Wonder Man
Boxer Sugar Ray Robinson’s American Cool
Let’s see what we have here: a review of Toni Morrison’s latest novel by young fiction writer Amina Gautier, a review of a book on agriculture and Africa by Africanist Priscilla Stone, and a review of a new novel about the Soviet Union in the 1950s by Mary Laurita, associate dean of the College and a Russian Studies scholar. These reviewers were not terribly happy with the books they reviewed. It happens that way sometimes. I wanted to make them happy reviewing books that I hoped they would gush over, but alas! But do not despair, dear reader, for we have reviews here by Ellen Harris and Henry Berger, who are much happier about the books they reviewed. And we have an essay by our friend and semiregular contributor Wayne Zade about jazz record producer John Snyder that is very positive about its subject. That’s a good thing because the 25 or 50 people who are still reading serious books in the United States deserve to be encouraged in their habit lest we wind up with only writers and no readers at all. O yes, some fellow named Gerald Early wrote a piece about a biography of a boxer named Sugar Ray Robinson. No one ever knows how that Early guy feels about anything, so let’s just leave him out of the mix.

II. Children, Go Where I Send Thee

As I understand the matter, one does not wish people a “Merry Christmas” anymore. The world being so diverse and offense being so easily taken. So, I wish all my co-religionists, all Christians, devout and lapsed, a Merry Christmas. To all other people, I hope that your December 25 is as good a day as any other, even better than usual. None of this religious correctness would be necessary if 120 years ago or so, retailers had not decided to make Christmas a universal consumer holiday for all, rather than respecting it as a religious observation for some. The secularization of Christmas is one of the more peculiar events in the history of liberal capitalism, beautifully allegorized in Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*, a story that perversely misinterprets Christianity itself. Christians, in their overreach, tarnished and cheapened the magnificence of their own holiday. O well, God bless us, everyone.
“Make Money to Make More Music”:
The Entrepreneurial Spirit of John Snyder

I. The Producer

If you are a serious, or for that matter not so serious, fan of jazz, chances are very good that you own a recording that was produced by John Snyder. In a career that has spanned the past four decades, Snyder has produced more than 300 jazz albums on at least ten major labels, including A & M/Horizon, CTI, Atlantic, A & M Records, Musicmasters, Antilles, and Telarc. The list of leaders whose albums Snyder produced is as long as it is diverse. From working with such mainstream musicians as Jim Hall, Paul Desmond, Gerry Mulligan, Freddie Hubbard, and Johnny Griffin, to the more experimental Ornette Coleman, Don Cherry, Andrew Hill, Cecil Taylor, and Sun Ra, John Snyder has earned the respect and trust of musicians and record company executives alike. Recordings he has produced have been nominated for a Grammy award 34 times, and five were Grammy winners.

In an interview on his web site (www.artistshousemusic.org), Snyder strongly hints at his personal secret to success as a producer, a secret that can be said to have guided him in his many and varied professional endeavors that now extend into the academic career he currently enjoys at Loyola University in New Orleans. The word entrepreneurial falls from his lips easily these days, and he describes the entrepreneurial spirit as one of “determination, to survive, to do whatever needs to be done, to take care of the smallest detail.” Snyder also stresses the basic desire he has to collaborate, to create a musical community and realize a common human purpose. He takes on an almost religious fervor when he emphasizes certain cardinal virtues of a record producer: “Have a love, a respect for process, outcome, and a sense of history of the music—this is how to really listen. This involves patience and humility, awareness both of the musicians and of the audience.” But lest he seem a dreamy idealist, Snyder is quick to add, “But you have to balance art and commerce. It’s really very simple: you have to make money to make more music.” It is this simple proposition that has guided Snyder to devote his life and career to promoting the success and welfare of musicians.

Lively testimony of John Snyder’s success as a producer of jazz records comes from the singer, composer, and lyricist Nancy Harrow, the subject of another essay of mine in Belles Lettres (Vol. VIII, No. 2, 2008). While she has had a long and distinguished career as a jazz vocalist, her finest, most ambitious recordings have been her jazz adaptations of literary works, such as The Marble Faun: Jazz Variations on a Theme by Hawthorne and Winter Dreams: The Life and Passions of F. Scott Fitzgerald. Harrow teamed up with Snyder first in 1988, at the suggestion of the legendary trombonist and composer Bob Brookmeyer, a mutual friend, for the album Street of Dreams. Five Harrow albums produced by Snyder have followed, including most of her literary projects. Harrow credits Snyder’s encouragement and his eagerness to be part of cutting edge concepts in recordings for her achievement on these albums. She fondly recalls his tribute to her on the Hawthorne project: “Nobody else in jazz could have done this except Ornette Coleman.”

Harrow cites John Snyder’s “incredible organizational ability” on their sessions together, the prolixity of his ideas, and his uncanny sense of knowing exactly how to be ready to capture just the right moment or opportunity. She also acknowledges his ability to manage time on a session, as time is money, quite literally! Harrow recalled for me a particularly tense period on the Marble Faun sessions when a student musician’s transcription of orchestral parts had to be redone by pianist and music director Sir Roland Hanna at the last minute, with all the musicians standing around and waiting. Although he was as frazzled as anyone at the session, John Snyder remained calm and joked with the musicians. According to Harrow, “John has this great ability to get people relaxed. He’s funny and charming, and yet he is totally concentrated on the work at hand.” However, Harrow did admit to me that she was not always completely relaxed at her sessions with Snyder, especially when he was “multitasking,” taking calls, juggling other projects. Yet she added that when he was needed, he would re-enter the session and seemed never to have missed a beat.

II. Artists House

“Multitasking” hardly seems to encompass the range and vitality of John Snyder’s professional activities. Having grown up as a musician (trumpet), he worked his way through college by playing gigs. He pursued a “day job” vocation by also getting a law degree from the
University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. He is a member of the New York Bar, but he has never practiced law in any conventional way. Speaking about his legal education in an interview with Fred Jung for the online journal All About Jazz in 2003, Snyder said, “It lets me know where the tricks are, and I can talk to lawyers, so it keeps me either out of trouble or into less trouble.”

In his long association with various record companies and some of the people who ran them, Snyder experienced more than his fair share of “trouble.” At the age of 29, he started his own company, Artists House, and he maintained very high production standards. I own several of the 22 LPs Snyder produced during a period of six years, and in sound quality and album packaging, they are among the most elegant in my collection (a particular favorite of mine is Charlie Haden and Hampton Hawes’s As Long As There’s Music). These albums clearly were labors of love, love of the music and love of the musicians. However, 1982-83 were very hard years, “years of cashing out,” Snyder told me. “I was dealing with independent distributors who were less than reputable people. Gangsters. But that was the world that you dealt with. You had five people who controlled it all, access to radio. I had the model that I didn’t want to own the art or the artist. I thought that was wrong.” Artists House was a recording company in which artists owned their work. Yet as he looks back on those years, just before the dawning of the CD era, Snyder has no regrets: “I wouldn’t say it was a mistake. It opened me up in a creative way that I’m still stuck with. I can’t stop. I can’t. That’s my thing, I can think of 50 ideas for any student interested in a career in music who comes my way now, any problem, any obstacle. Just tell me the parameters and I’m going to tell you the things you can do. Not just hypothetical, but specific. I can act quickly because I’m a problem-solver kind of person.” In comments made to me after I interviewed him, Snyder related his “problem-solving” skills very specifically to his days as a record producer: “Problem solving and thinking of ideas to interest a very small, ingrown group of record company executives who could actually ‘buy’ a project—that was a daily occupation for me, and it was a matter of survival. I had to be able to solve problems quickly, at least at the same rate I could create them.”

I referred earlier to the Artists House web site. After Artists House was reincarnated in 2002, the web site, launched in May 2007, has become, and is constantly becoming, a treasure trove of practical information for musicians about the music world. The Artists House motto that highlights the home page is, “Helping musicians and music entrepreneurs create sustainable careers.” Snyder, with funding provided by the Herb Alpert Foundation, created a non-profit musicians’ web site to provide, according to its mission statement on the site, “informational support, guidance, and expert resources to musicians to help them navigate the challenges and maximize the opportunities available to them within the music industry.” As founder and president of Artists House, Snyder works with a staff of content producers, content editors and assistant editors, videographers and video editors, a designer, and a programmer. He states that currently the web site has over 2,600 daily users and around 2,000 on its YouTube channel: “We have around 4,600 users per day watching our videos about the business, the technology, the production, and the legalities of monetizing music and intellectual property. We are webcasting live 24/7 on the home page, and we broadcast live from clubs, in real time, several nights a week.” The goal is to double usage over the next two years, and applications for additional funding have been submitted.

Perhaps the most appealing feature of the Artists House web site for jazz fans is the icon “Buy DVDs.” This site teaches and it also delights. The highlight of the DVD collection is The Jazz Master Class Series from NYU, which was co-produced by John Snyder and Dr. David Schroeder of New York University, and moderated by renowned jazz critic and historian Gary Giddins. There are eight programs in this series, each featuring a jazz legend in both performance and teaching situations. The legends are Jimmy and Percy Heath, Hank Jones, Clark Terry, Barry Harris, Cecil Taylor, Toots Thielemans, Benny Golson, and Phil Woods. The pupils are students in various jazz studies programs around New York City. The musicians perform their own sets and are interviewed by Gary Giddins. The students perform and receive critiques from the legends, and there are pre- and post-performance interviews with the students. As fans would expect, Hank Jones and Cecil Taylor, both pianists, offer broad contrasts in their programs. Jones is elegant and eloquent, modest and moderate. Taylor, on the other hand, is direct, if not blunt, and his teaching style is notable for answering questions by asking more difficult questions.

In addition to the DVDs in the Jazz Master Class at NYU series, Artists House has produced several CD/DVD recordings, including two by Nancy Harrow and one by Bob Brookmeyer and trumpeter Kenny Wheeler. When I asked Brookmeyer about his album Island, he praised John Snyder’s conception of releasing the music on CD and packaging it with a DVD of studio highlights and interviews. He told me how sad it was that people like Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk, and Dizzy Gillespie never got treatment like this—and what great opportunities were missed in that era, the bebop era, how fans should have seen these musicians at work in the studio, how a recording came to be. A longtime friend, Brookmeyer also praised Snyder’s total commitment to music and musicians: “His contribution to jazz is absolutely valuable and absolutely necessary. His sense of ethics in the business is beyond reproach. I’d like to say he might be the only honest man in the record business. I’ve never met anybody in the business who had a bad thing to say about John.” Shortly after they became acquainted in the early ’80s, John Snyder spent two days with Brookmeyer explaining music contract law to him. These days a trombonist young enough to be Bob’s grandson can get this kind of lesson on the Artists House web site.
In 2008, John Snyder applied his recent Artists House production techniques on a recording by pianist McCoy Tyner, *Guitars*, released on Tyner’s own label. The guitars are played by John Scofield, Bill Frisell, Marc Ribot, Derek Trucks, and (stretching the point a bit) Bela Fleck on banjo, players eclettically drawn from jazz, rock, and folk music traditions. The rhythm section is rounded out by the incomparable team of Ron Carter on bass and Jack DeJohnnette on drums. Each guitarist plays with Tyner, Carter, and DeJohnnette on a few tracks, and so a wide range of styles and tones is presented. *Guitars* resembles Artists House productions in that it is packaged as a CD/DVD set. The DVD takes us into the studio, and we are privileged to witness scraps of shorthand conversation in which the musicians work out details of arrangements of the tunes. Users are given the choice of multiple viewing angles of the individual artists and group performances. In his loquacious liner notes, John Snyder commented, “Pretty cool, huh? I like the four-camera-at-once version. You can see the musicians as they aurally relate—so quick and subtle and the music flows so spontaneously. Quite amazing, really.” Snyder himself can be seen thoughtfully pacing in the studio and occasionally offering brief suggestions and nods of approval. The album was a bit of a comeback and triumph for Tyner, who had been sidelined with health problems. It is safe to say that the piano master sounds better than ever, fully inspired in playing with old and new colleagues alike and in being recorded in a state-of-the-art format.

III. The Center for Music and Arts Entrepreneurship, Loyola University, New Orleans

A. A New Jazz Scene?

It is fascinating to watch the musicians on McCoy Tyner’s *Guitars* album in conversation in the studio as the recording was made. In the three+ hours of video footage, you can watch the musicians exchange maybe 50 musical words. Their eye contact and body language speak for themselves and there is living proof, on the album, of intense communication. The musicians “teach” one another effortlessly. Yet I doubt if any of the musicians who play on the album went to “jazz school.” In part, this is a function of their age. Tyner, Carter, and DeJohnnette are all around 70 now, and in their youth, there were no such programs. But the guitarists, while younger, grew up learning on the job too, and perhaps also in the school of hard knocks.

Jazz could be said to be inherently anti-academic. Each time a band plays, something new happens. Whitney Balliett called jazz “the sound of surprise.” But jazz has been around long enough to have a history, and History of Jazz courses are popular electives on college campuses. As “America’s classical music,” it speaks directly to American college students in particular. The trend toward the teaching of jazz, if it can be taught, parallels the teaching of creative writing, if it can be taught. Many teachers of creative writing insist that it can’t be taught, that either a young writer is talented, or not, and either a young writer will write and publish, or not. The issue is debated in a recent book by Mark McGurl, associate professor of English at UCLA, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (2009). For many, the best-case scenario is that the “workshop” (probably something vastly different from bassist Charles Mingus’s Jazz Workshop of the early ’60s) can instill a sense of comradeship, community, and common purpose, and students can learn about the ins and outs of the publishing industry firsthand. The same is often said of jazz education and career preparation as well. For others, the worst-case scenario is that college trained writers, or musicians, are derivative, cautious, “safe,” and are not likely to advance their art forms. In jazz, this kind of pessimism has provoked ambivalent books in the new millennium like Stuart Nicholson’s *Is Jazz Dead? (Or Has It Moved to a New Address?)*. Slightly less pessimistic were Howard Mandel’s *Future Jazz* and *The Future of Jazz*, edited by Yuval Taylor, which at least seemed to maintain that jazz has a future. (I reviewed the Taylor book in *Belles Lettres*, Vol. III, No. 3, 2003).

One incontrovertible good thing about degree programs is that many writers and jazz musicians are paid to teach in universities, and they receive medical insurance and other benefits for their services. When we think of the lives of brilliant young jazz musicians, such as pianist Sonny Clark or bassist Paul Chambers, who died at 32 and 34 respectively, largely from drug abuse and other medical problems, we wonder what greater music they might have left behind. There were countless others, as James Baldwin imagined in his quintessential story of the jazz life, “Sonny’s Blues.” Perhaps he had Sonny Clark in mind. Sonny Clark died in 1963, and Sonny in Baldwin’s story, published in 1959, seems well on his way to an early grave.

The social, economic, and psychological parameters of higher education after World War II lie beyond the scope of this essay. One could learn a great deal about them in McGurl’s book, among many others. For better or worse, college students came, saw, and conquered, and their children were expected and expect to do the same—and to express themselves, to find themselves. College enrollments in the fall of 2009 are expected to soar, as they have for the past few years, and there will be more students interested in majoring in jazz than ever.

B. Jazz and New Orleans

Since John Snyder gigged around in his college years (his major was music education, so in coming to Loyola he seems to have come full circle), and since he worked in the record business for so many years, he has had more than ample opportunity to observe the tough lives musicians lead and

continued on p. 6
the physical toll it takes on them. A musician friend of his told me that when John heard that he had gotten sober, he sent the musician $1,000, with no strings attached. When the shocked musician asked why, John said that he’d heard that he had been through a hard time and just thought he could use the money. Another check for $500 was to follow. When the musician was able to, he repaid the money, and an abiding friendship has ensued. Since he came to New Orleans in 2004 as the Conrad N. Hilton Eminent Scholar in Music Industry Studies at Loyola, it can be said that John Snyder has been taking his love of music and musicians to the next level.

According to Jessica Dore, in an article in *The Wolf*, the student magazine of Loyola University in New Orleans, Music Industry Studies began as a minor program in the early ’80s that branched off from the business school. Today it is a “cross-disciplinary, multifaceted program” with a booming enrollment. The program offers two major tracks, one leading to a performance-intensive Bachelor of Music degree, and one leading to a Bachelor of Science degree which is geared more toward business. The program requires a fifteen-week internship, which, according to Jerry Goolsby, the Hilton/Baldridge Distinguished Chair of Music Industry Studies and professor of marketing, “offers students work in a wide range of important internships for smaller companies, rather than menial work for huge companies.” Goolsby adds that “the volume of students in the program has meant a growing need for full-time faculty, facilities, and offices.” So, enter John Snyder.

Quickly warming to the topic of his work at Loyola, Snyder told me, “I’m committed to the idea of training artists to think entrepreneurially. What music schools have been doing is producing people who have exactly no chance. What are they going to do? They’re great flute players, violin players. That is not enough. You have to be able to monetize your love of music.” He feels he brought not only his experience in the record business to Loyola, but his vision: “I have a chance for changing the philosophical point of view that underpins these companies that populate the entertainment world. I’ve created student companies, and I’ve written sample business plans and codes of ethics for every company too to show them how a business should organize itself. I came to Loyola to change the world.” Changing the world, or even New Orleans, is a tall order, and a near-million dollar grant from the Louisiana Board of Regents and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development helped to create the Center for Music and Arts Entrepreneurship, allowing a consortium of Loyola with three other colleges and universities in New Orleans (Delgado, Dillard, and the University of New Orleans) to be forged. The Center opened its doors in the fall of 2008, and its web site explains that additional funding “was provided to produce audio visual content, of seminars, clinics, master classes, and performances, all aimed at improving the lives of local musicians and artists, arts entrepreneurs, music businesses, and cultural institutions of the area.” Most importantly, it is the student-run companies (which are called Enterprising Units, or EU’s) that create, produce, videotape, broadcast, distribute, and market the content. In this way, the campus community meets the city community and they join as one.

Another major accomplishment came in his second year when Snyder started a video program. He recalls, “I was going to train my own crew, create my own people.” To bolster his efforts, Snyder attracted Jim Gabour to the program. Gabour had been approached by Loyola before, but was reluctant to enter the academic sphere. But he had a chance conversation with John Snyder at a contemporary music conference. Gabour told me, “My ‘conversation’ with John consisted of listening to a solid half-hour of energy-laced visions for the future of New Orleans music. I nodded my head a lot, as I recall. But what Snyder said was inspiring, and the way he said it even more so.” Although his reservations about academic life have been realized, Gabour is amazed at how “John has somehow managed to navigate the program around the world of bureaucratic ensnarements to continue the development of an educational process that is geared to provide both a career and a life vision.” He adds that nine of his digital filmmaking students in the 2008-2009 academic year already had full-time jobs in the field before they graduated: “More than the diploma and the GPA, that is the index by which we measure our success.”

Another major relocation to New Orleans that John Snyder was semiinally involved in is that of the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz Performance from the University of Southern California to Loyola. A story in *The Times-Picayune* of New Orleans by John Pope stresses that the focal point of the Institute’s four-year initiative, “Commitment to New Orleans,” was “to reinforce the importance of music to the city’s post-Katrina comeback by collaborating on programs with other colleges, setting up school- and community-level programs, providing work for local musicians, and persuading musicians who have lived elsewhere since the storm to return home.” It can easily be seen that the community-oriented mission of the Commitment fits extremely well with the mission of the Center for Music and Arts Entrepreneurship at Loyola, and that the influence of John Snyder is strongly evident in the synergy. The popular trumpeter Terence Blanchard, the Monk Institute’s artistic director, himself a native of New Orleans, has said of the city, “It’s the birthplace of the music. We can do a lot for the city; the city can do a lot for us. It’s a win-win situation.” John Snyder commented, in an e-mail message to me, “I can say without equivocation that the Monk Institute has made a significant impact on this community, this city, in a very short period of time. Their people help public school students all over the city, not to mention the college kids as well. This is a jazz organization that has community action and music education as its FIRST priorities. They walk the walk.”

**IV. More Giant Steps**

I interviewed John Snyder for this essay at Loyola in New Orleans in July 2008, and he asked to do a follow-up on the phone in June 2009. He wanted to talk about a new project of his, something he loosely referred to as an arts-athletics alliance. As I have indicated, Snyder has long been interested in the welfare of musicians; however, he seems to have emphasized financial well-being. Lately he has been thinking about physical well being, or “wellness” issues for musicians.

He had been put in touch with a representative of a sports medicine association scheduled to have a convention in New Orleans. The association was interested in hearing from New Orleans musicians, not only on their instruments, but in
conversation about their health issues as well. Snyder contacted four musicians with the Preservation Hall Jazz Band, and they performed and spoke and were a big hit. Yet another creative idea struck Snyder, and he started to think about how he could take care of indigent, itinerant musicians by hooking them up with sports medicine professionals interested in the parallels between their maladies and those of athletes. The same association met in Seattle in 2009, and Snyder’s message to them connected young student musicians and young athletes, both groups being prone to certain kinds of injuries (wrist, elbow, neck).

Wellness is a concern in the Center for Music and Arts Entrepreneurship at Loyola as well. The Center’s first official event was a seminar called “Health Care, Wellness, and the Artist” that focused on health care options and wellness issues for artists. Snyder invited Jim Brown, managing director of the Health Insurance Resource Center with the Artists’ Fund, and Randall Dick of the Health and Safety Sports Consultants and the American College of Sports Medicine, to speak to students in the program. He has also brought in professional musicians to talk about their health issues. As is typical for the Center for Music and Arts Entrepreneurship, this seminar was filmed by a crew from its video production company, which is composed of students hired and under the supervision of a faculty member-mentor or industry professional.

Yet another new project is a new courseware system that Snyder is developing with Randy Funke, the web site and multimedia programmer as well as the systems administrator of Artists House. A recent issue of the Chronicle of Higher Education featured a series of essays by professors on the subject of online course programs, or distance learning, and the pedagogical plusses and minuses in this “brave new world.” Snyder and Funke embrace new technological challenges, and their philosophy of “move it or lose it” in the rapidly changing times of higher education has prompted them to move ahead boldly. I was able to view a sample of the new Snyder-Funke software, which includes a short video of John explaining the features of the system. Even though the video is only about three minutes long, the phrase “easy upload” is used several times, as are “live webcasting,” “You Tube,” “multimedia assignment capabilities,” and “database attached, with key word access.” Stay tuned, users of Blackboard, WebCT, etc.

V. Not Yet Famous Last Words

The final interview I did for this essay was with the magisterial bassist Ron Carter. Our conversation was easy and fun and contained tones of warmth and humor in the long friendship Carter enjoys with John Snyder, right on down to the preferred microwave plastic bag for cooking vegetables Carter sends to him so that he eats better. Carter goes back to the early days in the ’70s of Snyder’s career as a record producer, to their days on the CTI label, on which Snyder apprenticed with Creed Taylor. Since he had appeared on McCoy Tyner’s Guitars album in 2008, which I discussed earlier, Carter could look back and measure John’s growth and development over a period of some 35 years. He marveled at Snyder’s level of comfort and confidence now and his ability to get so much done on the Tyner session over just three or four days, a particularly challenging session, he felt, because of the diverse personalities on the date. “People have no idea what is involved in the process of making a record,” he told me. “The process is incredibly detailed—hiring people, hiring the studio, the piano tuner, checking the artwork, the photography—and yet John allowed McCoy to make his own decisions, getting the optimum out of the musicians and helping them make their music.” I asked Carter if there were any plans for him to play on another session produced by Snyder and he responded, very quickly, “No, but I’m ready for him whenever he calls me.”

I mentioned to Ron Carter that when I visited John Snyder at his office on the Loyola campus, we were interrupted at least a dozen times over about three hours. He was not at all surprised and said, “Well, he’s a problem-solver, man. He is the person you can talk to, and people look to him for advice. He’s going to listen to you and he’s going to tell you what you need to know.”

In his interview on the Artists House web site, in answering why he believes that jazz is central to bringing back New Orleans, John Snyder provided one of the most eloquent definitions of jazz I have encountered. I get the feeling that John is used to getting the last word in on most things. And he shall have it here:

Jazz is the music of democracy, of freedom, of personal choice. It is of the “new world.” It is the music that glorifies the individual over the group. It is the music of self-expression, of respect for one’s self and for others. The language of jazz is the sum total of all who express it, who use it to communicate the pain and passion of how we feel as individuals. It is the music of the Americas, our gift to the world, and by implication it says to all who hear it: you too are worthy as an individual. Jazz is the paradigmatic example of the power of one with its insistence on the uniqueness and value of every single person.

Wayne Zade is professor of English at Westminster College, Fulton, Missouri
Why Empires Commit Suicide
and Perhaps Why They Should

Review of

In 1952 Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971), the most influential American Protestant theologian of his time, published a series of lectures he had earlier delivered at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri, and at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. A slim volume, Niebuhr’s book, The Irony of American History, was intended as a cautionary tale for those of his fellow citizens seeking to transform the Cold War into a shrill anti-communist crusade for a Pax Americana. Admonishing his audience of policymakers and public intellectuals, Niebuhr challenged their convictions of national exceptionalism, of superior virtue measured by a culture of ever greater and growing material prosperity, and of a divinely ordained mission to save and remake the world in America’s image. Not only were these assumptions arrogant and unrealistic in Niebuhr’s judgment; in the new age of nuclear power in which the United States no longer possessed a monopoly of weapons of mass destruction, such hubris was also very dangerous. “Power,” Niebuhr wrote—quoting John Adams’s warning to Thomas Jefferson—“always thinks it has a great soul and vast views beyond the comprehension of the weak and that it is doing God’s service when it is violating all His laws.”

Yet, Niebuhr observed, “ironically, the United States [today] is less potent to do what it wants in the hour of its greatest strength than it was in the days of its infancy.”

America’s vaunted military and economic might had been challenged, but more importantly its claims of virtuous behavior and audacious innocence had been undermined by actions that were neither virtuous nor innocent. “The irony … lies in the fact that [Americans] could not be virtuous if we were really as innocent as we pretend to be.” And, Niebuhr pointedly remarked, “we were, of course, never as innocent as we insisted we were….. The surge of our infant strength over a continent, which claimed Oregon, California, Florida and Texas against any sovereignty which may have stood in our way, was not innocent. It was the expression of a will-to-power…in which the land hunger of hardy pioneers and settlers furnished the force of imperial expansion.”

America’s pretentious expanding empire, Niebuhr argued, had been nourished by an overwrought self-confidence that expanding production and technology proved its exceptional national character, reinforced its notions of manifest destiny, and exaggerated its capacity to master the destiny of the world. Such a view was illusory, Niebuhr contended, because freedom and national sovereignty evolved into avaricious material abundance increasingly dependent on imperial behavior abroad and loss of freedom at home. “[T]he price which American culture has paid for…constantly expanding production has been considerable,” the theologian-philosopher intoned, and he declared that “[w]e cannot simply have our way [in the world], not even when we believe our way to have the happiness of mankind as its promise.” To think and to act otherwise, Niebuhr concluded, would vastly “underestimate the depth of evil to which individuals and communities may sink, particularly when they try to play the role of God to history.”

Niebuhr’s soul-searching appeal was ignored in the corridors of power during the twentieth century and in the opening years of the millennium. Andrew Bacevich, for whom Niebuhr’s works constitute a template for his own writings, especially mourns the absence of Niebuhr’s influence. A professor of history and international relations at Boston University and a retired colonel of the U.S. Army, Bacevich has become an outspoken and much-read critic of American military and foreign policy in the twenty-first century. His frequent articles and commentaries have appeared in multiple newspapers and journals including Foreign Affairs, The Atlantic Monthly, Newsweek, The Nation, The New York Times, The Washington Post, and The Wall Street Journal.

A self-identified Roman Catholic and a conservative, Bacevich nonetheless regards the liberal Protestant Niebuhr as “the most clear-eyed of American prophets” who had rightly warned that “American dreams of managing history posed a potentially mortal threat to the United States.” Author of American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy (2002) and The Imperial Tense: Problems and Prospects of American Empire (2005), Bacevich’s most recent book is a seethingly angry and confrontational essay in which the author carries to the post Cold War era Niebuhr’s criticisms and remonstrances about American society and its leadership.

Bacevich spares no words in attacking core American beliefs of proclaimed virtue, innocence, and righteous causes. Calling American foreign policy a failure of means and ends, a policy which has produced “war without exits,” Bacevich challenges the “conviction that the conflicts in which [Americans] find themselves embroiled are not of their own making. Certain of our own benign intentions, we reflexively assign responsibility of war to others” who are determined to deny “us the peace that is our fondest wish.”

Responding that “the impulses that have landed us in a war of no exits and no deadlines…come [instead] from within,” Bacevich
declares that “they are an expression of domestic dysfunction—an attempt to manage or defer coming to terms with contradictions besetting the American way of life.” Locating the source of such contradictions in their denial of empire, Bacevich writes that Americans have come to believe that the preservation and extension of freedom depend on empire and on war to assure continuation of the alleged benefits of their global reach. However, Bacevich argues, Americans have mistakenly made a virtue out of perceived necessity, embracing imperial designs for which “the sole superpower lacks the resources—economic, political, and military—to support a large-scale, protracted conflict without, at the very least, inflicting severe economic and political damage on itself.” Echoing Niebuhr over a half-century later, Bacevich insists that “American power has limits and is inadequate to the ambitions to which hubris and sanctimony have given rise….The United States may still remain the mightiest power the world has ever seen, but the fact is that Americans are no longer masters of their own fate.”

In crisply crafted chapters in which the author details his disapproval of American conduct in the world, Bacevich elaborates three crises central to the nation’s predicament, excoriating a culture which, equating freedom with a never exhausting demand for material self-gratification, has made freedom ever more dependent on empire to satisfy its needs. “The ethic of self-gratification threatens the well being of the United States,” Bacevich protests, “because it saddles us with costly commitments abroad that we are increasingly ill-equipped to sustain while confronting us with dangers to which we have no ready response.”

Pointing to America’s increasing demand for and dependence on foreign oil (in 2007 over sixty percent of the nation’s oil consumption came from abroad; the U.S. Department of Energy forecasts that oil imports will grow to seventy percent by 2025), illustrating how the United States joins vital consumption needs to the exercise of preponderant power abroad, Bacevich notes that among the presidents since World War II, only Jimmy Carter “dared to suggest that the real danger to American democracy lay within.”

Bacevich quotes approvingly from Carter’s “malaise” speech to the nation of July 15, 1979, when, in the wake of rising inflation (substantially fueled by sharply escalating gasoline and oil prices), high unemployment, increasing national debt, and unabated demands for a continually rising consumption life style, Carter had solemnly observed that “too many of us now tend to worship self-indulgence and consumption. Human identity is no longer defined by what one does, but by what one owns.”

Carter’s insight that “the mistaken idea of freedom…centered on the never ending quest for more while exulting narrow self-interest” was completely rejected, Bacevich notes, and the president undercut his own rhetoric when he subsequently and dogmatically announced that American control of the Persian Gulf was a vital interest of the United States. Ever since, “for each of his successors [at least through George W. Bush], the Carter Doctrine has remained a sacred text, never questioned, never subject to reassessment. As such, it has provided the rationale for nearly thirty years of ever-intensifying military activism.” Bacevich bitterly attacks Ronald Reagan, whom he blames for skyrocketing budget deficits, a mushrooming federal bureaucracy, increasing U.S. involvement in the Persian Gulf, and greater reliance on imported oil.

“History will hold George W. Bush primarily accountable for the disastrous Iraq War of 2003,” the author remarks. “But if that war had a godfather, it was Ronald Reagan.”

Moreover, Bacevich continues, President George H.W. Bush solidified the commitments of Carter and Reagan by waging the first Persian Gulf War, declaring in the aftermath, “the American Way of Life is not negotiable,” and even though he credits Bill Clinton with on occasion balancing the federal budget, “the forty second President exacerbated the underlying contradictions of the American economy. Oil imports increased by more than 50 percent…, [the trade imbalance nearly quadrupled [and] gross debt climbed by nearly 1.5 trillion.” Bacevich titles these developments “the crisis of profligacy.”

That crisis, Bacevich further argues, produced the second and third critical difficulties of American power, the decline of political freedom at home and the increasing militarization of American foreign policy. A pronounced concentration and centralization of political power in the executive branch—a process, acknowledges Bacevich, actually begun by Franklin Delano Roosevelt in the run-up to United States involvement in the Second World War and enhanced at the outset of the Cold War by President Harry Truman—was then expanded by George W. Bush’s doctrine of preventive war in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States and by the administration’s war in Iraq undertaken in 2003. Undergirded by an “ideology of national security,” informed by the conviction that “for the American Way of life to endure, freedom must prevail everywhere” even if force must be deployed to achieve it, Bacevich indicts American leaders, Democrats and Republicans (including then presidential candidate Barack Obama) for their misguided views.

The former military officer also attacks “the wise men” who have counseled presidential administrations and American military commanders, though charging the latter more for monumental acts of incompetence in the field than for strategic mistakes. Vice President Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, and Douglas Feith, the latter three in the Bush Defense Department, come under blistering attack in Bacevich’s account. But in a significant dissent, Bacevich assesses primary responsibility for what he believes is the failure of the U.S. campaign in Afghanistan and a fiasco in Iraq, laying the blame squarely on the shoulders of the former commander of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), General Tommy Franks, who he says adopted, not a strategy in Iraq, but tactics “which were devoid of political context…paid no attention to the aftermath…ignored other regional power relationships and made no provision for how war might alter those relationships, whether for good or for ill. [The approach] was completely ahistorical and made no reference to culture, religion, or ethnic identity. It had no moral dimension. It failed even to include a statement of purpose.”

Bacevich has good reason to be particularly unhappy about the war the Bush administration waged in Iraq. His son, to whom the author dedicates his book, Andrew John Bacevich, First Lieutenant U.S. Army, was killed while serving in Iraq in May 2007. America’s military misadventures in Iraq and Afghanistan, continued on p.10
along with military interventions in Vietnam, the first Gulf War, and operations in Kosovo during the Clinton administration, were, in Bacevich’s words, “Small Wars for Empire,” undertaken allegedly on behalf of freedom, but really fought with the terribly mistaken idea that “force would produce hegemony” in regions of decreed American interests. Careful not to assign ultimate responsibility for the nation’s misdeeds “to some dark conspiracy,” Bacevich instead attributes flawed policies to the logic of an imperial ethos, embraced by the country and nurtured by an elite leadership.

That said (and Bacevich’s analysis of military misjudgments and misconduct is brilliantly damning), the author’s critique is constrained by his self-defining Niebuhran perspective. He embraces Niebuhr’s adoption of George Frost Kennan’s philosophy of national interest realism. Renaming Kennan’s program “enlightened realism,” Bacevich endorses the former Cold War warrior’s containment strategy: “The purpose of containment today should be to prevent the sponsors of radical Islam from extending their influence.” How should this objective be achieved? Bacevich, the neo-realist, proposes an “intensified surveillance of Islamist activity combined with sustained, multilateral [as opposed to U.S. unilateral] police efforts to prevent terrorist attacks and to root out terrorist networks.” The strategy “should also deny Islamists both the sanctuaries and the wherewithal…needed to pursue their agenda.”

Yet Bacevich seems to have overlooked Niebuhr’s criticism of Kennan’s containment formula. Niebuhr detected the egotism embedded in Kennan’s prescription and called Kennan’s “solution” to the perils of American foreign policy “wrong” because “a preoccupation with our own interests must lead to an illegitimate indifference toward the interests of others….The cure for a pretentious idealism…is not egotism.” Niebuhr observed, “It is a concern for both the self and the other in which the self, whether individual or collective, preserves a ‘decent respect for the opinions of mankind,’ derived from a modest awareness of the limits of its own knowledge and power.”

Bacevich might well agree since he brings his discussion to a close by imploring Americans to abandon their “imperial delusions” and end “their condition of dependency,” recommending that they recognize that “power is finite,” say no to empire, and address “other important problems” such as abolishing America’s nuclear weapons stockpile and “preserving the planet.” Like Niebuhr, however, Bacevich doubts his country will do these things. “Clinging doggedly to the conviction that the rules to which other nations must submit don’t apply,” Bacevich resignedly laments that Americans seem obstinately committed to bring about their own destruction. Given the present state of the American Empire (Bacevich’s book was published before the current financial and economic melt-down), the author may be justified in his pessimism.

In his sea-going novel White Jacket (1850), Herman Melville had commented on the perils of self-righteous fanaticism (the most important theme of his greatest work, Moby Dick, 1851): “[I]n many things we Americans are driven to a rejection of the maxims of the past, seeing that ere long, the van of the nations must of right belong to themselves,” instead believing “we Americans are the peculiar, chosen people—the Israel of our time; we bear the ark of the liberties of the world.” More recently, fifty years ago, the influential revisionist historian, William Appleman Williams, advanced his career with the publication of The Tragedy of American Diplomacy (1959). Williams, from whom Bacevich acknowledged inspiration in his earlier book, American Empire, located the roots of America’s marital relationship with empire far earlier in the nation’s history than does Bacevich, deploring the American propensity to indulge in a “grand illusion, the charming belief that the United States could reap the rewards of empire without paying the costs of empire and without admitting that it was empire.” In contrast, Williams appealed to his fellow citizens to recover the long ago neglected tradition of moral self-determination, independence, and anti-imperialism. Ever the optimist, Williams understood the power of the imperial system Americans had created but strongly advocated an alternative democratic, decentralized socialist community. No revisionist or socialist, Bacevich might, however, accept and have us act on the prescriptions of Secretary of State John Quincy Adams who, in 1821, instructed his fellow citizens that “[w]herever the standard of freedom and independence has been or shall be unfurled, there will [America’s] heart, her benedictions and her prayers be. But she goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own. She will recommend the general cause, by the countenance of her voice, and the benignant sympathy of her example.” To do otherwise, Adams warned, would mean “[t]he fundamental maxims of her policy would insensibly change from liberty to force….She might become the dictatrix of the world: she would be no longer the ruler of her own spirit.”

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2. Ibid., 3.
3. Ibid., 23.
4. Ibid., 35.
5. Ibid., 57,74,173.
Mercy Killing: Why Toni Morrison’s Latest Novel Doesn’t Work

Review of

Since the end of slavery, African-American writers have appropriated the voice of the slave for use in their fiction. During the early period of Post Reconstruction, or Jim Crow, many African-American authors looked back to American chattel slavery for their subject matter. In Iola Leroy (1892) Frances Ellen Watkins Harper revisited the Civil War to tell the tale of the beautiful Iola, raised white only to discover she is not only black, but the daughter of a slave. Seven years later, in 1899, Charles Chesnutt took the newly emancipated Uncle Julius McAdoo for his storyteller in The Conjure Woman, a series of interconnected stories in which Uncle Julius outsmarts and outmaneuvers the northern transplants who come to buy the plantation on which Julius has formerly been a slave. Pauline Hopkins links her heroine Winona’s quest for freedom to the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the contestation over free soil, and the Pottawatomie massacre in her novel Winona: A Tale of Negro Life in the South and Southwest (1902). Paul Laurence Dunbar cast the Hamilton family, still living and working on their former master’s plantation after the end of slavery, in the leading role in his Sport of the Gods (1902). Writing nearly thirty years after the end of slavery, signaled by the conclusion of the Civil War, the Emancipation Proclamation and the passage of the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth amendments ending slavery, granting citizenship and the franchise to the newly freed, these authors used slavery as a metaphor to allude to the New World, the Emancipation Proclamation and the passage of the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth amendments ending slavery, granting citizenship and the franchise to the newly freed, these authors used slavery as a metaphor to allude to the Jim Crow era, seen by them as a second slavery in which the rights guaranteed to African Americans either were repealed or failed to be protected. Though these texts ostensibly use slavery as their subject matter to comment on then contemporaneous events, the works of these authors would not properly be characterized as “neo-slave narratives.”

First appearing in the 1960s, neo-slave narratives are formally and structurally understood as “contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative.”1 Literary critic Bernard Bell’s 1987 definition has been expanded as more African-American writers look to the past for a way to describe the present such that English professor Valerie Smith argues “their differences notwithstanding, these texts illustrate the centrality of history and the memory of slavery to our individual, racial, gender, cultural, and national identities.”2 In light of this understanding, Toni Morrison’s novel A Mercy assumes its place among neo-slave narratives, thus entering into conversation not only with Morrison’s own body of work, but with such texts as Margaret Walker’s Jubilee (1966), Sherley Anne Williams’s Dessa Rose (1986), Ishmael Reed’s Flight to Canada (1976), Charles Johnson’s Osherding Tales (1982) and Middle Passage (1990), Morrison’s own Beloved (1987), and Edward P. Jones’s recent The Known World (2003). Therefore, one cannot, perhaps, escape comparing Toni Morrison’s latest novel, A Mercy, to its neo-slave narrative predecessors.

Dying before the completion of the construction of his third and grandest home, Jacob Vaark, a Dutch emigrant turned farmer and tradesman, leaves behind a motley crew of women—Rebekkah, his wife of many years who emigrated from England (sailing across the ocean in the company of prostitutes sent to the New World to work off sentences of “lewd behavior”) in order to marry Jacob and thus avoid the religious fanaticism of her parents and the drudgery of a life as a servant and to find adventure in the New World; Lina, a native woman orphaned because of the annihilation of her community by smallpox, sold to Jacob by Presbyterians who taught her their version of Christianity but prevented her from practicing it; Sorrow, a black woman shipwrecked as a young girl and given to Jacob by the family who took her in as a maid; and Florens, an Angolan slave to a prominent Catholic, Portuguese family who settled in Maryland and gave her to Jacob in lieu of payment on a defaulted loan. Jacob Vaark, then, is the lodestone which draws the women together, and his sudden and unexpected death is the incident which incites the primary action of the novel: Florens’ quest to retrieve medical help for her mistress, Rebekkah, who has contracted the disease which felled Jacob.

Set in 1682 among the colonies that would later become the United States of America, Morrison’s novel at first seems to be more about religious and territorial conflict than racial division. Not only are the differences clearly delineated between northern colonies (where Jacob Vaark lives) and southern colonies (where he must travel), but also the lines are drawn sharply between the neighboring southern colonies of Virginia (depicted as a lawless mess of a battleground for religious sects) and Maryland (characterized as a land of Papists). Told in chapters which alternate between Florens’ first person voice and the third person points of view continued on p.12
and narrative voices of Jacob, Lina, Rebekkah, and Sorrow, one half of the novel reconstructs the sequence of events that brought Jacob and the women together on his farm, and the other half follows Florens on her journey through disputed territories as she travels to find help for her mistress.

Aficionados of neo-slave narratives will inevitably compare A Mercy to similar award winning works. Unlike Johnson’s Middle Passage, Morrison’s A Mercy is devoid of overly anachronistic moments, such as the discussion of affirmative action that appears in Middle Passage during the scene in which Captain Falcon accepts the black stowaway Rutherford Calhoun aboard his ship: “I believe in excellence—an unfashionable thing these days, I know, what with headmasters giving illiterate Negroes degrees because they feel too guilty to fail them, then employers giving that same boy a place in the firm since he’s got the degree in hand and saying no will bring a gang of Abolitionists down on their necks… Eighty percent of the crews on other ships, damn near anywhere in America, are incompetent, and all because everyone’s ready to lower standards of excellence to make up for slavery or discrimination.” Unlike Jones’s expansive The Known World, which delves into the minds of any and many, reaching across continents and following characters even after death, A Mercy is much more narrowly focused. Unlike Morrison’s own Beloved (1987), A Mercy seems less ambitious, less dense, less descriptively rendered, and less historically rich.

Fans of Morrison’s oeuvre will find thematic and stylistic similarities in this latest work and the earlier novels. In Sorrow, Morrison revisits the idea of a woman developing a split psyche or personality to protect herself from traumatic knowledge. Sorrow’s dual personality and her silent conversations with an invisible “Twin” seem clearly a throwback to The Bluest Eye’s tragic Pecola Breedlove, except that Sorrow, being a minor character, has not Pecola’s story to compel a reader’s sympathetic identification. The cultivated pride that ostracizes Sethe from her community reappears to explain the isolation of the Vaarks from their Anabaptist neighbors. The desire for Ajax that consumes and crumples Sula resurfaces as Florens’s mindless desire for a free African blacksmith. Beloved’s punishing and greedy demand for maternal recompense refigures in Florens’s resentment toward her mother. The interracial friendship that nurtured Sethe and Amy Denver crops up in the reliance of the white Rebekkah and the native Lina upon one another. The sympathetic and humane renderings of women viewed as transgressive, i.e. prostitutes, in The Bluest Eye’s descriptions of China, Poland, and Marie are revisited in Morrison’s depiction of the prostitutes Rebekkah voyages with and befriends. But none of the prostitutes Rebekkah Vaark befriends can hold a candle to The Bluest Eye’s self-loving “three merry harridans,” China, Poland, and Marie. The prostitutes aboard ship with Rebekkah are weakly drawn in comparison. A Mercy’s rhetorical and stylistic strategies also seem less ambitious in comparison to Morrison’s other works. Driven by long unwieldy paragraphs that continue for pages at a time, reminiscent of Faulkner, Joyce, and Woolf, A Mercy attempts to reproduce the stylistic innovation that has garnered its author much praise. However, Morrison’s stylistic experimentation, her playing in the dark with form, adds very little to the narrative structure or emotional depth of this particular text.

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3 Charles Johnson, Middle Passage (New York: Scribner, 1990), 32-33.
Tom and Sally: The Great American Racial Melodrama

Review of
Clarence E. Walker, Mongrel Nation: The America Begotten by Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings (University of Virginia Press, 2009), 148 pages.

Who owns American history? For the past two centuries, the Great American Myth was that our Founding Fathers—who were of English Protestant stock—established the United States as a white nation. In writing the narrative, these men denied the role that nonwhites played. Generations of historians followed their lead, naming George and Martha Washington as our Founding Couple. But Clarence Walker, a history professor at the University of California, Davis, bestows that honorific on our third President, Thomas Jefferson, and his quadroon slave, Sally Hemings in Mongrel Nation: The America Begotten by Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings. During their 38-year liaison, the couple produced four biracial children who survived well into adulthood and had families of their own. Tom and Sally were not unusual. By 1789, we were already a people of mixed blood, Walker says.

He points out that America has been multiracial since nine months after the first European explorers landed on the shores of the Atlantic. Interracial sex has been common in all the societies of Africa and the New World in which Europeans subjected the native populations. But unlike the Catholic French, Spanish and Portuguese, British Protestants were troubled by their darker progeny and nowhere more so than in their North American colony. Their heirs became obsessed with fear of amalgamation with Native Americans, blacks, Jews, Irish, Slavs, anyone not Anglo-Saxon. Mixing threatened their sense of national identity. In their nativist ideology, only WASPs were allowed to decide who was white.

White became “the badge of privilege,” Walker says. White connoted civilization and citizenship. Blackness or redness or ethnicity was defined only in comparison to white, making “black an invention of whiteness,” according to Walker. To rationalize enslaving Africans, early Americans claimed these people were “creatures of nature” living in a primal state “governed by appetites rather than reason.” They lacked the civilizing attributes of “science, Christianity and racial excellence,” as Walker writes. Which brings us to his point: who is black? We think we know who is white, that is of European descent, but Sally Hemings’s children were ultimately “read” as white—three of them passed into white society, although under nineteenth century law they were black because their mother’s grandmother was of an African tribe.

Some Americans still believe there is a great divide between black and white although, as Walker says, African Americans on the average carry 17 percent white genes. But what percentage of African genes do whites carry? Under the one-drop rule, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis was black because she descended from a Muslim of Afro-Dutch origin in seventeenth century New York. She was not unusual. “If any branch of your family has been in America since the 17th or 18th centuries, it’s highly likely you will find an African and an American Indian,” Ira Berlin, professor of history at the University of Maryland and the founding editor of the Freedmen and Southern Society Project there, told The New York Times. Some white Southerners say that passing was and is so endemic that many of us have black roots that we may not be aware of. In her book, One Drop, Bliss Broyard quotes a 1958 study that claims one in five white Americans had black ancestors and that number would increase as those men and women reproduced.

Why should this matter in the twenty-first century when the scientific establishment says there is no such biological thing as...
race, that it is a social construct? Because ours is a history of race-based slavery and race-based citizenship. Sex between the so-called races exemplifies “racial treason,” as Walker labels it. No one was more troubled about miscegenation than the third President, who, as Walker says, saw America as a racist state. Jefferson wrote in his Notes On the State of Virginia (1787), that if the nascent Republic was to survive, it would be based upon “a harmonious and homogenous population.” In a letter to his friend James Monroe, he advocated resettling free blacks outside the U.S. to protect racial purity. He wrote this as his Hemings children raced around the corridors of Monticello. Sexual desire always trumps political ideology, Walker points out.

Which brings us to the second Great American Myth, that America is a country of sexual hypocrisy. Nonsense, Walker says. We are a country of racial hypocrisy. Some Americans believe that Thomas Jefferson volunteered for celibacy at the age of 39 when his wife, Martha, Sally Hemings’s half-sister, died and he promised her that he would not remarry. Walker quotes the former president of the Monticello Association as saying, “Defending Thomas Jefferson... has come to mean defending what America means.” That is, a white nation. If the great man lay down with pretty Sally, then he demeaned himself.

As white, often male, historians wrote our national canon, blacks, women, and minorities lost their place in the American narrative and became outsiders. As they became less important, their documents and papers were deemed not worth saving. Today there is less archival material on the contributions made by them. With less government material, there is less history. And that, Walker explains, leads to historical silence.

Recent historical research tells us what we weren’t taught in school, that one quarter of the soldiers who fought for our independence were of African descent and that the war itself was financed in part by a Polish Jew, Hayim Salomon. A Polish prince, Thaddeus Kosciuszko, provided the engineering skills that helped the revolutionaries win the key battle of Saratoga. Much of our First Amendment is based on the spirit of tolerance exercised by the Dutch in their sprawling colonies in New York, New Jersey, and Delaware.

Apologists may ask why these historians are “denigrating” the memory of Jefferson. Because it’s real history, Walker says, because it is the truth. And maybe one hundred and forty-five years after our fratricidal war, the truth will set us free.

When Thomas Jefferson returned to Virginia after five years in Paris, his slaves were so jubilant that some of them unharnessed the horses from his carriage and, despite his instructions to the contrary, hoisted and carried it up the mountain to Monticello. Do not take this as an “Abermarle County proslavery pageant play,” cautions Annette Gordon-Reed, who puts the scene in context. That the forty-six-year-old Jefferson was in good health and back home promised stability to his slaves: those who had been leased out in his absence could be reunited with their families, and the families no longer had to fear they would be torn apart on the auction block. One group of slaves, the Hemingses, however, did not suffer such anxieties; they were “a caste apart.” They were family to Jefferson, literally. Six of them were half-siblings of his late wife, Martha Wayles Skelton Jefferson, and the Jeffersons treated them as such.

With Jefferson’s traveling party that day in 1789 was Martha’s half-sister, Sally (Sarah) Hemings (1773-1835). She was sixteen, beautiful and pregnant with the first of seven children she would bear the future President. That the author of the Declaration of Independence was one of the largest slave holders in Virginia, owning two hundred persons, and publicly opposed so-called miscegenation yet enjoyed an intimate and apparently monogamous relationship with his slave for thirty-seven years illustrates one of Gordon-Reed’s themes: “Thomas Jefferson is a complicated metaphor for American attitudes about race.” One could say that each generation creates anew Thomas Jefferson, and that in an America that is more accepting of pluralism, we finally believe that the man we have deified loved Sally Hemings.

After more than eight years of prodigious research, Rutgers University historian Gordon-Reed provides a fresh look at Jefferson and slavery in her landmark new book, The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family. She offers a contextualized analysis of Jefferson’s relationship with Sally Hemings and the two hundred years of denial about it that followed. She explains the legal infrastructure of slavery that supported the planter aristocracy and suggests how that affected Jefferson’s obsession with his public image. She gives the biographies of the individual Hemingses, a large and remarkably talented family, who maneuvered to obtain freedoms while still enslaved. She describes their lives in a splendid narrative so rich in detail that the reader can begin to see the world through their eyes. She builds an edifice worthy of the architect of Monticello and one which recently won her the 2009 Pulitzer Prize for History and the 2008 National Book Award for Non-Fiction.

As a Harvard-educated lawyer and also a law professor at New York School of Law, Gordon-Reed explains in meticulous detail how Virginians created a new legal system of chattel slavery based solely on race. Instead of following English common law that a father’s status determined the children’s, they opted for an ancient Roman rule that the children of enslaved women were slaves, too, which served to increase their property. They passed legislation that debased blackness to justify slavery, e.g., making intermarriage illegal. Gordon-Reed points out that social custom doesn’t always follow state statutes: interracial sex was commonplace in Colonial America and the early Republic. What a man did in his home was considered his business. At the request of Sally’s sister, Mary, Jefferson sold her to his friend, Charlottesville merchant Thomas Bell, who openly lived with Mary and their children and in his will freed them and bequeathed them all of his property.
Jefferson’s solution to the racial quagmire was to create his own moral universe at Monticello where for fifty-three years he was surrounded and served by the Hemingses.

Jefferson’s solution to the racial quagmire was to create his own moral universe at Monticello where for fifty-three years he was surrounded and served by the Hemingses.

Jefferson, however, was the soul of ambivalence. As a young lawyer, he represented a slave suing for his freedom. He wrote that blacks had “the best hearts,” a quality of great importance to him. Amiability was the trait that Jefferson most valued in friends. Yet he created the three-fifths clause in the U.S. Constitution that counted a slave as three-fifths of a person, enabling slave states to acquire greater power in the U.S. House of Representatives. He believed that the most intelligent blacks—such as the Hemingses—were so because they carried white blood. He labored over algebraic equations showing that a person with one black great-grandparent should be considered white, which reflected the contemporary “one-eighth” rule and, given Sally’s three white grandparents, applied to their children. (During Reconstruction, lawmakers in Missouri and other border and Southern states feared black enfranchisement and power and adopted the “one drop” or one-sixteenth rule that a person having one black great-great-grandparent was “colored.”)

Jefferson’s solution to the racial quagmire was to create his own moral universe at Monticello where for fifty-three years he was surrounded and served by the Hemingses. “Bizarre” is the word Gordon-Reed uses to describe the four generations of Hemingses, some related to Jefferson, some not, in every skin tone from ivory to black, all orbiting around the American version of a Sun King.

Jefferson neither publicly discussed Sally nor acknowledged their children, but he did not hide their existence; visitors to Monticello remarked about her and about how her four children favored Jefferson in looks, especially Eston Hemings. (Three more children had died in infancy.) Gordon-Reed argues persuasively that the naming of these children points directly to Jefferson. Sally’s children had the first names of Jefferson’s friends and relatives, while the other Hemingses named their children after one another. By the time of Jefferson’s death in 1826, racism made interracial sex appear degrading and depraved. Jefferson’s heirs insisted that Sally Hemings’s children were fathered by the Carrs, sons of Jefferson’s sister. That, they hoped, would explain the strong familial resemblance. Reluctance to admit the truth says much about the legacy of slavery.

In her earlier book, *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy* (1997), Gordon-Reed bested the historical establishment with her legal argument that Jefferson was the father of Hemings’s children. One point was that all the Hemings babies were born nine months after Jefferson was in residence at Monticello. Gordon-Reed’s star witnesses were Madison Hemings, who described his family life at Monticello in an 1873 Pike County, Ohio, newspaper interview, and Isaac Jefferson, a former slave blacksmith and tinsmith, who gave a similar interview. For more than a hundred years, white male historians refused to take the word of two black men over that of Jefferson’s legal, white grandson, Thomas Jefferson Randolph. Fawn Brodie, in her biography *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History* (1974), believed the affair was real. So did Barbara Chase-Riboud, who wrote the historical novel *Sally Hemings* (1979). A year after Gordon-Reed lobbed her well-reasoned bomb, DNA testing of the Y chromosome in the male descendants of Jefferson’s uncle
compared to the male descendants of Eston Hemings and the Carrs proved that a Jefferson had fathered Eston. During her book tour here in St. Louis last fall, Gordon-Reed said she is continuing her multigenerational study with a third book on the Hemingses.

This family saga began with the birth of the matriarch, Elizabeth Hemings (1735-1807), the daughter of an English sea captain named Hemings and a nameless African slave. Captain Hemings acknowledged Elizabeth as his issue and tried to buy her, but her owner, John Wayles, a prominent slave trader, refused. After his third and last wife died, Wayles took pretty Elizabeth as his concubine, which Gordon-Reed points out was a common occurrence: widowers and bachelors often took their female slaves as mistresses. Elizabeth bore Wayles six of her dozen children. Upon Wayles’s death in 1773, Elizabeth, with Sally at her breast and with her other children, arrived at Monticello as the property of Wayles’s daughter Martha Jefferson, who was very attached to her (Elizabeth was like a mother to Martha). For fifty-three years Elizabeth, her twelve children, thirty-grandchildren and ten great-grandchildren created their own community at Monticello, and some of the family are buried there.

Tellingly, Jefferson gave strict instructions to his overseers that none of the Hemingses were to be relegated to field labor or to be whipped. He saw to it that Elizabeth, Sally and her full sisters, all exceptionally good-looking, were limited to what he considered the work of proper white women, sewing, spinning and weaving. He ordered that the male Hemingses learn valuable trades and allowed them to hire themselves out, keep their wages and travel at will. Elizabeth’s sons built Monticello; they made the bricks, laid the parquet floors, handcrafted the furniture and Jefferson’s fancy landau, fabricated the nails (no easy task before the bricks, laid the parquet floors, handcrafted the furniture and allowed them to hire themselves out, keep their wages and travel at will. Elizabeth’s sons built Monticello; they made the bricks, laid the parquet floors, handcrafted the furniture and Jefferson’s fancy landau, fabricated the nails (no easy task before the invention of special machinery), keys and locks, and maintained the splendid gardens. They were what Jefferson—ever the engineer—called “mechanics” of skilled crafts, which he himself enjoyed performing. In Paris, Jefferson paid dearly to have Sally’s elder brother, James, trained as the French chef de cuisine for his embassy.

Jefferson had brought Sally and James with him to Paris when he was the American minister to France. They could have won their freedom in court there, for the French had banned slavery. Jefferson did not want the officials he negotiated with to know that the Hemingses were his property, so he ignored the law requiring all visitors with slaves to register them. Gordon-Reed makes much of Jefferson’s benevolence that he paid James and Sally the wages of white servants, inoculated them for smallpox, taught them French, and outfitted them at great expense. In one season, he spent today’s equivalent of one thousand dollars to dress Sally properly in ensembles of fabrics he chose. Gordon-Reed emphasizes that as the American minister, Jefferson was very concerned with appearances for the nascent America.

Gordon-Reed brilliantly asks the right questions: Did Sally internalize her legal inferiority? She explains that it is unlikely. She argues persuasively that while most master-slave relationships were rapes, the Jefferson-Hemings union appears to have been one of affection. Jefferson, she emphasizes, could not tolerate being surrounded by people who did not like him, did not admire him. She quotes Sally’s great-granddaughter, who said of the couple that, “Jefferson loved her dearly.”

As Jefferson was making plans to return to America, Sally announced that she planned to stay in France. She spoke French and, skillful with her needle, could always find work. Gordon-Reed describes how Jefferson, the charming and crafty lawyer, met his match in the savvy teenager who negotiated a “treaty” with her owner. She agreed to accompany him back home and live as his “concubine.” In exchange, he promised to free their children when they reached the age of majority and to allow her to live in comfort with “extraordinary privileges.”

Contemporary sources say she was “pampered.” Sally’s duty was rather wifely, taking care of Jefferson’s garments and personal items.

As they had cared for him in his youth and prime, the Hemingses continued to “cosset” Jefferson as he became infirm with age. Only Sally and her male kin were allowed in his rooms as he lay dying. Gordon-Reed wonders what the now middle-aged woman felt as she left the grave of her lover. Sally went to live in a house on Main Street, in Charlottesville, with her two younger sons, Madison and Eston. Jefferson kept his word of emancipating their children—he had already freed several of her brothers. He did not explicitly free Sally in his will; she would have had to petition the Virginia legislature to allow a free black to remain in the state.

The 1830 U.S. Census listed Sally, Madison and Eston as white. Sally’s two older children, William Beverly and Harriet (who was said to be unusually beautiful), had already passed into the white world. They had left with their parents’ blessings when they became twenty-one. Madison moved to Ohio, where he saw two of his sons off to the Civil War in their blue uniforms. One came home and the other perished in Andersonville Prison.

As for the other Hemingses, their old fears were finally realized. Peter Fossett, Elizabeth’s great-grandson, later wrote: “Sorrow came... to the slaves of Thomas Jefferson.” Six months after the architect of Monticello died on July 4, 1826, Fossett, then eleven, was forced onto the auction block. He was one of the 130 valuable Negroes sold by Jefferson’s sole surviving legal child, Martha Jefferson Randolph, to pay Jefferson’s debts.


1 Back cover copy, Annette Gordon-Reed, Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy (Charlottesville, Va.: University Press of Virginia, 1997).
3 The Y chromosome is passed down father to son, unaltered for generations.
4 Madison Hemings’s word in the 1873 newspaper interview.
5 Ibid. “Concubine” then meant more of a common-law wife for whom a man had responsibilities.
The Politics of Food in Africa:
The Contentions of a Contrarian

Review of
Robert Paarlberg, Starved for Science: How Biotechnology is Being Kept Out of Africa (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008),
256 pages with references, index

There are some very appealing aspects to Robert Paarlberg’s recent book, Starved for Science: How Biotechnology is Being Kept Out of Africa. Few would contest his basic premise that improvements need to be made in the overall poor performance of African agriculture and that new approaches to improving yields should be taken seriously. He certainly seems to have a genuine concern for African farmers and their futures and is passionate to present a different point of view that will provoke debate. So far so good.

The problem is that the arguments he makes are so provocative that they end up alienating more than persuading. I fear he may relish his position atop the contrarian soapbox a little too much, never really climbing down long enough to engage the arguments of others honestly.

The sharp tone of the book is set early in a preface by the notable agricultural scientist Norman Borlaug and former President Jimmy Carter. They write that the book will show how “withdrawal of donor support for modern agricultural science in Africa, plus outright opposition to new farm science on the part of some global pressure groups, is contributing directly to the continued growth of poverty and hunger in Africa.” Them’s fighting words, and Paarlberg is ready to come out swinging.

He himself summarizes his position: “These smallholder farmers in Africa are poor... because the productivity of their labor in farming has not yet been enhanced by any of the modern applications of science that farmers elsewhere have used to prosper.” He acknowledges that this position will be a controversial one in the academic community—or the “social circles”—in which he works (he is a professor of Political Science at Wellesley College). He characterizes the dominant view among his colleagues and students as prone to “recoil if they knew I wanted to replace traditional African farming practices with an increased use of high-yielding crop varieties, or even worse, genetically engineered crops.” Though he may be right in classifying most academics as on the “small is beautiful” end of the agricultural spectrum, there is a great deal of nuanced scholarship he glosses over in staking out his opposing view.

Paarlberg’s argument is founded on several basic premises, none of which I could really stomach (sorry for the food metaphor, more to come...). First is to blame the problems with African agriculture on westerners, or the urban elite in Africa who mirror those Western views. Although blaming the West may actually align him with many academics, his argument is largely limited to the destructiveness of the “imperialism of rich tastes” and does not engage serious debates about the destructive effects of policies like structural adjustment on African agriculture or the activities of corporate agribusiness. While the debates about genetically engineered crops are certainly interesting ones, the behavior of Western consumers is a very small piece of the story of the current state of African agriculture.

Second is to make his case by belittling the positions of others. Organic agriculture seems to be a favorite whipping boy, but he also disdains “food purists, environmentalists, populists...
and agrarian romantics” in addition to taking on many of the NGOs as well as government agencies supposedly standing in the way of scientific research.

Third, and what I found most troubling, is that his case stays on a very macro scale and is made largely from outside the African continent. Rarely do we hear about specific African countries, not to mention agricultural systems. Where is a sense of the immense diversity in agricultural systems throughout the vast African continent? Paarlberg talks about visiting the African farmer in a sturdy vehicle and with a translator, but nowhere in the book do we hear about any research he may have undertaken on the ground, and he gives short shrift to the wealth of research on African agriculture, smallholders, and the farmers themselves. Why do we not come to understand the local political and social systems in which these men and women operate? Where is a discussion of the economic, ecological as well as “scientific” knowledge that is embedded in the existing systems of agriculture and upon which so many anthropological, historical as well as agricultural economic fine-grained studies have been conducted? Why is it only the consumers in rich societies who are interested in “social values—such as foods grown locally by small family farmers rather than by industrial-scale farmers half a continent away?” This actually typifies the “African farmer” embedded as she is in a social system of agrarian production often blamed for the lack of modern innovations (see Glenn Stone’s discussion, “Social Constraints on Crop Biotechnology in Developing Countries”). I am sure Paarlberg would not have found the results of these many studies on local agricultural systems persuasive or allowed them to topple him off his soapbox, but had he referred to them, I, at least, would have found his thesis more convincing and weighty. The intellectual meal would have been perhaps less spicy but in the end much more digestible (don’t say I didn’t warn you...).

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1 Full disclosure—he does summarize an Ethiopian study I co-authored (156).

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From Russia, with Love
or Is Leo Demidov Really James Bond without the Public Schooling?

Review of
Tom Rob Smith, The Secret Speech

Leo Demidov is the focus of Tom Rob Smith’s action-packed adventure story of crime, betrayal, and revenge, set in the Soviet Union and Hungary during the early days of Nikita Khrushchev’s eleven-year tenure as general secretary of the Communist Party and leader of the Soviet Union (1953-1964). It is Smith’s second book chronicling the life and transformation of Leo from a tenacious trained killer for the State into a more thoughtful servant of justice and devoted family man, the first being Child 44 (Grand Central Publishing, 2008), now in production for a 2010 film release by director Ridley Scott.

The plot of The Secret Speech is wide ranging, covering all of the Soviet Union, from Moscow in the west to Magadan and the forced labor camps in the east, and then southwest to Budapest, Hungary. It involves approximately a dozen main characters and at least as many lesser characters, all with interlocking stories and a wide array of backgrounds: orphans, secret police investigators, highly placed political figures, housewives, teachers, prison guards, prisoners, professional criminals, and even a baker, just to mention some. The larger themes of crime, betrayal, revenge, love, hate, and forgiveness emerge and develop as characters strive to acclimate to life once Khrushchev has delivered his so-called “Secret Speech” or Special Report to the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, during a closed session on February 24-25, 1956. Once the contents of the speech, an unprecedented critique of Joseph Stalin, his regime, his ruthless purges, and his “cult of personality,” are released to the public domain, all previous social structures are open to re-evaluation. People, especially those who had been in positions of power under Stalin, need to rethink quickly their belief in the Soviet system and any former actions in its name, especially those that might seem morally suspect within the context of the new regime. In such a situation, certain questions come to the fore and are specifically and obviously addressed by several of the characters at one point or another in The Secret Speech: When the police are criminals and criminals must keep the law, how is it possible to know who is good and who is evil? Can innocent people be guilty of heinous crimes by association, by virtue of the fact that they knew of these crimes, yet did nothing? Can humans commit acts of violence against each other that are ultimately unforgivable, and how and where does one draw the line? Is it possible for an individual to rectify the crimes of his past, especially if these crimes involved the torture and murder of innocent people?

The story told in The Secret Speech begins on June 3, 1949. It lingers here for just an evening, long enough for Leo Demidov, who has been working undercover for the MGB (the Ministry for State Security) as a seminarian, to arrest a secretly practicing Orthodox priest and his wife, before fast forwarding seven years to Moscow, March 12, 1956. Historically, this is less than a month after Khrushchev delivered his speech to the 20th Party Congress. However, there is a disclaimer at the front of the book telling us, “This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.” So perhaps this detail is irrelevant. Leo has been trying to put his past as an MGB officer behind him. Since 1953 (and the end of Child 44), Leo has been the head of a new homicide department, loosely overseen by the notorious MVD (Ministry of Internal Affairs, the secret police). Leo and his wife, Raisa, have been working out their marital differences. Mainly, this has meant that Leo has stopped keeping secrets from his wife regarding his work. He and Raisa have adopted two daughters, Elena (7 years old) and Zoya (14 years old), whom they saved from an intolerable existence in a Soviet orphanage, also recounted at the end of Child 44. Without reading this first installment of the life of Leo Demidov, the reader knows only that Leo was intimately involved in the murder of these children’s parents, and that Zoya can never forgive Leo for this, no matter how many bedtime stories he reads and how hard he tries to be a real father to her. Resolving this conflict proves to be the single most important motivating force in terms of explaining Leo’s actions for the remainder of the novel.

The action unfolds with amazing speed. Trying to keep track of time and location would be extremely difficult without the device of using chapter headings as markers of time and place. Titles range from “Same Day,” to “Kolyma: Thirty Kilometers North of The Port of Magadan; Seventeen Kilometers South of Gulag 57; 10 April.” By paying close attention, but not too close, since days seem to go missing from time to time, the reader knows that between March 12 and March 15, 1956, retired MGB officers are being victimized by an unknown gang of...
professional criminals. Each victim receives a copy of the Secret Speech, bound in brown paper with an ink cross drawn on the cover. They also receive official photographs taken during the midnight arrests of the many people they sent either to forced labor camps or to immediate death by execution. Victims range from a former low-level guard and photographer, to Leo’s former superior officer in the MGB, to the former Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia—the leading religious authority in the country. A great deal happens during these three days: suicide, murder, denunciation, kidnapping, shooting, domestic violence, and a chase through the Moscow sewer system. Befitting the genre, incidents of violence tend to be described in vivid detail throughout the book. The author is particularly adept at keeping the action fast paced, while making sure that the reader is fully aware that violence is messy and involves a lot of blood and pain. For example, during the chase through the aging and labyrinthine system of Moscow’s sewage tunnels, the reader’s attention is constantly and skillfully focused in on such details as the “slow-flowing stream of filth,” “excrement streaked across the wall,” and “open wounds roaring in pain as exposed flesh mingled with dirt and shit.” The last belong to Leo, who, as the reader will continuously be reminded, never gives up. Like the action, he is unrelenting. On March 15, at midnight, Leo meets the mastermind behind the murders of the formerly untouchable State officials. The revelation surprises Leo and is meant to surprise the reader. All that will be said here about the meeting is that as a result of it, three weeks later, on April 7, Leo finds himself in the windowless hold of the notorious Stary Bolshevik prison ship, sailing for the port of Magadan, in the Russian far east.

Leo spends the next two days “in the pitch-black belly of the Stary Bolshevik, among the stinking bodies of five hundred murderers and rapists and thieves…..” The air is “stale and putrid.” Leo has already been on board the ship for seven days and has managed to fight for and defend a top bunk “prized for its elevation from the vomit and shit slopping on the floor.” Before he can get to the Port of Magadan, however, he has to survive a collision with an iceberg, a death threat, and an attempted mutiny of prisoners. By April 9, the ship is safely docked and the prisoners are transported to Gulag 57. By April 12, he is back in Moscow. Incredibly, during these four days, Leo undergoes torture, a prisoner uprising within the camp, at least three near-death escapes, and the loss of his best friend and closest colleague. He takes revenge on the guard who killed his friend, escapes from Gulag 57 with one of the prisoners, even though “escape was considered impossible,” convinces a pilot-in-training to fly from Siberia to Moscow, and meets up with his superior officer in the MVD, Frol Panin, who has unexpectedly appeared at the airport to greet the plane and take Leo to another mysterious midnight assignation, this time on the Bolshoy Krasnokholmskiy Bridge. Too late, Leo realizes that he has fallen prey to a complicated plot of revenge.

The reader experiences these few days as a quick moving succession of fragmented scenes. The action constantly shifts between Siberia and Moscow, between Leo, Zoya, Raisa, and all the other characters associated with these three at this point in the book. This constant shifting of location and focus serves to intensify and compress the plot, as the characters all head inevitably and irreversibly towards a single, momentous event, the meeting on the Bolshoy Krasnokholmskiy Bridge. Once again, Leo and the criminal mastermind behind the murders and the elaborate, vengeful plan, which has taken approximately 285 pages of this 403-page book to develop and come to fruition, meet face to face. Again, Leo is taken by surprise and as a result of this second meeting will find himself five months later in Budapest, right in the center of the Soviet invasion of Hungary, this time with his wife and Karoly Teglas, a State appointed Hungarian guide, interpreter, and undercover operative working for the KGB.

In spite of the aforementioned disclaimer that The Secret Speech is a complete product of the author’s imagination, dates related to Leo’s sojourn in Budapest seem to adhere fairly closely to those of the actual historical invasion (October 23-November 4). Leo, Raisa, and Anatoly arrive in the city on October 27. By November 4, having successfully achieved their goal in coming to Budapest, Leo and Raisa are on their way back to Moscow. Without revealing too much about what goes on during this time, which is set against a sweeping backdrop of tanks, machine guns, grenades, blown out buildings, alcohol, drugs, and a lot of revenge, suffice it to say that all of the main characters who are still alive converge, and there is a significant twist in the plot that causes the question of who is good and who is evil to resurface as a central point of focus. Throughout it all, Leo relentlessly pursues his goal of redemption and forgiveness, particularly in his relationship with daughter Zoya. It seems as though this need motivates him to accomplish superhuman acts of strength and bravery, putting the safety of others before his own, but always managing to survive the tightest

continued on p. 22
near-death experiences nonetheless. Others are not so fortunate.
By the end of the book, with Leo and his family safely back in
Moscow and Leo in a new, gentler and less morally ambiguous
profession, all major characters, with the exception of Leo’s
MVD boss, Frol Panin, who, it might be suspected, is being
saved for a possible sequel, have died.
Although Leo seems content with
both his family and his new job,
there is a hint that the days of the
homicide department might not be
completely over.

If Tom Rob Smith’s book has
everything that an action adventure
novel should, and it seems to, then why
is it so frustrating to read? Perhaps what potentially makes this
book a satisfying read also serves to undermine the satisfaction.
The author has chosen to set his story during a complex, diffi-
cult, and painful time in twentieth-century world history.
Regardless of the disclaimer about similarities to historically sig-
nificant events and locations, it is clear, both by reading the text
itself as well by consulting the lists of “further reading” found at
the end of The Secret Speech and Child 44, that the author has
read and retained a good deal of historical and cultural information
in preparation for writing this book. Although they are in
slightly altered form, the book is liberally sprinkled with referenc-
es to real places and events and is filled with Russian words and
phrases. If not to suggest authenticity, then to what purpose?
And once authenticity is suggested, what then? Every event and
scene is so carefully rendered, and so often resembles something
real—the story surrounding the cathedral at the book’s opening,
specific Moscow metro stops, a detailed description of torture,
the barracks and prisoners’ lives in Gulag 57, and the events
of the Hungarian uprising, to mention some—that it becomes
difficult to maintain the suspension of belief needed to fully
lose oneself in the fictional story of Leo’s quest for redemption,
which lies at the core of The Secret Speech.

In order to achieve total immersion in the work as fiction,
it seems best to focus solely on the action, ignoring most, if not all,
of the extremely interesting details that might evoke curiosity
about the actual historical and cultural context. For me, as a
reader with prior knowledge of the language and the historical
period in question, becoming curious about descriptions that
seemed to be important literary, cultural, or historical references
only set up an ever growing series of false expectations. One of
the earliest and most striking instances of such an expectation
was the obvious allusion to Nikolai Gogol’s famous story,
“The Overcoat.” While I spent time wondering about the pur-
pose and uses of such a reference, about whether or not there
would be more such references, or at least some important fol-
low-up to the reference, I found myself losing track of, and
interest in, Leo’s quest. Additionally, Tom Rob Smith packs his
novel with words transliterated directly from Russian. I found
this feature interesting enough to spend time thinking about its
purpose. Some words, such as the slang used by criminals and
political prisoners, made sense to include because they lose mean-
ing in translation. But why the reader
needed to know that “council of bishops”
is “pomestny sobor” in Russian remained
unclear to me. I also wondered why “vory,”
which means “thieves,” was used to refer to
one thief or many thieves, a minor detail
that becomes distracting nonetheless. As an
active reader who enjoys novels that chal-
lenge me to read on several levels, I began
to think not just about the main plot line, but about language,
history, culture, and literature. This was a mistake. After several
hundred pages of reading, I realized that nothing, other than the
action, was going anywhere with a purpose. I had to admit that
while the text of The Secret Speech held the potential to develop
into a rich and satisfying many-layered tale, in the end, it was
what it was—a well-written action adventure story. With this
realization, I adjusted my expectations, stopped paying too much
attention to interesting details and possible allusions, and tried to
focus solely on the action directly related to Leo’s quest. In order
to fully enjoy The Secret Speech, one had best read the work in
full and passive acceptance of the characters and their actions as
they unfold, scene by scene, without letting the mind stray to
larger philosophical, literary, or historical questions.

Perhaps “reading” is the wrong verb to use in regard to
The Secret Speech. “Watching” might be a better choice, for the book
does seem to be well suited, as Child 44 was, for the screen. Since
Tom Rob Smith is also a screenwriter by trade, the idea that the
book might be easily adapted to the screen as a cinematic action
thriller makes some sense. While spending hours at the beach
or curled up in a comfortable chair reading a tale of action and
adventure set against a backdrop of human suffering, torture, and
forced labor in the Gulag Archipelago of Eastern Siberia will not
appeal to certain readers, this one included, this tale might, to
tese same people, seem more palatable, and ultimately less trou-
bling to the conscience, appearing on the screen, where there is
clearly no time or compunction to consider larger, more complex
questions of humanity, morality, or political climate, and where
the historical and cultural context is more likely to supplement
rather than distract from the central action of the work.

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at Washington University in St. Louis.
To be a good boxer you have to have a type of mentality that is rare. You could say boxers are rare people... —Angelo Dundee, who trained welterweight and middleweight champion Carmen Basilo and heavyweight champion Muhammad Ali, among others

The thing with boxing is you have to live a different life. It is your ass every time you go out there. It’s not “We’ll get ‘em next week.” You realize that one punch—from somebody who knows how to throw a punch—could kill you. —Boxer Greg Sorrentino

Part 1: The Art of Bruising

Professional boxers, like all high-performance athletes, are, indeed, rare people. In fact, even among athletes, boxers exhibit a rare mentality: theirs is the only sport where the object is to try to so severely hurt your opponent that he cannot or will not continue the contest. Better still if the boxer can knock out his opponent, render him unconscious, give him a temporary brain trauma. Dundee is right. It takes a rare mentality to want to do that to someone else and a rare mentality to endure the possibility of experiencing it oneself. It goes without saying that boxing is a violent sport. That is a trite observation. Boxing is something more profound than that. It is a shockingly persistent will to violence, an homage to the darkness that drives us as human beings, done up as a cultural ritual.

It is a mistake to think that boxing is about savagery, barbarism, or something like street fighting. It is not. Unlike today’s mixed martial arts and free-for-all bouts in cages, both compelling examples of twenty-first century decadence (make everything pornographic, the ultimate aim of popular culture), modern gloved-boxing reflects the considerable restraints of its Victorian origins. One can strike an opponent with one’s fists and that is all. One cannot bite, slap, head-butt, strike with the elbow, or kick. (Of course, all of these acts have occurred in prizefights, but they are illegal and since a fighter can be, and sometimes is, disqualified for doing any of them—I have seen disqualifications on these grounds over the years—boxers do them furtively. And only bad, tired, or hopelessly outclassed boxers resort to these tactics.)

One cannot hit below the belt, behind the back, behind the neck. One cannot strike an opponent when he is down. One cannot stand over a fallen opponent. (What Muhammad Ali did in the famous photo of him standing over a fallen Sonny Liston in their second fight, motioning for Liston to get up, was illegal and showed how little control referee Jersey Joe Walcott, an ex-champion who should have known better, exercised over the bout. It did, however, make one of the great photographs in the history of sports.) Boxing is rigid, like any true sport: the rules are everything. Boxing is about taking something that is essentially pornographic—two men fighting simply as a spectacle—and purifying it of its obscenity by making it a discipline so harsh that only the most dedicated can pursue it as a form of pure desire. Thus, the point of boxing is to hit one’s opponent without being hit, not simply to trade blows until someone falls, quits, or dies. Boxing, like blocking at the line of scrimmage...
in American football, is an art that takes years to learn. It may seem odd to call professional boxers artists, but that is exactly what they are. All high performance athletes are, really, artists whose artistry can be dismissed or ignored but never denied or even disputed as a form of virtuosity.

But if modern boxing is Victorian in its precision and control, it is also romantic in its spirit: individualistic, rebellious, a gesture of heroic expendability, populist, common and quirky to the point of being nearly a folk expression, innocent in spite of the corruption that envelops it, indifferent to, yet fascinated by, its tragic nature, mythic in what it claims to represent. Boxing is primitivism as a theory of enlightenment: how can you know who you are unless you confront that which is not you but yet seems like you. Boxing is the true theory of otherness, not this postcolonial nonsense that the intellectuals have been uttering for what seems like a long, dreary age.

No boxer better exemplified the art and science of boxing, its restraints and refulgence, than Sugar Ray Robinson, its greatest artist, the man Muhammad Ali called in his ghostwritten autobiography, *The Greatest: My Own Story* (1975), “the king, the master, my idol.” Ali, born in 1942, grew up in the age of the Great Robinson in the late 1940s through the middle 1950s. He copied Robinson’s fighting style, which in a heavyweight at first looked bizarre and untenable. Robinson, a welterweight and middleweight champion, at his fighting best weighed 60 pounds less than Ali did as a pro. A successful fighter of more recent vintage who copied Robinson’s style was the superb welterweight and middleweight Sugar Ray Leonard. Perhaps for younger folk, Leonard has supplanted Robinson, even taking the name. Robinson was the great hero of my uncles, the so-called greatest generation that grew up during the Depression and World War II, the last fans of swing music and the first fans of television, who were parents of young children in the 1950s and 1960s. These were Robinson’s legions: the generation before mine. And I am an old man now, so why would any young people under the age of 40 remember or want to remember Robinson, the most perfect boxer of our brief American Century, the greatest fighter, pound for pound, that ever lived?

“But as with all great and romantic men,” Wil Haygood, Robinson’s latest biographer, and unquestionably his best, writes, “Sugar Ray Robinson’s own dreams outpaced the desires others had for him with a blinding speed. He had an almost messianic drive, and wherever others saw limitation, he saw opportunity. Where others saw the confinement of the athlete, he saw the athlete in transcendence, using his drive and skill for other creations, especially those of an artistic nature.”

Robinson was one of the few fighters who understood the nature of his artistry, the sublimity of his calling, who understood that he had a rightful claim upon the public imagination as an icon of beauty. Robinson was the man who taught Ali how to massage being larger than life and how to perform brilliantly a sport that you disliked. There was always about Robinson, even more than most great fighters, an icy detachment in his destruc-
According to Wil Haygood, Sugar Ray Robinson was born Walker Smith, Jr., on May 3, 1921 (the official boxing record books give the birth year as 1920), in Detroit, Michigan. His father had left rural Georgia in 1920, as did many other African Americans, to seek a better life in the urban north. The great heavyweight boxer Joe Louis’s father (not his biological dad) did the same, also relocating his family to Detroit. The story goes that young Walker Smith, Jr., carried Louis’s boxing bag when Louis, as a teen, embarked on his amateur career. In 1932, his parents’ marriage gone sour, his mother took Walker and his sisters to Harlem, the great black Mecca of the world, which Walker would make his headquarters for the duration of his career as a boxer. In the public’s mind, Sugar Ray Robinson was Harlem, its face, its voice, its style, its hero. The Harlem of Robinson’s youth had two sides, as Haygood points out: “In one Harlem there were poetry readings and social teas; there were gatherings that featured notable speakers who talked about national affairs and the doings they were privy to in the Roosevelt White House. In this Harlem, the collegiate sons and daughters of prominent families, home on school break, talked about their studies at Fisk, Howard, and Lincoln universities. In this Harlem there was music by the Harlem Symphony; there were NAACP galas and fraternity soirees. . . . The other side was darker and unforgiving. . . . [This] Harlem was a rough place, a lower-class enclave of broken families, of flophouses and boardinghouses. Of racketeers and gangsters, of big crime and petty crime. Of handouts and hand-me-down clothing, of little boys often scampering about like lambs being hunted.” Harlem was the showplace of the New Negro, the self-conscious political and cultural invention of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and the biggest black slum in the United States. As a celebrity, in some ways Robinson would combine both of these Harlems: the New Negro and the poor ghetto youth, the sophisticated glam boy and the smart-aleck, hustling street kid who was a royal pain in the ass to boxing promoters.

Robinson had no interest in school, drifted into a boxing gym in the basement of a Methodist church at the age of 13 and stuck around. He worked obsessively at his craft. He became one of the greatest amateur fighters in the history of the Golden Gloves. He became Ray Robinson one night when George Gainford, who would remain his trainer for Robinson’s entire career, needed a flyweight to fill out an AAU boxing card. Walker Smith did not have an AAU card, but a kid named Ray Robinson, who was not there, did. Gainford presented young Walker as Ray Robinson, and a legend was born. What happened with Robinson was not unusual. The same thing happened to Leonard Liotta, who became Tony DeMarco, assuming the identity of an absent kid in order to fight as an amateur, despite the fact that he was under-aged. Rocky Barbell was Rocky Graziano for somewhat similar reasons. There are a lot of name changes, rebirths, and conversions in boxing, none greater than Cassius Clay, who became Muhammad Ali. But identity swapping is a tradition in the sport.

Robinson started his professional career in 1940. It took him six years before he finally got the opportunity to fight for the welterweight championship. He had 75 fights before he finally won a world title, an unconscionable number, and more than the entire careers of most fighters today. Why? His reputation and skills preceded him, as it were. The press called him “the uncrowned champ.” Champion fighters were not eager to fight him because they knew, in their heart of hearts, that they had virtually no chance of winning. He missed some time, not a great deal, as a result of being inducted into the army in February 1943, joining Joe Louis in giving boxing exhibitions at bases around the country. In June 1944, he was out of the army under mysterious circumstances, some business about his suffering from amnesia, which apparently cleared up entirely once Uncle Sam no longer needed him. He also attacked a white MP who threatened Joe Louis at a base in Alabama. He then disappeared, winding up in a hospital suffering from amnesia after a fall. (He provides an account of this in chapter nine of his autobiography, Sugar Ray, published in 1970, and ghosted by sportswriter Dave Anderson.)

“Robinson ignored the sportswriters who pilloried him over his military record, explaining that those same writers had long labeled him arrogant,” writes Haygood. They accused him of desertion. Robinson hated the military. He didn’t like to take orders; he didn’t like the segregation in the south or the segregation in the military. It is a bit ironic that what broke up Robinson’s friendship with Ali was Ali’s stance against the draft and his refusal to be inducted. Robinson told Ali that he had to go into the military; he was foolish to fight it. Ali called Robinson an Uncle Tom. 1 It was the difference in generations: Robinson knew Ali would not have been assigned to combat and Ali probably could have “slied” his way out of the army entirely after a year or so, faking an injury of some sort. After all, Robinson himself had done it. The fact that Ali, from Robinson’s perspective, either from fear of the Nation of Islam or out of political naivety, would refuse induction on the basis of some principle, seemed nonsensical. Who cared so much about conscription or Vietnam that one would go to prison, sacrifice one’s career over “bullshit” like that? Robinson wasn’t cynical about religion; he was a practicing Christian his entire life. But he was cynical about the Nation of Islam, which he, with his Harlem street smarts, thought was nothing but a hustle to rope in gullible blacks.

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Maybe Robinson just didn’t like authority figures of any sort. Before he shed himself of Uncle Sam, he got rid of his manager, Curt Horrmann. He couldn’t stand giving up the manager’s cut of 33 percent from his purses. For nearly his entire career, Robinson managed himself, an idea about as wise as someone deciding to represent himself in court. It did not work out so bad for Robinson. He wound up no more broke than most fighters who do have managers. Of course, he was no less broke either, fighting at the end of his career for purses of $800, which was chump change compared to the $400,000 or more he earned for his major fights during his heyday; and, like Joe Louis, he owed the government a small fortune in back taxes.

Robinson tried to brand himself before it became common with athletes by being an entrepreneur, starting a nightclub, a barbershop, a lingerie shop, an office for himself and Gainford, and a realty company from which he could borrow money. (See Kenneth Shropshire’s Being Sugar Ray: The Life of Sugar Ray Robinson, America’s Greatest Boxer and First Celebrity Athlete, published in 2007.) The club during the height of his fame became a hangout for celebrities, Harlem hustlers, everyday people looking for celebrities, white folks in a slumming mood, and sportswriters hoping that Robinson’s pink Cadillac would be parked out front, which would indicate the boss was in. There was nothing especially unique in this; boxers like Jack Johnson and Jack Dempsey opened nightclubs and restaurants. (Countless bare-knuckle bruisers back in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries retired from the ring wars to run their own saloons.) But Robinson really thought himself a sort of “race” businessman, although he knew nothing about managing a business and all his businesses ultimately failed because of mismanaged, thieving employees and the like. Part of the reason for this failure is that businesses of this sort, relying on racial segregation to have a market, are usually under-capitalized and have an insufficient or unstable customer base. (They were, after all, going after African Americans as a market, appealing to the poorest segments of the public. The Negro Baseball Leagues are a good example of the problem of building black commercial institutions back during segregation. See Neil Lanctot’s Negro League Baseball: The Rise and Ruin of a Black Institution, published in 2004.) Moreover, when prizefighters own businesses they are usually an easy touch for sponges and sycophantic leeches and they ignore the details where the development of bankruptcy works. Nonetheless, Robinson was something of a race hero for those days.

My grandfather’s brother told me once that there was no greater feat for a man than to be able to employ someone using his own money. He ran a candy store in North Philadelphia. He was very proud of that. He employed two workers and once killed a man who tried to rob him.

Robinson’s most famous ring battles were the six times he fought Jake “the Bull” LaMotta (Robinson won five). His third-round knockout of Rocky Graziano. His two fights with Afro-British boxer Randy Turpin, splitting them. His two victories over the legendary Kid Gavilan. His two fights with Carmen Basilio, splitting them. Among his worst defeats were a ten-round beating he took from Tiger Jones in 1955, his second fight after a near-three year absence from the ring as he tried a career as a dancer; (he never fought Jones again). His loss to light-heavyweight champion Joey Maxim, a fight he had in the bag except he wilted in the extraordinary heat on an exceptionally hot New York June night (the fight took place outdoors). He collapsed from heat exhaustion in the 14th round. The fight nearly killed him and led him to retire from the ring in an effort to become a professional entertainer. (Not unique, lots of champion fighters tried vaudeville, film acting, and the like to cash in on their fame.) Later in his career, when his skills had diminished, he lost fights to Gene Fullmer and Joey Giardello, tough, wily pros. Indeed, he had once beaten Fullmer for the title. His most troubling fight was in 1947 when he killed Jimmy Doyle in the ring. He was understandably unnerved by the thought that he had beaten a man to death, although it was not his fault. In total, Robinson won the middleweight title five times, but he lost it five times, the last time being 1960. He continued to fight through 1965, past the age of 45, in hopes of getting another shot, but he never did. He was just an old fighter by then, fighting against unknowns and journeymen in tank towns for short money. I remember how one of my uncles couldn’t stand that. It hurt him deeply to see Robinson as a shell of himself. My other uncles didn’t mind. They felt Robinson had earned the right to go as he wanted to. I didn’t care. He just seemed like some old guy who was fighting on memory, a nice jab here, a beautiful hook there. All I could think of when I saw him fight on television was, well, he must have been good when he was good. And why is he still wearing that processed hair?

“I bet Bennie Briscoe could beat Robinson easy,” I said to one of my uncles, referring to a popular North Philadelphia boxer on the rise. I thought I knew and knew and knew boxing in those days.

My uncle walked away from me. He wore an expression that said I was just some dumb kid who couldn’t recognize a profound work of art, aged to fragile splendor, if it jumped up and kissed me.
Part 3: The Death of the Cool

_I continue to believe that I’m a chosen man._

—Sugar Ray Robinson, five years after retirement from the ring

In 1971, former middleweight champion Sugar Ray Robinson, retired since 1965 at the age of 45 after having fought professionally for 25 years and in 202 bouts, guest-starred on an episode of _The Mod Squad_, a popular crime show that featured young undercover cops on “a soul beat,” as the ads for the show said. Robinson played a retired fighter named “Candy” Joe Collins who decides to make a comeback after 11 years in order to win the affection of his son, who thinks his father is a relic. Robinson, still with his processed hair, looked like a Negro street hustler gone long in the tooth in comparison to regular cast member Clarence Williams III with his huge Afro and hip sunglasses. Haygood mentions the television shows on which Robinson appeared as an actor, suggesting that Robinson lacked the acting chops of other black athletes-turned-actors like Paul Robeson, Woody Strode, Jim Brown, and Fred Williamson. But Haygood does not mention this particular show, which, with its strong autobiographical thread, seemed almost elegiac. (Rocky Graziano also guest-stars as Robinson’s trainer, a fighter Robinson defeated in 1952, and who had more success as an actor. Robinson was estranged from his own son, Ray Jr., who is rarely mentioned in Haygood’s book. He had virtually no contact with his other son, Ronnie Robinson, who was a product of a teenage love affair.) At the time the show aired, it was hard for my Black Power generation to understand that Sugar Ray Robinson had once been the epitome of cool. Robinson’s fictional character takes a beating in the show but does earn the love of his son in the end, in part because he was willing to take a beating in order to prove that he loved his son. For my generation, everything was politicized. Even love was political, which was something of a travesty and a tragedy. It was not until I was much older that I began to understand why my uncles loved Sugar Ray Robinson so, not just as a great fighter but as an emblem of a kind of manhood that was, for them, almost noble in its romantic grandeur, untouched by any sort of sentimentality. I wish I had been able to understand sooner. The tailored suits, the entourage, the gassed, coiffed hair as a symbol of pride.

Sugar Ray Robinson died in 1989. He had diabetes, Alzheimer’s Disease, hypertension, and other ailments. My last living uncle has Alzheimer’s Disease, but on certain days he remembers his hero Sugar Ray Robinson’s astonishing speed, grace, and determination in the ring. He talks to me over and over about his fights.

“Yeah, Jay,” he says to me, “You should’ve seen him in his prime. That Sugar Ray Robinson was something else.” He forgets and says it again. And a few minutes later, says it again. His face is beaming with joyous, broken memory.

“Yes, Unk, Robinson was something else.” I say each time in response to him.

I think these are the days my uncle likes best.

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1 The autobiographies of the two fighters naturally have different versions of what broke up their friendship but they agree that it involved politics.

2 Haygood’s three biographies—of Robinson, of singer/dancer Sammy Davis, Jr., and of Harlem minister and Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., form a remarkable set of chronicles about the intersection of black masculinity, politics, and popular culture from the period of the 1940s through the 1960s.
The Jazz Study Group
In addition to the seminar sessions, the Center is pleased to announce the formation of a Jazz Study Group that will conduct monthly discussions on influential jazz texts whose cultural importance extends beyond the jazz studies community. Faculty, staff, and students, as well as the general public, are invited to attend these informal gatherings to break bread and freely converse. No preparation is necessary other than having read the book of that particular month. The schedule for the Jazz Study Group is:

**Friday, February 5, 2010:** Maya Gibson, Postdoctoral Fellow of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Sawyer Seminar, will lead a discussion of Billie Holiday’s *Lady Sings the Blues*.

**Friday, March 5th, 2010:** Matt Shipe, Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Sawyer Seminar Fellow, will lead a discussion of Rafi Zabor’s *The Bear Comes Home*.

**Friday, April 9th, 2010:** Jerome Cemal, Dissertation Fellow of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Sawyer Seminar, will lead a discussion of Amiri Baraka’s *Blues People*.

**Friday, May 7th, 2010:** Patrick Burke, Assistant Professor of Music at Washington University, will lead a discussion of Mezz Mezzrow’s *Really the Blues*.

Reading and Discussions will be held at 12 noon at Hurst Lounge, Duncker 201. Lunch will be provided. Please call the Center at 314-935-5576 to receive a free parking sticker and to reserve a seat.