belles lettres

The Politics of Patriotism
John McCain’s Last Stand

See page 3 for a review of John McCain’s
Faith of My Fathers
This issue of Belles Lettres continues our focus on the upcoming presidential election. As you might remember, our last issue (spring 2008) featured a cover story/review of Shelby Steele’s A Bound Man: Why We are Excited About Obama and Why He Can’t Win by WU Professor Emeritus of History Henry Berger. (Given the decided uncertainty about the outcome in November, Steele may very much have wished that he had given his book a different subtitle, unless he knows something that the rest of us don’t.) In this issue, we have WU Ph.D. in English Jason Vest’s review of Obama’s autobiography Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance, originally published in 1995 along with my review of John McCain’s Faith of My Fathers: A Family Memoir, originally published in 1999. Normally, we would not review books that were published so long ago but we felt it would be informative for our audience, especially as interest in this particular presidential race is so high, pundits calling it “the change election,” meaning, I think, change of huge historic proportion will take place no matter the outcome. Moreover, as Washington University hosted the sole vice presidential debate of this season, further heightening interest in presidential politics in the university community, we thought our readers would be especially interested in reading reviews of the autobiographies of the major party nominees. (We thank Mr. McCain for choosing Alaska governor Sarah Palin as his running mate, assuring us one of the biggest audiences in history for a vice presidential debate. We would have reviewed books by the vice presidential candidates as well—Governor Palin, as far as I can tell has not written one but one has been written about her—but our editorial timeline did not permit, as especially Mrs. Palin was so recently chosen.) We also have a review Rick Shenkman’s Just How Stupid Are We? Facing the Truth About the American Voter by WU political science professor Bill Lowry. Whatever may be said empirically about the intelligence of the American voter (and Americans are notorious for thinking other Americans are stupid), there is no doubt those who vote for the candidate who loses think the majority of America voters are very stupid, indeed. We would have been happy, as well, to run reviews on books by or about Cynthia McKinney, Bob Barr, and Ralph Nader, all presidential candidates, if we could have found the reviewers. We do not discriminate against third-, fourth-, or fifth-party candidates. All candidates do not have an equal shot at winning but all the candidates are equally interesting. Only remarkably quirky, lively people run for the presidency for small parties. Whimsy, disguised as political radicalism, has its charms and who knows when it may cross the line to become real insurgency.

Others reviews include an essay by English Department colleague Rafia Zafar on cookbook editor Judith Jones, one by another English Department colleague Dan Grausam on Philip Roth, Washington University graduate Lynnel Thomas, now an English professor, weighing in on a mystery set in New Orleans, our friend and Center for the Humanities Advisory Board member Joe Pollack providing the lowdown on Harper Barnes’s new book on the East St. Louis riot of 1917, and a good many other articles as well.

Also, let me put in a plug for Center’s upcoming Faculty Book Celebration. This year we will be awarding our Bi-Annual International Humanities Prize to author Michael Pollan. Our first recipient, in 2006, was Turkish author and Nobel Prize winner Orhan Pamuk.

We hope you enjoy our fall harvest issue, as it might be called, as it seems to have sense of the bountiful roundup about it. Please email us or drop us a letter about the issue. We’d love to know what you think, well or ill. Naturally, we prefer well but ill helps us build character, strong bones, and healthy teeth. And, lastly, your friendly, neighborhood humanists remind you to vote in November (early and often, if you don’t fear going to jail for voter fraud, which, as I think about it, might, in itself, produce an interesting political autobiography: How I Went to Jail for My Candidate or something like that). Of course, you weren’t likely to forget about voting, were you? But, goodness, how often do we get a chance to do a public service announcement for an event that the pundits tell us will be second only to Armageddon? Geez, I hope I don’t sleep through it. Otherwise, I will have wait until the real thing comes along.
Last Stand

Last spring, a black journalist visited my office to ask me some questions about Democratic presidential nominee Barack Obama. This is the price one pays for being an African American who is associated with African American studies: always to be asked about famous African Americans in the news, to interpret things African American for non–African Americans. This visit was around the time when it was obvious that despite Hillary Clinton’s most tenacious and valiant efforts, she was not going to win the nomination. She was simply playing out the string at this point, hoping for a miracle, as Obama ran out the clock, knowing political miracles are very rare indeed and doing everything he could to prevent any such remote possibility. The journalist asked me a few questions about Obama’s historic run, a campaign that naturally impressed us both, then chatted with me generally about what would happen in the fall when Obama would face Republican nominee John McCain.

“McCain will play like Bob Dole,” the journalist said confidently, predicting an easy Obama win in the fall. “McCain will play old.” Dole, Republican senator from Kansas, ran against Bill Clinton in 1996 and lost handily, being outflanked by Clinton on virtually every issue and, indeed, despite being a wounded war hero playing “old.” Dole was seventy-three in the fall of 1996 and Clinton was fifty.

McCain is seventy-two and a wounded war hero (Vietnam, not World War II like Dole; an important distinction I will discuss momentarily), and to think that he will suffer the same fate against Obama, forty-seven, is reasonable, eerily easy to think. But even as the journalist belittled McCain, I was not nearly as confident. I had been reading up on the Republican senator, and I did not think he would be Bob Dole, although I thought and continue to think that the odds are against him this fall. (McCain will lose in November not because the public is convinced he will be a bad president or that he does not deserve to be president but that he seems, quixotically, to be standing athwart history, yelling stop—to borrow Bill Buckley’s phrase—as history in the form of an express train named Barack Obama is bearing down on him.)

McCain will lose in November. He may even lose by a large margin, but he will not lose, if he does, in the way Dole did. McCain has prided himself since his childhood on being the bad boy, the iconoclast, the one who goes down his own road. If McCain loses, he will do it on his terms. Nothing made that clearer than his controversial, historic selection of Alaska governor Sarah Palin as his running mate, the first woman to run on either end of a GOP presidential ticket. It was the pick not of a desperate man but a feisty one, not of a man with a chip on his shoulder but rather a man expressing the attitude of “damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead,” a man who likes to thumb his nose at the establishment and challenge conventional wisdom, a bravado pick. As McCain sees it, if this is the improbable year of Barack Obama, why not the improbable year of Sarah Palin or some other unexpected political wunderkind? Whether that makes a good president can be debated, but it makes a remarkably singular presidential candidate. Bob Dole chose supply-sider Jack Kemp as his running mate, whose claims to the position were his own unsuccessful runs for the presidency, having served in Congress a few terms, having been a secretary of HUD, and being a former professional football player. In short, Kemp was a dull, useless pick that signified no guts, no glory, a frightened pick that lacked confidence. And the rest, as they say, is oblivion.

McCain, whether headed for victory or defeat, is not headed for oblivion, even if the public consensus determines that selecting Sarah Palin was foolish, which at this point is not likely as the pick is viewed, predictably, in intensely partisan, ideological terms. (She is either the principled, reform-minded, sacrificing
mother/saint or the air-headed, devious, right-wing beauty queen; both caricatures inspired by the passions of the moment. She is not seen as a complicated, contradictory person as we all are. But no one can win public office presenting herself as a complicated person full of virtues and insecurities and riven equally by petty irrationalities and common sense. What people, either liberal or conservative, want during a presidential campaign is not honesty but the comfortable insanity of their passionate ideological delusions. Candidates can only helplessly comply by being fantasy projections, either demons or angels.) McCain will go down in history if only because the choice is so controversial. Maybe, like the main character in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, McCain thinks that history might be a gambler, and he has decided to bet the house on the hand he’s got. (After all, unlike his opponent, this is absolutely his last chance to be president.) One can’t help but have at least a grudging admiration for someone who tells the fates in a game that always favors the house, “Let it ride!”

**Patriotic Gore**

*Faith of My Fathers* was McCain’s campaign book for his presidential run in 2000, part of the “Straight Talk Express,” McCain’s campaign slogan. It was highly praised upon its publication, at the time when McCain was the darling of the mainstream press, every liberal’s favorite Republican because he fussed so publicly with his party and because, of course, he wasn’t George W. Bush, who was viscerally hated by liberals almost from the moment he expressed an interest in running for the presidency. McCain’s apostasy not only pleased liberals and riled conservatives, but it greatly juiced McCain himself. He liked being the political outsider.

It is probably because liberals favored him and that Bush took a page from the dirty tricks playbook in defeating him in the North Carolina primary that McCain didn’t win his party’s nomination. The Republican Party might be in better shape today if McCain had won, even if he had lost the general election against Al Gore. And even if he loses, his run this time around might do much to restore his party’s image and secure its future. In this season of overheated rhetoric, McCain is dismissed by Obama’s supporters as a Bush clone, as a water carrier for Bush. (Actually, McCain enjoys the give-and-take of political compromise. He was never an anti-liberal, which is why Rush Limbaugh, Ann Coulter, and other hard-core conservatives disliked him.) It must be remembered that when Democrat John Kerry secured the nomination in 2004, the first person he asked to be on his ticket as vice president was not any top Democratic politician, including Hillary Clinton, but rather John McCain, the same McCain who was on record as a strong supporter of the Iraq War, which had already begun going sour at that point. That says a great deal about McCain’s political skills and how much many of his peers see him as a leader. How many politicians could have survived being courted by the presidential candidate of the opposition party and then, four years later, become the nominee of his own? (McCain, in turn, wanted to select Joe Lieberman, the former Democratic, now Independent senator from Connecticut, as his running mate. That’s not the choice of a man bound by the strictures of ideology. But that choice was as unacceptable to the GOP rank and file, as McCain in 2004, was to the Democratic rank and file.)

It nearly goes without saying that *Faith of My Fathers* is a highly self-serving book, meant to further advance the political fortunes of John McCain: that is the definition of a campaign book, which is why so few of them actually impress the serious reading public as having any merit as books. They simply take pamphleteering to a new level. But McCain’s book is one of the few that actually has worth beyond being merely a presentation of the candidate adorned with a full range of cosmetic alterations. McCain and his speechwriter, Mark Salter (they have collaborated on several books including the sequel to *Faith of My Fathers, Worth the Fighting For: A Memoir*, published in 2002, which deals with McCain’s post-Vietnam political life and is actually even better than *Faith of My Fathers*), work well together. The book is not stilted in the way campaign autobiographies frequently are, with a ghostwriter trying with wavering degrees of success to capture the voice of the subject, like an actor struggling with a foreign accent. It does not seem as if it were written for McCain but rather written with him.

McCain’s story is surely familiar now, even to that section of the electorate that fervently opposes him: the scion of a highly respected military family, with a grand-father and a father who were both admirals in the Navy, the tradition of the Naval Academy at Annapolis, the five-year Vietnam prisoner-of-war captivity that nearly killed him, the agreeable, even magnetic arrogance of the maverick. But this narrative arc, whatever its familiarity, this story of John McCain’s heritage of patriotic gore, is presented with great power. He tells wonderfully thrilling episodes, both humorous and tragic, about his father’s and grandfather’s commands during World War II: his grandfather commanded a fleet of carriers, his father a submarine. The grandfather was a crusty old salt, incredibly profane in language, a chain smoker, a hard drinker, high strung, with bad-fitting false teeth, bone thin, and as duty obsessed as Ahab was psychic. McCain’s father smoked, chewed cigars, was an alcoholic (although he never drank on duty), moody, profane as well, duty obsessed, deeply ambitious, and was bothered by being very short, which meant he lived a life of compensation. McCain’s grandfather died four days after World War II, dropping dead of a coronary at the age of sixty-one. McCain’s father had to endure all of his son’s years as a captive of the North Vietnamese, even as he was named commander-in-chief of all the U.S. military forces in the Pacific.
He spent every Christmas for three years running with the marines in the DMZ in order to be closer to John. His wife said that during those years, McCain's father “was in agony” over their son. McCain’s father, entering the same profession as his own accomplished father, suffered from the insecurities and pressures of filiopiety. He was, after all, named after his father. John Sidney. McCain’s father became “the Navy’s first son of a four-star admiral to reach the same rank as his father,” writes McCain. This is a remarkable feat. McCain found himself in a family of overachieving men in whose footsteps he was expected to follow:

My father never ordered me to attend the Naval Academy. Although I am sure we must have talked about it from time to time, I cannot recall the conversations. There are no scenes in my memory of sitting in my father’s study listening to him expound on the virtues of an Academy education, or explain the reasons why I must follow him to Annapolis as he had followed his father. Neither do I recall any arguments with my parents about my wanting to consider an alternative future. I remember simply recognizing my eventual enrollment at the Academy as an immutable fact of life, and accepting it without comment.

What else could McCain do, as he was named after his father and grandfather, the third in line? He expressed his own resentment about how a successful father and grandfather eclipsed his ability to take credit for his own life:

Later in my career, as I rose through the ranks, some would attribute my advance to my dad’s benefaction. I suppose it is an accusation that many children of successful parents learn to ignore. I never did, however. I grew red-faced and angry every time some know-it-all told me how easy a life my father had made for me. The life my father led me to has been a richly rewarding one, and I am grateful to him for it. But “easy” is not the first adjective that comes to mind when describing it.

McCain may have been driven to become a great public man, an American president, if only to say that he had achieved something that his fathers had not, in order, at last, to be his own person. What was a bit unusual about this Oedipal struggle was not that young McCain was expected to do his father’s work or to become a leader of men but rather that he was to become a leader of men in a profession in which he was expected to bravely face death himself as well as lead men into battle and possibly (probably) to death as well. He was expected to love his country unconditionally.

I disagree with many of my liberal friends: I do not think it is an easy or mindless thing to love one’s country unconditionally or to accept a tradition unquestioningly. I think it is a very difficult thing to do and not necessarily the easy or irresponsible way out. Doubt is far easier to bear than faith, especially for John McCain during the Vietnam War years, when doubt became far easier to express, at least in certain institutional and political circles. Doubt is the best way to hedge one’s existential and metaphysical bets. (It is tantamount to saying, I may be right, but I may be wrong.) Human beings yearn for the certitude of unwavering loyalty, but how often, when the chips are down, are human beings truly loyal? In the best version of bad circumstances, that is only an even-money bet. As Billie Holiday said, never get into trouble with someone who doesn’t have the stomach for it, and a lot of people, we discover through experience, don’t have the stomach for it.

It is hardly a surprise that McCain would be a conservative, considering the family from which he came and its Southern roots. But his times, coming of an age in a post–World War II world, made him a peculiar sort of conservative, a conservative who wanted to be admired for his ability to thumb his nose at it all. He ended up being asked to pay to believe it. For the soldier, patriotism is a difficult thing to do and not necessarily the easy or irresponsible way out. Doubt is far easier to bear than faith, especially for John McCain during the Vietnam War years, when doubt became far easier to express, at least in certain institutional and political circles. Doubt is the best way to hedge one’s existential and metaphysical bets. (It is tantamount to saying, I may be right, but I may be wrong.) Human beings yearn for the certitude of unwavering loyalty, but how often, when the chips are down, are human beings truly loyal? In the best version of bad circumstances, that is only an even-money bet. As Billie Holiday said, never get into trouble with someone who doesn’t have the stomach for it, and a lot of people, we discover through experience, don’t have the stomach for it.

Those who think that many of the aspects of the ideological and psychological preparation for service in the upper echelons of the military are nothing more than a crock of bs are very likely to be those who endure it. Cadets in the service academies are as likely to disbelieve what they are being taught about duty, God, and country as the average seminarian who hates theology and hardly thinks it warrants belief. It is rather like preparing for any other profession: intense loyalty is more likely to result from a cynical view of loyalty; it is only with that sort of mental toughness that someone can lead others or oneself into battle, that someone can envision something higher than oneself to give oneself to. I believe my ideology, the professional soldier tells us, in essence because I have earned the right to believe it, because I have learned through a certain kind of unique pressure what I am being asked to pay to believe it. For the soldier, patriotism is a brutally demanding discipline, not an anti-intellectual gesture of conformity. But, of course, military leadership is nothing like preparing oneself for any other profession. For those of us with no connections to the military, the armed forces are another culture.

Liberals generally hate the military or deeply distrust it, yet it might be the best arena for preparing well-rounded political leaders that we have. Senior executives in the military have an extensive formal education (usually graduate degrees), must have
business skills, have usually gained experience living abroad, have ability to manage a large number of people, and understand the use of violence in instigating and resolving conflict. They are far better suited to run for the presidency than any lawyer, academic, or intellectual I know.

American Bad Boy

But underneath this narrative of duty and glory is the tale of an American Bad Boy. McCain’s story reads a bit like Twain’s The Adventures of Tom Sawyer (1876), The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1884), Thomas Bailey Aldrich’s The Story of a Bad Boy (1869), and Kipling’s Stalky and Company (1899), with a bit more ribaldry and debauchery thrown in to remind us that McCain grew up in the twentieth and not the nineteenth century. He was something of a punk, a kid with an attitude who knew never to go too far. He was this way even as a small child. He has always had a temper, although he never would have gotten as far as he has in life if he had no ability to control it when he needed to. (And his temper is no worse than Dwight Eisenhower’s or Richard Nixon’s or even Bill Clinton’s, all elected to the presidency.) He was never a good student and did just enough at Annapolis not to get expelled. Despite his hijinks, he was determined not to be expelled. For instance, he hated freshman hazing at the Naval Academy: “I resisted not by refusing the hazing but by letting my resentment show, and by failing to conform fully to the convention of a squared-away midshipman. . . . I wanted the lords of the first and second class to know my compliance was grudging and in no way implied my respect for them.” He understood that the hazing was meant to make him a better officer, and, although he hated it, he submitted to it in a sloppy, resentful, immature way. It was always important to him to show people in power that he did not like submitting to something, rather than to rebel against it: that is the essence of the psychology of the bad boy. In the back of his mind, he always wanted to make the grade as an officer someday, not just from pride but because the lives of others would depend on how well he performed as a leader.

His favorite subjects were English and history. He was indifferent to or possessed little ability for any other sort of academic work. (This made his Academy years, with its engineering-heavy curriculum, a particular torment for him. He used cramming and his short-term memory to get by.) His favorite high school teacher taught him English and made a lasting impression on him. (The teacher was one of the first persons McCain wanted to see upon his release from captivity in North Vietnam, but the teacher died while McCain was in prison.) In most respects, McCain has the temperament of a humanist, impressed by literature and history as ways of understanding the meaning of life and as a way of processing the significance of nationalism and politics. This probably explains why Mitt Romney, during their 2008 primary battle, called McCain “an ignoramus” on the subject of economics. McCain does not process his reality quantitatively or through numbers but rather through the imagination, the necessity of duty, the need for resourcefulness, the temperature of the gut, and the honor of the nation.

He was a womanizer as a young man, “a rowdy and impetuous young man,” as he confesses, which, as some might wish to point out, was part of his white privilege. A black man who misbehaved in this way, especially in the South, where McCain was stationed after graduating from Annapolis, would not have had much of a career in anything except perhaps being a jazz musician, where such misbehavior was romanticized. Such an observation would be true in regard to the undeniable cultural and political fact that a black man could not at all misbehave in the white world and expect to get ahead (or even to live, in some quarters), but he was free to misbehave as much as he pleased in his own world, where he would be as likely to get away with it without recrimination as McCain did. There is much truth in the claim that being bad made a black man deviant but made a white man fun-loving. How much McCain understands this is unclear, as he is deeply uneasy about the nature of the privilege he may have enjoyed in his life.

He showed only modest but sufficient promise in becoming a first-rate military officer. He took his duties more seriously, but he was still something like an overgrown frat boy. He married a divorced woman with two children to try to settle himself. They had a child together. (This marriage would eventually end in an image-sullying divorce several years after he returned from Vietnam.) What he needed in his young officer stage was a war, and he got one when the U.S. embarked upon its Vietnam misadventure in earnest in 1965.

The incidents that shaped McCain most deeply as a young man occurred during this war. First was the horrific fire on board the aircraft carrier the Forrestal that occurred on July 29, 1967, and resulted in the deaths of 134 men and damage to the ship in the neighborhood of more than seventy million dollars. McCain’s nightmarish description of the fire, which nearly killed him, is one of the highlights of the book. It is both maddeningly, absurdly horrifying and deeply moving. He had never seen men blown
apart before his very eyes, as the gas tanks and bombs on board the planes exploded on the ship. Two men were incinerated right in front of him, trying to put the fire out. He had also never seen men sacrifice themselves in the line of duty, try so hard to save one another and the ship. He had only heard about such things before in his father’s stories or in military histories. Second was McCain’s five-year captivity as a prisoner of the North Vietnamese. He was sick for most of his captivity, never received proper medical care, suffered two broken shoulders and a smashed knee, and was regularly afflicted with dysentery. He spent periods in solitary confinement and was beaten regularly. Many of his fellow prisoners did not think he would survive, and, as McCain acknowledges, probably the only reason he did was because his father was an admiral. The North Vietnamese, recognizing his propaganda value, chose to do enough to keep him alive. Indeed, he was offered an early release. He refused on the grounds that it violated the code of conduct for American prisoners of war, formulated after the Korean War, when there was such controversy about American POWs selling out to the enemy. Prisoners were to accept release in the reverse order in which they were captured; the longest held were the first released. One did not go out of order. (Ironically, the military, a highly hierarchical institution, created a policy that was meant to be anti-elitist.) McCain refused, clearly not only because of the code but also because of his father. How could he go home and face his father if he accepted an early release, no matter how sick he was? He had to stay. Besides, even then, in the dim recesses of his mind, he had to be thinking a little about his future. He was the son and grandson of honored military men. What future would he have, in or out of the service, if he came home under ambiguous circumstances that might open him to the charge of cowardice? So he stayed, forced by honor and practicality, by the tenacity of his own ambition, which is probably what kept him alive. He had to be able to lead a life worthy of his fathers.

The book ends with his release. It is not the finest memoir of the Vietnam War, but it ranks among the important ones and it does make for gripping reading. It is one of the best campaign books ever written.

Icon

Political commentator Andrew Sullivan made the case for Barack Obama several months ago in *The Atlantic* (December 2007). Among other things, Sullivan argues that Obama would take us, finally and with relief, beyond the Vietnam War and the cultural and political divisions it has caused in this country. Obama represents a new generation, a fresh face, a new post-Vietnam perspective that the country desperately needs. We need to move beyond the squabbles and battles of the baby boomers. This is a good argument, thoughtfully rendered.

But we might also need, as a nation, to come to grips with Vietnam in another way: by finally electing to the presidency someone who fought during that war. (We have so far elected two men to the presidency— one Republican and one Democrat—who found ways to avoid fighting in Vietnam.) It might be the only way to bring that war to some sort of closure in the American mind, to honor those who served and died, especially because the men (and the women) who fought in that war were generally not honored the way veterans of other wars were. McCain’s election might do some good for some people on that score. Moreover, if McCain were elected, it would be the first time we have ever had a man who served five years (or any time) in prison who became president. It may not be apparent, at first blush, that a man who was harshly denied his freedom for five years offers a certain dimension of experience that might be useful in a president. Whatever one might think of McCain’s vehement disapproval of the June Supreme Court decision that granted Guantanamo prisoners the right to file habeas corpus petitions, he had spoken out strongly against torture, had crafted legislation that tried to ensure the human rights of the prisoners, and was one of only two Republican candidates in the primaries (in a field of ten) who recommended closing Gitmo, which was the Democratic Party’s position. That he is so in favor of seeing Gitmo prisoners as enemy combatants no doubt reflects his military consciousness, but the fact that he was so deeply disturbed by evidence of torture at the facility reflects his memories as a prisoner that few other politicians have.

I am not entirely sure that having been a prisoner makes a huge difference in a person, but I think it is something worth thinking about, especially in a nation so troubled by the immensity of its incarceration rates. It certainly must have some effect on a person. Barack Obama knows he is different because he is a black man running for president, but John McCain may be thinking he is just as different as a man who has been tortured and imprisoned as, according to the Vietnamese, “a war criminal.” (Even if he were treated better than he claims, as his opponents have charged, he was still held against his will for more than five years.) McCain is unique among Vietnam POWs in that he holds no grudge against the people who opposed the war, although he thought they were deeply wrong and extraordinarily flawed in their thinking (as he did the politicians who prosecuted the war, whom he truly hated). That is one reason why he has enjoyed such bipartisan success in his career. He chose not to relight the war as a politician.

John McCain and Malcolm X are the two biggest prisoner icons in our culture in the twentieth century, men who received a certain kind of education from their imprisonments, whose imprisonments shaped the myth of their public careers as leaders. Perhaps if McCain became president we might be able to reconcile them both, politically, racially, culturally, in some ways that might be as profound as a black man becoming president. Perhaps we might be able to learn something about the ways that prison can be a form of redemption. Liberals might want to think about that if, by chance, McCain should win. It could be more of a teachable moment than many of us currently think.

*How could he go home and face his father if he accepted an early release, no matter how sick he was? He had to stay.*

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I. Campaign Fatigue (or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Blogs)

One day soon, I’m happy to report, the 2008 presidential election will be finished. On that day, Americans can look forward to moving past the endless platitudes, countless debates, and mindless advertisements that boggle, bemuse, and belittle their lives. On that day, Americans will find themselves in a world mercifully (but temporarily) absent minute dissections of electoral strategies, campaign hierarchies, and candidate biographies. On that day, Americans need no longer watch, stupefied, as CNN’s Wolf Blitzer wonders which way voters who prefer flag pins to agricultural subsidies will jump or read, horrified, as Ann Coulter publishes another screed against whomever has most recently defended the principles of critical thought. On that day, in short, we can all rest, weary from a perpetual campaign that has outlasted its welcome nearly as much as Angelina Jolie’s most recent pregnancy did.

This election cycle has persisted for so long that, of the children who entered kindergarten in August and September 2008, one-third to one-half of their lives has featured the campaign as background noise. Although speculation about the presidency officially began on December 28, 2006, when John Edwards, the former North Carolina senator and 2004 Democratic vice presidential nominee, declared his intention to run for the White House (Ohio Representative Dennis Kucinich’s December 11, 2006, announcement that he would seek the Democratic Party’s nomination drew press coverage limited to are-you-kidding? chuckles), discussion about who would replace George W. Bush as the nation’s chief executive reached new levels of intensity after Hurricane Katrina drowned the Gulf Coast from New Orleans, Louisiana, to Mobile, Alabama, in August 2005. Bush’s bungled management of the federal government’s response to this natural disaster, no matter how stridently his surrogates defended his behavior by defaming the actions of state and local officials (particularly in Democratically controlled New Orleans), became the new standard for government incompetence. Coupled with the ongoing fiasco in Iraq, the systemic corruption in Congress (thanks to House Speaker Tom DeLay and Washington lobbyist Jack Abramoff), and the perception that the administration was unconcerned about the economic difficulties facing middle- and lower-class Americans, Bush’s problems, reflected in plummeting public-opinion polls, fueled discussions around water coolers, dinner tables, and prayer circles about who would step into the office that Bush, on January 20, 2009, must vacate.

And on that day, Barack Obama—the first-term Democratic senator from Illinois; the man who electrified the 2004 Democratic National Convention by extolling his country as a place where “the hope of a skinny kid with a funny name who believes that America has a place for him, too” allowed Obama to deliver a keynote address to a group of people still mispronouncing his name; the candidate who surprised nearly everyone by out-campaigning master campaigners Hillary and Bill Clinton; and the politician who launched a thousand blogs—stands an excellent chance of becoming the forty-fourth president of the United States.
II. New Kid on the Block

Obama’s political ascent has surprised not only seasoned observers but also those individuals who pushed him to seek the presidency in the first place. The person most taken aback, as evinced by the deer-in-the-headlights expression that overtakes his face whenever the topic of Obama’s fund-raising prowess comes up on PBS’s The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer, is New York Times columnist and conservative commentator/flack David Brooks. One would expect Brooks to be pleased by Obama’s performance, especially considering that Brooks published a column titled “Run, Barack, Run” in the Times’s October 19, 2006, edition, which, as far as I can determine, is the first mainstream press piece seriously devoted to an Obama candidacy. The Brooks of 2008, however, with the prospect of an Obama presidency approaching reality, seems perplexed that a biracial man with “limited executive experience” (as Brooks and his right-leaning brethren robotically repeat) has come so far so fast. Brooks’s argument in “Run, Barack, Run” amounts to platitudes about how Obama’s globalized (or at least cosmopolitan) perspective, formed by the man’s unique background as the son of a Kenyan father and a Kansas mother, who lived in Hawaii, Indonesia, Los Angeles, and New York City before settling in Chicago, uniquely equips Obama to tackle the challenges that Bush’s failed policies and erratic presidency have created. Brooks’s piece, like most of his columns, is short, direct, and trite, concluding with the saccharine notion that an Obama candidacy will be good for the country: “It may not be personally convenient for him, but the times will never again so completely require the gifts that he possesses. Whether you’re liberal or conservative, you should hope Barack Obama runs for president.”

An old adage reminds us to be careful when wishing, for the wish may come true. Such has happened to Brooks, pollster Frank Luntz, and numerous other Republican pundits who have made this claim so frequently that, early in the Democratic primary process, they may actually have believed it. It’s as if the Republican intelligentsia (an oxymoronic term, perhaps)—knowing that the party, despite its professed love for Colin Powell, Clarence Thomas, J.C. Watts, and Condoleezza Rice, would never nominate an African American for the presidency—was able, by proclaiming the abstract virtues of an Obama candidacy, to convince itself that even a failed Obama run would heal the racial polarization that the GOP is largely responsible for creating, while ignoring the tragedy that it has taken 232 years from the signing of the Declaration of Independence and 221 years from the signing of the Constitution for any person besides a Caucasian male to receive a decent opportunity at winning the presidency.

The subtext of Brooks’s piece is that Obama, an African American Democrat, can absolve the Republicans (and their Democratic counterparts, the Dixiecrats) of systematically employing race as the most divisive issue in American politics since 1954’s Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court ruling desegregated the public schools and shocked the Jim Crow South. Obama, according to this argument, could, merely by throwing his hat into the ring, erase the uncomfortable political truth that Richard Nixon saw so clearly when he recommended, after Barry Goldwater’s landmark defeat in the 1964 presidential election, that the Republicans adopt the so-called Southern Strategy to reclaim power: blame African Americans for their lot in life by co-opting their historical victimization as the province of the newly disenfranchised, working-class white man. This idea is so absurd to anyone who has studied the history of slavery, Reconstruction, segregation, the civil rights movement, and America’s class system for more than two weeks that it scarcely seems credible. But as Lyndon Johnson—no less a clear-eyed political observer than Nixon—presciently commented after signing the 1965 Voting Rights Act into law, this single action delivered the South and, with the exceptions of the Carter and Clinton presidencies, the White House into the trembling hands of the GOP.

Brooks, as his recent behavior makes clear, never seriously expected Obama to win anything more than a few primaries. He, like so many of us, presumed that Hillary Clinton would waltz to her party’s nomination because she is one-half of the most famous brand in Democratic Party politics. Obama, after losing, would return to the Senate, work for social justice, retain his spellbinding command of the English language, give many fine speeches, vote with his party, and, with guile and luck, secure a position in the new Clinton administration. To expect otherwise, it seemed, was either wishful thinking or outright madness.

Obama, of course, refused to follow this script. The Democratic Party’s electorate defied all expectations by turning out in large numbers to vote for Obama, for Clinton, for Edwards, and even for Kucinich. The campaign lurched from thrilling victory to ham-fisted concession speech to ridiculous photo op in a contest that—despite its gutter sniping, implicit sexism, and ugly race baiting—engaged the nation’s attention more than most primary seasons. Obama seemed fresh not simply because he spoke eloquently about the war, the economy, and the promise of a better tomorrow, but also because he and his handlers knew that Americans of all stripes, ideologies, and dispositions wanted change so badly that, for the first time in American history, even a black man could become a serious White House contender.

III. Man of the People

Brooks, in “Run, Barack, Run,” devotes attention to Obama’s 2007 book, The Audacity of Hope, while ignoring Obama’s 1995 memoir (republished in 2004 to take advantage of Obama’s newfound national prominence), Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance. This oversight explains much of the column’s anemic impact for the simple reason that The Audacity of Hope (a title taken from a sermon delivered in Chicago by Trinity...
United Church of Christ’s now-infamous Rev. Jeremiah Wright that provoked Obama’s religious awakening) is much less compelling than Dreams from My Father. Whereas The Audacity of Hope follows the tried-and-true formula of extended press release masquerading as political analysis that first-term senators routinely publish, Dreams from My Father, written before Obama won election to the Illinois State Senate in 1996, recounts in vivid detail the man’s early life in Hawaii, his years in Indonesia (where he attended Djakarta’s International School to supplement his local education), his schooling at Los Angeles’s Occidental College, his time at Columbia University (where he worked one summer clearing construction sites), his first career in Manhattan as a research assistant for a consulting firm to multinational corporations, his decision to become a community organizer in Chicago, and, most tellingly, his trip to his father’s ancestral village in Kenya. The breadth of Obama’s experience (Obama was only thirty-three years old when the book was published) is impressive when compared to the mundane childhoods that many of his readers endured, rooted in one or two places for most of their lives. Obama emerges, by his own account, as a person who frequently feels rootless, restless, and lonely. He is rarely at home, even when at home, afflicted by an unrealistic image of his absent father, who looms as a figure of strength, enchantment, wonder, and unassailable authority to a boy who, while growing to manhood, cannot comfortably reconcile his biracial heritage.

The most startling aspect of Dreams from My Father, particularly for readers accustomed to Obama’s polished public speeches, is the fragmentary identity that he discusses in every chapter. Obama constantly searches for the larger meanings of life as a black American, not simply because his society marginalizes him in ways both cruel and subtle, but also because he cannot determine which culture (white or black, proud American or skeptical citizen, educated professional or salt-of-the-earth midwesterner) to choose. The book is so smartly written—with evocative prose, narrative urgency, expert pacing, and lucid characterizations of the people in the author’s life—that Obama, whatever his political future, could one day make a fine living as a novelist. The reader initially expects to hear the account of a charmed life that could thrill British writer Salman Rushdie, who has pronounced Obama’s invocation of fissure, fluidity, and collision problems. Obama’s invocation of fissure, fluidity, and collision should thrill British writer Salman Rushdie, who has pronounced on several occasions that the experiences of migration, crossing borders, and reforming one’s identity are primary features of the globalized twenty-first century. These physical and psychological dislocations, Obama observes, also define America’s history, no matter how reactionary, nativist, or blinkered some segments of its population may be.

Upon reading Dreams from My Father soon after Obama’s 2004 DNC address, I thought to myself, “This fellow should run for president someday.” Obama’s intelligence, thoughtfulness, and insight into the racial conflicts that define both his country and himself are not only refreshing in their complex understanding but also necessary to rebuilding America’s moral authority and battered image after Bush’s dumbed-down, go-with-my-gut, shoot-from-the-hip style. I did not expect the possibility of an Obama presidency to arise so soon, but upon rereading Dreams from My Father in light of Obama’s 2008 White House bid, I realize that my first reaction was, in fact, correct.

Obama’s candidacy, in other words, is good for America but not for the disingenuous reasons advanced by David Brooks, Frank Luntz, and Rupert Murdoch. Obama, although rarely saying so publicly, forces white voters to consider their own racial assumptions, biases, and anxieties more deeply than they have in a very long time. Some hate him for it. Others cannot wrap their minds around it. And yet others, particularly young voters between the ages of eighteen and thirty, seem ready for it.

I had written off the possibility of an African American presidency during Bill Clinton’s first term, when his administration’s much-publicized Commission on Civil Rights filed voluminous reports documenting ongoing problems of racial and ethnic unfairness in hiring practices, lending practices, and housing practices that were promptly ignored in favor of “reforming” the welfare system. A black president was only possible in cinematic or television narrative, with Morgan Freeman’s assured performance as President Tom Beck in Mimi Leder’s 1998 film Deep Impact and Dennis Haysbert’s marvelous portrayal of President David Palmer in the first four seasons of Fox Television’s counterterrorist drama 24 setting the standard for this character type. But it would never happen in my lifetime, I believed, because at the end of the day the American electorate is simply not progressive enough.

I may still be proved correct. Obama’s major opponent, John McCain, Arizona’s senior senator and the Republican Party’s 2008 presidential nominee, is running a competitive campaign despite his embrace of nearly every major policy advanced by George W. Bush (at a time when public opinion polls indicate that even
Republicans think that the nation is "on the wrong track," in imagery that suggests an out-of-control freight train). McCain, according to several political blogs (particularly the Huffington Post) has been shielded from serious scrutiny by the protracted Democratic primary process and by an admiring press corps (whom McCain has courted for years as part of his electoral base). This analysis is essentially correct, for despite Obama's occasionally fiery rhetoric about the Iraq War and his soaring oratory about the possibilities of building a better future, he cannot take for granted victory on November 4, 2008.

IV. Yes We Can (or We Can't)

Reading Dreams from My Father can cure the misperceptions about Obama that make Bill O'Reilly, Sean Hannity, and Rush Limbaugh chortle with glee. The most pernicious—that Obama is a Muslim fifth columnist who will deliver the nation into a different (and more malignant) theocracy than Bush's aggressive Christianity—is so explosive a charge that Obama's supporters never seem to ask an important question: Is being Muslim now a crime that prevents a person from achieving the highest public office? The unfortunate answer, even seven years after 9/11, seems to be yes, which tells us as much about the nation's frenzied psyche as it does about Obama himself.

The missteps that candidate Obama has made—publicly observing, early in the primary fight, that Hillary Clinton's aggressive campaign style meant that the claws were coming out; referring to admiring female voters as “Sweetie;” not vociferously challenging the charges of elitism leveled against him and his wife during the Pennsylvania primary—arise from his belief that division begets division, meaning that, although we should not overlook, underplay, or ignore the realities of American racial strife, we should also not permit these disagreements to overwhelm our private or public lives. Dreams from My Father documents Obama's difficult coming to terms with his biracial identity that, in the fashion of every good bildungsroman, requires a trip home to teach Obama who he truly is. His visit to Kenya, occupying the book's final chapter, probing—characterizes Dreams from My Father. No matter how many times political commentators proclaim Obama to be my life was neither tidy nor static, and that even after this trip hard choices would always remain.”

Those hard choices, we now know, led Obama, after his study at Harvard Law School, back to Chicago, where, as Ryan Lizza notes in his July 21, 2008, New Yorker article “Making It” (the centerpiece of the magazine's most controversial summer issue, with a cover painting that assembles, in one image, every major stereotype about Barack and Michelle Obama circulated by their detractors), Obama learned to be a hard-nosed politician with an outwardly soft touch. Dreams from My Father does not cover Obama's time at Harvard, his path toward marriage (apart from a brief epilogue in which Obama ascribes all improvements in his character to Michelle, who, he proudly states, was a big hit with both the white and black sides of his family), or his early political career. The book concludes at the Obama wedding ceremony, with Obama's Kenyan half-brother Abongo toasting absent friends.

As fascinating as the Kenya trip is, Obama's account of his time working as a civil-rights activist in Chicago's Altgeld Gardens housing project, in one of the South Side's bleakest neighborhoods, tells us the most about the potential president's priorities. Obama's lengthy examination of the problems besetting Altgeld's residents, including their fight to secure a job-training center for a blighted area whose factory work has disappeared, is among the best evocations of urban American life that I have ever read (its understated fury at the betrayal of the working class would make The Jungle's Upton Sinclair smile and has surely gained the approval of David Simon, creator of HBO's superlative Baltimore drama The Wire). Obama's discussion of what Harold Washington's groundbreaking mayoralty meant to Chicago's African-American residents is heartbreaking in its honesty and despair (Washington's unexpected death in 1987 ended the possibility, at least in Obama's mind, that Chicago could emerge from its bruising racial polarization to embrace a more responsive politics). Obama's incisive appraisal of the appealing yet dissatisfying principles of black nationalism offers the reader a sympathetic portrait of Malcolm X's importance to American history but nevertheless rejects Malcolm's most piercing calls for separatism. Obama, in one remarkable chapter, discusses how a group of concerned Altgeld residents tries to force the Chicago Housing Authority to remove asbestos from their apartments, only to see the CHA director struggle with an Altgeld spokeswoman for control of a microphone during a public meeting that promptly descends into chaos. Although a partial cleanup occurs with the help of federal Housing and Urban Development dollars, Obama warily concludes, after many of Altgeld's most passionate residents lose interest in activism, that the most intractable problems in the South Side projects will not be easily (if ever) alleviated.

This complex attitude—hopeful, idealistic, pragmatic, cynical, probing—characterizes Dreams from My Father. No matter how many times political commentators proclaim Obama to be
the black candidate who has transcended race, reading his first book demonstrates how searchingly he questions his own racial assumptions and how intelligently he analyzes the racial fault lines that define American life. Obama cannot fully dismiss the reactionary, nativist, or bigoted white people he encounters, for he knows that they, too, have endured job loss, historical upheaval, and economic disappointment. In this regard, New York City teaches Obama that race and class, at least in America, are inseparable: “But whether because of New York’s density or because of its scale, it was only now that I began to grasp the almost mathematical precision with which America’s race and class problems joined; the depth, the ferocity, of resulting tribal wars; the bile that flowed freely not just out on the streets but in the stalls of Columbia’s bathrooms as well, where, no matter how many times the administration tried to paint them over, the walls remained scratched with blunt correspondence between niggers and kikes.” Anyone who can envision George W. Bush or John McCain writing a passage half as accurate, forthright, or compassionate as this one possesses a more expansive imagination than I do.

Despite the plaudits that Dreams from My Father deserves, it includes such precise detail that the reader cannot help but suspect that Obama, no matter how good his memory, has reconstructed large portions of this book—particularly its long stretches of dialogue—from after-the-fact conversations with the people who share his narrative. This notion, if true, is a memoirist’s privilege. Obama mostly avoids the tendency to sanitize, sentimentalize, or prettify the events of his life, while he exhibits no fear about the potential problems that admitting to binge drinking, pot smoking, and cocaine use may create. Republicans have already pounced on these passages, but considering Bush’s and McCain’s hard-partying reputations, Obama’s youthful dissoluteness seems almost quaint by comparison.

Perhaps the signature moment of 2008’s Democratic primary battle came when Bill Clinton, near the beginning of a dramatic fall from grace that revealed how even the man whom Toni Morrison once ironically (and mockingly) termed the nation’s “first black president” would attempt to diminish a biracial candidate who was improbably outpolling Hillary Clinton in both caucus and primary states, declared during a December 14, 2007, interview with the titular host of PBS’s The Charlie Rose Show that electing Obama meant that voters were prepared to “roll the dice” on a less experienced candidate. The myopia of this comment was surprising, particularly considering the inconvenient facts that Clinton, when he declared his intention to seek the presidency on October 3, 1991, had a much lower national profile than Obama; that Hillary Clinton, who was first elected to the United States Senate in 2000, had served in national office only four years longer than Obama (her eight years as first lady notwithstanding); that Obama’s time in the Illinois State Senate, where he served from 1997 to 2004, meant that he had held elected office longer than Mrs. Clinton; that Bill Clinton was as well known for bad real estate deals and allegations of philandering as his policy positions during his 1992 campaign against then-President George H. W. Bush; and, most significantly, that 43 percent of the American electorate had rolled the dice in Clinton’s favor on November 3, 1992. The truth, as numerous editorialists, commentators, pundits, and bloggers have pointed out, is that, no matter how well we think we know a candidate, even one so notable as Obama, we always roll the dice on the outcome. We simply cannot predict exactly what a new president will do or say, partly because history is unmanageable and partly because political power affects people in fascinating, uncomfortable, and, as George W. Bush has proved, corrosive ways.

Clinton’s comment, however, drew into sharp relief just how formidable a candidate Obama had become. When the former president, a man who considers himself to be the smartest political strategist in his party (if not the country) during the past twenty-five years, worried that not even Hillary Clinton, a formidable political thinker, strategist, and force in her own right, might not prevail, Obama must have known that his chances were better than anyone had expected.

Even so, the most prescient comment recorded in Dreams from My Father comes during Obama’s first meeting with his Kenyan half-sister, Auma. She has flown to Chicago to spend time with her brother, who promptly takes her around the South Side so that she can see how he lives and works. Auma asks Obama if he has become a community organizer and activist on behalf of the people he tries to help:

I shrugged. “For them. For me.”

That same expression of puzzlement, and fear, returned to Auma’s face. “I don’t like politics much,” she said.
“Why’s that?”

“I don’t know. People always end up disappointed.”

This exchange forecasts the road ahead of Obama should he become the forty-fourth president of the United States. He will, at some point during his presidency, disappoint every person who votes for him (and, it without saying, everyone else). No matter how hagiographic the magazine profiles, campaign videos, and instant biographies may be, Obama is a human being who cannot fulfill the unreasonably lofty expectations that his most ardent admirers hold. His centrist stance on many issues, including the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA), military spending, and faith-based government programs, has already infuriated enough progressive supporters to make his campaign staff worry about retaining this voting bloc’s enthusiasm during the general election. Obama will also not be able to repair all of the damage created by Bush’s administration even if he (Obama) receives two terms in office. He will occupy the unfortunate position of Mr. Fix-it-in-Chief. Whether he, or anyone, can turn Bush’s political lemons into palatable lemonade is an open question.

*Dreams from My Father*, however, makes the reader more sanguine about Obama’s ability, experience, and judgment than did even his memorably combative August 28, 2008, acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention. The book reveals a man who has resolved his racial identity successfully enough to accept the fact that, no matter how many times he tells the story of his Caucasian mother and grandparents, he will always be seen by white people as an African American. It exposes how deeply he feels the wounds of racist behavior but how capably he understands this behavior’s origins. It demonstrates how the most significant figures in Obama’s life, despite the book’s title, are not men but women. It showcases a mind that continues to explore the contradictions of the American character even as it marvels at achievements of the American experience.

*Dreams from My Father* is also one of the best American memoirs published during the twentieth century’s final quarter, taking an honored place alongside Annie Dillard’s *An American Childhood* (1987), Lorenzo Carcaterra’s *A Safe Place* (1993), and James McBride’s *The Color of Water* (1996). Obama’s dreams—of his father, of his family, and of his future—cannot deter him from discussing the troubling truths about race, identity, and place that he has faced all his life. He emerges as an imperfect man who recognizes that his imperfections, as much as they belong to himself, also belong to his country. This idea may rattle those Americans who insist that the virtues of the United States outweigh its flaws, but for those Americans who realize that their nation is not now, nor ever has been, the perfect union to which it aspires, *Dreams from My Father* speaks to their experience far more authentically than the false patriotism that the Bush years have made fashionable.

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4 Ibid., 377.

5 Ibid., 120–21.


7 Obama, *Dreams from My Father*, 209.
How many times have you asked yourself over the last eight years how we ended up with the American politics we have? Just how exactly was George Bush elected, not just once but twice? I’m confident that many readers of this journal have not only wondered about these outcomes but have offered a variety of oft-cited explanations. These range from the evil genius of Karl Rove to the ballot shenanigans in Florida and Ohio. Investigative reporter and professor of history Rick Shenkman provides a very straightforward response by answering the title question of his book Just How Stupid Are We? His answer, in this readable account, is not just disturbing but convincing.

In short, Shenkman argues that when it comes to civics, most Americans just aren’t very smart. In fact, most are pretty stupid. As Shenkman says, “Our chief problem is . . . the limited capacity of the American public” (125). This limited capacity to understand political issues fosters manipulation by strategists like Rove, pandering by politicians, and lowest-common-denominator coverage by the media. This is not a new argument. Indeed, as Shenkman recalls, many of the institutions designed by the framers (e.g., the Electoral College and the legislative election of U.S. senators) were based on a mistrust of the potential of the public to act on their own ignorance in ways that would be at best uninformed and at worst dangerous. Political scientists since at least Phil Converse in the 1950s have shown systematically through public opinion surveys that American political opinions are inconsistent, often illogical, and easily shaped by question order and wording. Shenkman makes several contributions to this long-standing argument.

First, as Shenkman points out, the “gross ignorance” of the American public has become more problematic in recent years. Americans are increasingly less informed or even interested in the substance of politics. Shenkman provides considerable evidence that, even though education levels have increased substantially, people know less today than they did forty years ago. Further, one can’t be too optimistic for the near future. Only 20 percent of young Americans read a daily newspaper. The average age of a CNN viewer is sixty. Thank goodness for Jon Stewart, but even including those viewers, young people, according to Shenkman, are the “least informed of any age cohort” (27). What makes this situation more troubling are the recent developments in American politics that give even more direct control to the American public in making decisions. Shenkman compares the old politics to a bus where the public may tell the driver where they want to ultimately end up but leaves decisions as to how to get there up to a professional driver. Today, thanks to pervasive polling, direct primaries, and referendum processes, the people tell the driver where to stop, start, turn, and even signal. The combination of increasing ignorance and increasing power is troubling to any student of democracy.

Second, Shenkman defuses potential criticism of his analysis as merely elitist snobbery by describing the numerous times that
the public has been easily distracted or misled. The consequences are often tragic. The most recent obvious example is the Iraq War, in which public ignorance enabled the Bush administration to mislead the nation into a conflict that has cost tragic numbers of lives and untold amounts of resources. Shenkman’s historical accounting of the importance of myths as tools to mislead and manipulate the public is both persuasive and informative. For instance, I intend to use his account of William Henry Harrison’s 1840 presidential election as the birth of the modern American political campaign in my own classes. In short, Harrison, the veteran of a battle at Tippecanoe, and his running mate John Tyler perfected the use of a simple slogan that we can all recite even today: “Tippecanoe and Tyler Too.”

Third, as Shenkman describes, simply getting the analysis of an uninformed electorate out into the public discourse is important. His most popular target as an American myth is the so-called “wisdom of the American people.” This is a myth sustained by both liberals, who can’t question it for fear of undermining their own ideology, and conservatives, who won’t question it—although they are showing more signs of being willing to do so—because they have used it so effectively to win recent elections. According to Shenkman, the only columnist in our times to suggest public ignorance on a regular basis is Thomas Friedman, who even went so far as to say once in print that “9/11 has made us stupid” (143). Without discussing the problem openly, we can’t fix it.

But that leads us into two issues I see as less developed in Shenkman’s book. First, he promises to offer concrete proposals to fix the problem and finishes the book with a section titled “Hope,” but he provides only a few operational suggestions. Many of his recommendations are in the form of saying that something should happen. For instance, he recommends that polls force respondents to say what they actually know to “face their own ignorance” (176) but does not say how this would really work. One concrete proposal is to require all college students to take a course in civics (179). This one resonated with me, and I once suggested it at an Arts & Sciences faculty meeting, only to be questioned by others from various disciplines who said their intro courses should also be required for all undergraduates. At one point, Shenkman also suggests a basic civics test before anyone can vote (169). I fear that this may bring back images of the literacy test used to devastating effect in the South in the pre-civil rights era, but such proposals are certainly worthy of more discussion.

My second criticism is that while his explanation is compelling, Shenkman could have gone much further into why ignorance occurs. He barely mentions Alexis de Tocqueville, but this shrewd observer noted almost two hundred years ago a fundamental character trait of the American people that has affected so much of American politics: the worship of the common man. Indeed, de Tocqueville at one point predicted that Americans would usually avoid electing anyone who might be perceived as somehow superior. I remembered this prediction earlier in this year’s presidential campaign, when people began expressing so many concerns about Obama being somehow smarter or more clever than the rest of us. Many Americans are not only at least somewhat ignorant regarding subtleties on complex issues, but they are willfully so. Worse, they are often applauded for it. Sometimes I catch part of Jay Leno’s “Jaywalking” segment, in which he asks people on the street simple questions like identifying the vice president. They fail, people laugh, and the comically worst-informed respondents go on to become “Jaywalking all-stars.” And then we wonder why our politics are in such sad shape.

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Romance and Racism in New Orleans

Review of
David Fulmer, Rampart Street (New York: Harcourt, 2006), 352 pages

In the 1890 essay “My Politics,” George Washington Cable reflects on his 1880 novel The Grandissimes, a historical romance set in New Orleans in the year following the 1803 Louisiana Purchase. Cable acknowledges that The Grandissimes' attention to race, class, and miscegenation was intended as a political statement in opposition to segregationist efforts to curtail school integration in post-Reconstruction New Orleans. He recounts, “It was impossible that a novel written by me then should escape being a study of the fierce struggle going on around me, regarded in the light of that past history—those beginnings—which had so differentiated the Louisiana civilization from the American scheme of public society.”

Similarly, David Fulmer’s mystery Rampart Street tells us as much about contemporary struggles over race, class, and historical memory as it does about its historical turn-of-the-twentieth-century New Orleans setting.

Not unlike Cable, Fulmer fictionalizes a New Orleans in the midst of transition. By 1910, when the narrative begins, the flowering of jazz coincided with the codifying of Jim Crow segregation, marked by a series of laws and practices that defined, then relegated, all blacks—irrespective of class, color, ancestry, or social status—to an inferior position in society. Yet, while Cable’s novel challenges the popular image of New Orleans by exposing the realities of racism and social dysfunction, Rampart Street too often celebrates the popular tropes of New Orleans’s racial exoticism and interracial harmony. In the end, Fulmer’s presentist wish for a multicultural society, in which people, untethered from social and historical forces, make principled choices, minimizes the power of these forces in shaping the choices available to people in a given moment.

In this third installment of the mystery series, Fulmer guides us through New Orleans’s underworld of prostitution, drug abuse, political corruption, and racial and sexual transgressions with the help of the enigmatic Creole detective Valentin St. Cyr, who has returned to New Orleans after a lengthy sojourn. He reluctantly agrees to take on a murder case that has left a respectable white New Orleans businessman scandalously murdered on “the dark end of town” (17), a part of Rampart Street—distinct from the more socially tolerated Storyville prostitution district—that is associated with the most debased forms of prostitution, drug abuse, and black criminality. Because the murder victim’s daughter insists on unearthing the details of the murder instead of discreetly protecting her father’s reputation, St. Cyr delves deeper into a far-reaching social, economic, and political plot that places his life and the lives of his friends in serious danger.

Along the way, readers are introduced to or reacquainted with historical figures and events that shaped New Orleans and national history in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Interspersed in the plot, they add a sense of verisimilitude to Fulmer’s representation of New Orleans, made more compelling by characters whose racial and class identities and interactions affirm New Orleans’s history of diversity and creolization. A range of friendships and alliances—Beansoup, the white onderstudy of a black Delta bluesman migrant; Anne Marie, the white society woman, and her black maid, Betsy; Valentin’s mentor and mother figure, the voodoo queen Eulalie Echo—attest to the reality and possibility of relationships that crossed racial, class, generational, and gender boundaries.

Yet, the portrayal of these relationships as unequivocally positive and mutually beneficial loses sight of the historical and social realities that shaped and constrained them. Ultimately, despite the potential of the characters and their historical setting to displace a clichéd portrayal of New Orleans as racially progressive and socially exceptional, Rampart Street falls short in significant ways.

Ultimately, despite the potential of the characters and their historical setting to displace a clichéd portrayal of New Orleans as racially progressive and socially exceptional, Rampart Street falls short in significant ways.

It is not that the novel shies away from complicated ideas about race or the realities of racism that characterized the period. On the contrary, it presents characters whose racial ambiguity reflects a time in New Orleans history when contemporary ideas about race were not yet fully instantiated, and segregation and racial discrimination—though legally sanctioned by the Plessy v. Ferguson ruling—had not yet been universally and systematically applied. The novel also incorporates some of the most sinister aspects of New Orleans racism into the plot. The real possibility of lynching for nonwhites looms large with references to the actual 1891 New Orleans lynching of eleven Italians as well as St. Cyr’s own worry that a disclosure of his sexual relationship with a white woman could result in his castration and murder.

Yet, given the historical realities of interracial relationships fraught with ambivalence and fear because of racially motivated intimidation and violence, it is puzzling that this anxiety does not pervade the rest of the text. After all, during this period black New Orleanians of all backgrounds and experiences were acutely aware and often painfully reminded of their worsening political and social circumstances.

Instead, the novel portrays interracial relationships and social positions in the late-twentieth-century frame of individual choice
and personal responsibility. Racism is recognizable only in the vilest of characters whose proclivity for racist epithets, racially motivated intimidation and violence, and overt discrimination clearly mar them as the bad guys. Most characters, however, are somehow able to reject racism and to escape its historical, social, and cultural embeddedness simply by choosing to accept people for who they are inside. In this multicultural New Orleans, racism is merely an unsavory ideology espoused by the most egregious of bigots or only halfheartedly adopted by their misguided, but ultimately redeemed, minions. Missing from this contemporary framework are the systemic and institutional forces that limit individual choice and recast individual responsibility.

One example of the absence of power dynamics in the novel is apparent in the relationship between Anne Marie and Betsy. The often-giddy friendship between the white socialite and her black maid, though unlikely, is not the main issue. More dubious is the supposition that the two women are able to forge an interracial and cross-class friendship that is in no way affected by their race and class positions in early twentieth-century New Orleans. In an emblematic scene, Anne Marie entreats Betsy to guide her into the sordid world of Storyville. Betsy enthusiastically complies by instructing her in how to masquerade as a Storyville prostitute accompanied by her maid. Of the many risks associated with the trip, including someone recognizing Anne Marie and sullying her reputation, Fulmer focuses on the “problem of transportation” (193). Because neither woman could drive an automobile and both wanted to avoid being conspicuous, they decide to take the streetcar. Fulmer describes in detail their streetcar ride, including the specific route, number of transfers, and street names. We view the scene through Anne Marie’s experience of anticipation, anxiety, and anonymity. What we don’t view, and what Fulmer pointedly erases, is the reality of segregated streetcars in New Orleans. It is preposterous to suggest that these two women, one white and one black, would be able to so nonchalantly and uneventfully board a streetcar together in New Orleans eight years after streetcars had been segregated. Hence, the problem of transportation to which Fulmer alludes is immaterial compared to the more entrenched and painful history of racism and discrimination that would have made nearly impossible the “simple ride into the city” (194)—inconsequential and commonplace—that Fulmer describes. This description requires readers to buy into the idea that the women’s choice to be pals supersedes the restrictions imposed on that friendship by society and custom.

Throughout the novel, these types of omissions and erasures suggest a tension between history and memory, by which the historical reality of New Orleans collides against the selective memory and mythologizing of the city. Fulmer seems to want it both ways, to include the historical realities of race and racism, but to portray them as aberrant and exceptional in a city noted for its racial diversity and un-Southern social liberalism. Significantly, we see this tension in Fulmer’s portrayal of a raging storm that befalls the city: “Indeed, for the long minutes that it raged, the citizens of New Orleans were helpless, no matter what their station or color. No one could escape it” (310). Symbolically, this fictional storm washes away the debilitating effects of race, class, and gender oppression and equalizes all humankind. Ironically, it was an actual storm—Hurricane Katrina—that, shortly after Rampart Street was written, laid bare the enduring racial, class, and gender inequities persisting from this period in New Orleans history. Hurricane Katrina showed us the terrible, far-reaching consequences of ignoring these inequities in favor of a more palatable and romantic narrative of New Orleans exceptionalism.

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East St. Louis Riot Remembered

Review of

East St. Louis, Illinois, has a history of being poor and wasted, downtrodden and with little heritage beyond a handful of mournful musicians singing the blues about the town in which they grew up and learned to sing and play its sad, never-ending story. And the Mississippi River, which separates Missouri from Illinois and St. Louis from East St. Louis, has been a veritable River Styx.

Never Been a Time, by Harper Barnes (a friend and co-worker for thirty-five years), is a diligent, heavily researched volume about the most studied and publicized moment in the city’s history, a few days in the summer of 1917, when a race riot brought it more notoriety than it achieved before or since. The Illinois city, with a large African-American population, served for generations as the place Missourians went in search of sex, drugs, and pre–rock and roll music (and gambling, too) each night after St. Louis bars closed in deference to laws that its conservative white majority felt were vital to safeguard family values long before that hypocritical term was devised.

In the years after the Civil War, the rise of American corporations brought a concurrent need for labor, the cheaper the better according to the gospel of corporate philosophy. Importing former slaves and their families from the South was one way to create a labor force, and easy-to-ignite rivalries between residents and newcomers kept the timber warm, the spark close at hand. Racial attitudes, of course, were a key factor, but the rise of labor unions in the late nineteenth century and the huge immigrant influx of eastern Europeans, as that century turned into the twentieth, made the pressure even worse.

East St. Louis had long been a city of easy virtue, run by a group of white men who kept the dice tables humming, the brothel beds warm, the music loud, the beer taps open, and their hands out for payoffs. They were good about it, too. Barnes writes:

“On April 3 (1917), 47-year-old Fred Mollman was reelected mayor by the largest majority in East St. Louis history, managing to win a paradoxical combination—the black vote, the union vote, the gambling vote, and the church vote. He even got most of the female vote. On election day, a reporter saw Locke Tarlton (East St. Louis’s political boss and the power behind Mollman) drive up to a polling place and climb out of the car with a thick stack of $5 bills in one hand. Blacks who had just finished voting began lining up in front of Tarlton. Each voter gave a small piece of paper to Tarlton, and the real estate mogul then glanced at it and then handed over a $5 bill. Tarlton was overheard bragging that there was ‘no place for pikers in this election.’”

There was a small riot in East St. Louis in late May, and tension grew throughout June as black strikebreakers were hired, echoing the labor unrest that was widespread during the era. There were twelve hundred strikes in the United States during 1915, three times that number in 1916. The total rose again in 1917, reaching forty-two hundred. And on July 2, 1917, the tinder box exploded. An East St. Louis policeman was fatally shot during a confrontation at about 2:00 a.m. and the riot was on. White men ripped black men off streetcars, out of private cars, sometimes out of houses. Beatings followed. Other blacks were forced into houses that were set ablaze. Chaos ensued for the next few days.

Barnes, a former writer and editor at the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, speaks admiringly of the reporters on the scene, a group that included Paul Y. Anderson and Carlos Hurd of the Post. Anderson won a Pulitzer Prize a few years later for expos-
ing the Teapot Dome scandal. Hurd already was famous for having posted the first interviews with survivors of the Titanic five years earlier. By a fortunate coincidence, he was on the rescue ship Carpathia, defied Cunard officials by doing the interviews, hid the stories in his wife’s corset, then dropped them from the deck into Pulitzer-hired speedboats in New York Harbor.

National Guard troops supposedly were on their way on July 2. Their leader, Col. Stephen Orville Tripp, arrived at 8:00 a.m. He had not heard the conductor announce the East St. Louis railroad stop and went on to St. Louis, riding a trolley car back across the river. Robert Boylan, a reporter for the Globe-Democrat, wrote, “Colonel Tripp was not in uniform. He wore an ordinary business suit” that the reporter described as dark grey. Other witnesses called it seersucker, but all agreed that Tripp was wearing a banded straw boater. Boylan described him as “one of the most ladylike officers I ever saw.” The troops straggled into town as the day went on but did little to halt the attacks of white people on black people. By most testimony, they ignored or encouraged the white rioters. A few apparently took turns in the beatings and shootings.

No one actually stopped the riot. It apparently just wore out in the heat of summer. Records show that forty-eight people died—thirty-nine blacks and nine whites—but many argue that the total was higher. Only one man ever served prison time, Dr. Leroy Bundy, a black dentist and businessman, who spent a year in the Illinois State Prison in Menard before the Illinois Supreme Court freed him, deciding that the state had not proven its charges of inciting a riot. A few months later, there was a Congressional investigation by the House Select Committee to

Investigate Conditions in Illinois and Missouri Interfering with Interstate Commerce between These States, also known as the Special Committee Authorized by Congress to Investigate the East St. Louis Riots. After twenty-nine days of testimony, it reprimanded five East St. Louis politicians and Col. Tripp.

The book suffers from a lack of photographs, but Barnes reports that most of the Post-Dispatch files have disappeared. One picture, with the cutline “Blacks Fleeing East St. Louis,” reportedly illustrates the riot, but it doesn’t really. A handful of grainy mug shots of reporters Hurd and Anderson, plus W. E. B. DuBois, Ida Barnett, and others who lived at the time add little, and there is no shot of Col. Tripp in his boater. A map would have helped, too.

 Sadly, Barnes found no eyewitnesses, and people like Eugene Redmond and Miles Davis, who hand down family stories and casual reports, are not enough. Barnes worked diligently through files and histories, but too much of the book is dry from lack of context, conversation, and description. In the last few chapters, where he is able to draw from real people and from his own instincts, Barnes’s smooth, warm, comfortable style comes to the fore in a minor-key riff of the blues music that is such a meaningful, if sad, part of the history of East St. Louis.

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This section Bracey discusses the thought of three black men: Richard Allen, the first bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church; James Forten, a wealthy Philadelphia free Negro; and Jupiter Hammon, a slave who was also the first published black writer. Bracey groups together all three men under the rubric of Christian Evangelism and categorizes them as “conservative.”

Just what that term means when applied to black people in pre–Civil War America is not clear, however. To be sure, neither Allen nor Forten nor Hammon was a Toussaint L’Ouverture, who overthrew slavery by organizing and leading a slave revolt that established Haiti as the first black republic in the Western Hemisphere. These three black American men, drawing strength from their Christianity, contested slavery and racial inequality in a different way.

Allen, for example, purchased his freedom and that of his family. He was an opponent of colonization and organized one of the first independent black denominations in America. Allen’s church created a space that black people used to develop their talents and challenge white supremacy in the North.

Forten, as a young man, believed the American Revolution “required the overthrow of all distinctions of color.” This belief set him apart from his white countrymen, who thought the revolution was solely about white people. Forten, like his friend Allen, also opposed the movement to repatriate blacks back to Africa and considered America, not Africa, as his homeland. At a time when most free blacks were mired in poverty, Forten was a wealthy sail maker and social activist in the city of Philadelphia. His emphasis on business and the acquisition of property was not an idiosyncrasy or an expression of conservatism, but rather part of a larger black strategy aimed at challenging white ideas of racial superiority and wealth. It was not only black people with conservative views but also those with what would now be called nationalist sensibilities who thought that it was important for their people to be property owners in order to be independent of whites.

Forten would not have felt uncomfortable in the company of either Lewis Woodson or the black nationalist Martin Delany.

A lifelong slave, Hammon was a published poet whose writing was influenced by his devout Christianity. Bracey notes that in his four poems, two essays, and single, well-known sermon Hammon “urged slaves not to resist their masters, and to focus on the more important task of living a proper life and seeking salvation from God.” This statement of Christian quietism may reflect the conditions Hammon lived in. Open resistance to slavery may not have been an option for Hammon and his peers, as it was for Toussaint L’Ouverture and later on for the American slaves Gabriel, Denmark Vesey, and Nat Turner. Yet the writing

Black conservatives’ silence about structural racism arises out of the emphasis they place on individualism and their assumption that the problems blacks face are primarily a product of their own dysfunctional socialization.

The Russian anarchist Pyotr Kropotkin, on hearing Booker T. Washington described as conservative, asked what blacks in the United States had to conserve. The question is right on. What, indeed, do black people have to be conservative about in America?

For most of its history, the United States has been a racial state. As early as 1790 Congress enacted a law to declare that free white persons who had lived in the United States for a year had the right to become citizens. This law established a relationship between whiteness and citizenship that gave whites advantages over blacks in the pursuit of economic, political, and social equality that endure even today. This is an important point, whether the subject under discussion is late-nineteenth-century black conservatism or its modern counterpart, because black conservatives have consistently failed to engage in discussions of race or racism as structural issues in the racial history of the United States.

Black conservatives’ silence about structural racism arises out of the emphasis they place on individualism and their assumption that the problems blacks face are primarily a product of their own dysfunctional socialization. These conservatives, in other words, view racism as a problem of blacks, not of whites. The Nation made this point in 1867 when it observed, “The removal of white prejudice against the negro depends almost entirely on the negro himself.” When viewed from this perspective, modern black conservatism is a lineal descendant of “New Thought,” a loose collection of beliefs about mind power that emerged in the nineteenth century and should be seen as a form of twelve-step or self-recovery therapeutics. According to black conservatives, the problem with black people is black people. If we exclude the peculiarities of race in America, their argument seems logical. But when placed in the longue durée of black American history, the black conservative analysis of the black past and present is merely wishful thinking. Christopher Alan Bracey’s Saviors or Sellouts is an insightful, timely, informative, important, and clearly written discussion of the problem of black conservatism.

The initial section of Bracey’s book, an analysis of the historical origins of black conservatism, is its weakest part. In

Review of Christopher Alan Bracey, Saviors or Sellouts: The Promise and Peril of Black Conservatism, from Booker T. Washington to Condoleezza Rice (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008), 210 pages with index

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The initial section of Bracey’s book, an analysis of the historical origins of black conservatism, is its weakest part. In
that Bracey calls “conservative” was anything but that. The very act of writing was itself an expression of slave or free-black resistance. Given the social and cultural construction of blackness in eighteenth-century America, for a black man or woman to write was unthinkable. Jefferson made this clear in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, when he dismissed Phillis Wheatley’s poetry on the grounds that she lacked the emotional capacity to create literature. Hammon’s poems, essays, and sermon, like Wheatley’s poetry, were a way to counteract the idea that blacks were unthinking brutes.

No black person who wrote, protested, or agitated before the Civil War can be called conservative. In this context the term, when applied to blacks, has to be problematized. Bracey is on firmer ground, however, when he examines the thought and actions of Booker T. Washington and those blacks who currently echo Washington’s mantra of self-help. Washington represents a departure from the tradition of Allen, Forten, Hammon, and other black leaders and spokesmen who believed in agitation and protests, such as Frederick Douglass, Martin Robison Delany, and Lewis Woodson. Although some of their ideas about such topics as education, property, and sexual restraint may intersect with those of Washington, Washington nevertheless represents a radical departure from their political activism. His politics were reactionary. As Mark Lilla has recently reminded us, “We need to restore the term ‘reaction’ to our vocabulary, not as an epithet but as a psychological and political category.” I call Washington reactionary because he and other black spokesmen after the Civil War thought the government had gone too far during Reconstruction in giving black people the vote. Politics was dangerous and best left to the white man, Washington’s generation concluded, whereas blacks should husband their resources and develop the black community. This strategy of racial transformation was predicated upon the assumption that when black people abandoned those characteristics that distinguished them from whites, they would be accepted by their oppressors. According to this philosophy, “once blacks were properly socialized and endowed with appropriate skills, the structure of the Southern economy was sufficiently flexible to accommodate upwardly mobile individuals,” regardless of their color, and merit would replace race as the prescriptor of Southern society. In reality, the faith Washington placed in merit and embourgeoisement was a chimera. When situated in the broader context of the *fin de siècle*, Washington’s program of racial uplift resembles the efforts of nineteenth-century French and German Jews to assimilate. If the fate of French Jews was embodied in the Dreyfus case (1894), blacks in America adhering to the Washingtonian ideology were lynched. Between 1889 and 1946 almost four thousand black people were executed by white mobs. “Educated or ignorant, rich or poor, the niggers must be kept down,” Whitelaw Reid was told after the War between the States. Race trumped class in Washington’s world, and his efforts to elevate the race resulted in the organization of the NAACP in 1908. After his death in 1915, Washington’s ideas continued to influence what Bracey calls black conservatism.

Bracey does an excellent job of showing how Washingtonian ideas about community development and capitalism were incorporated into the work of Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association, the thought of George Schuyler, the work of the Nation of Islam, and some Black Power organizations. Within Black Power the only group to deviate from Washington’s emphasis on capitalism as the answer to black America’s problems was the Black Panther Party, whose members were anticapitalist and called themselves Marxist-Leninists. But having noted this one anomaly, it is important to recognize the fact that, like Washington, all of the above organizations and Schuyler emphasize the need for blacks to think in new ways about themselves. For the nationalists this meant black people should think of themselves as either colonized or displaced Africans. Conservative blacks, on the other hand, have asked blacks to stop thinking of themselves as either de facto or de jure outsiders: to forget the past and become born again in a world in which the government is the enemy. The “New Negro,” clothed in the habiliments of self-reliance and individualism will, like Booker T. Washington, become the symbol of a new age of race relations.

It is this emphasis on New Thought that connects many contemporary black neoconservatives to the Washingtonian movement. As Bracey makes clear, the black conservatives of the past have been replaced by a new class of antigovernment conservatives hostile to government intervention in black life. Their
number includes economists Thomas Sowell and Walter Williams, public intellectuals Shelby Steele and John McWhorter, Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, to name a few. What unites this group is a belief in merit, individualism, self-reliance, and a desire to make black American history normal—that is, to place the black American past and present in the master narrative of unfolding American progress.

According to this line of thinking, blacks should stop thinking of themselves as victims in need of special assistance, as Supreme Court Justice Joseph P. Bradley wrote in 1883, and cease “to be the special favorite of the laws.” Yet black people have never been privileged in American jurisprudence, at least not in the ways those opposed to civil rights legislation have claimed. The civil rights laws of 1866, 1875, 1964, and 1965, along with the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution, have all been efforts on the part of the government to level the so-called playing field between blacks and whites. Both the Reconstruction Amendments and civil rights legislation reflect a reality that American society has historically been deeply racist. Black neoconservatives on some level refuse to recognize this fact and seem to live in a twilight zone where structural inequality does not exist. Black neoconservatives, as Bracey describes them, are rooted in an understanding of American race relations consonant with the formulations developed in Gunnar Myrdal’s classic 1944 study, An American Dilemma. Like Myrdal, they think there is an “American Creed of liberty, equality, justice, and fair opportunity for everybody.”

For most of the American past this has not been the case. It is only since World War II that the United States has confronted its black problem. What progress there has been in race relations has come about as a by-product of the expansion of federal power, black protest, and biracial coalitions. If black people had simply waited for some of their white fellow countrymen to recognize that they were second-class citizens, nothing would have changed. In other words, it has been the government, activist blacks, and their white allies that have transformed racial interactions in America, not merit or individualism. The very use of such terms as merit and individualism by black neoconservatives obscures the historical fact that blacks were enslaved and Jim Crowed as a group, not as individuals. The history of black Americans is not a simulacrum of the imagined white American past, where the words merit and individualism have obscured a more complex process of social mobility. When black neoconservatives invoke these terms and apply them to either the black past or the present, they indulge in a historical revisionism as problematic as the neo-Confederate claim that slavery did not cause the Civil War. It is as risible as one of my students telling me recently that black people invented chemistry and that this is why ancient Egypt is called Kemet.

In the United States today people, regardless of their color, seem to require a useable and uncomplicated past. All pasts are imagined, of course, but some are more so than others. Any understanding of the black past that elides black structural inequality is useless and constitutes an act of imagination of the type that the late Anthony West called “fabalist.” People who practice this type of intellectual prestidigitation “deal with unacceptable truths, by modifying them again and again until they have been transformed into more negotiable material.”

Finally, what makes black neoconservatives interesting is their outsider status in black society. Unlike earlier conservatives such as Booker T. Washington, who identified with the white conservative cause and was deeply involved in the day-to-day of black America, neoconservatives occupy a marginal space in the black community. Their prominence in American public life derives from their association with white organizations. McWhorter, Sowell, and Steele, for example, are employed by right-wing think tanks. These people serve as interpreters of blackness for white America, and it is their color, rather than the profundity of their thought, that accounts for their visibility as public figures. After all, black people are still a mystery to some whites, even though blacks have been in this country since the seventeenth century. Having recovered from a blackness thought to be pathological and donned the magic slippers of merit and individualism, black neoconservatives serve as mediators and interpreters of black America for white America. Neither their ideas nor their associations have made black neoconservatives popular in black America. If they have any utility in current discussions of race, it is their ability to reiterate the bromides of Booker T. Washington and New Thought. In examining the origins, contradictions, and continuities of black conservatism and neoconservativism, Christopher Alan Bracey has made an important contribution to our understanding of a disturbing movement among black intellectuals.

Clarence E. Walker is Professor of History and Cultural Studies at the University of California, Davis. Walker’s book Mongrel Nation: The America Begotten by Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings is forthcoming from the University of Virginia Press.

On my shelf of most-used cookbooks sits my seventeenth-printing copy of Mastering the Art of French Cooking, by Julia Child, Simone Beck, and Louisette Bertholle. The inscription, by my cookery-hating, working mother reads in part, “Your omelets are ‘right on!’,” dating her words as surely as the year of her gift, 1971. The condition of the book, like others on that shelf, attests to its regularly being taken down and perused: it has a spatter of brown something or other across the first page of the instructions for roast chicken; the edges of the pages appear deckled, although they are not; and the buckram cover started some years back to come away from the signatures—in fact, it’s ripped at the spine. That the volume and others much loved—Madhur Jaffrey’s World-of-the-East Vegetarian Cooking, Anna Thomas’s The Vegetarian Epicure, and Marcella Hazan’s Essentials of Classic Italian Cooking, to name just three—are not only in a similarly hard-used state by me but also by millions of other Americans, is attributable in good measure to the efforts and dedication of one Judith Jones.

Now vice president at Alfred A. Knopf, Jones was once one of a small band of Cold War-era Americans fighting an initially lonely battle to bring taste, if not fine food, into the realm of the everyday. That I can stop at our University’s Village Dining Room and pick up a to-go container of eel sushi and eat it at my desk while perusing a copy of The United States of Arugula can be attributed in part to the superlative job of culinary education Jones performed in her longtime role of seeker and publisher of gastronomic talent.

Jones and I have a few things in common, even if initially she seems so different. She was of my mother’s generation, not my boomer one, for starters. She hailed from an entirely different background than my multi-ethnic one, even if we are both New Yorkers, grew up in a household with a cook, and attended an elite, if somewhat unconventional, women’s college. Yet Jones and I share a bond that many in our particular socioeconomic bracket do: a love for France, cemented by a sojourn in its capital after college, and a desire to break away from the plain food of our youth. At work in Paris, a young Jones comes across the just-published diary of Anne Frank; she convinces her employer, the Parisian agent for Doubleday & Company, to allow her to pitch the book to the New York office. The rest is not only the beginning of a world-shifting English language publication but also the commencement of Jones’s lifelong career in book publishing.

That Jones happened to be in the right place at the right time is indisputable: the world was realigning in the middle of the twentieth century, and American involvement in the Second World War led to a trickle, then to a tributary, of cosmopolitanism in the United States. Jones’s reminiscences of how she met her late husband, Evan Jones, a noted author and cook in his own right, and how their relationship was shaped in a postwar Paris will strike chords with the gourmet class, who should and will read this book. But the legions of English majors, like myself, who went off to France to sit in La Coupole and take to heart Ernest Hemingway’s
dictum that “Paris is a moveable feast” will also warm to Jones’s passages about that forever-vanished and legendary era of Americans abroad.

Sentimental favorites aside, the foodies amongst us will pore over Jones’s many engagements with the stars of the gastronomic firmament. Most charming are her reminiscences of working with Julia Child, from guessing (correctly, as she had with the Frank diary) that the book would have a culture-shaping impact on American eating and cooking, to watching and cheering Child’s obvious talents in the televised kitchen: Child is the ancestral muse of Rachael Ray, Emeril, and all that lot, after all. Besides getting up close and personal with the aforementioned chef-authors—as a home cook and reader of Jones’s memoir I can now know for certain that Marcella Hazan’s peremptory tone is as evident in person as it is on the page—Jones mentions many other movers and shakers in the culinary world, whether friends like Craig Claiborne, M. F. K. Fisher, and James Beard, or authors with whose cooking and books I am unfamiliar. And what better recommendation than to say one good book leads to another?

Fans of Laurie Colwin (the novelist-chef whose premature death is still intensely mourned) might ask, what is the good of a memoir without recipes? I am happy to report that Jones does not disappoint her readers on that score, providing opportunities to viscerally revisit some of the scenes Jones limns earlier and demonstrating, too, that a cook alone does not need to shelve her chef’s knife. In fine, and to extend her own invocation of Brillat-Savarin’s naming of “Gastrea” as the tenth muse to the classical nine, Jones attains an eleventh muse category of her own: éditrice par excellence.

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A round the Fourth of July, newspapers tend to print pictures of kids with American flags and hot dogs and declare the hot dog the All-American food, even though there's no compelling reason to give it this honor. The hot dog is not ubiquitous in America, having been mainly relegated to stadiums, carnivals, and hot dog stands. Hot dogs are considered déclassé, in the same category as Chef Boyardee and Kraft Mac and Cheese. Compare that to the hamburger, which can be purchased nearly anywhere, from a greasy spoon to an upscale restaurant. The hamburger can be big time, costing over forty bucks for the Kobe beef burger at the Old Homestead Steakhouse in New York or small time, coming in at just fifty-seven cents for a Slyder at White Castle. It can satisfy a myriad of palettes with its versatility. By whatever standard, the hamburger trumps the hot dog, even on the Fourth of July.

So when I picked up a copy of Josh Ozersky's *The Hamburger: A History*, I understood why someone would write it. I figured the book would be part panegyric, part cookbook, mixed with a little history. I was wrong.

Ozersky, food critic and online food editor for *New York Magazine*, avoids writing about the hamburger as a food. It's more than that. As Ozersky explains in his introduction, "The hamburger . . . isn't just icon. . . . Studying its story is one way of studying the country that invented it and then reinvented it again and again. The symbol is just the sizzle; the meat of the hamburger's meaning lies in how it changed the world, and why."

No, *The Hamburger* won't leave you salivating for one. Ozersky's book is part biographical sketches of the great hamburger men and part American culture viewed through a hamburger lens. Ozersky's strength is how well he chronicles the lives of the burger greats. The list isn't long, only four men: Billy Ingram, Walter Anderson, Ray Kroc, and Dave Thomas. Of the biographical sketches, the longest and most important is Ray Kroc's. For many Americans his name could be the million-dollar question on a game show and it wouldn't ring a bell. But maybe you know his restaurant, McDonald's.

In lively and telling prose, Ozersky sums up Kroc (1902–1984). He was "the living symbol and soul of everything the baby boom generation hated. . . . He was a square's square. Hostility oozed from his pores." He was known to utter epigrams like "this is rat eat rat, dog eat dog" and said that if his competitors were drowning, he would "put hoses in their mouths."

A story that Ozersky clearly delights in telling is when Kroc first went to the McDonald Brothers' restaurant. He was then, in 1954, a milkshake machine salesman and had just sold McDonald's eight milkshake machines for one restaurant. Curious as to why so many were needed, Kroc went to the restaurant in California. It was lunchtime when he arrived, and he saw a blonde sitting in a yellow convertible. "It was not her sex appeal but the obvious relish with which she
devoured the hamburger that made my pulse begin to hammer with excitement.”

Kroc wasn’t the man behind the McDonald’s innovation. The McDonald brothers came up with the system that made the quantum leap for fast food, but Kroc was the visionary who imagined the American landscape punctuated with McDonald’s restaurants. He also figured out how to make such a huge chain of fast food joints work. He kept franchisees in line, kept the McDonald’s machine making money, and made sure that other people’s good ideas worked for the good of McDonald’s by allowing franchisees flexibility within the system to develop products and marketing. By way of example, the Big Mac, Filet-O-Fish, and Ronald McDonald were all invented by franchisees.

Beyond the biographies of Kroc and the other burger barons, Ozersky’s book deals with American culture as he attempts to answer why the hamburger caught on in America and what kind of icon the burger business and the burger provide.

The *whys* of the burger are interesting, but it is the *how* that is the pull for Ozersky. Business made the burger the All-American All-Star, which is apropos for capitalist-loving America. As Ozersky writes when describing the McDonald brothers developing their restaurant, “Here was the American dream at its best: a kind of aesthetic cupidity; profit-making mixed with unfettered inventiveness in the service of a product nobody had the slightest regard for.” The expansion of the fast food restaurant was “a worthy goal, a universal meal that would be completely American, unmarred by the distinctions of region, class or ethnicity. Out of many, one—just like the meat of a well-ground hamburger.” (Whether this is giving a tad too much moral value to someone trying to make a living selling cheap food I’ll let Ozersky’s readers decide.)

Even McDonald’s, “the establishment,” and Ray Kroc, “the man,” are partially redeemed. “McDonald’s was the product of a paradox, composed of equal parts individualism, conformity, small-scale scrabbling, immense impersonal capital, and the willingness of every diverse part and personality to move forward together, grasping for a long-hoped-for and desperately desired prosperity.”

Ozersky does write about the burger being blamed for the obesity crisis and the critics who have been around since fast food began, but he mentions Morgan Spurlock’s film *Supersize Me* (2004) and Eric Schlosser’s book *Fast Food Nation* (2001), in particular, since their attacks have been the most damning of late. But I prefer to think of the hamburger in its heyday (well, early heyday). Back then, when people came to visit the General Offices at White Castle, the first hamburger fast food chain, they would often exclaim, “All this from a five-cent hamburger!” The same could be said about an entire industry or an entire culture, for that matter; but when you read a book like *The Hamburger*, such a fuss over a sandwich makes a little more sense.

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Hamlet as Teenager: A Rebel with a Cause

Hamlet is the one play of Shakespeare’s with which everyone, from the most experienced theatergoer to the person who has never set foot inside a theater, is familiar. Somehow, this play has become so embedded in popular culture and in our collective consciousness that we all know the story of the tragic Prince who is visited by the Ghost of his father and obliged to avenge his death. We have heard the famous lines a thousand times: “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark,” “Goodnight, sweet Prince,” “And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest,” “Alas, poor Yorick,” “To be or not to be, that is the question,” etc. Whether or not we have studied or seen the play, we regard it with reverence because it seems the one work of genius embedded in our heads, like the Bible. And if somehow we have managed to escape its direct influence, we are one work of genius in our heads, which recapitulates its story for a mass audience and a new generation.

This intense veneration, however, can be an obstacle to successful theatrical performance. Coming in at over four hours uncut and containing the most celebrated and familiar speeches in the English language, there is plenty to be concerned about for both actor and audience. In performance, the play places extraordinary demands, both physical and emotional, on an actor; and for an audience, there is the danger of its sounding like a hollow echo chamber of familiar quotations. Although the leading part is known as the ultimate test for any actor, it has proved too steep a climb for some. As one stunned undergraduate participating in Washington University’s summer Shakespeare’s Globe program recently exclaimed, after he learned he was to play the part on the Globe stage in London, “What can I possibly add after four hundred years of performance and scholarship?” The fact is, I told him, he could add quite a lot.

The question of experience aside, for an undergraduate to tackle the role of Hamlet is not inappropriate. As the forthcoming production by the Performing Arts Department hopes to demonstrate, Hamlet is Shakespeare’s quintessential story of adolescence maturing into manhood. True, the role of “Young Hamlet” was in all likelihood originated by Richard Burbage for the Chamberlain’s Men at the Globe, when Burbage was in his midthirties. Since then, the role has been taken by some of the greatest actors of each generation over the course of centuries: Garrick, Sarah Bernhardt, Irving, Gielgud, Olivier, Guinness, Burton, etc. Because of the sheer size and magnitude of the role (at three thousand lines, it is easily the longest role in the entire Shakespearean canon), most of these actors have assumed the role at the height of their powers. Thus Sarah Bernhardt produced, directed, and acted the role—as a fifty-four-year-old woman. David Garrick continued to play Hamlet until he was fifty-nine; John Philip Kemble performed it for thirty-four years, while, perhaps most memorably, Thomas Betterton played the role in his seventy-fourth year!

Despite the precedent of casting older actors or allowing mature ones to “ripen” in the part, there is a great deal to be said for casting an undergraduate as Hamlet and exploring what Ben Kingsley called “the greatest part for a young actor. . . . There are so many beautiful mysteries locked in there about boyhood becoming manhood.” To understand this position, it should be recalled that Hamlet is a student at the University of Wittenberg when he is suddenly called back to attend his father’s funeral in Denmark. Early in the play, there are numerous textual references to Hamlet’s extreme youth: he addresses Horatio as “fellow student,” and Laertes, himself a student at the University of Paris, who has returned home for the same purpose, casually dismisses Hamlet’s professed affection for his sister, Ophelia, as mere puppy love:

A fashion and a toy in blood,
A violet in the youth of primy nature,
Forward, not permanent, sweet, not lasting,
The perfume and suppliance of a minute,
No more. (1.3.6–10)

Later in the same scene, Polonius counsels his daughter that she should disregard Hamlet’s affections, saying she should “believe so much in him that he is young,” while the Ghost in 1.5.38 refers to him as “thou noble youth.” Indeed, not only Hamlet and Laertes, but Horatio, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern are all university students, while Ophelia is presumably younger still.

More important, however, than any specific biographical or textual references to Hamlet’s youth are the sudden behavioral mood swings and emotional instability that capture perfectly the ebb and flow of adolescence. Too often, both performance and academic criticism attempt to create a sense of unity and coherence in a role where there is deliberate roughness and discord. Even before the catalyzing appearance of his father’s Ghost, Hamlet appears in 1.2 as a deeply wounded and vulnerable young man preoccupied with suicidal thoughts: “O that this too solid flesh would melt, / Thaw and resolve itself into a dew, Or that the Everlasting had not fixed / His canon ‘gainst self-slaughter.” However, once the Ghost appears, he suddenly shifts full-bore into revenge mode:

Haste me to know’t that I wish wings as swift
As meditation or the thoughts of love
May sweep to my revenge. (1.5.29–31)

But despite casting himself as a typical Revenger in the mode of Hieronymo in Kyd’s Spanish Tragedy (mid-1580s), his thoughts repeatedly vacillate between self-doubt (“Am I a coward?”) and despair:
What is a man,
If his chief good and market of his time
Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more. (4.4.32–34)

The question of Hamlet’s feigned madness, which Shakespeare borrowed from his source material in Saxo Grammaticus, where young “Amleth” disguises himself as a simpleton to deflect suspicion as he secretly plans vengeance on his enemies, also supports this interpretation of the character’s youthfulness. Far from removing suspicion, however, in Shakespeare’s play Hamlet’s feigned madness actually serves to draw attention to him. As Claudius says to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, whom he has recruited as his spies, “Get from him why he puts on this confusion, / Grating so harshly all his days of quiet / With turbulent and dangerous lunacy.” (3.1.2–4)

“Turbulent and dangerous lunacy” is not the best way to remain inconspicuous at Claudius’s court. It is, however, consistent with the kind of exuberant and narcissistic behaviors that we know are common to adolescence. After forcing the King to rush out of the play-within-the-play, Hamlet’s mood soars to a giddy hysteria, oblivious to the dangerous position he has placed himself in by so blatantly offending the King:

Hamlet. O good Horatio, I’ll take the Ghost’s word for a thousand pound. Didst perceive?

Horatio. Very well, my lord.

Hamlet. Upon the talk of poisoning.

Horatio. I did very well note him.

Hamlet. Ah ha! Some music! Come, the recorders!

For if the King like not the comedy

Why then belike he likes it not, perdie.

Come, some music! (3.2.278–87)

In a well-known essay, “Hamlet and His Problems,” T. S. Eliot argues that Hamlet is not only not Shakespeare’s greatest play, it is a failure on the grounds that the essential emotion of the play, the feeling of a son toward his mother, is “full of some stuff that the writer could not drag to light.” The “stuff” Eliot refers to is defined as the “objective correlative” between a character’s feelings and his outward actions, and he concludes that “Hamlet (the man) is dominated by an emotion which is inexpressible, because it is in excess of the facts as they appear.” But what caused such insoluble problems for Eliot (“We must simply admit that here Shakespeare tackled a problem which proved too much for him”) makes perfect sense when Hamlet is cast as a teenager. What the play illustrates with remarkable psychological insight is a young man’s repulsion for a parent who has suddenly and unexpectedly displayed overt sexuality. In the “Closet Scene” with Gertrude, he is judgmental about her behavior, and his judgment concerns her sexuality:

Ha, have you eyes?
You cannot call it love, for at your age
The heyday in the blood is tame, it’s humble
And waits upon the judgement. (3.4.65–68)

Having had his mother reveal herself as a grossly sexual being by her hasty remarriage to Claudius, Hamlet not only feels betrayed, but he also jumps to the conclusion that all women are similarly duplicitous and given to “seeming.” It is a leap that may seem extreme for an adult but is entirely plausible for the mind of the adolescent. Consequently, he tells the innocent Ophelia in the “Nunnery Scene,” “God hath given you one face and you make yourselves another.” (3.1.141–43)

According to this reading of the play, Hamlet should be seen as someone of extraordinary intelligence and ability who is also very, very young; this combination, along with his father’s death, the supernatural visitings of a Ghost, and his mother’s “o’er hasty marriage” initiate a toxic combination that would propel any sensitive young man toward madness. How else do we explain Hamlet’s grotesque bravado in trying to outdo Laertes’ grief at Ophelia’s death, asserting the predominance of his own sorrow to that of her brother?

What is he whose grief
Bears such an emphasis, whose phrase of sorrow
Even Hamlet’s confrontation with his mother in the “Closet Scene” may be understood as an argument between an aggrieved parent and a surly adolescent. It is one of those instances in which the four hundred years between 1601 and 2008 seem to have melted away:

Hamlet. Now, mother, what’s the matter?
Queen. Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended.
Hamlet. Mother, you have my father much offended.
Queen. Come, come, you answer with an idle tongue.
Hamlet. Go, go, you question with a wicked tongue.
(3.4.7–11)

According to this reading of Shakespeare’s greatest play, Hamlet is a very young man trapped in a politically dangerous world that, despite his remarkable and profound intelligence, he is ill-equipped to handle.

Given the case for Hamlet’s extreme youth in the play, what is the evidence that Shakespeare’s hero should be cast as a man in his thirties? Much of it rests upon a single line in the “Graveyard Scene,” where the First Gravedigger answers Hamlet’s question about how long he has served as a member of his profession:

Gravedigger. I came to it that day our last King Hamlet overcame Fortinbras.
Hamlet. How long is that since?
Gravedigger. It was that very day that young Hamlet was born...I have been sexton here, man and boy, thirty years. (5.1.139–40)

Later in the same scene, the Gravedigger reveals that the jester Yorick has been dead for twenty-three years, and we soon learn from Hamlet that this same Yorick “bore me on his back a thousand times.”

While Hamlet may be a surprisingly “mature” student of thirty in both the Second Quarto and Folio versions, curiously, in the First Quarto the line about “thirty years” is expunged, and the Gravedigger says that Yorick’s skull has lain in the earth “this dozen yeare” (italics mine), suggesting that Hamlet’s age is closer to eighteen than thirty. But which version should we believe? Since the First (“bad”) Quarto may have been an early draft, a “memorial reconstruction” put together by the play’s actors, or the script of a touring production, we cannot be sure. But it ought not to be discounted in this instance; certainly, it does lend credence to the portrait of an adolescent rather than a mature Hamlet.

We do not and will never know what prompted Shakespeare to write the play in the first place. Its genesis will forever be shrouded in mystery. But it is curious that Shakespeare’s son, Hamnet, died in 1596, at the age of twelve, and would have been an adolescent at the time Shakespeare was working on the play. We also know that his father died in 1601, presumably at the very time of the play’s composition. So it is at least tempting to conjecture that this play about the tragically brief lives of young sons and supernatural visitings of powerful fathers was an imagi-native by-product of this particular period in Shakespeare’s life.

1 There have been some notable exceptions to casting more mature actors as Hamlet. John Gielgud was only twenty-five when he played the role for the first time in 1929, and more recently Ben Whishaw played it at the age of twenty-three in Trevor Nunn’s production at The Old Vic. Perhaps the most illustrious exception came in 1805, when the prodigy Master William Betty played the role at the Drury Lane Theater at age fourteen! This astonishing feat of virtuosity was considered so important that the entire House of Commons decided to adjourn, allowing its members to attend the performance.
4 This has not prevented more mature actresses from appearing as Ophelia. For example, Ellen Terry was thirty when she first played Ophelia opposite Henry Irving’s forty-year-old Hamlet in 1878.
6 The names “Hamnet” and “Hamlet” were used interchangeably in Shakespeare’s day.

Symposium: Hamlet and the Adolescent Mind

A special symposium on “Hamlet and Adolescent Mind” will take place on Saturday, February 21, 10 a.m.–2 p.m. in the A. E. Hotchner Studio Theatre in conjunction with the Performing Arts Department’s production of Hamlet. This symposium, underwritten by a generous grant from the Center for the Study of Ethics and Human Values and co-sponsored by the Psychology Department and PAD in Arts & Sciences, will examine Shakespeare’s play in relation to contemporary perspectives on adolescent psychology. Among the topics considered by a panel of experts: suicide, depression, brain imaging, cross-cultural behaviors, and psychoanalytical readings of Shakespeare’s play.

Hamlet
by William Shakespeare
Directed by Henry I. Schvey

February 13, 14, 20, 21 at 8 p.m.
February 15, 22 at 2 p.m.
A. E. Hotchner Studio Theatre
Washington University Danforth Campus

Hamlet: The very sound of the word is rich and full of echoes more than four centuries after it was produced at the Globe Theatre. It is Shakespeare’s most famous play, and the name of the most complex and controversial character in this or any language. No matter what our associations are with this great play—suicide, revenge, ghosts, incest, murder—it remains a play to trouble the spirit, challenge the intellect, and expand the imagination. In other words, Hamlet epitomizes the reason art is important to us today. A must see for this or any age.
The Long Good-bye

Review of Philip Roth, Exit Ghost (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2007), 304 pages

The year 2007 was a year of goodbyes. While Amazon’s announcement of the Kindle suggests that reading may have a strange new future, we won’t be seeing new books featuring some of our favorite characters. The mystery writer Walter Mosley retired his path-breaking detective Easy Rawlins, in Blonde Faith, to much handwringing from fans, and the news from abroad was even more alarming: the Scottish parliament was asked to raise the retirement age for the Scottish police force from sixty to sixty-five. The reason? Ian Rankin, author of the long-running, best-selling, and critically acclaimed Inspector Rebus novels, had always claimed that his detective would age in real time, and having reached sixty—the series begins with a forty-year-old Rebus in 1987’s Knots and Crosses—Detective Inspector Rebus would have to retire alongside his real-life cohort in the Lothian and Borders police force. Exit Music would be his last foray down the mean streets of Edinburgh. This story of political intervention, and the hate mail that Rankin apparently received from Scottish police officers newly afraid that the retirement age might actually be raised, reminds us that despite the pleasures of rereading it is never easy to part with a character we have lived with for years.

But I suspect that 2007’s most notorious retirement was that of Nathan Zuckerman, as Philip Roth announced that Exit Ghost would be the last book to feature his alter ego novelist. Readers have been following Zuckerman since 1979’s The Ghost Writer, and the nine Zuckerman novels surely rank among the most important achievements of postwar American fiction. The announcement was especially shocking because the Zuckerman we had come to know in the late 1990s, through Roth’s superb historical trilogy—American Pastoral (1997), I Married a Communist (1998), and The Human Stain (2000)—was finally a Zuckerman worthy of Roth’s prodigious talents. The skill that Nathan Zuckerman always had for describing everything from his own pain to the female body was finally unmoored from his own pleasure, and this late trilogy showcased a Roth at the height of his powers. By moving Zuckerman to the sidelines in those novels—as a narrator and observer, rather than the protagonist—the self-indulgent qualities of the earlier Zuckerman novels, which had reached preposterous heights in The Anatomy Lesson (1983), disappeared; indeed, for this reader the late trilogy was so compelling that it almost retroactively legitimized the weaker earlier novels. Encountering the intelligence, historical range, and thoughtfulness of this Zuckerman, one suddenly cared for the story of how this man came to be, and the earlier novels, despite their egotism and misogyny, took on a second life. Even if we didn’t always care for the details that accompanied his examination of three explosive topics—the McCarthy years, the excesses of the new left, and the puritanical culture surrounding the Clinton impeachment effort—the novels in the late trilogy were undeniably powerful, and Roth’s late style deserved all the praise that it attracted.

After sidelining Zuckerman, Roth has decided to take the risk of bringing him back one last time as the central character in a novel whose title, of course, recalls the first of the Zuckerman novels. In many ways Exit Ghost seems scripted by The Ghost Writer (1979). Zuckerman has left the safety and sanctity of his solitary existence in the Berkshires, where he has been living alone for the last eleven years, to return to New York City for medical treatment. Ever since undergoing surgery for prostate cancer, Zuckerman has been both impotent and incontinent, and treatment offers the hope of controlling, if not curing, the latter condition. As he leaves his doctor’s office Zuckerman is shocked to find himself in an elevator with Amy Bellette, a character from the first of the Zuckerman novels, who is now suffering from an advanced brain tumor. In The Ghost Writer Bellette is the former student and current lover of E. I. Lonoff, the famous writer with whom Zuckerman is obsessed, and we learn over the course of Exit Ghost that Bellette was Lonoff’s companion for the last four years of his life. After seeing Bellette, Zuckerman impulsively decides, after scanning the classifieds in the paper, to exchange his cabin in the woods for a flat on the Upper West Side for a year. He becomes infatuated with the much younger (she is thirty, he is seventy-one) Jamie Logan, who owns the flat with her husband, especially after Zuckerman realizes that he and Logan once met when she was a student at Harvard years earlier. The following chapters detail his obsession as he crafts in dialogue an imaginary story about his attempted seduction of her. The rest of the novel concerns Bellette and Richard Kliman, a college boyfriend of Jamie’s who is now trying desperately to gather material from Bellette and Zuckerman so that he can write the definitive critical biography of Lonoff.

Those who might have hoped that the discerning historical criticism of the American trilogy would now be turned to the immediate present in Exit Ghost will be disappointed. Set
immediately before and after the 2004 presidential election, it never anatomizes the moment of its setting; ever since withdrawing to the Berkshires eleven years ago, after receiving death threats in New York, Zuckerman has been slowly retreating from public life, and since 9/11 he has stopped following the news, reading only the most local of papers. The novel as a whole thus feels like a retreat rather than a culmination, and Zuckerman’s failing memory—he now needs a chore book to remind him of letters he has written and phone calls he has received—suggests that his historical phase is over.

From the beginning of his career—in books filled with novelists, professors, students, critics, and reviewers—Roth has been self-consciously teaching us how to read (and how not to; remember those arguments Zuckerman has with a thinly disguised Irving Howe in the earlier novels?), but in Exit Ghost he may inadvertently have said more than he intended. Kliman, the slightly mad Lonoff “biographer” who tracks Zuckerman throughout the novel and who is so obviously an echo of Zuckerman Unbound’s (1981) Alvin Pepler, is in possession of half of Lonoff’s final work, the only novel that the great short story writer ever produced. That vision of a manuscript cut in half seems oddly fitting, which is not to say that Exit Ghost is half a novel, but rather that it feels throughout like a novel composed of scenes clipped from the rest of Roth’s career. Exit Ghost is less a summation of the Zuckerman novels than a series of false starts and loose ends, and the compositional logic that should hold the series of novels together seems missing. So some of the novel seems dictated by a law of return, as if to say that since the series started with Lonoff and Bellette it must end with them, but this requires the too-perfect coincidence of Zuckerman finding himself in the hospital elevator with Bellette. The book also looks uneasily forward even as it looks (too slickly) backward—forward, that is, to the anxieties attendant on literary reputation. We might hope that Roth was better than this, that in the last of the Zuckerman novels, with Zuck facing the decline of his memory and everywhere reflecting on mortality, his enemy would prove more substantive and less obvious than a caricatured biographer intent on exposing the hidden secrets at the core of Lonoff’s life and career.

Lonoff is not Zuckerman, of course, nor is Zuckerman Roth, but the fear of a literary reputation dragged through the mud after a writer’s death, and the necessity of policing access to a writer’s estate, runs throughout the novel. In addition, the language used by Kliman to describe what he is after sounds straight out of Henry James as he seeks to expose the great secret that will unlock Lonoff’s work and life, tracing the supposed figure in the carpet that critics have never seen. Though Henry James has been ever present in Roth’s work, Lonoff, Zuckerman, and Roth aren’t, in the end, James, and the overplayed account of Kliman’s investigation reads less like a defense of Lonoff and more like Roth’s own Jamesian hope that he will one day be important enough to generate the same kind of posthumous battle over his work and career. But James is the writer of reticence and Roth the writer of excess, and it seems difficult to imagine mistaking one for the other.

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