Stanley Fish to Speak At Faculty Book Celebration

The Center for the Humanities announces its third annual faculty celebration to be held Thursday, December 2, 2004, at 4 p.m. in the Formal Lounge of the Woman's Building on Washington University's Hilltop Campus.

STANLEY FISH, a Distinguished Professor of English, Dean of the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences and Criminal Justice and Political Science at the University of Illinois at Chicago, will give the keynote address. Our 2004 Celebrating Our Books, Recognizing Our Authors Seminar will feature two Washington University faculty authors who will read from their recent books, discuss their work, and take questions from the audience. The celebration, aided by the Washington University Campus Bookstore, will display books by scholars from across the disciplines of the arts and sciences, acknowledging our colleagues' passion for their subjects, celebrating their encounters with the act and art of writing.

Books will be available for purchase, and the authors who present will be available to sign their books after the colloquium. The entire St. Louis community is invited as well as the Washington University community.

We will provide more specific information as the date of the colloquium approaches. We hope to see you on Thursday, December 2nd in the Women's Building Formal Lounge for what promises to be an exciting event.

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From Pulp to Comic Books

Inside the Kingdom of Marvel and DC Superhero Comics

Images represent items in the Pulp Magazine and Comic Book Collections of the library of the Center for the Humanities
Director’s Notes

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On the Cover:
Eisen, Will. The Spirit in Murder Runs Wild. New York: Vital Publications, Inc., 1941. This publication has been manufactured under wartime conditions in full compliance with all orders and regulations of the War Production Board.

The All-New Belles Lettres

You will notice that this new issue of Belles Lettres is a bit thicker than what you are used to. Beginning with the 2004-2005 academic year, Belles Lettres will be published quarterly instead of bimonthly. This new publication schedule we hope will afford the opportunity to feature more and longer articles, permitting richer variety and perspectives. It will also permit us to plan issues better.

The bimonthly schedule had all of us here at the Center for the Humanities flying by the seat of our pants, alternating between panic and dread. That was just a bit more angst and existential melodrama than even we humanists could bear. As always, please send us your comments by mail or e-mail about this issue and let us know what you think. Your friendly, neighborhood humanists here would appreciate it.

Presidential Politics or You Can’t Have a Debate Without Both Candidates

This issue is given over, in part, to the upcoming presidential election with review-essays about John Kerry and George W. Bush. After WU History Professor Henry Berger turned in his essay on Kerry, it occurred to me, as our deadline grew nearer, that we didn’t have one on Bush and that had to be corrected, quickly and desperately, just as in the old days of publishing the bimonthly Belles Lettres. I hope our readers will be charitable about the fact that I am not a historian, nor a political scientist. I have absolutely no credentials to write about Bush, except that I think he is a riveting presence, probably because he is both so loved and so hated, rather like his predecessor, Bill Clinton. But 9/11 has made the stakes much higher; thus, the love and hate take on the pretension of the cosmic, rather than the merely partisan. Besides, with Bush, there is a sense among his critics that he is not only wrong but incapable, a more serious public concern than Clinton ever experienced despite the impeachment. Bush evokes little neutrality or indifference, and his air of defiance has both a sort of toughness and desperation about it that makes him seem simultaneously a courageous statesman and a
Financial Support

Sixty percent of our respondents are willing to make a contribution to the Center for the Humanities to defray the cost of mailing *BL*. It is heartening to know that close to two-thirds of the respondents feel that *BL* is worth supporting in this way.

Who are You?

Now, who were our respondents? Sixty-three percent were female, 37 percent were men. Sixty-five percent were 46 to 75 years old. Only four percent were under 30. *BL* needs to get greater circulation among the young, and perhaps we need to run a few more features that appeal to readers under 30. Eighty-four percent of our respondents were Caucasian and 11 percent were African American. Three percent were Hispanic/Native American and two-percent Asian. Eighty-seven percent of our respondents are from Missouri. Sixty-nine percent hold graduate or professional degrees. Twenty-four percent are professional writers and 16 percent academics. So, we know we have a highly educated, mostly white, older audience that is very committed to the humanities and the arts. We at Belles Lettres want to expand our core audience, while reaching out to younger and more diverse audiences as well. We will continue to work on that. Keep your cards and letters coming about what you like and what you don’t like about *BL*.

We appreciate the time and thought that went into these comments, and thank all the respondents for their contributions.

Gerald Early, Jian Leng, and Amanda Beresford
of the Center for the Humanities, Washington University in St. Louis.

Remarks

Faculty Book Celebration
December 4, 2003

I was honored when Gerald asked me to say a few words about the importance of writing books. Then I began to wonder why I was asked. I worried that he asked the wrong person, or that I might have given someone a false impression, for, I must confess, I have never written a book. Unlike most university presidents and chancellors, I have not even a collection of chancellorial speeches. Maybe it is not too late, or maybe it is just as well because I have tried to read some of those collections of presidential wisdom and found them dated and with rare exceptions ponderous. Besides, usually one president sounds like every other president. As far as quality goes, I suspect that generally their books do not compare with the books of their faculties, which may be written gracefully and have a chance of lasting because they provide thoughtful analysis or new ideas or new ways of expression. But then when Gerald Early asks me to do something, I automatically say, “Yes.” He has good judgment and his programs are excellent. So here I am.

I have got myself up for this task by thinking about the history of Washington University. In this 150th anniversary we have been rightfully honoring our founders. But I turn not to our founders but to our patron saint, Robert Brookings, who re-founded Washington University at the turn of the last century. He was a man of vision and energy, who oversaw the building of this Hilltop campus and the establishment of the scientifically based modern medical school. He founded also the Brookings Institution in Washington because he believed that people of thought could help guide people of action. Here was an individual who truly understood and valued education, learning, scholarship and research. Here was also an individual who never graduated from high school. If Robert Brookings could understand and value education perhaps even more as an outsider because he had not benefited from formal education, perhaps I could appreciate the writing of a book even though I am myself no author.

Reading is different; reading has been a passion of mine at least since early adolescence. Books written by others have added to my knowledge and shaped my understanding of the world and the people who inhabit it. Insights elegantly and forcefully phrased have locked into my mind, helped form my character, and stayed with me for decades. They come to mind in difficult times or when I try to put something new to my experience in its proper place and perspective.

I wish that I were a writer. Then I could pass on what I most value to intelligent people of my generation and generations coming after. I would not even ask for a wide readership, just a few who would resonate to the same things that I consider to be beautiful and true. That would be a way of giving back to the world, to give to others what so many writers have given to me. There could be no better legacy. A well-written book can be a kind of immortality.

If you think I am caught up with romantic notions, you are probably right, but that is the way I am and that is the way I see writing a book. I honor those who report their own truths, often laboriously and even painfully gained, who do so in their own style and so create something lasting. It is a privilege to be here among those of the Washington University faculty who write books.

William H. Danforth is Chancellor Emeritus and Vice-Chairman of the Board of Trustees.
What the Readers Think: 
*Belles Lettres* Readers’ Survey

The Center for the Humanities included a Readers’ Survey in our May 2004 issue of *Belles Lettres* in an effort to gauge our readers’ thoughts about the publication, what they like, and what they would like to have us change. In addition, we asked for some demographic data that would allow us to help *Belles Lettres* better serve its readers.

*Belles Lettres* is sent to 10,500 national and international readers. We received a response rate of 1.3%, a predictable rate of return, and a statistically valid sample. Typically, surveys of this sort garner less than a 1 percent return. So, we thank these 138 readers, and the 18% of them who attached a stamp to help us defray postage costs, for their valuable comments and suggestions. Here are some of the things we learned.

**How People Learn About Belles Lettres**

Eighty-two percent of our respondents have been receiving *BL* for over a year. Overwhelmingly, our readers tend to be people who have followed the magazine for a while. Forty-two percent received the magazine as an unsolicited mailing and 20 percent began to receive it after attending an event sponsored by the Center for the Humanities. This indicates that our events are important in soliciting new readers. Twenty percent learned about the magazine through other sources, public libraries and the like, which means that the network we have established to the dissemination of our publication is important in attracting a significant portion of our readership.

**Favorite Features**

Forty percent of respondents listed the interviews with visiting writers and scholars as the feature they most enjoy. Thirty-three percent listed our book reviews and 30 percent said they liked feature stories about visiting writers and scholars. Most people, 36 percent, want more articles on writers and scholars. Interestingly, the demand for fiction (20 percent) and more poetry (17 percent) was relatively small, and certainly less than predicted when the survey instrument was constructed. *Belles Lettres* may, as an experiment, run a piece of fiction in one or two issues in the future to see how readers respond, but as of now there seems to be no strong interest in it.

**Frequency of Publication**

A large percent of respondents, 62 percent, thought *Belles Lettres* should be longer, a heartening sign as that indicates that people enjoy it. Fifty-five percent of respondents prefer that *Belles Lettres* remain a bimonthly and 45 percent wanted it to become a quarterly. This means that people prefer to get it frequently. With this issue, we begin *BL* as a quarterly in response to reader demand for longer issues. As funding is identified, we will try also to respond to our readers’ wish for a more frequently published *BL*.

**Unsolicited Manuscripts and Passion for the Humanities**

Most respondents are strongly in favor (66 percent) of *BL* accepting unsolicited manuscripts. And most of the respondents (90 percent)
beleaguered imposter. Despite my ignorance, I couldn’t resist writing about such a fascinating man, whose foreign policy has so changed how America goes about its business.

We went to press before the Republican National Convention aired. Thus, we were unable to have Wayne Fields comment on the speeches given at that event.

The Center for the Humanities Wins NEH Grant or Understanding Why We Play

The Center for the Humanities was awarded a grant of $222,000 to fund a 2005 summer institute for public high school teachers. The theme of the institute is “Teaching Jazz as American Culture” and will feature an examination of the impact of jazz on literature, on fine art, on film (as a dramatic subject and on film scoring), and on American social history. The institute will also look at jazz and gender (Why do we often think women can’t play saxophones, trombones, trumpets, and drums as well as men?) and jazz and race. It is hoped that the institute will offer teachers new and engaging ways to teach popular music as a humanities subject, and it is hoped that this endeavor will lead to new ways to teach the humanities, to new ways to see the humanities as cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary. A number of very good scholars will participate in the institute as instructors and the participating teachers will have the chance to listen to live jazz music every week. There will be more about this in upcoming issues of Belles Lettres and The Figure in the Carpet. Special thanks are due Jian Leng for her hard work in assisting with the grant writing.

Oh, God, Not More On Popular Culture

This issue is also given over to comic books as there seems to be a great deal of activity surrounding that art form at Washington University, with two comic book exhibitions and a book about comics coming out this fall — all connected to Washington U. The interview with WU Art Professor Douglas Dowd gives us the skinny on all of that. I wrote a review-essay about superhero comics, a subject about which I know a great deal more than about George W. Bush, much to my embarrassment. But misspent youth is, alas, misspent youth. You can’t be a humanist without it. The Pete Rose book review was thrown in because the Cardinals are going to the playoffs and may prove themselves to be one of the finest baseball teams of all time. There just had to be something about baseball in this issue and that was all there was in the folder. As my friend, Michael McCambridge, who has just published a brilliant history of the National Football League, said, baseball is not what America hopes to be, but actually what America is. Football is what America hopes to be. Unfortunately, I think he is right. Baseball was America. Football is America.

Thanks and All That

The rest of the stuff in this issue, very good stuff, indeed, speaks for itself. I am deeply grateful, as always, to all of our contributors and the fact that they produce such good work for nothing, or as we call it here, no-fees, which, I think, are much like the no-prizes Marvel comics used to award their fans back in the 1960s. I, like Stan Lee at Marvel, send envelopes with nothing in them. Special thanks to William Danforth for giving remarks at last year’s Faculty Book Celebration. This year’s speaker is Stanley Fish.

Coming Up Next Time

Our next issue will have articles on children’s literature by children’s poet Connie Levy and WU Professor of Chemistry William Buhro as well as pieces about rape and pornography. How is that for a version of the marriage of heaven and hell? Just when you thought this magazine was safe to give to your children, the editor has decided to have the R lie down with the G, as they say in the movie ratings business. As some people tell me, that’s what’s wrong with the humanities today. Writing about pornography! My goodness, no standards and no taste. Oh well, as the song goes, don’t blame it on my heart, blame it on my youth.

As Rocket J. Squirrel was wont to say, “Bye now, see you next time.”
Vietnam Redux?
John Kerry and the Burden of Guilt


Several days after primary election victories ensured John Forbes Kerry the Democratic Party presidential nomination, I screened an already scheduled documentary about the anti-Vietnam war movement in the United States to a Washington University class of nearly 100 students.

It so happens that the film includes an extensive excerpt of Kerry’s nationally televised testimony against the war in April 1971 in front of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. In measured, sensitive, and dramatic words, Kerry systematically exposed and condemned American military conduct in Vietnam and denounced the irresponsible behavior, flawed leadership, and defamation of avowed democratic ideals and national honor by Washington policymakers who authorized and directed America’s intervention in Southeast Asia.

The 27-year-old veteran naval lieutenant, who had served military duty as the skipper of a six man patrol “swift” gun-boat plying the dangerous inland rivers and canals of the Mekong River delta region in South Vietnam, returned to the United States a decorated officer, the recipient of three purple heart ribbons for wounds received under fire, and of silver and bronze stars in recognition of heroic combat action. Angry, however, over the deaths of comrades in a war the strategy and tactics of which he had increasingly come to question during his tour of duty in Vietnam, Kerry had become a commanding figure in the growing ranks of anti-war veterans.

At the end of the film showing, several students remarked that they were quite taken by Kerry’s eloquent rhetoric. But, they asked, how could the same John Kerry, now a junior senator from Massachusetts and a presidential candidate, have voted some 30 years later to authorize the Bush Administration to wage war against Iraq, let alone participate in a conflict in Vietnam about which he had had growing doubts even before he volunteered to serve in the Navy?

A fair question. It is also a central issue of a recent biographical account by three Boston Globe reporters. Based largely on previously researched and lengthy newspaper articles, the reporters have been tracking Kerry’s public and private life ever since he catapulted into national fame when, overnight, his televised testimony made him an instant media celebrity and an icon of the veterans’ anti-war movement.

Fact-filled down to the latest moment of Kerry’s career, crisply written though lacking wider contexts of the story, John F. Kerry is a detailed, investigative exposure of every development and controversy of Kerry’s life.

The volume by historian Douglas Brinkley, Tour of Duty (also published in time for the election-year cycle), is more nuanced, contextualized, and analytical. That said, the Globe reporters and Brinkley each acknowledge the other for supplying particular details for their books. It was the Globe reporters, for instance, who, through the employment of an Austrian genealogist, uncovered the details of the Jewish origins of Kerry’s paternal European grandparents. Changing their last names from Kohn to Kerry and converting to Catholicism, the grandparents emigrated to America from

In somber but elegant sentences and paragraphs that riveted the attention of the audience in the room, Kerry verbally assaulted the official architects of policies that he said had sent Americans to fight and die in a futile war and which had resulted in atrocities against the Vietnamese and destroyed their villages and farms. Only a few days earlier, on NBC’s television program, “Meet the Press,” Kerry had included himself among those who had violated provisions of the Geneva Convention governing warfare.

Kerry climaxed his testimony with lines that became among the best remembered of his anti-war pronouncements: “How do you ask a man to be the last man to die in Vietnam?” he demanded. “How do you ask a man to be the last man to die for a mistake?”

John Kerry Christmas photo from 1947 in Millis, Massachusetts: Diana, John, and Margaret Kerry.
Photo provided by the Boston Globe.
How can that be so? In the longest and best chapter of the book, titled “Fathers and Son,” John recounts the visit to his father in the exotic deep South of slow trolleys and warm rain. The “other” father was John’s stepfather, a respectable man who taught John to tie a tie and ran a Connecticut country newspaper. John’s mother, born Charlotte Marshall Maurice (pronounced Morris), was an exceptional woman, but in the book, specifics are lacking. In her most substantial appearance, it is 1986 and she is bravely dying. We never learn enough about her, not even about the way she looked, to see the riches in her that her son did, and it was only by hearing John speak about her that I learned how he treasured her opinions and wit.

I think I felt impatient with Then because I wanted John to single himself out as special, as an artist, but it seems that his goal in writing was to locate or center himself as a member of his extended family, as if he did not accept that position as a given. Perhaps he didn’t. There are things I don’t know. Yet, standing at the family burial plot, remembering Sunday family breakfasts 60 years before, he wrote that he felt “glad to be in the only company we all thoroughly approve of, the only ones, who, as we all believe, perfectly understand us.” I found it disappointing that he meant only his relatives. His Preface suggests that his kind of solid, white middle-class people, “by the middle of the century, as a class or caste. . .were beside the point.” But he would not have poured his last efforts into Then had he really thought so.

Much of the content of this work echoes of works already written: George Orwell’s “Such, Such Were the Joys” surpasses John’s chapter on surviving boarding school; Mary McCarthy, who was orphaned at six, told more about social distinctions and snobbery. The only place where John is John and no one else is in his poetry, which he practiced long enough to cover and master everything he knew about himself, before the gift was withdrawn.

Catherine Rankovic, Production Editor and Designer, University College, Washington University in St. Louis
including a dining-room chair he sold in 1989, he told our class, for $77,000. Only at a university would we have ever met at all. But that is what universities are for, and John, by example, persuaded me that gentlemen make ideal educators. When they must, they will say, “I don’t know,” the most humbling admission a professor has to make. Their criticism tends toward the subtle and spare. Faced with a student poet trying to sneak a bad poem past him, Professor Morris assumed a neutral tone and compassionate expression. “This poem,” he would then say, “doesn’t do quite what you want it to do.” Then he set it aside and politely gazed elsewhere while the poet’s hubris vaporized in a flash of self-ignited shame. By contrast, a younger, more famous poet had told me to “get some humility” and go learn to write at the University of New Mexico at Las Cruces, advice not intended to advance the art. John Morris had his issues — they’re in his poems; and, yes, I know he used to drink, and some people were not fond of him at all. But as our teacher, he had no agenda except for insisting on his right to smoke (“I do it,” he told an objector, “because I’m in pain”), and he was pleased when his students did well.

Then is not like revisiting John’s portrait, which is a fair likeness of the man. As far as it goes, Then is lovely, like a pond of chilly water. But childhood memoirs appeal mostly to readers who believe that the child is father to the man, and I think that is as fantastical as it sounds. Memoir and autobiography are crucially different. The memoir encapsulates memories, as if they existed in a vacuum. In autobiography, one’s memories are used to reflect on the being one was or eventually became. Reconstructing a former self, out of fascination with one’s own origin, is a kind of taxidermy. To be interesting, a memoir needs context — a backdrop, like money, a place, an obsession, or a historical event; or a dramatic story like those told in Black Boy and Angela’s Ashes. Absent those things, a reader must know the origin, the sign of membership, of class and status, academic costumes — all these sustaining signs of membership, of class and status, words in my own arrangement of them and my name in print on poems and title pages, even these chapters of memoir, spurs to ambition at once contemptible, necessary, and exhausting. (p. 65)

Winter colonized the Housatonic valley. At twilight a first tiny snow had dusted across the blacktop in the school-bus headlights, and ticked against my bedroom windows where in the morning ice flowers blossomed . . . Here and there some self-delighter cut solitary figures in the ice (p. 84).

Out on the fire escape behind me a sailor emptied his stomach richly into the alley below (p. 104)

Writing about winning little badges given at school for high marks, he gives the reader a condensed version of “Why I Write”:

Contemptible? Why? I’d like to know. Yes, he was a bookish child, but what kept him writing? What were his worst mistakes? What was it like at Columbia University in the 1950s? Washington University in the 1960s? How did he negotiate envy? His undeserved obscurity? What did he really think about when he thought about anything in particular? Now there will be no answers. In a postscript to Then, he writes that if illness had not forced his hand, Then might have had another chapter. Even so he would have sold himself short. Was he too modest to write four more chapters, or five?

John’s father, Charles Morris, a frustrated scholar (in 1931 studying at Oxford, England, John’s birthplace) suffered a bout of mental illness that precipitated his divorce. Recovered, he later became a schoolteacher and dance-hall musician. About 7 years old at the time of the divorce, John stayed with his father only once, in Savannah in the summer of 1945. John wrote of him, puzzlingly:

By those shynesses, inhibitions, tics, and quirks of gesture and feeling, the failures of nerve, the incapacitating depressions, the envy and corrosive self-irony, I notice in myself and many of my friends, he was startlingly unmarked. (p. 103)
the Austrian-Hungarian Empire in 1905, escaping the latest wave of anti-Semitism sweeping across parts of Europe. Several of Kerry's forebears, remaining behind, died in Hitler's concentration camps during the Second World War (Appendix, pp. 387-392).

John Kerry's father, Richard, was born in Brookline, Massachusetts, an older suburb of Boston, and married into the patrician Forbes-Winthrop family, supplying John with his middle name Forbes. Despite the impression of descending from and behaving as one of the closely knit, elite, wealthy Brahmin families of New England, the Globe reporters convincingly demon-

strate that neither John Kerry nor his close relatives were people of either great wealth or high social standing. Kerry's immigrant grandfather lost his fortune three times, committed suicide in despair, and left the family virtually destitute. Richard Kerry was a salaried legal officer in the diplomatic service and married into a family of old and declining wealth. Frequently moving from place to place as Richard Kerry's job required, including to Europe and back again to America, John Kerry was separated for long periods of time from his family, attending private boarding schools, the tuition, room, and board costs paid for by more distant, wealthier maternal relatives including a childless great aunt, Clara Winthrop. John Kerry's own wealth as an adult was acquired through two marriages, the second in 1995 to Teresa Heinz, widow of Republican U.S. Senator John Heinz III and heiress of the Heinz food industry family fortune.

Despite his long absences as a teenager from his parents, it was from them, especially his father, that John was exposed to and engaged in absorbing discussions and debates about national and international affairs. His father encouraged his children to challenge prevailing ideas and question accepted doctrine. At the boarding schools he attended and at Yale University as an undergraduate, Kerry refined his rapidly developing speaking and argumentative skills and became a highly visible leader of debating societies, steering them to discussions and debates about "major issues of the day" (p. 27). As a Catholic and a liberal among a largely Protestant and conservative student body, Kerry often found himself in a minority on many matters. This status and his remoteness from family may have contributed to Kerry's seemingly aloof personality, the Globe writers suggest, but this did nothing to deter close relationships with school friends and teachers or comrades in the Navy, for which he later volunteered.

Nor did such factors cool Kerry's early ambitions to enter public life. The authors single out two persons in particular who influenced and provided role models for Kerry in this respect. At St. Paul's college preparatory school which Kerry attended as an adolescent, the sole African-American on the staff, Reverend John Walker (later the bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Washington, D.C.) educated Kerry about race, racism, and civil rights activism. Walker, Kerry remembered, "was the closest teacher to me…the first black ever to come to this school as a teacher" (p. 29).

John F. Kennedy, with whom Kerry shared initials, a fact not unnoticed by either the self confident adolescent or by those acquainted with Kerry, had long been a favorite family politician. Kerry, who met Kennedy, became a zealous supporter and it was Kennedy's successful run for the presidency that energized Kerry's commitment to public service and political ambitions. “Kennedy
was certainly a model for him,” Kerry’s roommates at St. Paul’s and Yale affirmed (p. 31). Kennedy’s assassination in 1963 devastated Kerry but seemed also to rededicate his desire to participate in public life. By the beginning of his senior year at Yale (1965-66), Kerry was speaking openly about “the life of a politician [as] the life I want” (p. 50).

By then, Kerry was also criticizing the way in which the administration of Lyndon Johnson was pursuing America’s involvement in Vietnam, an intervention he had initially supported. In perhaps the most astute observation in the book, one of Kerry’s close college colleagues analyzed Kerry’s developing critique of Johnson’s Vietnam policy. “I think [he] was alarmed by what we were doing. That doesn’t mean [he was] opposed to what (reviewer’s italics) we were doing. He saw this growing quagmire we were heading into with good intentions and certain results. My recollection …is that it was not so much a statement of opposition but was really a clarion [call]” (p. 51).

Perhaps it would not be a stretch to find echoes of Kerry’s changing and ambiguous position about the Vietnam War in his favoring and then dissenting from the Bush Administration’s war on terrorism and the invasion of Iraq. Kerry has said he would never have fought the war in Iraq the way the Bush Administration has done, that the unilateral, preventive attack upon Iraq without United Nations endorsement and support of European NATO allies had unnecessarily cost lives, isolated America in the world, and impaired the nation’s effort to deal with terrorism. The Democratic presidential candidate has not, however, repudiated his vote in October 2002 authorizing George W. Bush to use force, if necessary, to disarm Iraq of weapons of mass destruction, a rationale for war since proven to be false as was the administration’s claim of an Al Qaeda-Saddam Hussein collaboration in the terrorist attack on the United States in September 2001.

Despite his growing reservations about how the war in Vietnam was being fought, Kerry was anxious to join the navy after graduating from Yale, knowing that this might lead, as it did, to his own participation in the conflict. The Boston Globe writers argue that it was his sense of duty and obligation to serve, his “belief in the Kennedy credo” of national public service that determined Kerry’s decision. “I wanted to be there…make my contribution, have a sense of what it was all about,” Kerry recalled. “Like all young men…who are testing themselves,” he “had a sense of invincibility” (pp. 56-57).

Idealistic commitment, probably. Naivete, for sure. But, as the Globe reporters also observe, Kerry’s closest male friends and peers were going…and “Kerry was not about to be left behind” (p. 57). He signed up to attend the Officer Candidate School (OCS) in Rhode Island and was then shipped to Vietnam in 1968 as the skipper of a “swift” boat, an assignment he originally believed would involve only coastal patrolling, a relatively safe activity that “would keep him away from the frontlines of combat” (pp. 70,77).

By that time, however, one of Kerry’s closest friends, Richard Pershing (grandson of General “Black Jack” Pershing) had been killed while engaged in ground combat in Vietnam. Pershing’s death inflicted a heavy emotional wound upon Kerry and furthered his questioning of the war’s purpose and America’s role in the conflict.

Moreover, soon after his arrival in Vietnam, Kerry learned that the “swift” boat mission had been changed by the officer in charge, Admiral Elmo Zumwalt, to the far more dangerous task of patrolling inland waters in South Vietnam, enforcing “U.S. imposed curfews in so-called free fire zones along key rivers and canals” (p. 81). What troubled Kerry was that the free fire zone policy allowed Americans to shoot indiscriminately at Vietnamese, including civilians, suspected of being or aiding Viet Cong insurgents and to destroy alleged military targets that often were homes and entire villages.

Even so, the Globe authors and historian Brinkley are in agreement that Kerry carried out his duties and that, overwhelmingly, Kerry’s crewmates praised his outstanding leadership as commander of the patrol vessel, his unhesitating willingness to face danger and to act aggressively and fearlessly on behalf of the men under his charge. Both accounts reprint portions of Admiral Zumwalt’s honorary citation that declared “Lt. Kerry’s calmness, professionalism, and great personal courage under fire were in keeping with the highest traditions of the U.S. Naval Service (Brinkley, p. 317; Globe reporters, pp. 106-107).

Yet Kerry’s steadily growing disillusionment with the stalemated war, the mounting losses of Americans and Vietnamese that increasingly made no sense to him, his recognition that American power was obliterating Vietnamese society, that the United States was an “unwelcome foreign occupier,” and “unsettled by his own role and overall U.S. strategy” convinced him that the war must be opposed and stopped (p.109).
Our Own Voices:  
The Story of An Extraordinary Gentleman


John N. Morris taught in Washington University’s Department of English for 30 years. He was a well-liked teacher. He was also a well-respected poet although little known beyond academic and certain literary circles. He died of pancreatic cancer in 1997. Then: Essays in Reconstruction is one of two books of Morris’s work that was published posthumously by Washington University. John N. Morris: Selected Poems is the other. Then is the subject of the review below. Belles Lettres will publish a review of Morris’s volume of poetry in an upcoming issue.

I couldn’t imagine why I felt so impatient reading the memoirs of Dr. John Nelson Morris, a poet and teacher I admired. His memory remains dear to me and to many of his former colleagues and students, perhaps especially the graduate students who wrote and refined their poetry under his direction. Surprising us, without being asked, he showed up on our class’s graduation day in 1990, cheerful in his Columbia University academic apparel. The stories told about him are stories of surprises: how John sometimes betrayed his usual reticence by telling jokes and blowing smoke rings, or starting a sentence with, “One of my wives...”, or of the stunning difference between the fineness of John’s poetry and his share of recognition and acclaim.

John’s office, Duncker Hall 201, was furnished like a private den, walled and carpeted with books and papers well-cured by nearly 30 years of cigarette smoke and some legendary trash-can fires. Usually one found him in his recliner, reading. But on a morning when I came by in 1995, he was seated at his typewriter table. He hadn’t been writing a poem, because the racket of the typewriter keys had been too dense for that; and he would not have typed letters on the cheap newsmprint he was using, because he had good manners, and they had him, and therein lay one of the chief tensions of his life. Although busy, he asked me in, and I noticed too that the stack of paper nearest him looked fresh.

“You’re writing your autobiography,” I said.

John seemed surprised. He opened his mouth and then closed it. (I have since realized that this requires discipline.) He had a long upper lip, like a turtle’s, and I mention it only because it had taken me years to see it. Teachers and students often stay strangers, experiencing each other mainly as knots of disquieting energies. To see anything more requires active inquiry and observation. It took me ages to conclude that John’s whitening hair was yellowish because it had once been blond. The lenses he wore slightly magnified his eyes so that they revealed a bit more than he wished them to — his shrewdness, nagging self-consciousness, and, at that moment, real surprise — and I wonder now if this disarming effect might have been deliberate. However it was done, he inspired fondness.

After a moment he said, “How did you know?”

“Vibrations,” I said. “Do you have a minute?”

John Morris retired from teaching and left the Washington University campus in 1995, aware that he was terminally ill and determined to work on his memoirs. Then, subtitled Essays in Reconstruction, is the portion he finished; the work is incomplete. Then appeared in 2002 alongside of his Selected Poems, sibling volumes published by a suddenly constituted Washington University press, a venture that those in and of the English department had always said the University considered but could not fund. It is right that Washington University should publish, if anyone’s, John N. Morris’s work, otherwise all out of print.

After John’s death in 1997, I often visited his portrait in Olin Library. He had possessed several distinct kinds of intelligence that together amounted to wisdom — about life, about art — so vast as to induce a state of shock. Even if he could not hear me, I believed he would have understood why I sought him out with my petitions and questions. Because I was merely his student, not a personal friend, there was much about him I didn’t know, but I knew he didn’t dismiss what he didn’t understand. “I’m not qualified to comment on this poem,” he said, when flummoxed by an exuberant workshop entry written in what I would call the Black Esthetic style. Indeed, John was as WASP as they come, with Mayflower connections. Then opens with an account of his lineage. He insists that the Morrices were always unremarkable, and the implication is that John himself was unremarkable, when of course he was anything but. He was so smart and knew so well the tricks of authors, that it is never clear how he wants us to take such protestations and faint praise; but that is the way he was. Howard Nemerov called him “a victim of unrequited self-love,” and the label had some truth or merit because John liked and repeated it.

Schooled in the rhetoric of reticence, as he writes, John nonetheless reveals that he learned riding and shooting, “if in a rather homemade way,” on his grandfather’s North Carolina peach farm, attended a military academy advertised in National Geographic magazine, and was destined to inherit family antiques...
The Rubber Frame:
Speaking About How Comics Speak

An Interview with D.B. Dowd

D.B. Dowd is Director of the Illustrator and Creative and Professor of Art at Washington University in St. Louis.


Whose idea was it to do this upcoming exhibition on alternative comics and how did this all come about?

The exhibition was suggested about a year ago by Phil Slein (director at the School of Art’s Des Lee Gallery) and Tom Huck, a lecturer in the printmaking area and devotee of underground comix. Given the potential scale of the project, they asked Todd Hignite (a recent M.A. graduate of the Art History program and publisher of the new and highly regarded Comic Art magazine) and I to get involved. We felt it was an opportunity to do something really special. The result was a three-part project: the underground show, the formal language of comics show at Special Collections, and a book of essays. Heather Corcoran (assistant professor of Visual Communications and a graphic designer) agreed to design the book. “The Rubber Frame” is the umbrella name for the whole project. The title is meant to suggest the plastic nature of the field of comics. You can come at it from multiple points of view and get something new each time.

Do you think comics are still a vital creative and cultural force in American art? Why?

I don’t think you’d commonly hear comics described as ‘art’ in the grand sense as implied by a term like “American art.” The high cultural folks have tended to view comics as a set of conventions that can be used for real artistic purposes by fine artists, a la Roy Lichtenstein. And possibly those people are right, to a degree, by which I mean to say that comics operate on the level of popular art. Popular art is different from museum art.

That said, some of the most sophisticated comics artists today make use of modernist strategies to introduce doubt, anxiety, and self-reflexive concepts in their work. These are hallmarks of what still gets called “fine art,” even in a period of decline. In part, I guess, I’d attribute the rise of comics in the “art” conversation to an audience hunger for something that’s clear, stylish, direct, and emotionally potent. The best of alternative comics deliver on that level, and there’s an audience for it. A big one, in fact.

The two basic forms of comics are the book and the strip. The newspaper strips have fallen on hard times; they are overly reliant on words and can often be read without so much as a glance at the visuals. Early newspaper strips were often dramatic visually. All of the most interesting work today is happening in comic books.

Who are some of the principal innovators in this field of illustration?

I think that Todd Hignite is the best person to ask, insofar as his magazine has featured many of them, and he knows the field especially well. Todd is the curator of the Des Lee show, which focuses on the 1964-2004 period. But I am particularly fond of the work of Seth and Chris Ware; other luminaries in the show include Art Spiegelman, Charles Burns, Daniel Clowes, and Gary Panter.

What is the Special Collections exhibit on illustration coming up this fall all about and how did that come about?

The second exhibition covers the development of the comics language from 18th-century caricature through today. That includes important developments in visual/verbal narratives in the 19th century, the birth of what’s recognizably a modern newspaper “strip” to the casual observer in the 1890s, the flowering of the strip tradition between 1900 and 1940, the influence of the advertising industry on the creation of the comic book in the 1930s, the influence of cinema on comic books, and the self-censorship of the mainstream comic book industry following Congressional hearings in the 1950s.

Could you talk a bit about the book that you put together and what is in it?

The book is called The Rubber Frame: Essays on Culture and Comics. Writing about comics, as about a lot of popular art, can be pretty soft. If comics have suffered from snobbery on the one hand—the “it’s not really art” business—they have also suffered from the insularity of a kind of cult. Fans can make poor critics. Comics are a subspecies of popular art and exist in a wider artistic and cultural context. The book is an attempt to bring several points of view to bear on the subject. The essays, by Todd Hignite, Daniel Raeburn, Gerald Early, and myself, provide analyses of particular works and treat subjects as diverse as the historiography of comics, African-Americans in the comics, and the historical relationship between comics and animation. The book also includes an introduction by art historian Angela Miller, and an extensive historical timeline of developments in comics and related subjects in the graphic arts. Our ambition was to make a contribution to the field; I would like to think we’ve done so.

Have you ever done or would you ever do a graphic novel or comicbook? If so, what do you as an illustrator find attractive about this artform?

I did a newspaper serial for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch called Sam the Dog that ran for 107 weeks, and I’ve informally gathered it into a book, and I’ve done illustrated books, but nothing that you would call a comic book. I respond to the language of comics, and at the moment am at work on a hybridized piece for electronic presentation that’s part comic, part animation. I would describe myself as more a pictorialist than a narrator, so the thing that most interests me about the comics is the construction of the page and cinematic possibilities of serial imagery arranged in a rectangle. The single part inside a simultaneously perceived whole. As for doing a whole graphic novel, if the right opportunity presented itself, I’d be up for doing it.

Interviewed by Professor Gerald Early.
The *Globe* reporters leave no doubt that his Vietnam War experience and anti-war protestor fame played a central role in fueling Kerry's subsequent political activities and campaigns for political office. The biographers also make a special point that the Nixon presidential tapes housed at the National Archives reveal that Kerry was a high profile target of the Nixon Administration in the wake of his 1971 senatorial testimony. White House officials, including Nixon, viewed Kerry as an "effective" moderate, non-radical, and sophisticated anti-war opponent who was politically dangerous, "a unique, charismatic leader who could undermine public support for the war" and who should be discredited (p. 111).

To what degree Nixon and his aides accurately assessed Kerry's impact on public support for the war is not addressed by the *Globe* writers. By 1971, however, most Americans had turned against the war and believed that United States involvement in the conflict was the mistake Kerry identified in his lengthy discourse before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

In any case, Nixon did not succeed in de-railing Kerry's political ambitions. The Vietnam veteran went on to seek national office after a brief stint as Lieutenant Governor of Massachusetts. Nixon's efforts to undermine Kerry's political career were likely unsuccessful after the President's own political fortunes sank from the self-inflicted wounds of the Watergate scandal.

When John Kerry ran for lieutenant governor and then was elected as the junior senator from Massachusetts in 1984, he did so by mobilizing Vietnam veterans in support of his candidacies and advertised both his Vietnam War service record and his anti-war activities, emphasizing his commitment to fellow veterans and patriotic loyalty to the nation.

Highlighting the same themes, the newly elected Senator led the campaign seeking closure to the Vietnam War POW-MIA controversy, enlisting in the successful effort Republican Senator John McCain of Arizona, a fellow Vietnam War veteran. Both men also embarked on the lengthy but eventually victorious mission of American normalization of relations with Vietnam in 1995 during Kerry's second term in the Senate.

John Kerry's Vietnam past is thus very much a part of his political present. It is clearly his foil against the Republicans who wish to defeat his bid for the presidency and portray him as less than patriotic.

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in an effort to seize Baghdad. He then sharply criticized the administration for encouraging an uprising among Iraqis against Saddam Hussein after declaring a cease fire but failing to shoot down Hussein's armed helicopters that were slaughtering those engaged in the revolt and waited in vain for American assistance.

No pacifist, the authors also note that Kerry favored U.S. military action in Panama in 1989, the U.S.-led NATO bombing campaign in Kosovo in 1999, and supported President Clinton's decision in 1998 to launch missiles against Al Qaeda bases in Afghanistan and suspected weapons locations in Sudan in retaliation for lethal attacks against U.S. embassies in Tanzania and Kenya. As a high ranking member of both the Senate Foreign Relations and Senate Intelligence committees, Kerry was especially alert to the threat of terrorism against which he believed the United States must respond. He therefore backed President George W. Bush's war on terrorism in the aftermath of the 9/11 catastrophe, including the administration's military operations against the Taliban Regime in Afghanistan and the U.S. Patriot Act.

Conceding that Kerry's decision-making process concerning these and most other issues, domestic as well as foreign policy, is frequently murky and his explanations for his positions often circumlocutory, the *Globe* reporters conclude that "[f]or John Kerry, all major decisions [are] Socratic exercises. He [will] seek advice from many quarters, examine all the angles, and raise every doubt. Over the years, a number of aides have privately described the approach as methodical to the point of exruciating…a propensity for windy explanations, with nuance layered upon nuance" (pp. 342-343).

And so, following his vote in October 2002 to give George W. Bush the authority to use force against Iraq, Kerry declared on the Senate floor that "the vote I will give the president is for one reason and one reason only, to disarm Iraq of weapons of mass destruction if we cannot accomplish that objective through new, tough weapons inspections in joint conference with our allies…. He went on to say that he would oppose unilateral force… 'without a showing of an imminent threat to our country' " (pp. 346-347).

Knowing what he and all the world now knows but did not know then, one might repeat Vietnam veteran John Kerry's powerful words in 1971 to presidential candidate John Kerry in 2004: "How do you ask a man to be the last man to die for a mistake?"

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Tales to Astonish
Is Bush a More Worthy, Formidable President Than You Think?


I. The Return of the Ugly American

When George W. Bush ran for the presidency in 2000, he was essentially cast in the role of the provincial. Before he became president, he had hardly traveled outside the country and knew virtually nothing about most foreign countries. He is not a man prone to self-examination or angst, as Stephen Mansfield points out in his book, The Faith of George W. Bush. He does not think very deeply and makes no pretense of being an intellectual. He might even be anti-intellectual. These traits are not necessarily bad in a president; they can, in fact, be downright useful for a politician. They are the traits that give a conservative the air of being something like a populist, in that he seems so much a common man. Ronald Reagan made skillful use of a similar set of attributes. In fact, what Bush may have learned from Reagan is that an implacable hatred of terrorism may serve him even better than Reagan's implacable hatred of communism. The issue is simple for Bush and the portion of the American public that supports him: there are people who wish to kill us and we must do all we can to prevent it. Few people have ever voted for a president because of his ability to make matters complex. The public is right to have a certain suspicion of intellectuals as political leaders.

In 2000, and again in 2004, Bush is running against the cosmopolite—first, Al Gore, now John Kerry. In part, Bush's appeal is that he represents those values and attitudes that are skeptical of the cosmopolite. Bush is a good politician, better than many people who hate him give him credit for being, and he is aware that his role as the provincial is precisely the one his supporters wish for him to take, for they, too, are “ provincials” and they hate everything about the cosmopolite: the smugness of secular orthodoxy or as the Catholic church calls it, “intolerant secularism;” the “ self-evident” moral superiority of the concept of equality that liberals preach largely because they believe in the politics of avoiding a bad conscience; the sense that all who criticize the cosmopolite are either irrational or stupid, backward or opportunists; that the cosmopolite's liberalism is the way of the future, an inevitability, progress. What Kerry hopes is that he can convince enough voters that Bush is really the provincial as Ugly American, a gauche cowboy with the instincts of a bad gambler. Bush is not trying to deny he is something like the Ugly American—he is, in some respects, reveling in being a modern version of the backwoods American upsetting china in the elegant parlor of his European cousins. If European leaders thought him at first to be some sort of Pygmalion project, Bush turned out to be not terribly cooperative in a make-over. He has convinced his supporters that the Ugly American can best protect America.

Bush's mangled speech—even worse than his father's—not only questions the glibness of the cosmopolite but serves as something of a rich paradox for Bush's supporters: his stumbling words underscore a sense of steadfastness, of principle. After all, Moses was thick-tongued, too. And more than a few disreputable politicians have been great orators. (And Bush does honestly seem to be, as Gail Sheehy pointed out, dyslexic, which in this age of everyone being learning disabled, is rather akin to being “differently” normal or “differently” abled.) Moreover, Bush's tongue-tied oratory is a sign of his limitations, most of which he has never tried to hide from the public, a fact that his admirers find honorable. (As tough guy Clint Eastwood said in the second Dirty Harry film, “Magnum Force,” “A man has to know his limitations.”) It is interesting that as of the writing of this essay, the worst rhetorical gaffe, a mild one, to be sure, has been committed by Kerry when, before the National Association of Black Journalists, he spoke of conducting a “sensitive war” against terrorism. Admittedly taken out of context by the Republicans, the remark, nonetheless, was a ludicrous oxymoron, and not really, within the context of the entire sentence that Kerry uttered, what he meant to say. (Kerry, overall, in fact, gives the impression of faltering with his torrents of language as he seems, in his wind, to mean some of this and some of that, not as if he were co-opting positions, as Clinton did with Machiavellian deftness, but as if he were of two minds on every position. So, he seems like an ambiguity wrapped in set of clumsy contradictions.) The Republicans have tried to make hay with “sensitive war” to show Kerry as an effete liberal who can't do national security. The Democrats responded with a sentence by Bush, where he said: “We must be sensitive about expressing our power and influence.” This is really not the same thing at all. Bush is not talking about conducting war here, but rather about America as a reluctant but unwavering hegemon, a wary but determined empire. Bush is speaking the standard construction of the imperialism of anti-imperialism. American presidents have spoken like this since the beginning of the Cold War, indeed, even earlier.

George Bush is hated for several reasons: first, because he seems a rich, dumb kid of little distinction who stole the presidency. But the Bush family, as shown in the Schweisers' highly favorable The Bushes: Portrait of a Dynasty, is really quite remarkable (even detractors have to concede that point), and Bush wants to be a great man and live up to the legacy of his well-connected family. Even if he is merely a “legacy” kid, he has a right to feel a certain anxiety of influence being the son of a living president, the grandson of a U.S. senator, and the brother of a governor. He was a man of little distinction before becoming governor of Texas, and, first, Al Gore, and now John Kerry, decided to run their selected résumés against him: Gore's eight years as vice president (he knew
So, last year, I decided to give the collection to the library of the Humanities Center because I thought it would make that library useful, because the collection had enough good material in it to make its availability to students and faculty a real contribution to the study of popular culture, because my wife would be happy to see the comics gone. I donated the comics in small batches.

I gave the comics in the exact opposite way that I bought them. I started with ones I bought out of curiosity or because I wanted to complete a run or because a particular artist was interesting to me. I did not donate any that I bought because I had owned them as a child. Whenever I tried, I would change my mind. I just couldn't part with them. It almost pained me physically to think of it. Yet I did not like the comics that I could not part with. I only liked the idea that I had once liked them dearly.

One day, a few months ago, during that stormy spell we endured here in St. Louis, I drove to campus on a Saturday afternoon to drop off some comics. I usually dropped off material on the weekend because it was easier to park close to my office. Maybe I just didn't want people to see me carting around a lot of comic books. I was angry that day because I had left my house without an umbrella or a raincoat and, sure enough, it began to pour as I drove in.

I waited in the parking garage for a while, watching the rain fall. I had two stacks of comics in my trunk for weeks. One was comics that I had read when I was a boy. And even on that day I did not think at first that I would donate that pile. They would stay in the trunk.

But I picked up an old Batman from the late 1950s and it made me think about something else: when I was 4 years old I was hospitalized for two days at Children's Hospital in Philadelphia for a hernia operation. I had no idea at that time why I was in the hospital or what had happened to me. All I knew was that I missed my mother and that I cried a lot for her and when she came for me the first day, I did not understand why she did not take me home with her. Finally came the morning after my second night and my mother came again. I had dressed myself and was proud to tell her that I did not need the old ratty nurse to help me, for I knew I was going home when I was told I could put on my street clothes.

My mother took me by the hand and led me to the gift shop, which had a magazine rack, and there, on the bottom, were comic books. I had never seen one before and I was instantly absorbed, so fascinated that I forgot everything, even where I was or where I had been the last two days. I looked through them all over and over, for though I could not read, I understood them through the pictures, the wonderful pictures, the magnificent pictures. I was thrilled to the bone. I would have stayed for hours. But my mother wouldn't. I asked her if I could buy one and she told me I could. It was a Batman comic, actually Detective Comics, which featured Batman. The lead story was “Batman and Robin’s Greatest Mystery,” in which they lose their memory and must find out who they are through a series of investigations and clues. I loved the way Batman’s cape enveloped him, his grim face, and Robin, his helper and how Robin looked up to him. That comic book and that moment have always stayed with me.

And then my mother bought me a soda from a soda machine, the kind where the cup drops down and then the soda pours in. I had never had a soda that way before. In fact, I hardly remember having a soda at all before this. My mother told me she was giving me a reward for being such a brave little boy and staying in the hospital by myself for two days. And I felt very brave, indeed, and happy with my wonderful comic book with the extraordinary cover.

Whenever I thought about this in the past, I always misread it, misunderstood that event. It was, for me, always about when my love of comic books started. I remembered the day, the hour, nearly. But that was wrong. That was not how I was supposed to remember that event at all. I never learned the lesson. My mother, at that time a widow raising three children completely alone, was earning $18 a week in a part-time job. Even by 1950s standards, those were poverty wages. She had to pay rent and utilities, buy clothes, food, and everything else on $18 a week. She had, on that day, spent 25 cents on me, 10 for the comic, 15 for the soda. As a small child, I had no idea what things cost and thought my mother was rich. But as I stood in the parking garage waiting for the rain to stop, it occurred to me that my mother had spent a lot of money on me that day. Twenty-five cents could buy a loaf of bread with change to spare, could buy a quarter-pound of salami, a pound of apples, a gallon of gas. Despair came upon me as I realize the story was not about my loving comic books but about parental sacrifice. She wanted me to have a comic book to make me happy. It was the last 10 cent comic, the last comic with a cover, that I was to own for years. Like all the kids in my neighborhood, we bought remainders with their covers ripped off, at three for a nickel. Ten cents to us was a lot of money. And so it was, even more so, for my mother, then. It occurred to me that the reason I remembered so vividly the comic my mother bought was because it was one of the very few I had as a child with a cover and covers are probably the most memorable aspect of comics. Why had it taken me so long to see this? Finally, I had learned everything these comics were going to teach me. And people had gone to worse schools than that! I must learn to take my gifts where and how they come and who’s to say comic books weren't great gifts that served. Pulp is really, in the end, just one big torch song that says over and over, as the song goes, You Don’t Know What Love Is. Who can, not because of the conditions under which we must love but because of the nature of love itself. Pulp is not cheap cynicism, finally, but a nearly tender morality. One of the things superhero comics taught every boy I knew who read them was that if you have great gifts, you ought to help people less fortunate than yourself, that you ought to do something for the common good. Pulp is as much of a world view, as much an explanation of the world's condition, as any other and I am not ashamed that my mind is largely a result of it.

The rain continued to fall, harder than ever. The thunder boomed, the lightning sizzled and hissed. I couldn’t outlast the rain. I took up those old Superman, Batman, Spiderman, Justice League of America comics that I knew so well and placed them carefully in my book bag, so they would not get wet. I hoisted the bag on my shoulder, closed the trunk, and looked at the weather once more.

“As Gene Kelly sang, ‘Come on with the rain,’” I muttered. Then, I walked out into the storm.

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the creative blood of the artists.

*Stan Lee and the Rise and Fall of the American Comic Book and Tales to Astonish: Jack Kirby, Stan Lee, and the American Comic Book Revolution* complement each other well. Each tells the story of Marvel Comics, which is telling a major story of mainstream American comics, from the distinct views of these two giants: Lee and Kirby. Both books are honest and fair to both men, explaining their strengths and weaknesses, clarifying for the reader how both men worked together and how the comics were created as a collaborative effort. Comic books are, by and large, a collaborative art. Lee did not create the comics single-handedly but he was an important influence on plotting, story, and dialogue. Lee had spent his whole life in the industry and he understood what comics were as narrative. Kirby, striking as his art sometimes was, was not a good writer by any means. This can be seen in the stories he produced when he returned to DC in the 1970s and worked without Lee or anyone, for that matter, to edit and shape his narratives. And even Kirby’s art could have a certain redundancy to it, the very elements that made it arresting and compelling, also made it limited as well. There is no doubt that there would have been no Marvel Age of Comics, as Lee trumpeted on the comics’ pages, without the energy, the art, and the imagination of Kirby. But there would also have been no Marvel without the distinctive voice and hustling of Lee. Kirby understood comic art; Lee understood the times both men lived in when the 1960s erupted. In fact, there would have been no Jack Kirby, as we know him today, without Lee whose vision of a new type of superhero comic book gave Kirby a platform to display his genius. Lee gave Marvel its image and, to a large extent in its glory years, its creative mission. Each man prevented the other from dying a faceless hack in a disrespected enterprise. The Marvel Age of Comics did not last that long, 10 years before everything unraveled and what was hip became corny or dated very quickly. But it lasted long enough to make a sizable impression on American popular culture and American popular art.

### III. Be What You See/Receive Who You Are

When I decided to donate my modest collection of a few thousand comics to the library of the Center for the Humanities at Washington University, it came as something of a relief. My wife never liked the collection. She, in fact, never liked comic books, thought they cluttered up the basement and were a fire hazard. Besides, she could never understand why I wanted to collect them. Perhaps I never understood, either. It was beginning to seem like a lot of paper baggage.

I read comic books passionately as a boy until I was around 14, then I stopped, suddenly and completely. They fell away from my realm of interest so quickly that I wondered how they had ever engaged me in the first place. I suppose it was age: I liked superhero comics, mostly, and by the age of puberty I think most boys lose interest in them. The drawings seem ridiculous and so do the stories. Moreover, the times had something to do with it. I entered my teenage years in the late 1960s, when America and the world seemed so turbulent. Comic books seemed out of place, out of kilter with everything about the age.

Explaining why I left them might be easier than explaining why I started, slowly but surely, to collect them again when I was in my early 30s. On a lark, while in San Jose in 1985, I bought some comics from a comic book shop, old ones, naturally, that I remembered from my youth. I hadn’t read a comic book in years. A few times in my young adulthood I had picked up a Superman or Batman comic while passing time at a newsstand and found them unreadable. The modern stories, more violent and darker than I remembered as a child, repelled me and the art seemed static. I discovered that I had grown to dislike comics. The ones I bought in San Jose I thought might be useful for an essay one day, nothing more. I did not even think at the time that I was starting a collection.

As the years went by, I slowly began to buy more. I felt myself growing older, having bouts of illness, and with each inescapable wave of mortality came more comic books. For a long time, I bought only comics that I grew up reading, reconstructing my childhood, as it were. I would buy them with some Wordsworthian sense of return but would always be disappointed. They were unreadable to me still. I still disliked them. In fact, the more I bought, the more I was ashamed that I ever read them as a child. What silly rot! They contributed immensely to my poor childhood education, of that I was sure.

But of course I was learning more about comics, their history, and the men and women who created them, and so I began to buy comics beyond the range of what I had grown up with. I bought alternative comics, feminist comics, pornographic comics, funny animal comics, romance comics (which I hated as a child), comics by particular artists like Jack Cole or Alex Schomburg or Will Eisner or Carl Barks or Neal Adams or Trina Robbins. I began to become a completist, wanting to have an entire run of a particular title. That was a sure sign that I was on the road to becoming a dreaded collector, fascinated by my own fascination. A snob about the obscure. I was transformed from hating comics to defending them. Comics became intellectual, a way of understanding the culture that produced them but they had not become a way for me to understand myself. In fact, I was convinced that collecting was only some sort of compensation for an inadequacy that haunted my subconscious mind. There was something that I wanted to do, and since I couldn’t do it or wouldn’t do it, I collected comics instead.

Ebay came along and made satisfying the obsession so much easier. The collection began to have value and I thought of leaving it to my children, who told me they intended to cash it in when they got it. I did not decide to give the comics to Washington University because of that. I rather liked the idea of them cashing the books in and getting the money. I have a peculiar sort of desperation to leave my children money, lots of it, probably because no one ever left me or anyone I knew any money at all. I figured it must be a nice way to get money. My mother will certainly never leave me any money. But I figured I could leave my children with more from other sources. Good heavens, how much could the collection be worth anyway? Comic books were mass produced, after all.
foreign policy) and Kerry’s four months in Vietnam (he knows war, although, in the end, he might know the wrong one). As Ivo H. Daalder and James M. Lindsay, a couple of Brookings Institute Fellows and former Clintonites, point out in *America Unbound: The Bush Revolution in Foreign Policy*, Bush is no dumber than the people he has run against for public office, not by standard academic indicators.

In *The Faith of George W. Bush*, Mansfield tells how Ann Richards thought Bush stupid, calling him “shrub,” and patronizing him in her speeches. She underestimated him and lost the Texas governorship as a result, an election she was supposed to win rather easily. And Bush was actually smarter in outmaneuvering Gore in Florida; one can see this in how he responded to it and the people he sent to represent his interests there. If he stole the election, it is because Gore and the Democrats weren’t quite as clever or organized in stealing it themselves in their “high road” strategy. If the GOP intimidated, good for them. In politics in a democratic society, as in sports, a certain kind of intimidation is a legitimate psychological tactic. (It is a rather sad state of affairs, if some black Florida voters were disfranchised, that the Democrats do such a poor job of protecting one of their most important constituencies.) Bush decided, as a good politician does, to take what was there for the taking. As MacArthur said, “There is no substitute for victory.” And it doesn’t really matter how you get it, in the end, in a situation such as we had in Florida where the election turned into a jump-ball contest. And there was no “endearing” way that Bush could get it as he lost the popular vote and thus had less moral leverage. As Al Davis, owner of the Oakland Raiders, is famous for saying, “Just win, baby!”

The second reason Bush is hated is because of his public profession of faith, his opposition to abortion and certain types of stem cell research for religious reasons, his opposition to same-sex marriage. This is further proof, if any were needed by his enemies, that he is nothing more than a provincial.

The third reason Bush is hated is because he is seen as a unilateralist who got us into a war with Iraq for no good reason and on a bad principle; indeed, that he was, at best, mistaken, and, at worst, lying about the necessity for such a war.

Let us look briefly at the two books under review here that consider the last two reasons.

II. Religion: The Blessed Company of Faithful People

*The Faith of George W. Bush* is a highly sympathetic spiritual biography. Mansfield argues that two aspects of Bush’s faith make him a unique president: first, he “seems to genuinely believe privately what he says publicly about religion.” Second, Bush “seeks to integrate faith with public policy at the most practical level.” (pp. xviii-xix). Mansfield then proceeds to unfold the story of Bush’s religious faith journey: his boyhood in the Episcopal church, the influence of his morally stern grandfather, Senator Prescott Bush, who publicly berated New York governor Nelson Rockefeller when Rockefeller divorced his wife and married a much younger woman,7 the impact of Midland, Texas, and his years in the Presbyterian church, his years at Andover Prep where he was required to attend a Congregationalist chapel five times a week. As Mansfield pointed out about the Andover years, “[Bush] spent as much time in church in those three years as a normal attender does in ten” (p. 60). When he went to college, his church attendance declined. When he married, he became a Methodist as was his wife, Laura, and his interest in church was revived, although he was not, in his own mind, a committed Christian at this point, by any means. Indeed, he seemed worried and anxious about his soul, about his directionless life, and about his drinking.

There are two interesting observations that Mansfield makes about Bush’s faith: the Bush family see faith as something “personal,” “that the deepest issues of the soul ought [not] to be grist for the public mill” (p. 19). Also, Bush never experienced any dramatic conversion of any sort. Neither did his father, which hurt him when he tried to win over conservative Christians when he ran for the presidency in 1988. He simply couldn’t talk their language about his faith. As George W. became more deeply committed as a Christian, he joined Bible Study groups, read quite a bit of Scriptures, and began to understand the word of the born again, evangelical, conservative Christian, although he was rarely to use the expression “born again” in relation to his own faith. He was, over a period of time, transformed rather than converted. (Probably his famous walk on the beach at Kennebunkport with Billy Graham in the summer of 1985 is the closest to a moment of conversion.) It was, in fact, only through George W.’s own abilities to communicate with the Religious Right, and talk about faith in the language that they understood, that Bush Sr. was able to wrest the group away from his challenger in the primaries, television evangelist Pat Robertson. As George W.’s faith strengthened, his life took direction, he became less anxious about his soul, he stopped drinking and, eventually, stopped smoking and chewing tobacco. He was able easily to deflect the amorous interests of women campaign workers. What flattered Clinton’s ego (being the player) was of no interest to Bush. He felt an obligation to married life. He was able to cow Lee Atwater, his father’s aggressive, tough, if somewhat unreliable, political operative. He didn’t stop cussing, as staffers knew. (He was still calling a New York Times reporter “an asshole” as late as the fall of 2000 when he ran for president.) But he learned about leadership: he saw his father’s presidency close up, so he had an understanding of the office and how the White House worked that far exceeded anything Bill Clinton knew when the latter first ran for president. Bush was also an enforcer; he fired John Sununu as his father’s chief of staff. He knew how to handle himself in the rough world of

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insider White House politics. Being a Christian was no business for the faint of the heart. For Bush, as for so many religious conservatives, to be a Christian is to follow the Savior and be a warrior. His enemies think he is a warrior for privilege because he refuses to feel guilty about his good fortune. But Bush is right to be skeptical of guilt.

Since Bush has been elected, he has become noted for his initiative that faith-based charities should receive government support. This is not a new idea. It was simply a useful platform from which Bush could say that his faith influenced his policy-making and that such support ought to be given to support faith as a social good. It was also a way for Bush to challenge the idea of 1960s social reform. The left charged the privileged as guilty, something that Bush disdains. In Bush's faith view, the poor are charged with personal responsibility as are the privileged. It is the Victorian reciprocity of the idea that endears him to many of his followers. Although Bush is not popular among African Americans as a constituency, he is very close to a few African-American ministers who understand him as a Christian. Whatever African Americans think about Bush generally, they are sympathetic to the idea of social reform being faith-based and involving a transformation of the soul of the needy by the faithful. When 9/11 happened, Bush felt he had been chosen by God to stop terrorism: this was his historical moment, this was what was to give his presidency meaning. Interestingly, as Mansfield points out, Bush made a point of praising Islam after the World Trade Center attack, which did not sit well with conservative Christians but which probably, particularly because Bush had considerable standing among conservative Christians as a conservative Christian, saved the lives and property of more than a few American Muslims. But he conceded a great deal to his conservative religious faith by saying that Islam was a religion of "peace" with a great heritage, while never mentioning that it was a religion of truth or truths. For Bush, Islam is the spiritual equivalent of an interesting museum, something aesthetic and cultural. As a conservative Christian, he cannot rightly believe that Islam is anything other than a form of spiritual error.

Bush also chose not to defend his war against Iraq using the "just war" theory, which some in his administration found attractive. Mansfield rightly says it was because Bush, in part because of his personality and in part because of the nature of his piety, hates the theoretical. (Bush's stridently expressed anti-intellectualism is a convenient pretext for liberal/leftist intellectuals to use to hold him in contempt. But Bush, like all presidents, has no trouble attracting intellectuals. The self-named Vulcans are among the most aggressive set of intellectuals ever to surround a sitting president.) In part, Bush's restraint in condemning Islam is shrewd politics both here and abroad. Conservative Christianity cannot succeed in its mission of the restoration of non-relativist values if it is merely an expression of intolerance. Intolerance as a form of courageous conviction drives a good deal of conservative religious sentiment, something that is simply incomprehensible to a liberal. Bush perceptively tries to balance this sense of righteousness with an old-fashioned sense of tolerance as living with some things you clearly disapprove of, submerging it all in a vision of American values. What Bush wants, as Mansfield makes clear, is for the world to resemble the Midland, Texas, in which he grew up; not a theocracy, but upper middle-class, small town America (p. 36).

What I found convincing about Mansfield's book was that Bush would like to use religious faith in a new way in political life, in part, because he thinks he understands the implications of faith in political life better than some of his predecessors, and because he wants the public to understand him as a man of principle and righteousness. It is a way for Bush to make the personal the political. Bush wants very much to be right for the right reasons or, at least, to convince the public that to want this sense of rectitude is necessary for any politician worthy of its respect. Bush will not admit to being wrong about Iraq (I am not suggesting that he should), for that would mean being wrong in understanding the spiritual meaning of his presidency, that he misread the signs of his destiny. It would mean that he failed his own historical moment. What I found less convincing was that Bush would succeed or indeed was succeeding with this in any significant way. It remains to be seen.

III. Empire: Clash Consciousness

“. . . the expansion of American power in response to surprise attack has no historical precedents: a nation that began with the belief that it could not be as safe as pirates, marauders, and the agents of predatory empires remained active along its borders has now taken the position that it cannot be as safe as terrorists and tyrants remain active anywhere in the world. That conclusion surely reflects prudence: where the nation’s security is at stake, one can hardly be too careful. It also reflects capability: what other nation today could conceivably aspire to such a role? But it reflects arrogance as well: there’s more than a whiff of grandiosity about the insistence that one nation’s security is coterminous with that of everyone else.”

—John Lewis Gaddis

I wish it wasn’t this way. I wish I wasn’t the war president. Who in the heck wants to be a war president? I don’t.

—George W. Bush

America Unbound: The Bush Revolution in Foreign Policy is a useful, if polemical, primer about George W. Bush, his team of advisors, and the nature of foreign policy. The book, in the end, opposes Bush’s unilateralism but many portions of it are a balanced treatment of his presidency. “Bush set in motion a revolution in American foreign policy. It was not a revolution in America’s goals abroad, but rather in how to achieve them” (p. 2). The authors continue: “He relied on the unilateral exercise of American power rather than on international law and institutions to get his way. He championed a proactive doctrine of pre-emption and de-emphasized the reactive strategies of deterrence and containment” (p. 2). The book then proceeds to give a brief history of the formation of American foreign policy and the tug between unilateralism, which America tended to exercise in its own hemisphere, and multilateralism, working with European allies, NATO, the United Nations, and the like to build consensus. Bush, in effect, reversed 50 years of American foreign policy tradition, dating back to Truman and the doctrine of communist containment, when he invaded Iraq. The book provides the professional backgrounds
expected to crank out inferior copies of what was already assumed to be a third-rate commercial art fit only for children and lining bird cages. Besides, as Raphael and Spurgeon point out in their book, Lee was a writer in a field that was dominated by visuals. So, not only was he in a third-rate profession but he was something like the fifth wheel in it.

After working at Harvey Comics with Joe Simon, Kirby eventually wound up at DC Comics, the major company in the field at the time, whose art was the cream. Simon left the business to go into advertising. Kirby believed in comics and stayed or had no choice but to believe as he had a wife, children, and a mortgage and no way out of a dying industry. Finally, Kirby landed back with Lee at Atlas in 1958, having been dumped by DC because his art was considered too raw and inelegant.

Lee and Kirby began to work together putting out radioactive monster comics under the titles “Journey Into Mystery” and “Tales to Astonish.” Good comics they were, with better writing than many and situations that were formulaic but frantic and startling. Kirby’s raw art served this sort of science fiction-cum-moral-ity tale stuff well. Kirby could draw three stops on the board of human emotion better than anyone: fear, desperation, and anger. He could also draw action sequences with more power and imagination than anyone else ever had. And, together, Lee and Kirby, in 1961 launched the revolution by reinventing superheroes.

Lee and Kirby brought back superheroes only because Martin Goodman had ordered them to do so, after he had learned that DC was making a mint on its new Justice League of America line. Lee and Kirby created the Fantastic Four, bringing back the Human Torch from the 1940s but making him a teenager instead of an android; and adding an Invisible Girl; a scientist named Reed Richards who could stretch like Plastic Man; and a misshapen, grotesque strong man called the Thing. They were the first superheroes who quarreled among themselves, could be foul-tempered, worried about money, and generally behaved like human beings. Lee also had them speak like human beings. Most comic book speech, especially in superhero comic books, until this point, was painfully bad, little more than exposition to explain the story. The Fantastic Four was an instant hit. They breathed new life into comic books.

Then came the Hulk, another anti-hero along the lines of the Thing but even more out of control as a hero. Then came the Norse God, Thor, then, Iron Man, and a set of superheroes called the Avengers. Lee and Kirby brought back Captain America, the most popular hero ‘Timely/Atlas produced. Then came one of the most incredible comic book creations in history of the industry: Spiderman. This character evolved from an earlier character created by Kirby and Simon called the Fly. Kirby first began to draw Spiderman, grounding him in a domestic situation, but Lee turned the character over to Steve Ditko, who really worked the teenage angst aspects of it and made the hero more vulnerable. Spiderman became a huge hit. Lee and Kirby even invented the first black superhero, the Black Panther, an African, in 1966, a character that is still being published in his own book today. Kirby, particularly, felt strongly about having black people in his books and made a persistent effort to do so from the 1960s onwards. Lee and Kirby seemed at this point to comb innovations out of their hair. Lee convinced Goodman to rename Atlas: it became Marvel Comics.

Within a few short years, Marvel was challenging DC Comics for the lead in sales. It would eventually surpass DC. DC tried to copy Marvel, once they realized they couldn’t beat them, even though their artists always thought Marvel comics were poorly drawn. Everyone interested in superheroes tried to copy Marvel. Marvel was the talk of the 1960s in the world of comics. And Lee became the face of the company. But Lee did something that virtually no other comic company had ever done. He made stars of the artists who penciled, inked, and lettered the comics by crediting them in the front of the book and talking about them on the letter page as distinct personalities. Lee’s promotion of his artists, part of the essential hucksterism of the man, was part of the zeitgeist of the 1960s. But it was Lee as company man, as the face of Marvel and the so-called creator of the Marvel universe (as the press presented him to the public) that caused a rift between him and his artists, particularly Jack Kirby, who grew to hate Lee, a hatred that was fed by other artists and that grew almost in spite of Kirby himself, who was not a vindictive or hateful man but who was surely envious of the attention Lee received. Lee, by turns, was befuddled and angered by this hatred.

It was Lee who seemed to side with the company against artists getting copyrights to their creations, earning royalties, and having their original art returned to them. It was, after all, in the company’s interest, as Ro and Raphael and Spurgeon pointed out, to make Lee the sole genius of Marvel, to blunt any copyright claims or royalty demands by the artists. (Comic book artists now get everything—their original art, royalties, and shares in copyright—that artists of Kirby’s generation were denied.) It was Lee who seemed to be taking all the credit, Lee the glib, Lee the hustler, Lee the college lecturer, Lee the leech who sucked on

Stan Lee? That was different because Stan Lee was famous.

Most historians of the form date the emergence of comic books in the 1930s, particularly in 1933 with the publication of Famous Funnies, which was nothing more than a compilation of newspaper comic strips. New Fun Comics, published in 1935, by Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson, a pulp writer, was the first comic with original material, westerns, crime stories, adventure tales, all the stuff of pulp magazines now done in pictures. What comic book publishers discovered was that it was cheaper to put out original material than to pay reprint fees to put out collections of newspaper strips. And there were lots of unemployed artists and writers in 1935. Artists were paid by the page for their art. The more pages you could produce, the more you made. Jacob Kurtzberg began drawing for Lincoln Newspaper Features in 1936. In Ro’s Tales to Astonish, we are told he began to use pseudonyms almost immediately. “I wanted to be an all-around American,” Kurtzberg said. “I felt if you wanted to have a great name, it would be Farnsworth, right? Or Stillweather. I felt Jack Kirby was close to my real name (p. 3).” He drifted over into comic books when he began to work for Art Syndication Company under the great comic book innovator, Will Eisner. Kirby was there at the birth of the comic book industry. He eventually was one of the most prolific artists in the history of the industry. He produced literally thousands and thousands of pages of comic books.

This industry received its big lift when two Jewish teenagers from Cleveland, writer Jerry Siegel and artist Joe Shuster, invented Superman, who appeared in DC Comics’ Action Comics #1 in 1938. The character was an instant success and the superhero was born. Superhero comics became the rage. Along came Batman, the Human Torch, Prince Namor (Roman spelled backward), and Captain Marvel, who rivaled Superman in sales. Eventually, Kirby wound up working for Martin Goodman at Timely Publications, where he created, with artist Joe Simon, one of the most memorable superheroes of the era, Captain America. “I thought comics were a common form of art and strictly American, in my estimation because America was the home of the common man,” Kirby said. “It’s a democratic art.” The one aspect that Kirby found about comic books that was not so democratic was that artists did not own the rights to the characters they created. The companies they worked or freelanced for did. Superman created millions for DC Comics over the years. Siegel and Shuster sold the character for $130.00 and only a campaign by writers and artists in the industry, when both men were old and sick, garnered them a modest pension. Kirby was to battle as he grew older, not only for recognition for the characters he created, but also for his original art that his company was reluctant to return to him, and for money. Timely fired Kirby and partner Joe Simon over money.

Stanley Lieber wound up working for Martin Goodman at Timely Publications in 1940. He was a cousin of Goodman’s wife, so there was something of an element of nepotism in his hiring. Most of Goodman’s employees were his relatives. Lieber eventually became chief writer and editor of Goodman’s comic book division. In fact, it happened within a year, during which time he became Stan Lee to the comic book reading public. He never thought he would spend his entire adult life, minus a stint in the army during World War II, working in comics and basically working for the same company. But it was at Timely that he met and eventually became a partner with Jack Kirby. Perhaps the difference between the two men is best seen by how they served in the war: Lee wound up writing manuals and drawing posters, never leaving the United States. Kirby saw combat in Europe as a member of the infantry invasion at Normandy, landing ten days after D-Day on Omaha Beach.

If comic books were a big boom before the war, they enjoyed a bigger resurgence after the war ended. Superhero comics, madly popular during the war, began to die out, replaced by several new or resuscitated genres: westerns, romance (which became very big and were the only comics to draw a great number of girls), war (especially when the Korean War began in 1950), crime (with the legendary Charlie Biro’s Crime Does Not Pay spawning dozens of other imitations), and horror comics (the last was the specialty of EC Comics, much to their everlasting regret).

By the early 1950s, as comic books were being attacked as lurid, lewd, violent, tasteless, and harmful to children (as indeed some comics probably were) by the government and by church and civic groups, the industry enjoyed their most robust sales, millions of copies sold every month of a variety of titles. Once the comic book code was issued in the fall of 1954, the result of societal and political pressure, comic books never recovered quite the dominance they had as reading material for the young. And for several years, until the early 1960s, comic books were in the doldrums. Many publishers left the industry. Others consolidated.

Timely, now called Atlas, where Lee was responsible for the entire comic book line, trudged on. Lee wrote tirelessly and effortlessly all types of comics. He was also a hack in an industry that was little more than a sweatshop for artists. He had written nothing memorable or important or even good. Comic books were an art form that even the industry that produced them did not take seriously. Moreover, as Goodman was only interested in imitating whatever other companies put out that was popular, Lee had no chance to produce something that might be good. He was only
of Bush’s foreign policy team, the Vulcans including Condoleezza Rice, Paul Wolfowitz, Dov Zakheim, Richard Perle, Robert Blackwell, and others who tutored him about foreign affairs. The Vulcans are hard liners who tend to distrust international institutions, feel that America should aggressively push its values and interests, should not be bashful about using military force, and should support free trade. Essentially, the authors argue Bush and the Vulcans were hegemonists. Bush surrounded himself with strong, highly experienced people. But, contrary to some popular notions, he is not pushed around by them. The authors argue that Bush is very much in charge of his administration.

The book gives a detailed account of Bush’s foreign policy views when he ran for office: “Bush’s foreign policy goals were thoroughly conventional” (p. 39) and his foreign policy forays during the first eight months of his presidency, when he pulled out of the Kyoto Protocols and the ABM Treaty, had a hands-off policy toward the Israeli-Palestinian dispute at first, and got into a dispute with China about the shooting-down of an American military aircraft. On the whole, Bush seemed to dislike diplomacy, appeared brusque to other nations, and determined to push them in the way he wanted them to go. But foreign policy was playing second fiddle to domestic concerns: tax cuts, the No Child Left Behind Act, and a Medicare prescription drugs bill. Until 9/11, Bush had no reason to think his re-election would hinge on foreign policy.

After 9/11, Bush had a mission through which to test American resolve and his vision of American foreign policy. The authors write that Bush denounced neutrality: “To suggest that countries could sit on the sidelines of the conflict would mean tolerating terrorism as a kind of nuisance in world politics rather than as a grave threat to free and democratic nations” (p. 96). The book goes through the entire send-up to the war with Iraq, all the business with the U.N. resolutions and the inspections. The reader gets useful explanations of the difference between preventive and preemptive wars. The book is critical of Bush’s approach to diplomacy and ultimately feels that Bush’s unilateralism has been harmful to America’s interests. “The deeper problem was that the fundamental premise of the Bush revolution—that America’s security rested on an America unbound—was mistaken. This premise would have been right if the unilateral exercise of American power could have achieved America’s major foreign policy goals. But the most important foreign policy challenges America faced—whether defeating terrorism, reversing weapons proliferation, promoting economic prosperity, safeguarding political liberty, sustaining the global environment, or halting the spread of killer diseases—could not be solved by Washington alone. They required the active cooperation of others” (p. 195). This view is much like the article in the latest issue of Foreign Affairs called “History and the Hyperpower,” which basically argues that since America unavoidably is an empire, it oughtn’t to throw its weight around like a bully and act like a dumb empire but learn from Britain and Rome and be a clever empire, which must inevitably suffer resentment but can minimize its effect through diplomacy, co-optation, and cooperation.

But this is all just sounding the conventional wisdom, an endorsement of how things were done in the past. Bush concedes this. What Bush argues is that American interests can no longer be advanced in the old way. Bush is, unquestionably, the most radical American president of the 20th century. He is either a very good mix of Wilson and Reagan, or a very bad one. This reaction to Bush is to be expected whenever there is radical change: first, because human beings hate change; second, because radical change is an explicit criticism of what went before, and those who were responsible for or have a vested interest in what went before are bound to defend themselves.

Historian Niall Ferguson argues a bit differently in Colossus: The Price of America’s Empire (2004). For him, America ought to act more aggressively as an empire, a “liberal empire,” because empire has historically been the norm in the governing of the world, not independent states, many of which Ferguson argues, are actually growing poorer than they were when they were colonies and this fact threatens world stability. The most important date for him is not 9/11 but 11/9 (1989) when the Berlin wall crumpled and the world became a very different place without Soviet power. The problem he sees with the invasion of Iraq is not how it was done—flexible coalitions of the willing are not a bad thing—but that America will not stay and actually make Iraq a successful democratic state. The pressure of frequent elections and the unpopularity of both war and imperialism in the United States will force America to leave at the soonest possible moment of grace. Besides, America, according to Ferguson, has a lousy record of nation-building, something we have always disdained and botched. (Bush ran in 2000 expressing a clear hatred of nation-building on the part of the military.) We have had success in Germany, Japan, and South Korea (and we have had troops in all three countries for over 50 years; Ferguson argues it would take a commitment like that to succeed in Iraq).

But we have failed virtually everywhere else: Haiti, Nicaragua, Cuba, you name it. Part of it was racism. Part of it was not being interested in being an empire, caught between the imperialism of human rights and the imperialism of anti-imperialism. Ferguson does not dismiss multilateralism by any means but thinks the conventional view about it is, well, conventional. Alliances are overrated, have not achieved as much as their proponents claim, can work as effectively in antagonism as they can in cooperation, and if it wasn’t for the United States providing the United Nations with much of its legitimacy (and budget), there would be precious little multilateralism in the world.

Empires use multilateralism to mask their power, not to limit it. Multilateralism is a salve to make liberals feel better about exercising power. Whether or not Bush is re-elected, a chaotic Iraq will remain a major threat to world stability and strain allied relations.
And there is historical precedent for what the United States did in invading Iraq with little international support, although it does not mean that there was political justification for it. War is a great way to change the world or to cut your own throat with a blunt blade. Since Kerry has admitted that he, like Bush, would have invaded Iraq even without the pretext of weapons of mass destruction, the difference all comes down to whether it is in the best interests of the United States to do something that most of the world disapproves of. Can democracy be dictatored, especially in a part of the world whose history has been nothing but conflict? To the civilization of clashes, as the Middle East is called, comes the rattle and hum of the United States, and its multicultural consciousness. It seems impossible to say that the American war in Iraq won’t work. One hundred and sixty years after the fact, when Chinese premier Chou En-Lai was asked about the effects of the French Revolution, he said, “It’s too soon to tell.” He may have been trying to be wry, but he was also being quite serious.

It is difficult to say how history will judge George W. Bush (his enemies and his admirers seem to think they already know). One of the things I like about him is that he has seized his moment, made his mark, rightly or wrongly, and will not permit us or history to allow him to slouch into a fog of moderate, acceptable mediocrity. He will either be judged one of the greatest presidents we have ever had or, worse than a failure, he will be considered incompetent, a disaster, a man who nearly wrecked his country, not through blind ambition but arrogance disguised as piety. No great politician worth his or her salt should aim for anything less than the clarity of uncompromised historical judgment. And as Bush knows with his father: history is always a harsh mistress.

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1 The reviewer was able to read, but unable to include in this review, David Aikman’s A Man of Truth: The Spiritual Journey of George W. Bush (W Publishing Group, 2004). It is a favorable book that covers much the same ground as Mansfield’s.


3 In The Bushes: Portrait of a Dynasty, we learn that Prescott despised his brother, James, when the latter left his wife and children for another woman. When James left his second wife, Prescott never spoke to him again. (Doubleday, 2004), p. 111.


6 “For decades, free nations tolerated oppression in the Middle East for the sake of stability. In practice, this approach brought little stability and much oppression, so I have changed this policy.” —George W. Bush, Commencement Address at the Air Force Academy, June 2, 2004


9 For a recent strenuous support of Bush and the Bush doctrine, see Norman Podhoretz’s “World War IV: How It Started, What It Means, and Why We Have to Win,” Commentary, September 2004. Either one believes we are engaged in WW IV (WW III was the Cold War) against evil or one believes the U.S. is being run by hapless conservatives who consistently make bad decisions.

The Art of Pol Speak
An Interview with Wayne Fields

Wayne D. Fields is Director of American Culture Studies and Lynne Cooper Harvey Distinguished Professor in English at Washington University in St. Louis. He is the author of Union of Words: A History of Presidential Eloquence (1996).

Was John Kerry’s acceptance speech effective and did it accomplish what it needed to? Did he effectively position himself against Bush?

I think Kerry’s speech was effective particularly in challenging the efforts of conservative Republicans to declare themselves, and only themselves, true American patriots. His insistence that the flag belongs to all Americans, Democrats as well as Republicans, and that the military can be represented by a Democrat were projected through his own military service as well as that of Max Cleland who introduced him (and who, despite the severity of the wounds he suffered in Vietnam, was accused of being unpatriotic by a Georgia GOP challenger with no military record). In all of this he was also challenging Republican claims to superior character and a deeper commitment to values by contrasting his own record of service to that of Bush and Cheney. The contrast with Bush was, I think, compellingly drawn, but I am uncertain how important that can be in a country where many voters seem more concerned with ideology or single-issue politics than past performance. The fact that much of this contrast has to do with a span of years that in 2000 Bush claimed were, in his story, irrelevant because of his subsequent religious conversion, a claim generally accepted by media and voters suggests that Kerry’s understanding of “character” based on previous behavior may not be terribly important in contemporary politics. Actions seem less important than beliefs.

The problem in all of this is that in recent years spin has become more important than what is actually said and commentators are more listened to than candidates or officeholders. In recent years the popularity of a political discourse (from left and right) of shouted claims rather than reasoned arguments, makes the success of any speech difficult to evaluate.

What impact do you think Barack Obama’s speech had on the party and on the convention viewership as a whole?

Obama’s speech represents an unprecedented moment in American political history. First, he spoke as an African-American whose presence in this country is the result of immigration rather than the slave trade. Second, he reminded his audience that he was the product of a biracial marriage between an international student from Kenya and a girl from Kansas (a marriage opposed in much of America throughout much of the 20th century as a violation of the laws of God and of nature). In his telling, because he came from a union based on love (“an improbable
Hourman, the Specter, the Flash, the Joker, the Blonde Phantom, Sgt. Rock, Miss Fury, the Phantom Lady, Darkseid, Daredevil, Dr. Octopus, the Penguin, Spawn, Mister Miracle, Brainiac, Blackhawk, Lex Luthor, Combat Casey, Captain Marvel, the Fantastic Four — our strange, juvenile version of Greek Gods, heroes and villains who never die and who always battle just above our heads in mad flight over the city, the implausible Gods of our innocence and our experience, the Gods of our world of power and consumption, of power as ultimately moral good. Comic book superheroes, particularly, have always been a twin expression of our feeble cynicism (only characters that cannot possibly exist can bring justice and order to the world) and our grand hope (we can all be superheroes for we are what we imagine are best selves to be).

An important transformation has taken place with the rise of the comic-book superhero film, a fact noted by several scholars of popular culture: this sort of film, like science fiction films of an earlier day, were meant to be second-, even, third-tier films, something for Saturday children's matinees at the theater, cheap, unimportant, little better than serials. And old comic book films were exactly that: bad B movies and serials. It was only with the coming of "Superman" in 1978 that the comic-book superhero film became an A movie extravaganza, a mass-cult spectacle that attracted the top producers and directors, as it does now. What we have seen in the last 25 to 30 years is the elevation of pulp art—pulp storytelling, pulp images, a pulp view of reality—from the backwaters of American art to its mainstream. The dime western died as the central art form that explained American experience, our need for "regeneration through violence," as one historian put it, our need and psychological use of the frontier, our understanding of ourselves and our past as a heroic struggle of daring and destiny. Perhaps the western was killed by the Vietnam War, perhaps by the shift in sensibility from the cowboy to the cop, from the range to the urban streets. Stanley Kubrick's "2001: A Space Odyssey" gave us the science fiction movie as art-house angst and "The French Connection" and "Dirty Harry" reinvented the crime film noir as the socio-pathology of urban cosmopolitanism. The cinematic rise of the pulp genres of crime and science fiction as huge, serious films certainly signaled the death of the western, although, in the end, they may have only partially pre-empted it. The dime western ultimately has been replaced by the genre that absorbed all of pulp reality: the dime comic book.

The Amazing Adventures of Lee and Kirby

Stan Lee wrote in his autobiography, Excelsior! The Amazing Life of Stan Lee: "While I really enjoyed my job and the stories I was writing, there was one thing that both irritated and frustrated me. It was the fact that nobody, outside of our own little circle, had a good word to say about comicbooks (sic). To the public at large, comics were at the very bottom of the cultural totem pole. Most of the adult world didn't buy them, care about them, or want their children to 'waste their time reading them.'" Lee, in fact, was so embarrassed that he wrote comics that at parties, when people asked him what he did for a living, he would say that he "wrote stories for young people." When pressed, he would admit that he wrote comic books, and the questioner would invariably drift away. It is important to know that critics and the public have always made a considerable distinction between comic books and comic strips that appear in newspapers. A good many comic strip artists like Al Capp, Charles Schultz, Garry Trudeau, Winsor McCay, George Herriman, Hal Foster, Chester Gould, and others were held in high esteem for their work. For instance, "Pogo" by Walt Kelly and "Calvin and Hobbes" by Bill Watterson were loved by academics and intellectuals. It has only been very recently, with the rise of the graphic novel and the awarding of the Pulitzer Prize to Art Spiegelman for Maus in 1992 that comic books have come to receive critical acclaim that approaches what has been bestowed on comic strips. (In the case of Maus, the subject matter—the Holocaust—may have elevated the art form in the eyes of the public and critics. In other words, comic books—or graphic novels—that get highly praised by the highbrow critic or the general public tend to deal with subjects not normally associated with comic books.)

But even today comic book artists are largely revered by the fanatical cult that still reads comic books and sees itself as actively defending this art form through its obsession. Comic book reading when I was a boy in the 1950s and 1960s was a form of juvenile entertainment and gender bonding. It is now a commitment not unlike religious faith. I do not condemn this, nor do I necessarily prefer the good old days. I merely note the distinction which, I think, is important. It does not signify the death of comic books, as some writers have suggested, any more than the stratification of the audience for jazz signifies the death of that music. But it does mean that these art forms will never be what they once were. Comic books are no longer marketed to children or to adolescents and are not sold at news stands or Ma and Pa stores (such stores no longer exist) but rather in specialty comic book shops which, naturally, attract mostly the cognoscenti and a few casual shoppers. When comic books were attacked by various sectors of the public in the late 1940s and early 1950s including schools, religious groups, and even academics, newspaper comic strip writers were exempted from criticism.

Lee himself did not think much of writing comic books, at least, not for many years, not before the Marvel Age of Comics in the 1960s. His real name was Stanley Lieber. As Raphael and Spurgeon write in Stan Lee and the Rise and Fall of the American Comic Book, "Dissatisfied and embarrassed by the kiddie material he felt forced to produce, the writer wanted to reserve his given name for the cover of the Great American Novel he hoped to write one day (p. xv)." Stanley Lieber, born in 1922, was a New York Jew. The illustrator with whom he was to create so many memorable characters, Jack Kirby, also a New York Jew, was born Jacob Kurtzberg in 1917. The comic book industry of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s was largely dominated by Jews and located in
Pulp Fiction:
The Art and Heart of the Superhero Comic Book


What the Grosses Say About the Death and Birth of Comic Books

Among the 100 highest grossing American films of all time are “Spiderman” (#6), “Spiderman 2” (#10), and “X2: X-Men United” (#50). All of these films have been made in the last three years, so their impact has been sudden, if not entirely unexpected, and more such films are on the way. Also, these films are based on characters created by several writers and artists who worked for Marvel Comics, the company that is the subject of the two books under review. But two men are principally responsible for the origin of the characters upon which these films are based: writer Stan Lee, (along with artist Steve Ditko), created Spiderman in 1962, and Lee with artist Jack “King” Kirby, arguably the most influential creative team in comic book history, created the first group of Uncanny X-Men, the teenage mutants, in 1963. So, in another respect, the penetration of these characters into various layers of mass culture has been, by pop culture standards, a fairly long journey, and more than a few observers are surprised by their longevity, their sheer persistence of presence in the collective American mind. These characters have lasted more years than did Swing music, Prohibition, the civil rights movement, drive-in theaters, Cinemascope and Cinerama, or all of America’s wars combined.

The success of these comic book characters as films is not unusual. Comic book-based films are sprinkled through the list of the most commercially successful films ever made; “Men in Black” and “Men in Black II” (#31 and #60 respectively, based on a little-known comic published by Malibu), “Batman Forever” (#66), “Batman Returns” (#99), and “Batman” (#30), based on the famous DC Comics character accused of everything from being a blatant plagiarism of Johnston McCulley’s southwestern pulp hero, Zorro, to pandering fascism, to glorifying vigilantism, to endorsing homosexuality (the last charge made by Dr. Frederic Wertham in his famously blistering, highly influential, if somewhat misguided, attack against comics entitled Seduction of the Innocent, published in 1954.) If one were to look at the grosses of all the films based on comic books that require large-scale special effects that have been made since 1978, when Richard Donner’s “Superman” starring Christopher Reeves was released, one would find that most of these films have made money, a lot of money, and they also cost a lot of money to make.

In the past two years two other Marvel comic characters, the Hulk, created by Lee and Kirby, and Daredevil, created by Lee and artist Bill Everett, have both been made into films as well. “The Hulk” had less financial success than its director, Ang Lee, had hoped for (although it still grossed over $100 million domestically), but “Daredevil” did well, despite being a lesser effort. Marvel Comic characters have been particularly attractive to Hollywood film makers and more films have been based on them than any other comic book company’s set of superheroes. That is probably because so many film makers in Hollywood read Marvel when they were young, and Marvel so revolutionized the superhero genre as virtually to be seen by some as having invented it, which Marvel did not, by a long shot. Film makers generally are very attracted to comic books, perhaps because both are sequential art forms, that is, constructing narrative around a sequence of pictures with dialogue.

On one level, it is easy to explain Hollywood’s recent interest in translating comic book heroes to film: first, the film industry now has the technical expertise to recreate and even exceed the effects that the illustrators create in the books; and second, despite the fact that comic books no longer sell as well among children and adolescents as they once did, many of the characters of this genre are extremely familiar to audiences of great demographic range (characters like Batman, Superman, and Spiderman are familiar to people who may be as old as 60 or 70 and remember actually reading the comic books when they were young, when comic books were a major force in popular culture, or to children as young as eight or 10, who may watch cartoons or play video games based on these characters), a range of remembrance and affection, of imaginative engagement and attraction that Hollywood loves.

Comic books have created a powerful mythology of American life: Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, Sheena the Jungle Queen, Dr. Doom, the Red Skull, Spiderman, Green Lantern, Captain America, Dr. Fate,
love”), he could honor both a black grandfather whose labor made possible his son’s education and his grandson’s existence and a white grandfather who volunteered and fought in WWII. In a remarkable and humble way, Obama was able to present himself as the epitome of America, as one whose personal diversity of experience and background made him more rather than less American, central rather than marginal. His message more wholly and convincingly echoed traditional Democratic themes than did any of the other speeches at the convention precisely because Obama brings together in his own person so much of the divided house that is the Democratic Party. He assumed the authority to speak for a much larger America than other speakers could claim and exercised that authority in a message of reconciliation more far reaching and inclusive than any other we are likely to hear in this campaign season. He represents both a new face of America and its most compelling traditions, and his is the message upon which his party’s future depends.

How would you contrast Obama’s speech with Al Sharpton’s, or Sharpton’s speech against Kerry’s or Clinton’s?

Only Obama could give Obama’s speech. He, himself, is much of the evidence upon which his argument depended. Clinton effectively developed similar themes and ideas, but it is ironically both the representative nature and the uniqueness of Obama’s person that gives his version of this message renewed power and authority. Sharpton, by contrast, was the strongest voice of past wrongs, an essential reminder in the midst of the more positive messages of Edwards and Obama, of grievances that go back generations in an African-American past that Obama can only indirectly share. His explanation of African-American support for the Democratic Party began with Republican failures to keep the promises of emancipation (40 acres and a mule and full citizenship) and concluded with the disenfranchisement of black voters in Florida in 2000. Obama’s and Edwards’s call to be one America were balanced by Sharpton’s recognition of how our persistent division continues to be politically exploited. His was an appeal meant to energize an essential part of the Democratic base that both parties had failed in the 2000 vote count.

Dolly Madison to Hillary Clinton, they have been much discussed in terms both of what they say and how they represent America. Discussion, of course, often revolves around their particular ideas and how they express them, their influence and how it gets exercised, but more importantly it is an ongoing commentary on aspirations of and anxieties about women more generally. Since Democratic hopes very much depend upon the votes of women, all the women—Congresswomen as well as wives—who took the stage at Boston were part of an effort to convince those voters that this was the party that could best represent their interests. At the same time the wives in particular, and with the assistance of their children, had to testify to the personal “family values” that conservatives have emphasized in recent years. The familial parades at political conventions are a relatively recent innovation, one that suggests a shift both in the ends these public events serve and a shift in emphasis from politics to personalities.

Do wives offer effective rhetoric in behalf of their candidate husbands? Have the role of wives changed?

Wives are certainly treated as evidence of something about their candidate husbands, but I am less than sure what that something is, probably because it is inconsistent and always changing. From

What do you think are George W. Bush’s rhetorical strengths and weaknesses?

The present President Bush’s greatest rhetorical weakness is an ineloquence that grows from an indifference bordering on contempt. And that is his greatest rhetorical strength as well. In extemporary speech, when addressing ideas, he tends to stumble and “mis-speak.” In situations where he has a prepared speech and practice, there remains a stiffness and a slightly awkward sense of pacing in his delivery that reminds his listeners that he is less than comfortable with such discourse. But for many listeners this seems to be reassuring, makes him more trustworthy precisely because he isn’t all that articulate and because he seems to view words with a degree of suspicion. They trust his emotions (in 2000 he insisted that it was his heart that could be trusted) and regard his ineloquence as evidence that he will not/cannot deceive them. His easy comfort—in contrast with his father’s stiffer manner—in mixing with people reinforces this impression.

Interviewed by Professor Gerald Early.
Most people who write — or hire other people to write — their autobiographies, have something to explain or exploit. Usually, they want to show how smart, or good, or brave, or wise they are. Not Pete Rose. With the help of writer Rick Hill, Rose’s book, *Prison Without Bars*, spends, or wastes, 322 pages showing what a jerk he is. And a stupid jerk at that. After 14 years of forcefully denying or lying through his teeth that he ever bet on baseball, guess what?

He admits he bet on baseball and on his own team while he was its manager. Rose continues to deny he made bets from his own clubhouse, but others have said he used them as go-betweens. His only defenses are right out of the logic used by juveniles when arguing with parents, i.e.: “Everybody else gambles,” and, “I just do it to get a rush and to enjoy the competition. I don’t do it for the money.”

With the help of writer Rick Hill, Rose’s book, *Prison Without Bars*, spends, or wastes, 322 pages showing what a jerk he is. And a stupid jerk at that.

And he blames his habit on his parents, on the fact that his father used to take him along to Cincinnati-area tracks with some friends who included Eddie Brinkman Sr. and Dud Zimmer, whose sons, Eddie Jr., and Don, went on to good major league careers. Their fathers liked to put some money on the horses, but they didn’t become addicted to gambling. Rose happily admits liking horse racing, emphasizing his winning visits, but is light when it comes to discussing his other sports betting.

Writer Hill, whose lack of research shows in dozens of errors along the way, is a pedestrian writer who also lacks the ability to find anything good in Rose’s life, except the fact that he occasionally visited young patients in hospitals, admired his father, and loved his mother and sisters.

Rose blames so-called friends and business associates for causing him to cheat on his income taxes, for which he served a few months in a Federal prison near Marion, Ill., but the force of his personality, he says, made him respected and liked by other inmates. Statements showing that type of understanding of the world pepper the book, and each is more absurd than the one that went before.

Other discussions, about card shows and memorabilia sales, many of which were made on shady pretenses, make one less impressed, even if Rose does hold the all-time major league record for hits. For example, when a new Reds’ manager told Rose to move from second base to third base, he admits he didn’t practice much or hustle much, but he did return to his original position. The point is that no one tells Pete Rose anything. You ask him, and politely. Card shows and memorabilia sales, from which players earn lots of money and declare little of it, are another fund-raiser for professional athletes and their pals, and positively cries for a real investigation.

Throughout the book, Rose is convinced that he was judged more harshly than any other athlete who committed similar offenses and that he received more severe punishments and he belongs in the Hall of Fame and that it was all someone else’s, anyone else’s, fault. Ironically, his stance, and this book, have probably done even more to cripple his chances for election. The nation’s sports writers will not vote him in, and veteran players, who get the job in a year or two, hold him in even less esteem.

About the only tactic remaining to him is to throw himself on the floor, kick his heels, and hold his breath.

*Joe Pollack, a retired St. Louis Post-Dispatch columnist and critic, writes about restaurants and wine for the Web site saucecafe.com, and is the theater and film critic for KWMU.*
The Center for the Humanities at Washington University continues its SmartSet Series: Where Great Writers Read this fall. Here is an interview with Wil Haygood, who will be here on November 9 and 10. He is the author of major biographies of Sammy Davis, Jr., and Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.

Wil Haygood is currently a staff writer for the Style section of the Washington Post. For 17 years he was a feature writer, and national and foreign correspondent for the Boston Globe. He is the author of four books: Two on the River; King of the Cats: The Life and Times of Adam Clayton Powell Jr., (a New York Times Notable Book); the Haygoods of Columbus: A Family Memoir (awarded the Great Lakes Book Award); and In Black and White: The Life of Sammy Davis, Jr. He has received the following honors: the Sunday Magazine Editors Award; the New England Associated Press Award; the National Headliners Award; and the National Association of Black Journalists Award, which he received three times. He has also been a Pulitzer Prize finalist. He resides in Washington, D.C.

What do you find is the greatest challenge in writing biography?

Biography is an exhausting and exhaustive craft. It involves huge amounts of work, of getting to places, of tracking down people to interview. One tries to corral as many facets about the life one is writing about as is possible. Thus the childhood and the teen years, the midlife years and the later years. Of course the family lineage. Then the friends and relationships and the clues which ignited your subject's life. It is like putting together a kind of jigsaw puzzle.

How do you choose your subject? Why did you choose Adam Clayton Powell and Sammy Davis, Jr.?

I choose subjects that I, personally, want to learn more about. For years I had heard things about Adam Clayton Powell, many unflattering. But during high school, I was in something called the Upward Bound program. It aided inner-city kids in getting acclimated to a college setting during their high school years.

Biography is an exhausting and exhaustive craft. It involves huge amounts of work, of getting to places, of tracking down people to interview.

Are you involved in the Denzel Washington project on Sammy Davis, Jr.? If so, in what capacity?

Yes, I am writing a screenplay based on my Sammy Davis Jr. biography, which has been optioned by Denzel Washington and Universal Pictures and Imagine Entertainment.

Do you read biographies yourself? Do you have any favorite biographers?

I do read biography. I have some favorites, among them Robert Caro on Robert Moses [The Powerbroker]; Geoffrey Wolff on Harry Crosby [Black Sun]; Arnold Rampersad’s Langston Hughes; David Leavering Lewis’s W.E.B. DuBois.

Who is your audience? What people do you imagine you are writing for? Does that differ from your actual audience?

I hope my audience is those who simply care about good nonfiction. About stories that maybe they’ve heard about but not read a great deal about. There was always something, to me at least, rather mysterious about Adam Clayton Powell and Sammy Davis, Jr., as well as Mt. Vernon Avenue, the street I write about in my family memoir. I think others have had their own questions about those two personalities. As far as Mt. Vernon Avenue, well, it was a personal story, to be sure, and didn’t find the audience I hoped it would have. But book writing is always a leap of faith.

Interviewed by Professor Gerald Early