chong Story*, is, in important respects, a different story altogether. In fact, a viewer who leaves the room for just a few minutes might even miss any mention of sexual assault at all amidst the larger, fast-paced account of the life of Annabel Chong, a porn actress best known for breaking a world record by having sex with 251 men in a single day.

Neither the film nor Annabel herself seems to attach much lasting significance to an incident in Annabel’s life in which a consensual sexual encounter turned into a cruel gang rape. Attentive viewers, however, might be more tempted to connect the powerlessness of her brutal attack to her relentless pursuit of agency and power through staged sex; Annabel’s world-record-setting sexual activity seems eerily like a carefully orchestrated version of the gang rape years earlier. While Annabel’s insistence that her participation in pornography is an exercise of her individuality and celebratory control over her own body in an exploitative world, the film also takes care to expose the costs of such apparent control, including Annabel’s practice of self-mutilation and the pain her career causes her family.

The recent merging of the genres of trauma narrative and more traditional autobiography has enabled the discussion about rape to become less secretive and its victims less stigmatized. Sebold’s book and Lewis’s film in particular, however, demonstrate the need for new narratives to tell the story of rape—even if these new kinds of stories cannot hold out the promise of comforting conclusions. They insist that there be room for narratives of rape that can make less familiar-looking survivors of violence intelligible to others—and themselves—in terms we are more prepared to hear.

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An Interview with Biographer Geoffrey C. Ward

Geoffrey C. Ward is one of the leading biographers and historians currently on the scene. He has written virtually all the scripts for Ken Burns’s documentaries and the books that have accompanied these films including The Civil War: An Illustrated History (1990), Jazz: A History of America’s Music (2000), and Baseball: An Illustrated History (1996). Burns’s latest project is Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson. The film tells the story of the first black heavyweight champion, Jack Johnson (1878-1946) and the intense disapproval he evoked because of his romances with white women. The documentary will air on PBS on Monday, January 17, 2005. Ward’s accompanying book is the best biography written about the boxer and is a rich account of his times. Here are some questions posed to him:

Unforgivable Blackness includes vivid accounts of his early career in his own words.

The years of Johnson’s professional rise as a boxer are during the era of the controversy between W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington. Is Johnson as significant a figure in defining this era in African-American history as Du Bois and Washington? Is Johnson important in helping us understand the Progressive Era generally?

The controversy that swirled around him tells us a lot about race relations around the turn of the 20th century, but Johnson himself resisted being seen by anyone, black or white, as a symbol of anything. He was simply himself. Booker T. Washington deplored him. Du Bois didn’t think much of him, either, but defended his right to live his life as he wished. The title of the book comes from Du Bois: since whites didn’t seem concerned about the character of white athletes (or white statesmen, for that matter), he wrote, the only reason for “the thrill of national disgust” he inspired must be his “unforgivable blackness.”

As a biographer, what were the biggest challenges you faced in writing about an African-American boxer who lived at the turn of the century and who was probably not accurately portrayed in the press?

I’ve been writing American history and biography for some 30 years now and thought when I began this project, that I knew something of the harshness of American racism in Johnson’s time. But nothing had prepared me for the viciousness of the newspaper coverage he inspired. Thousands of stories describe him alternately as a buffoon or a demon and his words are usually rendered in a kind of Uncle Remus dialect that makes even the most serious things he said seem clownish. To try to get closer to his authentic voice I decided early on to restore conventional English spelling to whatever he was reported to have said. (I didn’t alter any of the words or correct any of the grammar.)

Do you fear that Johnson, because he was a black boxer of a bygone era, might have limited appeal to the general audience that you and Burns have developed?

It seems to me that Jack Johnson’s life is an all-American story, the compelling tale of a man who acted always on the American premise that superior skill and unshakable resolve should be all a man needs to succeed—and proved it, at least for a time, against seemingly insurmountable odds. I hope people like it, both on paper and on screen.

Is there any other athlete you would consider for yourself as a subject for a biography?

I doubt that any other athlete’s story contains so many rich complexities. But who knows?

Interviewed by Gerald Early.
A Russian Sonderweg?


In the first half of the 19th century, Sergei Uvarov, the Educational Minister in the government of Emperor Nicholas I, defined Russia’s official identity as Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and “Narodnost,” “nationality,” being the European romantic notion that each nation possessed unique traits and a unique role in the unfolding of cosmic history. Nativist Slavophiles, reacting to European charges of national insignificance, defiantly defined Russia’s essence as the simple Orthodoxy of the Russian peasant, a pacific and mutual non-interference between the Russian tsar and his people, a collective spirit, “sobornost,” best seen in the peasant commune, just as the West was defined by Catholicism, individualism, rationalism, and a Classical tradition of law that mitigated the incessant conflict between rulers and the ruled. Contemporary Westernizers defined Russia as simply a backward European nation, which should adopt democracy, end tsarist arbitrariness, abandon Orthodox obscurantism, liberate women, and pursue education and economic development. Enlightened bureaucrats, the men who would craft the Great Reforms and emancipate the serfs in the next generation, held that Russia under serfdom was not genetically different, only underdeveloped, but moving inexorably in the same direction as England, Germany, the Netherlands, or France.

What all of these confrontational positions had in common was both a strong propensity to measure Russia by European standards, and having their roots in an amorphous body of thought best described as German idealism, as well they might: a German academic tradition had long dominated Russian institutions of higher education. Over a century earlier, after a momentous victory in the Great Northern War, Emperor Peter the Great had also described world history as fundamentally a European process: like the circulation of blood in human bodies, he said, the “arts and sciences” had once transmigrated from their birthplace in ancient Greece to Rome to be reborn in the Renaissance and had since dispersed to the other European nations. Now, the great Europeanizer confidently stated, should Russians but *ore et labore*, pray and work, this package of culture would deign to visit Russia, and afterwards surely to return to Greece, ending the cycle of a Euro-world history.

Marshall Poe has previously demonstrated that by the Petrine era in the early 18th century, Europeans had been teaching Russians already for the previous 200 years to measure themselves by a European yardstick. Far worse, he here argues, contemporary professional historians who should know better, and political pundits who could care less, have bought into this Eurocentrism, the notion that there was but one European path to modernity. His little essay, a provocative evening’s reading, is a plea to see Russian history in its own unique terms, embarked on its own path.

One should begin, he insists, by discarding the assumption that Russia is European, or for that matter, that it is Asian. What, other than a geographical exaggeration, unites Russia and Belgium? Or Russia and Laos? Better, he suggests, to regard Russia as Russia, a historical experience unto itself.

Old Muscovy, in his view, was unlettered, uneducated, agriculturally mediocre, commercially insignificant, technically unsophisticated, but above all, poor. Among many pre-modern empires around the globe, Incas, Aztecs, Ottomans, Safavids, Mongols, and Qing, however, Russia was the only one to survive the enormous military and financial challenges of the early-modern European gunpowder revolution. Somehow the tsar and warrior elite of this perennially impoverished and frequently invaded wasteland mobilized the resources of its peasantry and tiny merchant establishment to permit not only a survival unique among
continental realms, but indeed to create the world-altering power of the Russian Empire/Soviet Union.

How? The mechanism that allowed this extraordinary and improbable survival was not Europeanization, but autocracy, or political slavery, a socio-political system which permitted no division of power (as in feudalism), no competing estates or independent cities. Already in the 16th century, European travelers universally recognized Muscovy’s political and social system to be different. It controlled its borders, mobilized the land and its population, and militarily modernized in some unfamiliar manner which, however, resembled a kind of national slavery. European monarchs mobilized their resources by granting representation to free towns and to a complex social order through parliaments and assemblies of their social estates. Russia’s warrior elite faced no internal competition. It constantly and effectively warned of the threat of invasion, and for centuries the Russian masses assented to autocracy as in their own best interest. This was the “Russian Moment,” the unique survival and expansion of Muscovy/Russia/Soviet Union from the 16th century until 1991, based on its own political principles.

My own students have long heard this phenomenon described as “the genius of the Romanovs.” Beginning with its steppe army and serfdom in the 17th century, and continuing beyond the age of “self-government” in the era of the Great Reforms, the Romanovs were always able to mobilize society inexpensively to do what was needed, without writing the salary checks demanded by free Europeans. The Romanovs, for example, created a gentry from its old warrior elite by granting them the revenues from enserfed land. It enjoyed prestige, it still defended the state against invasion, but it also served as the unsalaried police, social welfare office, and judiciary in the countryside, saving the state untold sums over the 200 years from 1649 to 1861.

Poe therefore firmly rejects such modern commentators as Isabel de Madariaga who maintains that early-modern Europeans wrote autocrat (samoderzhets) when they meant nothing more than sovereign, or Cynthia Hyla Whittaker, who goes so far as to suggest that the tsar/Imperator was somehow “elected.”

Poe extends the Russian Moment into the Soviet period: Soviet socialism turned out to bear a remarkable resemblance to the Russian tradition it pretended to transform. A tiny elite at the head of a slightly larger ruling class dominated the entire enterprise. There would be no politics in the ordinary republican sense…. Subjects had no enforceable rights … The borders were closed and public discourse severely restricted…. Land and labor were nationalized in the interest of the state…. Finally resources were poured into a military modernization program aimed directly at keeping the West at bay.

In short, the Russians [under the Soviets] seem to have traveled the same road to modernity that they had traveled to early modernity, one characterized by autocracy, command economics, cultural insularity, and an emphasis on arms. (p. 82)

Recognition of this enduring Russian Moment, of course, does not imply Poe’s approval, as he is fully aware that the “Communists—particularly under Stalin—were guilty of the greatest crimes against humanity.” But not “only did the Soviet program succeed within its borders, it provided much of the undeveloped world with a reproducible road to modern infrastructure” (p. 83), in short, an illiberal, authoritarian model for national survival.

Having differentiated “two competing paths to modernity, the European and the Russian,” Poe is inclined to end this “remarkable story” in 1991, when “Russia suddenly and unexpectedly descended into a premodern condition” (p. 87). Here he may err. As President Putin and his old KGB friends systematically dismantle the federalism of the Constitution of 1993, shamelessly manipulate elections, curtail the free press to guarantee electoral apathy, and directly assail the free-market capitalists who emerged after 1991, yet another chapter in the long history of the autocratic Russian moment may yet be written.

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The Wild Man and His Films


The legendary screenwriter Ben Hecht once quipped, “All you have to do to make a screenwriter behave is gag him with thousand dollar bills.” Such advice appears to be wasted on Joe Eszterhas, whose tell-all autobiography, *Hollywood Animal*, describes his rise to fame and fortune as Hollywood’s highest paid screenwriter. With his boisterous personality and rock star appearance (think of a cross between fat Elvis and Willie Nelson), Eszterhas also became the industry’s most visible screenwriter, and he appeared regularly on *The Today Show* and other media outlets to defend and promote his often controversial work.

Not surprisingly, *Hollywood Animal* shows that Eszterhas’s life was as lurid and melodramatic as anything he portrayed on screen. Eszterhas sets the tone in the first few pages of the book when he relates an incident involving bad-boy producer Robert Evans. During pre-production work on *Sliver* (1993), Evans had a telegram hand-delivered to Eszterhas by one of his many ingénues, who came to the screenwriter’s hotel room dressed in nothing but a mink coat and proceeded to extract the telegram from her vagina. It read, “Best first draft I ever read. Love Evans.” Eszterhas himself adds, “The note smelled fantastic.”

The incident is quite typical of *Hollywood Animal*, which details the screenwriter’s alcoholism, drug use, infidelities, and pitched battles with studio executives. Readers interested in Hollywood dirt will not be disappointed. Eszterhas offers a great deal of “behind the scenes” gossip about his early failures, his breakthrough success with *Flashdance* (1982) and *Jagged Edge* (1985), and the later public relations problems caused by his three exploitation classics: *Basic Instinct* (1992), *Jade* (1995), and *Showgirls* (1995). Eszterhas also offers several “war stories” regarding his work with unscrupulous agents and beautiful, but conniving starlets. Much of Eszterhas’s ire is reserved for Mike Ovitz, the head of CAA, the most powerful talent agency in Hollywood in the ‘80s and ‘90s. After Eszterhas asked a friend from a rival agency to represent him, Ovitz utilized Mafia-style intimidation tactics to keep Eszterhas at CAA. Eszterhas, however, managed to extricate himself from Ovitz’s clutches by leaking a letter to the press that publicly accused the *uberagent* of threatening to ruin the screenwriter’s career and even “blow his brains out.”

Eszterhas’s other great nemesis is *Basic Instinct* star Sharon Stone. Unlike the situation with Ovitz, however, Eszterhas’s problems with Stone were much more personal than professional. Although Eszterhas alleges that he enjoyed a brief flirtation with Stone after the production of *Basic Instinct* wrapped, he insists that their relationship was fueled by marijuana and Cristal champagne rather than lust. That said, during the production of *Sliver*, Stone eventually became involved with Bill Macdonald, the head of Robert Evans’ production company, thereby setting off a romantic roundelay that came to include Eszterhas; his wife, Gerri; and Macdonald’s cuckolded spouse, Naomi.

Eszterhas is quick to link Stone to Catherine Trammell, the murderous, manipulative, and polymorphously perverse heroine from *Basic Instinct*, but he all too easily absolves himself for the subsequent destruction of his own marriage. Revealing his sturdy Catholic roots, Eszterhas implicitly suggests that his account of myriad one-night stands and his later affair with Naomi constitutes a public confession of guilt that itself serves as proper penance for these indiscretions. Yet, after branding Stone with the Scarlet Letter, Eszterhas justifies his own actions by demonizing Gerri and suggesting that the emotional harm he caused is more or less outweighed by the genuine love he shares with Naomi. After reading these chapters, one might well conclude that Eszterhas’s ethics are as sleazy as his films.

Yet beneath the glitz, decadence, and corruption of Hollywood lurks a second storyline that details Eszterhas’s experiences growing up as a Hungarian immigrant in Cleveland. In these chapters devoted to childhood and adolescence, Eszterhas describes his love for his rabidly anti-Communist father, his fear and concern for his paranoid and delusional mother, his experiences in a refugee camp, his emigration to America, his juvenile delinquency, his assault of another teen with a baseball bat, and his fondness for rock and roll and masturbation. Eszterhas’s childhood offers plenty for armchair psychologists to chew on. For example, the screenwriter recalls that during his shipboard journey to America, he stayed with his mother in a steerage area filled with cots for other female refugees. Not yet six years old, Eszterhas was fascinated with the bodies of these women as they would disrobe for bed each night. One can only imagine the bruised and emaciated condition of these Hungarian refugees, but Eszterhas himself characterizes the scene as his first sexual awakening. In retrospect, such a primordial moment might well explain Eszterhas’s depictions of women in his screenplays, who seem to constantly oscillate between their roles as sex objects and victims.

In perhaps the most provocative episode in his autobiography, Eszterhas relates his experiences working on *The Music Box* (1989), a courtroom drama starring Jessica Lange as an attorney defending her father against accusations of Nazi war atrocities.
About a year after the film’s premiere, Eszterhas learns that his own father is being investigated by the Department of Justice, which suspects him of being a Nazi collaborator. During the inquiry, Eszterhas discovers that his beloved father had worked in the Hungarian Propaganda Ministry and had written several hateful, anti-Semitic tracts. Moreover, Eszterhas finds out that both his parents were members of the Arrow Cross, Hungary’s version of the Nazi Party. In a twist that could only take place in Hollywood, Eszterhas’s partly autobiographical script for The Music Box suddenly veers much too close to his personal reality.

As a stylist, Eszterhas writes lucid journalistic prose. Although it might seem strange to call a 700-page book “terse,” Eszterhas composes punchy sentences seemingly inspired by his adolescent exposure to Ernest Hemingway and Mickey Spillane. Ever the screenwriter, Eszterhas even structures his narrative like a screenplay by introducing his chapters with references to common cinematic techniques, like voice-overs, close-ups, and flashbacks. Moreover, the chapter titles themselves indicate Eszterhas’s tabloid sensibilities and also allude to the graphic depictions of sex and violence typically found in his trashy, but popular films. Samples include “I Kill Rocky Balboa,” “Michael Eisner Pimps the Teamsters,” “Michael Ovitz Fondles My Knife,” and “Blood and Hair on the Walls.”

Looking back on the book, I would have liked to read more about Eszterhas’s work as a novelist and journalist. Before coming to Hollywood, the future screenwriter was an investigative reporter for Rolling Stone and The Cleveland Plain-Dealer, and his novel, Charlie Simpson’s Apocalypse, was nominated for a National Book Award. But if there is one thing Eszterhas knows, it is the base desires and vulgar tastes of his audience. Why waste paper on the craft of writing when one can gossip instead about Sylvester Stallone, Glenn Close, Bob Dylan, and Elizabeth Berkley? Joe Eszterhas’s Hollywood Animal is precisely that kind of book: highly readable and quite revelatory about Hollywood deal-making and decadence. As the highest paid screenwriter in Hollywood, Eszterhas has lived an amazing life and reading about it is one of the great guilty pleasures of my summer. But like any day at the beach, after finishing Eszterhas’s tome, you might want to take a shower afterward.

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Letters to the Director

Hello, Dr. Early:
October 2, 2004

I lived in St. Louis for many years and used to enjoy hearing you speak at various occasions. I’ve been receiving Belles Lettres unsolicited I guess since it started. I have enjoyed it, but have thought it too brief and was glad of the decision to expand it.

But I was puzzled and a bit disappointed in your review of Stephen Mansfield’s The Faith of George Bush in the current issue.

1. Nobody but nobody I’ve heard of underestimates the political skills of George W. and his team.

2. Ann Richards is a particularly wonderful sort of Texas woman. There are a fair number of them: tough, outspoken, funny, hard-edged, and hard-working. Anglos. Republicans and Democrats. Ann Richards was not naive about George W. He won in part by casting doubts on whether she was sober or was having current substance abuse problems. He won in part because Karl Rove and his team were in the process of systematically knocking the lynchpins out of the Democratic Party here by means that seeped past the normal dirty politics of the past. And of course the Democrats, an odd mix of progressive and Dixiecrat, had been masters of dirty politics.

Among other Democrats in the United States, anti-Bush Texas Democrats—the native Texans especially—are not what you call Cosmopolites. They are progressives in the tradition of labor, both urban and rural. They have roots in the struggle to make a living in a harsh land. They have a grand tradition of writing and talking and preaching and running for and holding office.

3. People around here remember Bush differently from the way Mansfield portrays him.

4. Away from urban universities, there actually are a lot of people of faith, even of evangelical faith, who have grave doubts about Bush, who feel he does not see poverty in a Christian way. Anyone coming to Texas would say that the
results of his efforts have left the poor with a lot more responsibility and an infinite amount less of resources than the rich.

5. People in Texas don’t consider themselves “provincial” whether they be Democratic or Republican. Nobody here in Texas that I know uses the words “provincial” or “cosmopolite” to describe Bush, Kerry, or anyone else.

6. You buy into the “Bush as a success” story. In fact he had to be bailed out of a number of ventures, and his family has been known to regard him as a bit of slacker, to say the least.

7. The Vulcans are very smart, but they are ideologues, fanatics. Really.

8. People support Bush for a variety of reasons, some pretty complicated. I don’t, but I know people who do, and they aren’t necessarily religious.

Your article seemed to accept the characterization of our country as two fairly undifferentiated lumps. This is just inaccurate. But worse, you seem to let Bush bask in a strange fuzzy glow like that Televangelists get shown in while you degrade what you see as the liberal left in a totally unjust way. You need to look beyond The Academy for sure. There’s a whole world out here of people who don’t support Bush.

Finally I would like to say that I think there are a lot of people across the political spectrum who would like to see some core values in evidence in the public life of the country. As a practicing Christian, I am one of them. But I don’t think that “intolerance in the form of courageous conviction” is any way to go for the country as a whole, even in the context of “an old fashioned sense of tolerance.” Currently, the religious right is financially supporting efforts to undermine religious tolerance of homosexuality, etc., etc. I think the “old fashioned sense of tolerance” may exist in Bush, and probably does, but the religious right will dump him if he doesn’t support their agenda. They have seized the public forum and make it hard for others of conviction to speak. Many people of faith, including Catholic clergy, understand that the abortion issue and the stem cell research issue among others are complicated, not black and white, and don’t like that there is a lack of public space for discussing them.

If George W. wanted the world to be like Midland, he’d have bought his ranch there, I suspect. Anyway, you ought to go to Midland for a visit to understand more. Or just come see Texas. It’s an amazing state. Or at least subscribe to The Texas Observer. It’s a great liberal political rag.

Esther Buddenhagen
San Antonio, TX

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Gerald Early:
Oct 13, 2004

When I get magazines like Belles Lettres it is usually with no sense of gratitude—one more thing to skim and pitch.

Your Sept-Nov issue proved an exception. I finally got around to “skimming” and was surprised that it took two nights.

I especially enjoyed the articles on Bush, Rose, and comics—even though I believe Bush deserves to lose, never paid much attention to Rose, and gave up comics in my teens. I also enjoyed a few lines in the John Morris story.

For credibility—I’m not even pitching the issue, but giving it to my son—a Bush-man, baseball fan, and game creator.

To add to your survey data—I don’t like fiction, poetry, or verbiage about scholars and writers. What do I like—plain English and honest words. Please don’t send it more than once a quarter—but please keep me on your distribution.

Dan Steinmeyer
Isaac Bashevis Singer: A Celebration

In honor of the 100th anniversary of Isaac Bashevis Singer’s birth July 14, 1904, the National Endowment for the Humanities, in association with the American Library Association and the Library of America, gave grants to 60 institutions nationwide to hold Singer-related programs. As part of the celebration the St. Louis Public Library held a series of three events. (The Saul Brodsky Library in Creve Coeur was the only other beneficiary of these grants in Missouri.) This article is based on my remarks presented July 13, 2004, to patrons of the Schlafly Branch at one of these events.

It seems appropriate to be celebrating the centenary of Isaac Bashevis Singer’s birth concurrently with the World’s Fair centennial. Today the World’s Fair is perhaps most famous not only for the enormous Ferris wheel, the hot dog, and the ice cream cone, but also the human displays, the side shows of Filipinos and African pygmies under the guise of ethnology. Bashevis Singer’s work presents anthropology under the guise of sideshows, portraying the great colorful diversity of humanity—and sometimes of the demonic—in his stories.

In the World’s Fair of literature, Singer deserves a palace of his own (or at least a long stretch on the pike). A prolific writer, he preserves and recreates a home that is no longer, a way of life that had all but disappeared by the time he took pen to hand. Singer built his palace between tradition and secularism, belief and doubt, mysticism and nihilism. This palace is made from bricks of Yiddish, based on a strong foundation of traditional storytelling and Jewish source texts; decorated in a mix of earthiness bordering on the carnal and the lewd, accented by the supernatural; furnished with moral dilemmas, crises of faith, and unexplained events; inhabited by survivors, ghosts, and fellow-writers.

Choice of language

Yiddish is a specifically Jewish language, based on an older form of German, with a great deal of Hebrew, and varying degrees of Russian, Polish, and other languages. While it was once the vernacular of most of the European Jewish population, today its use is largely limited to ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities and hardly more than a handful of scholars and diehards. Whether dismissed as “jargon” or championed as a language in its own right, Yiddish was daily vernacular of several million Jews. Others have written on the division of labor between Hebrew and Yiddish: where Hebrew was used in religious, scholarly, and legal spheres, Yiddish was “the language of the simple people and of the women, the language of the mothers which preserved fairytales and anecdotes, legends, and memories for hundreds of years past, through a history which seems to have left nothing untried in the way of agony, passions, aberrations, cruelty, bestiality, but also of heroism, love, and self-sacrifice.”

Hebrew was the language of the synagogue and the beider (school); the public; Yiddish, of the marketplace and the home: the domestic and the private. Hebrew thus was seen as masculine and Yiddish as feminine, but in reality, those credited with establishing a rich body of literature in Yiddish were almost exclusively men.

There is a long and lively tradition of Yiddish literature from the 18th and 19th century. Many of the founders of Modern Hebrew Literature, indeed, began their literary careers composing in Yiddish, and shifted away for ideological not aesthetic reasons. By the 20th century, however, this once thriving literary tradition was starting to wane because of dwindling readership, and even more so after World War II.

By the 20th century, however, this once thriving literary tradition was starting to wane because of dwindling readership, and even more so after World War II.
The Yiddishist Yossi Birstein, Singer’s Israeli counterpart, labeled Yiddish a silent language, one that was both deaf and mute. Birstein, who just recently passed away, shifted to Hebrew in his later years, but Singer remained true to his only literary medium. “Yiddish is the wise and humble language of us all, the idiom of frightened and hopeful humanity.” Yet he was apparently aware of the futility of such: when one of his several writer-characters is encouraged to write in Yiddish, the character asks: “For whom? For the yeshiva boys?” In his youth, Singer was himself dismayed by the Yiddish writers whose own families spoke a cultured Polish. He was clearly concerned with the demise of the language even before millions of Yiddish speakers were killed in the Holocaust. He dedicated his writing life to Yiddish, “a language of exile, without a land, without frontiers, not supported by any government, a language which possesses no words for weapons, ammunition, military exercises, war tactics; a language that was despised by both gentiles and emancipated Jews.”

In his Nobel Acceptance Speech he claimed:

One can find in the Yiddish tongue and in the Yiddish spirit expressions of pious joy, lust for life, longing for the Messiah, patience and deep appreciation of human individuality. There is a quiet humor in Yiddish and a gratitude for every day of life, every crumb of success, each encounter of love. The Yiddish mentality is not haughty. It does not take victory for granted. It does not demand and command but it muddles through, sneaks by, smuggles itself amidst the powers of destruction, knowing somewhere that God’s plan for Creation is still at the very beginning…

When asked why he wrote in a dying language, he gave several reasons in his Nobel Prize Banquet Speech: he felt it the most appropriate language for the ghosts he wrote of and for; he still had hope that the language could be revived (pointing to the example of Hebrew); he felt most comfortable writing in his mother tongue.

What Singer has done is make Yiddish into his homeland and an important link to the past and the Jewish people. Using the language gives voice to the victims and survivors. His choice is based in a certain morality—it honors the memory of millions—and in a certain logic—he uses the survivors’ language for their experiences. “For whom do you write?” he is asked in his memoir, Lost in America, “For Jews who read Yiddish?” “Yes,” he replies, “those are my readers.”

But his readership extends well beyond those fluent in Yiddish. Having started out as a translator himself, Singer was ever aware of the importance of translation. “The ‘other’ language in which the author’s work must be rendered does not tolerate obscurity, puns, and linguistic tinsel. It teaches the author to deal with events rather than with their interpretation and to let the events speak for themselves. The ‘other’ language is often the mirror in which we have a chance to see ourselves with all our imperfections and, if possible, to correct some of our mistakes.”

Some of his translators were more like collaborators working in close contact with him as they transformed the language of his works into English. Some worked independently. At least one couldn’t read his handwriting and would work side by side with Singer who would read the Yiddish to her and she would prepare the rough draft on the spot. Both author and translator would revise and edit as they proceeded, taking into account differences in the religious, cultural, and literary contexts of his new audience. Although Yiddish purists might protest, Singer considered the English translations of his stories to be his compositions as well, calling them second originals. Nearly all translations in languages other than Hebrew and English are from the English versions.

**Writer as character**

The Singer portrayed in his memoirs differs from the image of the old-fashioned Nobel Laureate. Described as “a quiet, intense figure with a bald dome, a fine-boned face, and delicate skin that seemed almost transparent. A demonic aura hovered about him, reinforced by glinting blue eyes and high prominent ears.”

Always of a slight build, he also had red hair when younger. As an older man, he continued to haunt cafeterias and delis in Manhattan—Famous Restaurant on 72nd Street—dressed in a dark suit, white shirt, and tie. Only in Miami Beach did he begin to dress less formally. A late photograph shows him posing with his wife of 50 years, his arm around her shoulder, leaning forward, a kindly grandfather with only the slightest hint of an ironic streak in the line of his smile.

His own memoirs create the image of someone beset by poverty, lust, and despair. Thoughts of suicide plague the protag-
Gimpel the Fool

“Gimpel the Fool” was Bashevis Singer’s breakthrough story. When it was translated and published by Saul Bellow in the Partisan Review May 1953, it garnered a great deal of positive attention, and a few years later it was included in his first collection as the title story (published by Noonday press). The piece begins with the narrator protagonist introducing himself: “I am Gimpel the Fool. I don’t think myself a fool. On the contrary. But that’s what folks call me.”

The character reveals himself to be an extremely naïve and good-natured fellow. He offers us a number of examples in which he is conned.

And I like a golem believed everyone. In the first place, everything is possible, as it is written in the Wisdom of the Fathers, I’ve forgotten just how. Second, I had to believe when the whole town came down on me! If I ever dared to say, “Ah, you’re kidding!” there was trouble. People got angry: “What do you mean! You want to call everyone a liar?” What was I to do? I believed them and I hope at least that did some good.

Note the language in the passage: the simplicity of both the words and the concepts, the references to both the mythical golem (a lump of earth or clay brought to life) and the book Pirkei Avot, the inherent logic and the narrator’s desire to do good. Not a scholar (“I’ve forgotten just how”) or an intellectual force, he has the entire community to contend with. He consults with the rabbi who advises him: “Better to be a fool all your days than for one hour to be evil.” But before even leaving the courtyard, he is duped by the rabbi’s own daughter. She has him kiss a wall telling him that it’s the law, one needs to do so after every visit. Of course, when he complies the impish girl laughs at his gullibility. Even in the rabbi’s household Gimpel cannot remain unscathed.

Gimpel is an orphan, taught the baker’s trade, and then led into a marriage with a shrewish woman, who limps and already has one illegitimate child (who she claims as her younger brother). Despite his own realization—“No bread will ever be baked from this dough”—Gimpel agrees to the match. The town sponsors the wedding, held near the gates of the cemetery. Just four short months after the wedding the bride brings forth a child. And despite the fact that the bride has not allowed him into the marital bed, she convinces her bridegroom, or so it would seem, that the child is his and merely premature. For his part, Gimpel finds his abrasive and abusive wife charming and though she beats him, he does what he can to pamper her. “What’s one to do? Shoulders are from God, and burdens too.” As in many later works, Singer offers a skeptical, even dubious, take on relations between men and women. Marriage is doomed, and the connection between violence and desire is demonstrated. (In this case the violence is hers, the desire his.)

Gimpel catches his wife in bed with another man—twice—and allows her denials to stand. “What’s the good of not believing?” he asks the reader, “Today it’s your wife you don’t believe; tomorrow it’s God Himself you won’t take stock in.” For 20 years they live together, and only on her deathbed does the wife ask his forgiveness, confessing that none of the six children were
his. “Whose are they?” he asks. “I don’t know,” she replies with her last breath, “there were a lot… But they’re not yours.”

After her death, he is visited by an evil spirit that urges him to get his revenge, and briefly gives in, urinating on the morning’s dough and baking it into loaves. But before offering the tainted bread for sale, he buries it. As penance he takes his leave from his children and from the village, and spends the rest of his life wandering and telling stories. At the end of the narrative he is prepared for death—a shroud in his beggar’s sack, the burial plank near the door of his hovel, and the gravedigger’s spade at the ready. He looks forward to death: “Whatever may be there,” he concludes, “it will be real, without complication, without ridicule, without deception. God be praised: there even Gimpel cannot be deceived.”

At first glance, the story fits into the tradition of “fool literature,” and indeed, Singer would go on to publish a variation on the classic: “The Wise Men of Chelm.” His literature is full of fools, shlemiels, and shlimazels. It also offers us a taste of the grotesque, so rampant in Singer’s stories. Gimpel is so gullible as to be ludicrous, and so passively accepting of those who trick him that it seems as if he may deserve the terrible things that happen to him. In one possible reading the story is actually holding Gimpel’s goodness up for judgment, criticizing his blind faith and his dependence on the rabbi who offers nothing of help. (Remember that the rabbi’s own daughter hoodwinks him just moments after he meets with the rabbi.) The irony is in the gap between the narrator Gimpel, and the implied author of the story.

But the ending doesn’t necessarily allow this reading. Gimpel’s more sophisticated philosophy demands a rereading and reassessment of his character. Gimpel is a modern Job, challenged by fate and tempted by the evil spirit. He loses his wife and also his children. They are taken from him by her deathbed confession. And yet, like Job, throughout all of his trials and tribulations his faith stands firm, wavering briefly only to emerge stronger.

Having left his bakery behind, he becomes a storyteller. He characterizes the content of his stories as “improbable things that could never have happened.” But this is just after his statement that in his travels he heard “many lies and falsehoods,” but continues correctly: “the longer I lived the more I understood that there were really no lies. Whatever doesn’t really happen is dreamed at night. It happens to one if it doesn’t happen to another, tomorrow if not today, or a century hence if not next year.” In this statement the character alludes to the tension between reality and storytelling, a tension that recurs in Singer’s literature. The character becomes an early portrait of the artist as another man, or a model for him to aspire to. Thus, there is no ironic gap between the character and his author; it is not Gimpel who is being criticized for his gullibility and passivity, but those who would take advantage of him.

It is clear from the way the other characters treat Gimpel, and the characterization of his wife, that the shtetl was neither Edenic nor inhabited by pure and noble souls. By this short story alone, Singer has freed the Jewish village from nostalgia and from rosy misperceptions.

While Singer set some later pieces in New York and even Tel Aviv, it is his fictional recreation of Bilgoray, the village in which he grew up, that sits at the center of his body of work. The apparently timeless setting gave him opportunity to consider his main concerns: relationships between men and women, the nature of desire, the role of belief, and so forth.

Yentl

Another of his village stories considers the role of women in the shtetl culture. “Yentl” begins with a feminist-like protest against a girl’s fate: “What becomes of a girl when the wedding’s over? Right away she starts bearing and rearing…”

Yentl’s father taught her from the traditional Jewish sources as if she were a son, and in fact stated that she had “the soul of a man.” After her father’s death frees her from fulfilling social expectations of marriage and motherhood, she sells her house and leaves the village, now masquerading as a young man whose name is Anshel. Along the way she-as-Anshel meets a yeshiva student named Avigdor who persuades her to join his school; he becomes her study partner and best friend. Avigdor tutors her in mishnah and gemara, and she in turn brings him treats from the bakery, mends his clothes and buys him gifts.

Avigdor, still mourning the end of his engagement to the town rich man’s only daughter Hadas, is quickly betrothed to the widow Peshe, and leaves the yeshiva to study at his future father-in-law’s. Yentl-as-Anshel marries Hadas herself as per Avigdor’s suggestion. She is tormented by the deception of her masquerade but unable to stop her descent down the slippery slope. As Avigdor’s marriage falls apart, Anshel and Hadas offer him a place of refuge. The two yeshiva students again study together, and Anshel resumes bringing Avigdor treats from the bakery as his shrewish wife Peshe no longer tends to him.

Anshel is more and more distressed by her deception: “The lie was swelling like an abscess and one of these days it must surely burst.” She finally reveals her secret to a stunned Avigdor. She counsels him to divorce Peshe and marry Hadas. Avigdor expresses regrets regarding her, barely hinting that he would like to marry her. “It wouldn’t have been good,” Yentl tells him, “I’m neither one nor the other… I wanted to study Gemara and Commentaries with you, not darn your socks!” Avigdor’s thoughts echo Yentl’s father’s words, declaring that she has the “soul of a man.” The town never does find out the mystery behind Anshel’s sudden divorce from Hadas, nor his disappearance, but in time Hadas and Avigdor do marry, and to the surprise of everyone else, name their first child Anshel.

The story ends by repairing what was broken at the beginning of the story. Hadas and Avigdor were meant to be joined together in marriage. The widow Peshe’s fate is less important—for she did not marry out of love, but out of the need to have someone help out in her store and such a spouse is more easily replaced. And Yentl disappears from the story just as Anshel did from the town, as if she were in fact a demon.

The narrative does not take Yentl’s transgression lightly. Within the traditional Jewish framework she needs to disguise herself as a man in order to engage in the most important activity: to study, and yet it is the same framework within which the enormity of her deception is judged. Yentl is not let off the hook, nor is she allowed a happy ending. Instead she is doomed to wander, never again to become so entangled in others’ lives and risk having her secret discovered.
The story clearly belongs to the genre of stories in which the woman protagonist disguises herself as a man. Joan of Arc, Mulan, and others are all women who clothed themselves as men in order to take on their roles, in these cases: to fight. In contrast, Yentl becomes Anshel so as to be able to study, to fulfill her intellectual curiosity. In all of these cases, however, the women pretend to be men in order not to be bound by social conventions that restrict them as women. The women warriors end up returning to their fathers’ homes and rules, marrying as if they had never been in war; Joan of Arc, of course, ends up burnt at the stake. And Yentl merely disappears. Despite their extreme efforts, their societies remain virtually unchanged.

Irony is one of the governing modes in this story. Early in their friendship Avigdor unwittingly asks Anshel, “Why can’t a woman be like a man?” When Yentl-as-Anshel chokes on a celebratory brandy, someone says to her, “You’re not much of a man.” And while Yentl tells Avigdor she would make a lousy wife (“I don’t even know how to cook pudding”), their friendship is played out along gender lines in an imitation of a marriage. He teaches her and protects her, and she nurtures him in feminine ways, bringing him baked goods, sewing loose buttons on his jacket, and giving him presents of warm clothing.

In both stories under discussion, we see the importance of dreams in Singer’s world, and their effectiveness in teaching the heroes life lessons. Gimpel is brought back to his moral center by dreaming of his wife, her face black from the punishment of the afterlife, admonishing him “You fool! Because I was false is everything false too? I never deceived anyone but myself.” (p.48) And once he resumes his life of faith he dreams of his wife with “her face […] shining and her eyes [...] as radiant as the eyes of a saint.” Yentl dreams that she is both a man and a woman. She wakes with a start and the narrator claims, “Only now did Yentl grasp the meaning of the Torah’s prohibition against wearing the clothes of the other sex. By doing so, one deceived not only others but also oneself. Even the soul was perplexed, finding itself incarnate in a strange body.” (p.22)

While the shtetl in these stories seems to be untouched by time, other works by Singer confront the changes and challenges posed by the forces of modernization and secularization. In his most desperate works, the characters are walking corpses, the survivors face being alive as if it were ongoing punishment. Curiously, the characters’ strong will to live is accompanied by a sense of the futility of life. Many of Singer’s characters struggle with their Jewish identity and what it means, several flirt with various options and escapes—pursuing and sometimes marrying the non-Jewish woman, in the most extreme, converting to Christianity. In the works that end with a sense of resolution, the apostate finds his way back to his faith, embracing it, doubts and all. At the other end, the communist is also seen as an extreme threat, for the communist smooths over differences and distinctions and Singer’s Judaism is firmly grounded in acknowledging differences and making distinctions. To be Jewish in Singer’s world is not to avoid all temptation, and not to have unshakeable faith, but to be part of tradition and to accept faith and doubts.

Singer’s legacy

In addition to his large oeuvre of essays, novels, and short stories—over 45 volumes—preserving prewar Polish Jewry and expressing the plight of the transplant, Singer has left us an enormous legacy. We haven’t even touched upon the author’s writing for children. Called “A One Man Grimm Brothers,” he began writing juvenile literature only in his 60s at the urging of one of his translators. Most of it has an old or other-worldly charm. His 17 volumes for children include fairytales (rewritten and original), autobiography, and new versions of traditional Jewish tales of Chelm and the golem and the Baal Shem Tov; the tone ranges from the silly to the serious. Margot Zemach, Maurice Sendak, and Eric Carle illustrated a number of these books. While his children’s literature doesn’t avoid the ugly—violence, ignorance, and such—unlike in his writing for adults—it is always defeated at the end. His writing for children is not separate from his writing for adults, but in fact informs our reading of it. He took his juvenile audience seriously, and even in his Nobel acceptance speech gave many reasons why children were his favorite readers. “There are 500 reasons why I write for children” he begins and limits himself to 10: Children read books, not reviews. They don’t give a hoot about critics….”They have no use for psychology. They detest sociology… They don’t expect their beloved writer to redeem humanity. Young as they are, they know it is not in his power. Only adults have such childish illusions.”

His palace in the World’s Fair has a whole suite of playrooms for children and a garden as well.
Included in Singer’s legacy are his stories made into films: the short story “The Cafeteria” in a BBC playhouse production; “The Magician of Lublin,” Streisand’s “Yentl”—based on the story discussed above—and “Enemies: A Love Story.” A play currently on stage in Tel Aviv at the National Theater HaBimah, “The Beloved and Faithful,” is based on his work; both “The Slave” and “Shosha” are being performed in New York.

Singer also appears as a character in pieces ranging from Cynthia Ozick’s classic “Envy or Yiddish in America” to Sandra Bernhard’s humorous piece “My Date with Isaac Bashevis Singer.”

His influence on other writers, especially contemporary Jewish-American writers, continues to be felt. As a postscript to her story “Hershl” about the village babymaker who would take orders on babies from prospective parents—no guarantees, no returns—Judy Budnitz notes: “I was reading a lot of I. B. Singer at the time and wanted to write something in that style, a new sort of shtetl story.”

But most prominently, his legacy is felt in keeping the tradition of secular Yiddish alive, and in making the language not only his homeland but a home for others as well.

While the World’s Fair remains an important event in the collective memory of St. Louisans, most of the palaces are gone, leaving behind shards of plaster of paris and anecdotes; Bashevis Singer’s life’s work is its own world’s fair, recording and creating a rich, vibrant, and multivalent collective memory. Singer’s structures endure. Singer lived up to the model Gimpel presented the storyteller. An author who wrote in a dying tongue for a diminishing audience has slipped through the limits of language and time and has entered the realm of the eternal. His world lives on in his books. Gimpel and Yentl may be from the vanished shtetl, but Singer has endowed them—and his vanished shtetl—with immortality.

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Stencell, A.W. Girl Show: Into the Canvas World of Bump and Grind.