Dooryard Flower

Because you’re sick I want to bring you flowers,
flowers from the landscape that you love—
because it is your birthday and you’re sick
I want to bring outdoors inside,
the natural and wild, picked by my hand,
but nothing is blooming here but daffodils,
archipelagic in the short green
early grass, erupted
bulbs planted decades before we came,
the edge of where a garden once was kept
extended now in a string of islands I straddle
as in a fairy tale, harvesting,
not taking the single blossom from a clump
but thinning where they’re thickest, tall-stemmed
from the mother patch, dwarf to the west,
most
fully opened, a loosened whorl,
one with a pale spider luffing her thread,
one with a slow beetle chewing the lip, a few
with what’s almost a lion’s face, a lion’s mane,
and because there is a shadow on your lungs,
your liver,
and elsewhere, hidden,
some of those with delicate green
streaks in the clown’s ruff (corolla—
actually made from adapted leaves), and more
right this moment starting to unfold,
I’ve gathered
my two fists full, I carry them like a bride,
I am bringing you the only glorious thing
in the yards and fields between my house
and yours,
none of the tulips budded yet, the lilac
a sheaf of sticks, the apple trees
withheld, the birch unleaved—
it could still be winter here, were it not
for green dotted with gold, but you
won’t wait
for dogtoothed violets, trillium under
the pines,
and who could bear azaleas, dogwood,
eary profuse rose
of somewhere else where you’re assaulted
here, early May,
not any calm narcissus, orange corona
on scalloped white, not even its slender stalk
in a fountain of leaves, no stiff cornets of
the honest
jonquils, gendered parts upthrust in brass
and cream:
j ust this common flash in anyone’s yard,
scrambled cluster of petals
rayon-yellow, as in a child’s drawing of
the sun,
I’m bringing you a sun, a children’s choir, host
of transient voices, first bright
splash in the gray exhausted world, a feast
of the dooryard flower we call butter-and-egg.

—Ellen Bryant Voigt

Reprinted from Shadow of Heaven (W.W. Norton, 2002) with permission of the author and the W.W. Norton & Company
The compassionate Whitman during the Civil War, in about 1862. A friend thought he looked sorry for the world.


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Director’s Notes

The Reader Survey

This is the last issue of Belles Lettres for the 2003-2004 academic year. Of course, I have many people to thank including Jian Leng, the assistant director of the Center for the Humanities, and Amanda Beresford, the program coordinator, who put a great deal of effort into making the magazine what it is and all it can be under our current set of constraints. I thank the work-study students who help us with the mailing. I thank as well all of our contributors. It is a great deal of work to put this out and everyone connected with it is usually exhausted by this time of year. But as I may grow weary writing for and editing Belles Lettres, I never tire of thinking about how to improve it. (If I had my druthers, it would be quite a bit like the New York Review of Books. Unfortunately, I don’t have those druthers or that budget.) Few Americans, I suppose, think about life except as one long, manic slog to self-improvement. It is virtually a sin in America not to think about becoming bigger and better (or, at least, bigger).

To that particular end, (of becoming better, if not bigger), we have included in this issue of Belles Lettres a reader survey. It would be greatly appreciated if you take a few minutes to answer the questions, make whatever additional comments you want and return it to us. We want very much to know what you think of Belles Lettres, where we can make improvements, how the magazine can better serve you, our readers. You don’t even need to use a stamp to send it back to us. (But if you wish to use a stamp on the return envelope, it would help us conserve our modest budget.) We thank you for your interest and your support and hope that we can continue to count on both.

The Toy Museum

As promised in our last issue of Belles Lettres (March/April), we have set up a small display case of toys, located in our library. It is a modest but hopeful beginning, and we expect to expand over the coming months. We will, as we gather more toys, have themes for our displays, although in the main, we will concentrate on controversial, antique, or popular toys. We wish particularly to thank American Culture Studies, Women and Gender Studies, and African and Afro-American Studies for their kind support, without which this endeavor would not have been possible. Our display is free and open to the public from 8:30 to 4:30, Monday through Friday, at the Center for the Humanities, East Tower of McMillan Hall.

Library

Our library continues to grow as we continue to get donors. We would like to thank Paul Fliceck for donating his collection of over 1,000 comics. We also thank Susie Philpott for donating a French language edition of Little Black Sambo, published in 1921. We continue to expand our minority-interest holdings in new ways: we are now collecting old comedy albums by black stand-up comics, beginning with two early Chess albums by Moms Mabley, “At the Geneva Conference” and “Onstage.” We hope, in the near future, to have more old Moms Mabley recordings, as well the older material of Bill Cosby, Rudy Ray Moore, Redd Foxx, and Pigmeat Markham. We also have five books by Spike Lee.

We have added more comics including the Marvel Comic Book Library Volume 1 on CD-ROM. This includes the first 10 issues of Spiderman, Iron Man, Captain America, The Incredible Hulk, Daredevil, The X-Men, The Fantastic Four, The Avengers, Namor the Sub-Mariner, and The Silver Surfer. All of these are the first original, early 1960s runs of these series with the exception of The X-Men. The disc, unfortunately, begins with their reintroduction in 1975 and not the original debut of the comic in the early 1960s. This is a significant addition to our already established collection of old comics on CD-ROM. Those holdings were described in an earlier issue of the 2003-2004 volume of Belles Lettres. This new Marvel CD-ROM might be of particular interest for those who eagerly await the second Spiderman movie, to be released this summer. Spiderman’s new enemy, Dr. Octopus, was introduced in Spiderman Number 3, July 1963. He was a research scientist named Otto Octavius, nicknamed Dr. Octopus by his colleagues. He invents a vest of mechanical arms that aid him in his research in nuclear radiation. Unfortunately, a radiation accident occurs. (This is the early 1960s when such concerns as radiation poisoning were a commonplace in our cultural imagination, when 10-year-old inner city black kids like me were tossing around terms like Strontium 90 that we learned from watching “The Twilight Zone,” and such radiation seemed particularly to afflict comic book heroes and villains.) As a result, Dr. Octopus’s mechanical arms become organically fused to his body and he becomes a megalomaniac villain. The character became so popular that he returned many times to battle Spiderman, beginning with issue Number 11 in April 1964. You can come over to our library and read on CD-
This fear of being understood—or, at least, having his narratives of male-male “comradeship” interpreted as feminizing manifestations of homoerotic desire—extended into the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass* and beyond. Pollak contends that Whitman never quite accomplished the “healing fusion” he sought in his poetry; instead, he short-circuited his efforts at elevating male bonding by instead reinscribing “the isolating individualism [his] *Leaves of Grass* project was intent on revising.” An indication of Whitman’s anxiety over what “being understood” might reveal was his response to John Addington Symonds, who admired Whitman’s work and asked Whitman whether “comradeship” could include the possibility of “semi-sexual emotions and actions which no doubt occur between men.” In his reply, a defensive Whitman called such interpretations of his poetry “terrible,” “gratuitous,” and “morbid” (also for Symonds’ benefit, Whitman asserted the heterosexualized, masculinizing fiction that he had fathered six children).

Pollak’s final chapters include a lengthy analysis of “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” and an investigation of the limited roles for women in Whitman’s work (in short, they can only be mothers). In her analysis of “Lilacs,” Pollak relies heavily on her familial origin scheme, arguing that the poem does not eulogize a historical Lincoln. Instead, Pollak claims, Whitman “histrionically foregrounded himself as the leading character in Lincoln’s drama and dissolved the actual Abe into a national panorama of lost men.” While a common grief at last opens up channels for affectional and erotic connection between individuals, “death alone has the power to interrupt a phallic narrative which identifies the male gender with social aggression.” This seems to be a drastic interpretation, reducing the complex dilemmas Pollak has previously described to a formulaic solution. Given the arguments Pollak makes earlier in the book for the performativity of Whitman’s literary persona, to identify only Whitman’s grief as “real” denies the psychological inconsistencies and complexities she claims to examine.

Overall Pollak’s book is a provocative entry in the discussion about the “erotics” that fueled Whitman and his work. While little is said here about the possibility that Whitman might have found male-male relationships, or aspects of such relationships, that offered rewards as well as disappointments, Pollak’s extension of recent criticism and her cross-referencing of later poems in her discussions of earlier works offer new insights into Whitman’s erotic journey.

Jeanine Jewell, Department of English, University of Nebraska, Lincoln.
Our Own Voices: WU Faculty’s Book Review

“Who Goes There! Hankering, gross, mystical, nude?”


In *The Erotic Whitman*, Vivian R. Pollak takes a historically based, feminist-informed approach to tracing “the development of [Whitman’s] subjectivity as it emerged, fraught with contradiction, from and within a very particular social context, the Whitman family.” Pollak is aided in her task by her extensive familiarity with and astute use of Whitman criticism. Rather than imagining a Whitman with a clear social agenda writing through his own personal experience, Pollak suggests the opposite: that the historical and social conditions that constrained Whitman’s desires forced him to find language that might fuse his own hurts and doubts about sex, gender, and love to more expansive constructions of affection. This idea of fusion operates most clearly in the first half of the book, which presents the younger Whitman struggling to establish both a personal and professional identity; ultimately, however, Pollak sees this fusion failing as Whitman can never overcome anxieties about the social and cultural possibilities of his own sexualized desire.

Pollak organizes the book somewhat chronologically, each chapter generally corresponding to a period of Whitman’s life and/or literary production, but allowing leeway for using later works to inform earlier stages of his psychological development. She begins at the beginning: with Whitman’s family. Using the well-known facts of Whitman’s difficult family situation—Jesse, the hot-headed brother whom Walt signed into a lunatic asylum; Eddy, the mildly retarded younger brother; Walter Sr.’s frequent absences and inability to provide the family with consistent financial support—Pollak leads us into the strong bond that united Walt with his mother, Louisa. Consistent with her assertion that his perceptions of his parents’ gendered behavior informed Whitman’s later anxieties about his own masculinity, Pollak provides generous extracts from Louisa’s letters to Walt to show us the “conflicted psychological community” created wherein the father figure was isolated at best and “appropriately gendered appearance” must be maintained. Pollak asserts that this situation led Walt to imagine a healing fusion wherein he would rewrite the nation’s story as a familial one, in the process publicly rewriting (and rehabilitating) his own family story.

Once Whitman began writing, however, his attempts to mold his thoughts into conventional forms doomed his efforts to failure. One of the most rewarding sections of Pollak’s book is the section on Whitman’s fiction, which is rarely discussed as effectively as seen here. Again, Pollak claims that Walt’s own commitment to “keeping up appearances” blocked him from telling the story he wanted to tell of the redemptive potential of male-male relationships. Pollak aptly points out that most of Whitman’s fictions rely on woman-less worlds but that the conventions of sentiment led the males in those worlds to victimize each other—a reflection of how male aggression in the market economy could have injurious effects on private affection. Pollak posits that despite its lucrative potential, Whitman abandoned fiction for poetry as a way to create a “sexually fluid world beyond moral convention.”

Pollak’s discussion of the 1855, 1856, and 1860 editions of *Leaves of Grass* portray a Whitman who, in both his literary and his psychological development, moves from challenging conventional social values of sexuality and gender to a more specific exploration of male-male love and loss. A strength of Pollak’s presentation here is her use of what she calls Whitman’s “personal audience”—the family members, friends, and close associates such as the stage coach drivers he admired and befriended. By using the term “personal audience,” Pollak suggests that despite Whitman’s desire to democratize sex for all people, he also felt compelled to answer more familiar voices. For example, while recognizing that in the case of driver Fred Vaughan, with whom Whitman shared an intimate (perhaps sexual) relationship, the exact content and dynamics of the two men’s friendship cannot be completely known, Pollak notes that both Vaughan’s concern with appearances and social codes and Whitman’s possibly negative reactions to the friendship’s demands influenced Whitman’s poetry. Pollak states that despite wanting to write of his “faith in sex,” Whitman instead created for himself an “erotic double bind: he wanted to be understood but he was afraid of being understood.”
ROM the first issue of Spiderman with this Dr. Octopus character and be ready for the movie. It is a heck of a lot cheaper than trying to buy the original comic which, in poor or fair condition, would probably run between $150.00 and $300.00. You don’t even want to know what it would cost in excellent or fine condition. Just another small service provided by your friendly, neighborhood humanists.

David Hadas

My late colleague, David Hadas, once taught my class for me when I became ill and had to have surgery. It was a class in the golden age, as it was called, of children’s literature, the period from say, 1865 to 1920. David was very generous in that way, and I think at one time or another he taught everyone’s class in the English Department in an emergency. It didn’t matter whether he knew much about the subject in question. In this instance, he probably knew more than enough to get by. One of the books he taught in my absence was Kate Douglas Wiggins’s Rebecca of Sunny Brook Farm. He asked me why I chose it because he thought it such an awful book. He did not say this to me in a judgmental way but rather because he was honestly curious. I told him that I had to have an example of a certain type of girl book of the period—Pollyanna, Heidi, What Katy Did, it really didn’t matter to me and I thought one of them was as good as another. He told me I should have used Anne of Green Gables, which he thought to be a much better book of the type that I wanted to exemplify. I told him I would use it the next time I taught the course. He was by no means appalled about my carelessness or indifference in using a book of a certain type. He was not bothered by my holding a certain sort of literature in a mild, languid form of contempt. He seemed simply to think that, given that the students have to read a book of this type in a course of children’s literature which covered this period, they ought to read something he thought was better. I appreciated the fact that he cared enough to recommend something.

He always told me odd jokes, some were funny, some were not. Some I got, some I didn’t. He was capable of being very funny, in a way that combined the mocking and the serious, as, for instance, when we were both listening outside of Hurst Lounge one evening to a colleague giving a lecture and David began to tell me that he thought all humanists had been reduced from teaching to being camp counselors, teaching nice courses to students that weren’t especially vital. We humanists had ceased to be a prime part of the university enterprise. It was rather like the lecture we were listening to, about psychoanalysis and literature. “No one who does science takes psychoanalysis seriously,” he said, “Only humanists do.” He was not joking about this when he said it, but I thought it to be hilarious. If one wants dead scientific ideas to live and thrive, give them to humanists.

During the years I knew David, I always found him curious about me and supportive in a way I hadn’t quite expected. He was curious about African-American literature and sometimes we would talk about it. I was always frank with him about my opinions, not because I am usually this way with people, but because there was something about David’s demeanor that made candor necessary, as an appropriate response to his own trustworthiness. He seemed someone who didn’t mind if you were honest. That’s fairly unusual with most people. He sometimes wondered aloud to me how I managed to survive expressing some of my opinions as I did. I never had an answer for this. I never tried to answer but it was touching to have someone have that kind of concern for you, and equally touching that someone read your work and didn’t think about how smart you were but rather how vulnerable. I was also always struck by the fact that David wanted to talk to me whenever he saw me. He’d ask me about my work, really talk about anything.

I have for some years been working on a young adult novel. I showed David an earlier draft of it (something I almost never do with any of my work but David was different in that regard), and he offered me some constructive comments, not essential, but useful. I couldn’t help but think of him every time I worked on the book after that. It’s sad I couldn’t get it published before he died. I would have wanted him to see that. I think he would have liked it, not the book necessarily, but just the idea that I got something published that meant a lot to me, for he was really the only person on campus I ever talked to about it or ever wanted to talk to about it.

I’ll be teaching the golden age of children’s literature in 2004-2005. I’ll make sure to use Anne of Green Gables.
There is an art to introducing famous speakers. An art, I suppose, and also a kind of shrewdness. It is not merely the case that one reads off a list of accomplishments. To be sure, the grandeur of the speaker, the fact that one is so lucky to have someone so distinguished speak at one’s school, requires a certain degree of star worship and adulation in the form of paying proper homage to the speaker’s pedigree of achievement. But there is more to this. For, alas, an introduction is only partly for the audience. It is mostly for the benefit of the person being introduced. (The audience may know why it is there; the speaker may wish to be reminded.) Some years ago, before I truly understood this, when I was new at the game, and rather thought introducing people was a polite ritual of little importance, I introduced the autobiographer and poet Maya Angelou at an Assembly Series event. After her performance, and that was precisely what it had to be called, and quite a crafted and dazzling one at that, she asked me if I thought she was wonderful. I was so surprised by the question, so taken aback by the very word “wonderful,” which seemed so diva-like, that all I could do was stammer, “Yes, of course.” She then told me that I had given her an introduction appropriate to her stature. She said this in a way that made me realize that the only reason I came to her attention at all, that I registered faintly in her consciousness, was because I had introduced her. I didn’t feel bad or injured about this. (She had every reason to praise me, for which she collected fees from her introduction, not new but hysterical, the work of an operative more than mere self-adulation.) On the whole, rather, I felt lucky. I was glad to know that through sheer providence I hadn’t insulted this woman by praising her insufficiently and wondered a bit what might have happened or what she might have said to me if she had felt the introduction had been a bit lacking. I believe she would have told me if the introduction had not lived up to her standards in terms that would have been candid and unpleasant, and I might have given up this line of work having been mortally wounded, verbally felled, as it were, by the very first shot fired in my very first hunt.

I learned from this that well-known speakers are a complex jumble of frail insecurity (Why the heck should she have cared whether a cipher like me thought she was “wonderful”?) and unbridled egotism (They do listen to their introductions with a considerable critical ear). Speakers for the Assembly Series are stars, after all, in somebody’s constellation of “genius,” of which speakers’ bureaus seem to have an endless supply and for all occasions (from Black History Month to the Bourgeois Guilt Hour when some speaker tells of the latest massacre, injustice, or form of oppression in some part of the world about which we should feel appropriately miserable in our privilege), and part of the lure of coming to a university, aside from being decidedly overpaid for sprinkling a tiny bit of the pixie dust of their celebrity over our campus (may it gleam ever the brighter as a result!), is to enjoy a bit of institutional obsequiousness. Over the years, I have managed to introduce some extraordinary people: Toni Morrison, Wynton Marsalis, and Julian Bond, among others. I have never remembered a single word these people have said, but I have always remembered what I said about them. Life is short and the burden of introducing the famously important is long and heavy.

When Barbara Rea, who oversees the Assembly Series committee, e-mailed me about introducing Ann Coulter, I thought, at first, that this had to be something of a joke. Why would anyone think me the right person to introduce Ms. Coulter? At first, I wondered if I were thought so conservative among folk here that I was an obvious choice. It is doubtless a sign of considerable crossover success to start life as a Democrat, with nothing to lose, and to end up a Republican, with something to conserve. Perhaps, for some, that is the true American Dream: to wake up one morning hating labor unions instead of wanting to be a member of one. In any case, I had told Barb Rea on more than one occasion that we needed to have a few more conservative speakers on the bill of intellectual fare of the Assembly Series, if only for the sake of variety. Ms. Coulter was not quite what I had in mind (although clearly the Student Republicans thought her a marvelous choice), but I suppose she would have to do until the real thing should come along, that is, until we could actually have a speaker who could intelligently and persuasively defend conservatism or even define it as something more than sheer spleen, distemper, and diatribe against all that one disagrees with in this world. It seems an odd thing that one has to speak of “compassionate” conservatism, a confession that perhaps conservatives would be better off not making, if only because one is all the more likely to think that Scrooge has simply learned something about modern-day spin. But I suppose that only a certain sort of slouching liberal like myself would think such variety of fare to be important and think that it ought to be defended by introducing the speaker.

Barb sent me Ms. Coulter’s books, which I found interesting (her point, for instance, about WASP snobbery playing a role in the defense of Alger Hiss I found reasonable and persuasive but not new) but hysterical, the work of an operative more so than even a polemicist. They confirmed my suspicions of having seen

She was an actress with a medicine-show act for which she collected fees as if she were a star on Broadway.
through Nicholas and Alexandra in 1971 to The Last Tycoon in 1976—was long, precipitous, unrelieved, and inexplicable. Fraser-Cavassoni suggests that Spiegel enjoyed his biggest successes with The Bridge and Lawrence when he was nearly 60 and that, subsequently, he was simply out of touch. Some argue that his desire to make great films diminished after Lawrence. This is probably not true but he seemed, in his old age, to understand less how to make the various, sometimes antagonistic, elements of film production coalesce. He continued to pamper himself, sleep with college undergraduates (there was an age difference of over 50 years between him and his girlfriends), and live the good life. He died on December 31, 1985.

Fraser-Cavassoni’s book is a good, solid study of an important figure in the film industry and an important period in the history of film, well researched and competently written. It provides a fairer portrait of Spiegel than is given in Kevin Brownlow’s David Lean: A Biography, 1997. But the book is strangely insular. There is little attempt to contextualize Spiegel’s films in relation to film history, to what was going on in the United States and the world in filmmaking at the time of Lawrence of Arabia or The Bridge On the River Kwai. (What was the Cold War significance of these two war films, for instance, that portrayed two “tic” heroic, neurotically obsessive British army officers—Nicholson and Lawrence—as absurd and mythical warriors?) Also, Fraser-Cavassoni does not include testimony from other filmmakers, those who did not work with Spiegel, about his work and reputation, both Spiegel’s contemporaries and today’s filmmakers. It would have been interesting to hear what Spike Lee, Jane Campion, the Coen Brothers, Jerry Bruckheimer, Michael Eisner, or Peter Jackson might have to say about Spiegel’s films or his abilities as a producer. Nonetheless, the book is worth reading if only to learn about what independent film producers do and how precarious and fragile, financially and artistically, most film projects are. It is amazing, when one looks at how film deals are made, that any film is ever even started, let alone completed. Spiegel made films through sheer will, and nearly all the films he made would not have been made if he hadn’t assembled the parts. Moreover, this biography is something of a cautionary tale as well as an uplift story, to read about a man, who, while not always admirable, indeed, sometimes ignoble, lived life and made art largely on his own terms.

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the tension on the set bordered on outright hatred. Spiegel believed that “films that ran smoothly were colorless—only those which were produced in strife had an outstanding merit” (50). (For his greatest films, Spiegel followed his own dictum of tension creates great art. Few of his most noteworthy productions ever ran smoothly.) Spiegel lived well in England, ran up unpaid bills, and wound up in Brixton Prison. He was kicked out of England in 1936.

Spiegel went to France, ran up bills and tried to make more film deals. French authorities kicked him out of the country in April 1938. He wound up Mexico on the set of the film Maria, surprising everyone by speaking fluent Spanish. He later became involved in producing a musical called Mexicana, which apparently had the approval and backing of the Mexican government. The musical played on Broadway. But somehow Spiegel seemed to have run afoul of Mexican authorities. Otto Preminger later accused him of selling dope and running a white slavery racket while Spiegel was in Mexico. In the late summer of 1939, Spiegel crept back into the United States. This time he managed to stay.

Spiegel succeeded in Hollywood for three reasons: first, he was persistent. He was never bothered if one of his deals fell through. He simply shrugged it off and started another. He was never embarrassed by his lies. Indeed, whenever he was caught in one, he would say, “If I hadn’t [learned to] lie, I would now be a bar of soap” (57). This combination of confidence, arrogance, and almost child-like lack of self-consciousness or guilt, the sheer unreality of his personality, made him the right kind of personality for Hollywood, the realm of unreality. Second, he was a displaced European Jew in an industry that had a disproportionate presence of displaced European Jews and he was well-known in the German Jewish filmmaking community of Hollywood. Third, he actually had good ideas about how films should be made, did not mind and was not intimidated by working with high strung, insecure, artistic people, and he could make deals. His first major film was an anthology piece about the travels of a particular coat called Tales of Manhattan made in 1942. He used the name S. P. Eagle, which his colleagues found hilarious. If this was an attempt to evade immigration authorities, it certainly could not be seen as clever or mystifying. When Spiegel married an American (his second wife, a very unhappy, somewhat unstable woman who wound up in a messy, unfulfilling marriage that ended in mutual adultery and divorce as her life eventually ended in suicide), this rather straightened out his immigration problems. Moreover, he managed to establish himself in Hollywood and had many influential people speak up on his behalf.

He truly hit his stride as a producer when he formed his own production company, Horizon Pictures, and began to do small, but interesting films like The Prowler and When I Grow Up, both in 1951. With director, John Huston, who, like Orson Welles, (whom Spiegel worked with in producing The Stranger in 1946) was considered one of the young, brash geniuses of Hollywood. This began a pattern for Spiegel that would obtain for the rest of his film career: he worked with a succession of the best directors around—Elia Kazan (twice), Joseph Mankiewicz, David Lean (twice), and Arthur Penn. He also worked with some of the best writers—Gore Vidal, Tennessee Williams, Robert Bolt, Harold Pinter, as well as several blacklisted writers. (He liked using blacklisted writers because they were cheaper.) Almost always, by the end of the scriptwriting process, the writers would dislike Spiegel’s interference, although some said that he had good story ideas. By the middle of the shooting, the director would be nearly at wit’s end dealing with Spiegel, in part, because the director would often feel that Spiegel was both interfering with and neglecting the film. Spiegel learned early on in his career rarely to visit the sets. He understood that the set was the director’s realm. But he had his spies, so he knew exactly what was going on with great precision on each day of shooting. He knew exactly how much of the script had been shot and what the problems were. Although he may have seemed to be loafing in some luxury hotel or on his yacht, he actually paid enormous attention to his movies and to details of production. He loved to have control of the rushes, which many of his directors disliked. Once the shooting was over, Spiegel tended to exercise great control over the final cut. All of the tension that his presence, or his lack of presence generated, seem to suit him. The greater the tension, the better the film.

Another matter was that Spiegel never paid people if he could help it. His lawyer, Albert Heit said about Spiegel, “If you didn’t ask, you didn’t get your money.” (131) It was largely because of money that Huston, who thought he had been cheated, and Spiegel seriously and permanently fell out.

The African Queen, shot in the Belgian Congo and Uganda, was a fairly uncomfortable shoot, complicated by the fact that many of the actors and crew drank contaminated water and became extremely ill. (The opening scene of the film with Katherine Hepburn playing the organ at a church service was shot while the plucky actress threw up in a bucket between takes. When she wasn’t sick, Hepburn went around gushing, “What divine natives! What divine morning glories!” 126) But The African Queen was a good dress rehearsal for The Bridge On the River Kwai, shot in Ceylon (Sri Lanka), and Lawrence of Arabia, shot in the Jordanian desert, both also difficult location shoots, and Lawrence an especially long one.

So, Spiegel made The African Queen, On the Waterfront, The Bridge On the River Kwai, and Lawrence of Arabia, in a span of 10 years and became one of the most powerful independent producers in Hollywood. But after 1962, he made nothing that was commercially or critically successful. His downfall as a producer—starting with The Chase with Marlon Brando in 1966...
her on television: she was an actress with a medicine-show act for which she collected fees as if she were a star on Broadway. The short, tight black dress, the flowing blonde hair, the thin physique, the rude insult as a form of political debate: all of this was bad theater in much the way that the Africentrist’s libations, the feminist’s abhorrence of make-up as a plainsong of resistance, or the earnest Marxist’s crumpled suit and disheveled hair is. If you can wear your heart on your sleeve, why not your political convictions as well? If gender is performance, why not politics?

Ms. Coulter soothed the anxieties of her audience, which feels itself embattled on a liberal college campus. Most constituents in a campus community bring in speakers of this sort to be soothed and affirmed in their sense of feeling misplaced, outcast, and unappreciated for some reason or another. Ms. Coulter’s lecture (if a series of repetitive, sometimes dull one-liners about how bad and hypocritical liberals and Democrats are can be said to aspire to something beyond mediocre stand-up comedy), was meant to be a psychoanalytic salve, a form of liberating approval for her fellow conservatives, who feel themselves victims on a college campus. It is the belief these days that everyone, in some context, somewhere, is oppressed and a victim, so, everyone is entitled to this type of speaker, entitled to being able to express publicly some sort of political hatred as a form of righteous therapy. The left are guilty of this as well. I call this the moral sanctification of political infallibility and it is a shame that universities offer themselves as paying podiums for this quackery and nonsense. Leftist, “oppositional” professors, those paragons of “resistance” in their newly endowed chairs given to the university by the rich they scorn, unlike Ms. Coulter, have their tenured jobs to fall back on when the bookings dry up, as their shtick wears thin.

My introduction for Ms. Coulter was too long, but I was trying to do her a favor by suggesting that she was part of an important intellectual tradition in the United States. Moreover, I wanted to teach the audience something about the history of conservatism. I am, after all, a teacher and this is, after all, a university. If you can’t teach people here, where can you teach them? I wanted very much to say something about George Schuyler because I knew most of my audience knew nothing about him and as a black John Bircher, I felt they should know something. To mention Schuyler was probably the main reason I was willing to give the introduction, to complicate conservatism for both the liberals and the conservatives in the audience. I think Ms. Coulter was a bit flummoxed by the introduction. She told me as she walked by me to the podium that no one had ever given one like that before. She told her audience that it was the typical liberal view of conservatism (of the conservative wanting to maintain the status quo or to return to the past). But since, for instance, her defense of heterosexual marriage was based exclusively on its being a time-honored tradition (the exact same defense, with greater justification, that slave holders used in defense of slavery, which failed to still the winds of change, a fact that seems lost on today’s conservatives), I felt she justified my view of conservatism (and Ralph Waldo Emerson’s) by her very own words. But she also used the introduction to say that it showed that conservatism was “the party of ideas.” (I guess conservatism and Republicanism are interchangeable.) How can anyone hate being connected to Edmund Burke, Bill Buckley, and Donald Davidson, for heaven’s sakes? Ms. Coulter may be a bad actress, but she’s no fool.

It was the first time in my life I was ever heckled while giving an introduction. That was strange. It was even stranger when people expressed great disapproval of the introduction afterwards. One gentleman told me it was “terrible what I had done to Ms. Coulter.” I had no idea what I had done to Ms. Coulter other than to try to make her appear a bit less superficial than she actually is and asked him to explain. To be sure, I was not the person tossing invectives from the stage as if they were posies to my beloved. And he did not seem to understand that she insulted his political ideology, in the very crass, fraudulent, and anti-intellectual way she defended it, far more than I ever could in questioning why conservatism has historically seemed, in some important instances, to be against the advancement of black people. She had hustled him, conned him, picked his pockets and he seemed ecstatic because he thought she had been brave, facing down the left. She faced down something that was never there. She had never been challenged because she wouldn’t permit herself to be. Far from being brave, there seemed something almost craven about her performance. (And I was not brave, either, in introducing her. I was merely calculating.) He thought I was even more despicable in my claim of innocence and walked away. He had a right to feel that way because who, after all, is innocent. “I don’t want no part of this crazy love,” as Paul Simon sang, so I walked away, too. This was a love feast to which I had not been invited.

A student, a philosophy major, I think, sent me a long e-mail telling me what was factually wrong with my introduction. I tried to answer this briefly but patiently, reminding the student that I was not, after all, giving the lecture, merely the introduction, while trying to correct some of his own mistaken assumptions. But he was so hungry for intellectual sustenance that he latched on to my intro in a way that was actually quite flattering, if only to give him the opportunity to show that he knew more about a subject than a professor. It was the only food around on that occasion. I was glad, actually, that he was able to use the intro in that way. It was successful teaching for some, after all.

At first, I was embarrassed, then angry about the whole affair. There was something about it that seemed almost sordid. But I have gotten over that. I am amused by Ms. Coulter’s foolishness and my own quixotic attempt at outreach, and the intro has made me a strange celebrity in a way. I mentioned to a friend that I was very much looking forward to introducing Ms. Coulter or someone like her again. He was a little bewildered and asked why.

“Because, like the doubtful, I couldn’t believe it the first time,” I said.

Michael Lesy’s *Long Time Coming* is an anthology of photographs made for the Farm Security Administration, part of Roosevelt’s New Deal. Under the direction of Roy Stryker, some 44 photographers (only a fraction of whom are included here) produced 145,000 exposures between 1935 and 1943. Stryker looked at every one, punching holes through a certain percentage to assure they would never see the light of day, while filing others as contact sheets with negatives. Of the original group, 77,000 were printed, captioned, and made available for a broad public of journalists, writers, artists, historians, and film studios; the other 68,000 were stored. The “File” as it is known, is now in the Library of Congress, as much alive as a cultural document today as it was when first created. As prolific of meanings as the nation which it set out to represent, and as rife with contradiction, the File contains as many tales as there are talemakers. Its vast architecture, to borrow a metaphor from Lesy, is reconfigured by each person who enters and walks through its world of images. Lesy introduces us to the personalities who shaped the File; he is keenly aware of the hubris (and Orwellian potential) of any effort to present a comprehensive portrait of America, and in doing so to shape—and control—the nation’s image of itself. Yet, avoiding reductive readings, he also conveys the Whitmanic breadth and visionary aspect of an undertaking that aspired to embrace the multitudes.

*Long Time Coming* offers a compelling new vantage from which to survey the File; 20 percent of the photographs here have never before been printed or captioned. The book, in this sense, is a resurrection, bringing images cast into the charnel house of history back to life. Many of them are stunning; the greatest labor of this book was the labor of selection. I don’t know if anyone has ever looked at the entire file, apart from Stryker and his archivist Paul Vanderbilt. So we can only judge Lesy’s selection on the basis of the power of the images themselves. Preserving the spirit of the original filing categories, Lesy has divided his book into eight sections by subject, ranging from city life to work, hometowns, hilltowns, coal towns, family farms, hard times, and amusements and distractions. These sections are interspersed with Lesy’s own lively commentary and with excerpts from the primary texts—from the utterly banal rhetoric of J. Russell Smith’s typologically driven 1925 geography of North America to the Lynds’ *Middletown in Transition* of 1937—that shaped Stryker’s conception of the File. This in itself is a worthy addition to the literature on the FSA. These texts reveal with striking directness the nature of Stryker’s own personal script. His private portrait of America inevitably found its way into the file he masterminded.

When most of us think of FSA photographs, we conjure a few iconic images: the furrowed faces of migrant mothers, the image of sun-bleached cow skulls on land parched and furrowed like the faces, the evidence of social and natural destitution that was one primary purpose of the File to expose. In doing so the File served to justify government intervention in the lives of private citizens. The massive nature of New Deal programs had to overcome the suspicion of a nation grounded on principles of self-help and individual responsibility. The File was—in this respect at least—propaganda for the New Deal. A certain notorious instance of a cow skull moved from place to place by photographer Arthur Rothstein did much to further discredit the “truth” claims of the FSA.

*Long Time Coming* vastly expands the reach of the File beyond these images of a rural culture in crisis; here are Puerto Rican slums, street kids in Washington, Mexican tailors and barbers in San Antonio, the lazy drone of small town summers. While correcting our rather narrow view of the File, Lesy’s selection reveals the central place of the small town and of agrarian communities in the nation’s imagination of itself. At a time when modern life was being forged in the metropolis, only 25 percent of the photographs in the File pictured cities of 50,000 or more.

Stryker was a man who had few big ideas but who knew them when he saw them. Like others who shaped the self-image of the nation—Norman Rockwell comes to mind here—he was.
Summer that he read on an airplane or would have generally wanted to make the sort of films that Spiegel wound up producing, films that did not subscribe to a formula, nor films that were obvious box office hits. According to Fraser-Cavassoni, Spiegel was “articulate in nine languages, including Russian, French, Hungarian, and Spanish.” So, it was quite possible he did work for the foreign language department of MGM during his 1927-1930 stint in the United States. His ability with languages held him in good stead his entire life.

Spiegel was born in Jaroslav on November 11, 1901, in western Galicia in what was then Austria-Hungary, where his friend Billy Wilder was also born. Spiegel always claimed to have been born and reared in Vienna, which was far more cultured. The Jews of Galicia were considered peasant-like and devout, gauche country cousins, by the Jews of places like Vienna. Spiegel’s ego would not permit him such a self-image. His father was a Zionist, a tobacco merchant, and a strong believer in education. Spiegel, as a young adult, eventually wound up in Palestine, working on a farm inhabited by Bedouins. It was a miserable existence and the farm failed. He switched his native language, when he registered again for the University of Vienna in 1921 from German to Yiddish. While in Palestine, he married. He had already become something of a schemer, looking for the main chance, but nothing worked for him. He stole checks, borrowed a friend’s white Mercedes and forgot to return it.

He left Palestine because he was, apparently, deeply in debt and bored by his marriage. He came to the United States in 1927 and was deported in 1930, for behaving much as he did in Palestine, only worse. He wound up in Berlin where he helped with the publicity of the film All Quiet on the Western Front, based on Erich Maria Remarque’s famous novel, which was not nearly as popular in Germany as it had been in the United States. (The German right wing hated it.) The film was banned in both Austria and Germany. Eventually, though, the film was shown in both countries; even Hitler and Goering saw the movie. This seemed to have been Spiegel’s first real work in the film industry. He never left.

Spiegel fell in with the German Jewish filmmaking community of Berlin and played marathon games of gin rummy with William Wyler, Wilder, and Anatole Litvak, all of whom would become highly successful directors in Hollywood. He left Berlin shortly after Hitler rose to power. The circumstances were a little unclear. At least one version has him escaping with Otto Preminger, although Preminger denied that. In any case, for the rest of his life, Spiegel always said about his departure from Berlin, “But for the grace of God, I would have been a lamp shade.”

Spiegel went to London, where he charmed the aristocracy, slept with and escorted beautiful and influential women, formed a production company with Laurence Evans (with Evans’s money, naturally) and produced his first English language film, The Invader, with Buster Keaton, who was hopelessly alcoholic at this stage of his career. The film failed commercially and

Sam Spiegel:
The Hollywood Producer as Confidence Man


While director David Lean was hard at work in the Jordanian desert on *Lawrence of Arabia*, he vented his irritation in a letter to his producer, Sam Spiegel: “You tell me you work a 15-hour day and have been doing so for weeks. You can’t even get into the office until midday with luck. Up to a point that is your own business, but you cannot imagine how galling it is to have you nagging me to go faster and faster while you sail in on your yacht, have weekends in Paris, or show the results of my hard work in cut form which I haven’t seen myself.” (243)

Playwright Peter Shaffer, who worked for Spiegel for a time when the producer thought of filming *The Lord of the Flies*, described him as “a cultivated pirate. I love that kind of man who seems fearless, but in the end you tend to feel used.” (213)

Actor Alec Guinness, who wanted nothing to do with *The Bridge On the River Kwai*, when he had been initially approached about playing the lead, had dinner with the film’s producer, Sam Spiegel: “I started out maintaining that I wouldn’t play the role [of Nicholson] and by the end of the evening, we were discussing what kind of wig I would wear.” (186)

In many respects, Sam Spiegel was the stereotypical Hollywood producer: He smoked big cigars, he called everybody “baby,” he used the casting couch his entire career as a way to meet women (it was said that virtually every female bit player in his films had slept with him), he lied brazenly and without guilt. His biographer, Natasha Fraser-Cavassoni, refers to Spiegel’s yarn spinning as “Spiegelese.” As she puts it, “Spiegel was only capable of conducting his affairs through misinformation.” (57) Yet he remains the only Hollywood producer to win three Best Picture Oscars: *On the Waterfront*, 1954; *The Bridge On the River Kwai*, 1957; and *Lawrence of Arabia*, 1962. And *Lawrence of Arabia* is still arguably the most celebrated, most mythologized, most life-altering (for more on this aspect of the film, see, for instance, Steven C. Caton’s *Lawrence of Arabia: A Film’s Anthropology*, 1999), most critically acclaimed epic film ever made, which deeply influenced an entire generation of filmmakers. (This, despite James Baldwin’s famous misgivings about the racism of the film and disdain for its loud and unsubtle soundtrack expressed in his book, *The Devil Finds Work*, 1976.) Spiegel must have had something more going for him than the trappings of the big time film producer. Yet it is difficult to locate much that is exceptional or admirable in his character.

He was a poor husband (his three marriages could scarcely be called that; once the lust wore away, so did his interest), and an even worse father. (He abandoned his daughter when she was one year old. A clumsy attempt at later reconciliation failed.) He was, to use the Yiddish term, a ganef, a rascal, a scoundrel. He was a hustler, a con artist. As director Billy Wilder, Spiegel’s friend and fellow Jewish emigré, said, “[Spiegel was] a modern day Robin Hood, who steals from the rich and steals from the poor.” (4) For instance, Spiegel landed in New York in November 1927, wound up in San Francisco where he ran up huge bills at expensive hotels for which he had no money, and was eventually deported in 1930. It was an indication of his ability to charm people that he delayed deportation by two years, as immigration authorities wanted to deport him by the summer of 1928. He did suffer the indignity of being jailed in San Francisco, but he also, apparently, wound up working for MGM’s Paul Bern in the studio’s foreign language department. Spiegel ran up huge, unpaid bills wherever he went, and he continued to do this even after he achieved some notice as a producer under the name of S. P. Eagle in the 1940s and 1950s. He owed people money as he became established in films in the 1940s, even as he ran around putting together a massive art collection. But at least at this point he had his name as a film producer to gain him entry and legitimacy. How did he do this when he was nobody in San Francisco, fresh from a failed escapade as a Zionist in Palestine? Biographer Fraser-Cavassoni describes it in this way: “It was simple—he looked respectable and had exquisite manners. The *eine kleine außererkennung*—the charming little gesture—stood him in good stead: flowers for the ladies, the pressed suit, the shined shoes, and the style. His portliness gave him a cherubic and affable air. The fluttering of the eyelashes, the dimples when he smiled, the joy of good food and the pleasure of a pretty face, made an impression.” (28) Spiegel was also educated, cultured, surprisingly well-read, very sophisticated man. He attended the University of Vienna, and he had far more education than other eastern European Jews who became legends in Hollywood like Sam Goldwin, Louis B. Mayer, Harry and Jack Warner, and Adolph Zukor. (All of these men were born within a 100-mile radius of Spiegel.)

Only such an educated man would have wanted to make a film of an obscure Tennessee Williams work like *Suddenly, Last
captivated by the vision of an older America that neither he nor most of the photographers he employed had ever known in any kind of purity—a point central to Lesy’s telling. His written instructions to the corps read, in Lesy’s words, as “scripts of longing.” (226) As the nation moved toward war preparedness the File increasingly emphasized what William Dean Howells decades earlier had referred to as “the smiling aspects of life.” Always looking for a way to make the documentary section of the FSA indispensable and thus secure his shaky position in Roosevelt’s embattled New Deal, Stryker instructed his photographers in 1939, “it is to our advantage to have a few pictures of the better situation in every state—protective coloring, you know! . . . Put on the syrup and white clouds and play on sentiment.” (324)

Much has been made of Stryker’s shooting scripts in determining the attitude, subject matter, and ideological bias of the photographers who worked for him. And indeed the photographs selected here more than bear out the scripted nature of much FSA photography. Many seem remarkably posed and composed. We know, for instance, that John Ford looked to FSA images of the Dust Bowl in directing *Grapes of Wrath*; scholars have paid less attention to the extent to which the photographers shared with filmmakers a theatrical approach to composing their shots. Photographs such as Russell Lee’s “Farmers talking at crossroads grocery store” (rep produce: on p. 293) reveal a depth of focus, careful staging of poses and attitudes, and deliberate mise-en-scène worthy of film direction.

What emerges from Lesy’s book is a sense of the remarkably rich image culture which shaped both the production and reception of FSA photographs. This image culture is indeed the subject of many of the photographs themselves, which feature newstands, billboards, advertisements, and circus posters, forming the visual tapestry against which Americans increasingly played out their lives. Stryker understood this and grasped its importance for amplifying the hold his scripted images would have on the public imagination. Writing to photographer Russell Lee in 1939, he gave vent to his excitement about the news that Paramount would be making a film of Steinbeck’s novel: “I am just bubbling over this whole thing . . . We should make all possible capital of it . . . “ (324)

All this and more in Lesy’s book seems to bear out the emphasis in much contemporary scholarship on the File as manipulative and ideologically coercive. Yet such scholarship overlooks the range of personalities involved in creating the File, the best of whom (Lange, Evans, and Shahn) resisted the consensus-building intentions of the FSA. Photographs are cultural texts, and all cultural texts are, to one extent or another, scripted—their production and creation inevitably informed by the knowledge of specific audiences, bodies of meaning, and viewing contexts. In 2003, we need not exert much energy in proving or disputing the claim that the File as Stryker’s brainchild was an unparalleled effort to shape the public’s imagination of the country. We have many instances of how FSA photographers used whatever techniques were necessary—from scripting to posing, to adding props, to manipulating negatives—in order to achieve the most forceful statement of a particular idea. Once we take this as a given, however, we are free to appreciate the wondrous power of the best of these images to capture moments that exceed the framing context of the File itself, offering glimpses into a world of human and social relations that cannot be contained within an ideological reading. Such is Ben Shahn’s photograph of six children in Omar, West Virginia, a vivid and unsentimental study of a range of childhood experience across the color line. The smallest of the group looks up startled at his older sister, perhaps in response to a pinch summoning him to attention. In the background at the perfect center of the image stands a white boy, hands in pocket—unapologetic, slightly defiant. Though farther from the camera, he asserts his presence with surprising confidence. In the background a row of identical shacks recedes into the distance. Complicating the bland typologies of social science, and the platitudes of Stryker’s shooting script, Shahn’s image conveys what Roland Barthes proclaimed in his late and moving work *Camera Lucida* as the discrete identity—the irreducible indexicality—of the photographic image as a presentation of life as it is transformed into history.

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Asian Approaches
Interview with Kenny Barron about Jazz in Japan

Kenny Barron is among the most distinguished pianists in jazz. Born in Philadelphia in 1943, he broke into jazz through his older brother, the saxophonist Bill Barron. In his teenage years, he worked with such accomplished players as drummer Philly Joe Jones and saxophonists Jimmy Heath and Yusef Lateef. He moved to New York in 1961 and entered long apprenticeships with reed player James Moody and Moody’s mentor, the trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie. Extended jobs with trumpeter Freddie Hubbard and bassist Ron Carter followed, and in the early 1980s he was a co-founder of the group Sphere, a quartet dedicated to performing the music of pianist and composer Thelonious Monk. While developing as a performer, Kenny Barron taught at Rutgers University, from 1973 until 1998. For the past 20 years he has led his own groups, mainly heading a trio and also a Brazilian quintet. Among his principal influences on piano are Bud Powell, Tommy Flanagan, and Wynton Kelly. His most recent recordings are Canta Brasil and Live at Bradley’s, both on the Sunny Side label.

The following conversation took place in April 2000 at Sweet Basil in New York, a jazz club no longer in operation but whose owners were Japanese.

What can you recall now about the first time you traveled to Japan to play? First impressions are lasting. What were yours?

My first trip to Japan was with the Ron Carter Quartet. We had two basses: Buster Williams and Ron on piccolo bass, myself, and Ben Riley on drums. The trip was culture shock for me, you know? There were a lot of things I wasn’t prepared for. The food, number one, and the culture there is so different. And yet there are many things the same. You’re going over there and seeing Kentucky Fried Chicken and Baskin-Robbins and 7-11, which is now owned by Japanese. Tony Roma’s for spareribs—all those kinds of businesses are there. But yet, there’s always the sense that as an outsider—gaijin, they call you—you will never really fit in. You can stay there forever, but the point is that you will never be Japanese. I mean, they’ll be polite and courteous, but you’ll never be Japanese. You can’t assimilate—that’s what it is. So, it’s a little different from, say, somebody coming here. People can actually assimilate here, even though they might be of different colors, races, nationalities; they can assimilate eventually. You can’t do that in Japan. You’re always aware that you’re an outsider.

That first time was a great experience for me. Certain things stood out. We went to a restaurant in Kyoto, and it was in an old building, four or five hundred years old. This was real Japanese, traditional Japanese—sitting on the floor, taking our shoes off, and all that. Then the waitress comes in on her knees. That’s how she came into the room. I was kind of taken aback by that.

You were definitely not in New York.

No, no. And the food, of course. I’d never had an experience eating with chopsticks. Hashi, as they call them. The food was totally alien to me. Coming from Philadelphia, I hadn’t eaten any Japanese food, even after having lived in New York for a long time. So the idea of eating raw fish just did not appeal to me. And there were other things that I just couldn’t—they had this soup that was—oh! Phew! Since that time, I’ve learned to like a lot of different dishes in Japanese food.

Do you recall the year this was?

It would have to have been around 1974 or 1975. More than 25 years ago.

Before you made that trip, did you study up on the country and culture? Or had you heard things?

No, I didn’t study up on it, particularly. But I listened to other musicians talk about their experiences in Japan. That was my concept
Part of what this novel studies is the breakdown and re-formation of systems of culture and communication. Among the myriad allusions to the present, Oryx and Crake are both named after endangered species and play central opposing roles. Crake is a scientific prodigy—as self-centered, aloof and manipulative as his namesake—a short-billed old world raven with a peculiar cry. Oryx is a sexual marvel, loving, nubile and playful—an updated version of some male fantasies; she is named after a rare antelope from Kenya with unusual markings and ringed horns. The sounds of these simple words are also onomatopoeic.

This is Atwood’s 17th novel and her 40th literary work; it ranks with Cat’s Eye, Bodily Harm, Bluebeard’s Egg, Alias Grace, and True Stories as among her best work. She is a humorist in the tradition of Iris Murdoch, but adds current Canadian and American points of view. Oryx and Crake is funnier and wilder than her first dystopian novel, The Handmaid’s Tale, which was based, in part, on gender discrimination in Afghanistan and other cultures and on modern biochemical hazards presently leading to involuntary sterilization. Oryx and Crake is set in the future, yet its language, conversations, and weird scenarios are about daily life and each human being’s responsibility for the safety—or destruction—of oneself and others.

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Visions of a Dangerous Future


The witty dialogues and bizarre creatures in *Oryx and Crake* make it a fast, funny read. Even so, it comes loaded with allusions to and reminders of important aspects of literary history, cutting edge science, and old and new mythologies: the cautionary tales of Swift, the Brothers Grimm, Aesop, and La Fontaine along with pressing contemporary issues: cloning, gene splicing, and the increasing “buzz” about chemical, nuclear, and other toxic disasters. Written before 9/11, parts of this futurist novel have already come true.

Set in a dystopian era without time, Snowman, originally named Jimmy, is the only human being in his immediate ken and has become the *paterfamilias* to a family of childlike cloned creatures, the Children of Crake. These charming naked beings have beautiful green eyes, silky skin of many hues, and the digestive systems of grass-eating animals. The women's bodies and part of the male anatomy turn azure during their periodic, exuberant mating cycle.

The seemingly otherworldly Crakes, along with opening quotes by Swift and Woolf, point to underlying issues: preserving the planet from human destructive tendencies, preserving endangered species, and preserving human freedoms. Atwood draws upon studies by science writers, including her brother, neurophysiologist Dr. Harold Atwood and Jared Diamond, all of whom are credited on the oryxandcrake.com Web site. Taking these ideas seriously does not detract from Atwood's nonstop humor, wordplay, and dialogues. Take, for example, Crake and Jimmy's discussion about imagination. Crake argues:

“...Men can imagine their own deaths...and the mere thought of impending death acts like an aphrodisiac. A dog or a rabbit doesn't behave like that...But human beings hope they can stick their souls into someone else, some new version of themselves, and live on forever.”

“As a species we’re doomed by hope, then?”

“You could call it hope. That, or desperation.”

“But we’re doomed without hope, as well,” said Jimmy.

“Only as individuals,” said Crake cheerfully.

“Well, it sucks.”

“Jimmy, grow up.”

Crake wasn’t the first person who’d ever said that to Jimmy.

Atwood lets cynical and optimistic views collide, leaving readers to decide who’s correct. And she often ends her novels ambiguously, challenging each reader to sort out carefully planted clues.

Atwood's ease as a storyteller moves the plot alternately backward and forward, starting with Snowman waking up in his tree perch near a seashore lagoon and taking us back to his ordinary childhood. Jimmy didn't excel in hyper-genetic science like his parents and those of his best friend Crake, so he ended up studying marketing at a middlebrow college. Jimmy retells past and present stories in his head in imaginary conversations with his female alter ego, who sometimes challenges his version. After his debauched younger years, he lands a spin doctoring position working for Crake, who runs Paradise, a top secret eugenics program at RejoovenEsense, an elite institution that is hermetically sealed off from the plebian world. Here Jimmy re-encounters Oryx, his fantasy dream girl—an exotic, alluring former child prostitute from the HottTotts website who is now servicing Crake and traveling to the provinces to distribute BlyssPluss, which is being promoted as a love drug far more potent than Viagra. Jimmy’s craving for Oryx leads to many further complications.

Much of the excitement comes from Atwood's fluent writing style that moves the plot along. After a mysterious international biochemical disease ravages the planet, Jimmy renames himself Snowman after the Abominable Snowman—a personal joke—this PR man has low self-esteem. Yet he leads the Crakes to safety. To gather provisions for his own sustenance, he raids deserted compounds where, in futurist chase scenes, he is attacked by vultures, pigoons (cloned pigs with tusks that grow human-tissue organs), and wolvogs (vicious wolf dogs).
of what the country was like—based on hearsay, really. Some of it turned out to be accurate, some of it didn’t.

**Were most of the reports from musicians about Japan positive?**

Oh, yeah. A lot of it was very positive. Actually, by the first time I went, I never really heard anything negative. What I heard was positive, in terms of the Japanese attitude toward jazz, how they felt about the music, how respectful they are to musicians. Basically, I found that all to be true.

**Like you were with the Yankees baseball team or something.**

The fans knew what hotel we were going to be in. When I was getting ready to carry my bags from the van into the hotel, this young woman grabbed the bags and would not let me carry them. She just hung out with us all evening—concert, and after. Whatever she had to pay for it, she paid. But she would not let me carry my bags.

**She was a fan?**

She was a fan. Now there was nothing sexual involved, you understand. She just loved the music. And other times, people would bring us extraordinary gifts. It was unreal. On the same tour, one guy—I guess he was a farmer; we were playing a small town. So what he brought us was this big box of tangerines, which he had grown. That was incredible. We had tangerines for a long time, and they were awfully good.

**You just mentioned having played in Kyoto and in some smaller places. Was that the way the tours through the country are set up, cities and small towns?**

Pretty much. Big cities and small towns. The cities—Tokyo, Osaka, and Sapporo up north. Some of the small towns are Ichinoseki, Kawasaki. But wherever you go, even in the smallest town, there is always a jazz club. They all don’t necessarily have “live” music. They’ll have it sitting in the tank so everybody can see what it is. And they just serve coffee. These are the coffee houses. Or liquor, whatever. You can find a place like that in any little town in Japan.

**So in smaller towns in Japan, you’d more likely be playing in a club, and in cities, you’d more likely be in a concert hall?**

Well, this depends on the promoter. Some promoters are at a certain level, and others work in smaller operations. With Ron Carter, that first time, we did all concerts. On my second trip to Japan, I went with Benny Carter, in about a ten-piece band, and that too was all concerts. Then I went again with my trio and that was mostly clubs. Sometimes for jazz musicians in Japan it’s a mixture of both. Clubs are very expensive to get into anyway. I remember playing at a club with Buster Williams and Al Foster was on drums, and it was sold out. And there were only 30 or 40 people. Maybe 50. But they were charging like $150 each set. Yet it was packed. This was interesting because it was packed mostly with young women, single.

**Was that in one of the cities?**

No, this was in one of the towns. Maybe Shimonoseki. And the club was small, very small. But there were mostly young women, by themselves.

**They were like fans of Elvis or the Beatles.**

Yeah, it was great!

**It’s like you were idolized.**

Yeah, that’s true. I think that has changed somewhat since then, though.

**When you were not performing in Japan, did you get out much during the daytime to see the country? Did you feel comfortable moving around?**

Yes, but you do it with some trepidation because very few people speak English there, and that’s one of the things that’s a drag, you know. In the big hotels, places like that, people speak English, the employees. But by and large, if you go to little shops, they don’t speak English. So I did most of my eating, the first few times anyway, at the hotel. Since then, I’ve become a little more relaxed and I can go out and venture. I can always point. That’s what you would do anyway. They always have plastic food in the window. That makes things a lot easier.

I don’t really have any problems getting around. I took my wife one time. We went to Kyoto, or we happened to be in Kyoto and I had about four days off. So we went to the temples and shrines and castles, the whole sightseeing thing. Even in Tokyo we did that: sightseeing, riding the trains, the subway. I feel comfortable getting around now.

**Have you taught at any music clinics in Japan?**

I’ve done a couple of workshops there, but not at a school or college; they were at jazz clubs. Last summer, for instance, the bass player Bob Cranshaw and I did a clinic at a club in Osaka owned by a bass player. It was at night, after our concert. There were mostly young aspiring musicians there. Of course, the club owner spoke English and he had to translate everything we said, which would sometimes be a drag, because you can’t really speak naturally. But it was a lot of fun, and the audience seemed to get the gist of what we were saying.

**In Japan, have you played mostly with American jazz musicians, or have you played also with Japanese players?**

Mostly with American players. On one tour, I went by myself, and I worked with a Japanese singer and Japanese musicians. They were quite good. And since that time, I’ve recorded with a lot of Japanese singers and also musicians.
Who were some of the singers?

One is Keiko Lee—it was strange: She’s actually Korean, but she’s been in Japan a long time. Then there was a singer named—none of them is very well known—Shikako. She now lives here in the States. I did a record with her. And a singer named Aska Shimizu. Most of these singers were usually pretty good. There were some others I recorded with too.

Are there many female jazz instrumentalists in Japan, or are they mostly singers?

There are a lot of female pianists—a lot! I mean, there are so many, it’s unreal.

The bassist Ray Drummond made a point of telling me that in Japan taking up the piano was one of the few things that a young girl from a pretty good family would be allowed to do.

Yes, that’s very true. Sometimes the flute. I made a record with a flute player, Tanami. Tanami—I can’t remember her family name. I guess that studying a certain instrument is considered feminine enough, like the piano. But there are a million piano players, and they are good!

In classical music, the young women take up violin too.

Right, right. There’s a violinist I heard just a few years ago in Nagoya, Naoko Terai. I was so impressed with her that I asked her to be on one of my albums, Things Unseen. So she came to New York and did her first record. It was her first trip to the States and her first record date.

You’ve recorded many, many albums for several labels over the years. What are your impressions of the jazz record business in Japan?

I don’t really know that much about the business itself in Japan and how it operates. I don’t think that it’s much different from in the States. Recordings certainly are very expensive over there. I’ve done some recordings in Japan, and they operate much the same way.

These recordings were for Japanese labels?

Yes. I don’t believe they were later released in the States. One may have been. I did a date with a trumpet player named Keiki Natsushina, and I think that was released here. But mostly they were only for Japanese release.

Do you think that the Japanese market jazz well?

I think they do. I don’t know if they do it better than it’s done in the States, but the Japanese do it at least as well. The Japanese producers know the audience, and they market the music to that audience. The audience there is—the same thing here—very wide in terms of age, in terms of social-economic groups; there’s a very wide spectrum. From teenagers on up to very elderly people who really like the music. You can see that at concerts.

Did you ever think of it as strange that two countries that were at war 50 years ago now have this musical language, jazz, in common?

I think the appeal of jazz music for the Japanese resides in the fact that they are not a very demonstrative people, on a personal level; they’re just not, it’s not their thing. But jazz is one area where they can kind of demonstrate some feelings. Baseball is too. That may be a clue to the popularity of both jazz and baseball in Japan: They allow the people to express themselves. Otherwise, the only time the Japanese do that is when they drink, which is part of the custom there. For businessmen, they can drink and are allowed to say whatever they want and it’s OK. Just don’t say it when you’re sober. I think that jazz reaches the Japanese on an emotional level.

Have you visited the Peace Memorial, the museum at Hiroshima?

No, not the museum. But there’s a park there, Peace Park. The hotel I was staying at there was near to it. I had the occasion to be there, not at Hiroshima, but in Japan, on the anniversary of the dropping of the bomb. It’s a weird feeling, as an American, to be there on that day.

You write your own music. Have you been influenced in composing by your experiences of Japan, your exposure to the culture?

I’m not sure that I have. I love Japanese music. I love certain instruments, like the shakuhachi flute. That’s one of the most sensual sounds I have ever heard. I also love koto, koto music. So maybe I have been influenced by the music. One of the nicest memories I have is being in Japan with Buster Williams and Ben Riley. The promoters took us for a boat ride—actually, it turned out to be more like a canoe. We were the only Americans. The canoe didn’t hold that many people—ten of us, maybe. You could sit down and run your hand in the water. But this guy who was steering us just stood up and started singing a Japanese song, in Japanese scales, and I’ve never heard anything so really enchanting. To be in this beautiful canopy of green, the water with the little goldfish—it was incredible. There was a certain kind of peacefulness that music had. So, yes, I would say that I’ve been influenced by that.

And you hadn’t expected anything like a ride through paradise in a canoe! This was a surprise to you?

I kind of had an idea culturally about the music before I went, you know, from films, things like that. Stereotypical kinds of things. But I also knew about kabuki theatre. And I investigated some things. I went to a tea ceremony, which is incredible—it lasts an hour to make tea! Sumo wrestling, an art. Cultural things. So I had some idea, but I didn’t really know what to expect.
Do you think that the Japanese feel the same way about classical musicians who travel to Japan to play? Surely they have known and enjoyed classical music longer than jazz.

Yes, I’m sure they do. The Japanese are very much aware of classical music, and there are great symphony orchestras there. The Osaka Symphony. Tokyo String Quartet. The Japanese are aware of all kinds of music, and they respond to all of it.

How about music we associate with young people, like rock, rap, hip hop?

They’re into that as well. They’re definitely into some of the American music from the 1950s or ’60s. There’s an area in Tokyo called Harajuku. There’s a big park there, and on Sundays you can see all the young people with spiked hair—that’s their thing, heavy metal. There are a lot of bands like that over there. Not my cup of tea, but . . . .

Thirty or 40 years ago, and earlier, a lot of American jazz musicians, many of them African-American, went to Europe: France, Denmark. They found a kind of solace or respect there, and they could work. Many African-American musicians have talked of being free of racial prejudice that they had experienced in the States. Do you feel that jazz players of any race have felt that kind of freedom or respect in Japan? Is there an awareness of racial tension in Japan?

Yes, I’m sure there is. No, the Japanese people are not beyond that. Racism exists there, but to a lower degree. And not necessarily toward black people, per se. It’s maybe more a nationalistic thing, like toward Americans or other Asians. But the Japanese see things on the news involving black people here in New York, or wherever. So they might have the attitude that, oh, New York is not safe. There was a guy, an official in the Japanese government, very high up in the government, and this was quite a while ago now, who made a statement to the effect that that’s why the children aren’t smart here, because of the minorities. He was thoroughly castigated for saying that. But in some areas of Japan, there is still that attitude. Personally, traveling there, I have never felt anything negative toward me as a black man. Sometimes, though, in certain small towns, people will stare at you. Then you realize that you are probably in a town where they don’t see many black people. So it’s a look of curiosity. They might look at white people that way. It’s a town where they just don’t see any foreigners.

Having gone to Japan to play for over 25 years, do you feel that the culture of Japan has changed significantly during this time?

As far as jazz goes, I don’t notice any significant changes in Japan. The music is accepted, it’s respected. When you go there, the people know all about you. They’ve read your history. In the popular jazz magazine Swing Journal, they had a whole thing about me in two issues. I didn’t know anything about it! A whole thing about me—interviews, and they listed every record I’ve ever been on. And they took two issues to do it. Somebody told me about it and brought me copies. All in Japanese. No English edition. I can’t imagine that kind of feature happening in the States.

My perception of Japan remains basically the same. I always have a great time when I go over there. The treatment is pretty much always first class. Great pianos to play. For a while I’ve been doing a tour in Japan called “100 Golden Fingers.” This is 10 jazz pianists, playing in various combinations, including a rhythm section. I have such a good time when I do that tour. All concert halls, all fine pianos. I went on the first one, and I’ve been on every one since. Junior Mance, Ray Bryant, Hank Jones, and Tommy Flanagan were on several of them. It’s always fun. No egos. It’s just, “Show me that!” You travel in Business class, you stay in five-star hotels. But then again, that’s every time I go to Japan now. The treatment is always great.

Interviewed by Wayne Zade, Professor of English at Westminster College, Fulton, Missouri. Zade is working on a book about jazz in Japan.