“Yes, we’re going to a party party:”

WU alumna Rosalind Early weighs in on if the undergrad experience is as expensive, dumbed down, and empty as critics say it is.
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Notes of a Common Reader

Nothing is final until we render it fleeting; nothing makes sense until we confuse it; nothing is lively until we kill it.
Nonehtheless, there’s hope.
—Florence King, 1997

The Quest for Cheeky Women Pop Singers. On Tuesday, March 22, I saw, with my daughter Rosalind, who was reviewing it for St. Louis magazine, the Rep’s production of Beehive, the musical revue of 1960s women’s pop music. The audience was mostly aging baby boomers like myself for whom, I suppose, this music had some special attraction as we had, so to speak, lived through it, remembered it when it was new. Rosalind asked me how I felt about seeing something I lived through as nostalgic entertainment. There is a great deal of money, of course, in selling baby boomers, the first true youth culture generation in America, semi-fictionalized versions of their childhood and adolescence. I found this amusing, if also somewhat humiliating, as Rosalind did not think a great deal of either the music or the claims Beehive was trying to make for it. The major claim was the empowerment of women through this music, a claim resting largely on Lesley Gore’s “You Don’t Own Me,” Janis Ian’s “Society’s Child,” and Aretha Franklin’s version of “Respect,” as well as an onslaught of Janis Joplin at the end (four tunes). But most of the music made by pop women performers of the 1960s was not empowering in any sort of feminist sense, as people would mean today. It was about dating, being liked by a particular boy, hoping to get a particular boy, telling other girls to leave a particular boy alone, and getting married, this last being almost certainly a curious feature of the pop music of the time for today’s listeners. In the 1960s, sex in pop music culminated in marriage; today, it culminates in orgasm. In the 1960s, women were girls; now, they are bitches. Progress obviously comes with some considerable costs. In any case, the content of these 1960s songs differed very little from the content of the romance comic books of the day, sagas of modern love with a happy ending for working-class and lower-middle-class tweeners and teens. “Respect” has even a more ironical history because soul singer Otis Redding wrote and originally recorded the song as an anthem for black men, many of whom at the time felt that black women disrespected them. (Remember Reddings’s version was released in 1965, the same year as the Moynihan Report on the status of the black family and right when Black Power was on the status of the black family and right when Black Power was.

The Dilemma of the Humanities, Slightly Tongue-in-Cheek. Those who know these sorts of things tell us that the humanities are under attack once again and seem in serious danger of going under not only at the university but as any sort of significant presence in education itself. (Rage against the humanities is a disorder that is both acute and chronic.) It seems that the humanities had their heyday right after World War II when there was a great passion exhibited by educators and politicians for general education or exposure to great thoughts and books of mankind (or at least the Western branch of it) as a way to make better citizens (and to improve their taste). It was then the belief that no person could be considered well educated without a solid grounding in the humanities. Apparently, as the years have gone by, many people have been able to outgrow this dated, childish, and unwarranted assumption. Now, the humanities seem to suffer from two contradictory diseases simultaneously: obsolescence and faddishness. We in the humanities respond in an equally contradictory fashion by saying the humanities are relevant today, indeed, that they are eternally relevant because they teach something called “critical thinking” (whatever that redundancy means; I suppose there can be something called non-critical thinking, but I suspect that if people are being non-critical, they are also not thinking). This arrogant stab at pertinence (the sciences, the social sciences, business, and engineering do not teach “critical thinking,” I guess) is coupled with the idea that the humanities need no defense, really, as they transcend the marketplace, capitalism, communism, any connection with something so plebian as job skills (unlike those grubby disciplines—the sciences, the social sciences, business, and engineering), the humanities ultimately sitting as they do somewhere on the right side of the heaven-continued on p. 4
ly Father. To be sure, this two-pronged response has not gotten humanists very far in persuading politicians and university administrators that they still need us or need us in any notable number beyond SERVICE (making sure the kiddies know roughly the difference between Shakespeare and Abraham Lincoln), which, unfortunately, brings the humanities right back to their heyday after World War II when everyone thought they should be the core of general education. Unfortunately for humanists, general education is not quite what it used to be; the humanities are merely decorative now. And with Google and Wikipedia these days, even our SERVICE relevance is not what it used to be. Anyone can be a humanist now without the bother of reading a lot thick, old books as we live in an age when people get by very well, thank you, knowing “the gist” of things, the bottom line, as it were, as “knowing” the humanities is a bit akin to knowing baseball trivia. Ah, the humanities! So democratic in their rebelliousness, so trapped in elitism by their last refuge: expensive, prestigious colleges and universities where few of the working class ever tread. What is puzzling about advocates for the humanities is their insistence that the humanities are indeed oppositional to economic growth. Economic growth has made the humanities possible. (Humanists ought to be careful about arguing the anti-market blessings of their trade. They have only to trace the history of jazz to see that such claims only intensify the marginality of those making the claim and, indeed, the claim itself. The humanities are arguing themselves right out of school curricula and into museums and archives with such a strategy.) During my childhood, I was told that the humanities were nothing more than white cultural propaganda, a form of skepticism that all humanists, in not quite the pre-multicultural political formulation it was given to me, ought to have about the limitations and self-serving dishonesty inherent in our business, which, to some degree, multiculturalism has masked with its slogans of diversity and inclusion. The humanities are necessary, not virtuous either politically or as a cognitive exercise. The argument for the humanities is: they teach people how to read, decode, and translate literary, artistic, rhetorical, and well-rendered but ordinary pieces of writing; they teach people how to write in various modes and particularly how to use writing to manipulate, entertain, enrich, and poeticize, as well as to inform and argue; they teach people how to unearth narrative in all earthly activities and how to pack all earthly activities with narrative; taken together, these skills are extremely marketable for everything from formulating plots for video games to writing copy for catalogues, if taught correctly, and are highly significant for social and political reasons. We live in a culture of desire and humanists help the public understand itself by clarifying its desires through the instruction and seduction of words and by instructing the public to want what it wants to improve itself.

The Grand Actor versus the Barefoot Man with Cheek. It is commonly thought that Harry Houdini was the greatest of all theatrical magicians. He was not, although he, without question, with his escape artist stunts, was one of the most famous and daring performers of his time. His muscular physique, his flaunting of his fitness in numerous nude poses in chains, made him a combination of an athlete, a model, a sex symbol, and a matinee hero (which he tried to become in several silent films). Houdini is the most well-known magician (the entirely fictionalized 1950s Hollywood biopic with Tony Curtis and Janet Leigh further promoted Houdini’s fame among baby boomers, and more biographies have been written of Houdini than any other magician), but for those who know magic, he was never considered the best. Many people thought his close-up magic (cards and coins) never displayed good, clean technique. Critics often thought him to be clumsy yet machine-like in his execution. So, Houdini was not the heir-apparent to either of the two great magicians of the 19th century, Alexander Herrmann and Harry Kellar, the latter like Houdini made up in dogged ambition what he lacked in technique. Jim Steinmeyer, historian of theatrical magicians, makes a strong case for Howard Thurston, Houdini’s main rival, as the heir of the great European and American magicians and probably the finest performer of his age in the biography The Last Greatest Magician in the World: Howard Thurston versus Houdini and the Battles of the American Wizards (2011). Thurston had extraordinary technique, would practice his routine for hours on end, day after day. He was a magician, pure and simple, not an escape artist obsessed with publicity stunts. But there was something more. Thurston was a better actor. As Steinmeyer describes him, Thurston “played the part of a gentleman, businessman, entrepreneur, and a pillar of society who was a magician. Thurston charmed his audiences as the dapper man in the tuxedo standing at the edge of the stage, with his hand raised in supplication—the gatekeeper between the comically ordinary, doubting rabble in the audience, and the rarified wonders and profound magic just beyond the curtain.” Houdini wanted to be this but never could pull it off.

Boy, Are My Cheeks Red. On Friday, February 25, 2011, Washington University hosted a stated meeting of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. The occasion was the winter 2011 issue of Daedalus, the journal of the American Academy, which I guest-edited on the theme of Race in the Age of Obama. Three contributors from the issue gave short presentations: Jeffery Ferguson of Amherst College, David Hollinger of the University of California, Berkeley, and Korina Jocson of Washington University. During the question and answer period, someone mentioned how, during the age of segregation in the United States, black dignitaries from other countries were often treated differently and not discriminated against as ordinary, native black Americans were. I then added that filmmaker Preston Sturges had satirized this form of “passing” back in the 1930s in the opening scene of a film called Twentieth Century that starred Carole Lombard. There is very little that is correct about what I said. Let me unravel the mistakes: Preston Sturges did not direct Twentieth Century, Howard Hawks did. The film I was thinking of is entitled Nothing Sacred, which was directed by neither Preston Sturges or Howard Hawks but rather William Wellman. I did get three things right: the film does star Carole Lombard, it was made in the 1930s (1937, to be exact), and it does have an opening scene of an American black passing himself off as a foreign potentate and being treated with enormous respect by whites at a formal dinner. The scene is funny but somewhat discomforting to blacks, I would think, in ways that the filmmakers probably did not even think about at that time, specifically about what constitutes a fraudulent racial identity versus an authentic one.

1 Houdini was born Erich Weiss in Hungary but adopted his stage name, as the story goes, from the famous French magician, Jean Eugene Robert-Houdin. It was not necessarily a tribute. Robert-Houdin put it well when he described his craft: “A magician is an actor playing the part of a magician.”
Ten Things Art Can Do:
Speech Upon Receiving Washington University’s International Humanities Medal, November 30, 2010

By Francine Prose

One: Art can be beautiful. That is all it has to do. The only thing required. But what do we mean by beauty? Did the cave dwellers think, “Hey, that’s beautiful” when someone drew the first bison on the wall? Critics and philosophers have devoted their entire lives to defining beauty, while artists have pursued it from another part of the brain. Is there a beauty on which we agree? A Netherlandish portrait, perhaps, or Vermeer’s The Letter, or Cezanne’s apples. Probably it would be possible to know nothing about art, to have never seen a painting, and to look at any one of those works and think, Well, that is really gorgeous.

But what about those early viewers who saw Cezanne’s apples as the smudgy scrawlings of an untalented child? What about Jackson Pollock? It took me years and years to see the beauty in his paintings. When I say that I find Diane Arbus’s photographs of deeply strange looking children and bleary-eyed transvestites beautiful, you might not agree, even though you might know that they are supposed to be art and sell for a lot of money. And when I say that there is nothing so beautiful as a certain phrase in the St. Matthew Passion, or Cosi Fan Tutte, or in “Flamenco Sketches,” or in Mary Wells’s version of “You Beat Me to the Punch,” what I am saying, exactly?

Unraveling the word beauty can get us so ensnared that it’s no wonder that for a time critics and academics and even some artists agreed that it was probably better not to use it at all. For all I know—I haven’t kept up—this taboo still exists. And really, who can blame anyone for not wanting to sling around this vague, loaded, indefinable, antiquated term in the learned journals? Though it does seem a little strange to ban the word from the conversations of people for whom it is a matter of life and death.

The Greeks, at least, had some ideas: order, harmony, structure. But all of that had gotten a radical shaking up even by the time of, let’s say, Hieronymous Bosch. If we think the Apollo Belvedere is beautiful, what do we say about the naked bottom and legs of a man emerging from a strawberry and scurrying around The Garden of Earthly Delights?

Obviously, content is only a fraction of what matters. There’s beauty of conception and beauty of execution, which is, to oversimplify, partly what makes Cezanne’s apples different from the apples we doodle on a note pad or from the scribblings of a child. Conception and execution are major factors in the narratives on the page and screen that I tend to remember as beautiful. The scene in Mavis Gallant’s story, “The Ice Wagon Going Down the Street,” in which the self-deluded and heartbreakingly sad office worker at the League of Nations in post-WWII Geneva is asked to take home a mousy co-worker who has gotten drunk at a costume party. What happens—nothing happens—may well be the most important event in their lives. Yet one of them thinks that the nothing that happened was about not having sex, while the other thinks it was about not committing suicide.

Or the scene in Kosztolanyi’s novel Skylark: An elderly couple, whose beloved and burdensome thirty-five-year-old daughter has been away on vacation, freeing them for a week of unaccustomed pleasures and shattering realizations about their domestic life, goes to greet her at the station on her return. Dressed in an unflattering rain cape, a stupid hat, and carrying a scruffy pigeon, her new pet, in a cage, she is even homelier than they remember, just as she is even more intensely the love of their life and their jailer. Suddenly they notice that autumn has arrived. “A desolate boredom settled over everything. The warm days are over.”

Or the moment in Mike Leigh’s film Life is Sweet in which Timothy Spall as the sublimely geeky Aubrey opens a restaurant, a bistro on an Edith Piaf theme, the Regret Rien. Très Exclusive. On opening night, no customers come, and Aubrey, who has been drinking wine as he waits for the nonexistent onslaught of diners, trashes the place and winds up passed out on the floor, stripped down to a pair of terrifyingly creepy Speedos. Or the
scene in The Godfather in which Sonny speaks out of turn and the Tartaglia family knows that the Corleones can be attacked, or every moment of Michael K. Williams’s portrait of Omar Little in David Simon’s The Wire.

There is little that is conventionally pretty about watching a filing clerk dressed as a hobo nearly fall down in a Geneva Street, or a woman and a pigeon arrive at a rural Hungarian train station, or a chef with heartbreakingly hilarious pretensions to coolness charging around his empty bistro, overturning elaborately set tables, or a mafia sit down or a scar-faced Baltimore gunman stick up a dealer. But how can you not feel the beauty of these scenes?

Each of us has heard, and probably in a charitable moment thought, that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but each of us secretly believes that we are the one with the eye. Why do I see those melancholy scenes as beautiful? It’s a question to which there is no real answer, except to mention truth, another difficult noun, and to add that we do feel we know beauty when we see it. We could quote Emily Dickinson’s famous definition of poetry as applying also to beauty:

“If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. Is there any other way?”

Two: Art can shock us. I don’t mean shock as in bad news or brutal murder or horrific catastrophe or embarrassing scandal. I don’t mean shock as they meant it on this summer’s Next Great American Artist, a reality show modeled on Top Chef, in which, one week, the contestants competed to make shocking art. One of the judges was the photographer Andres Serrano, once considered shocking by among others the late Senator Jesse Helms, who was sincerely shocked that a government arts grant should go to a person who had photographed a crucifix submerged in a vial of urine. Did Andres Serrano think “beautiful!” when those contact sheets came back? On the show he spoke about the difficulty of making art that shocks at this particular moment. Certainly I wasn’t shocked enough to remember which competing artist won the competition.

But in any case, I mean something less esthetic and moral and more neurological, if you will: the shock that travels among our nerves and leaps across our synapses when we look at a Titian portrait or read a Dickinson poem. We understand it, and we don’t. We feel something we can’t describe; it’s a bit like those moments in dreams when we fall off a cliff and then discover we can fly. Dropping, then soaring. We can no more explain or paraphrase, describe or categorize our response than we can explain why a Chinese scroll can transport us out of the gallery and the museum and return us, moments later, giddy with the aftereffects of travel through time and space. The effect of those tiny art shocks is cumulative and enduring. Enough of them can change our consciousness, perhaps even our metabolism. Dieters, take notice.

I’ve always hoped that someone would fund a research project to measure the changes that occur in our brain waves when we lose ourselves in a book. What if it turned out these changes have a beneficial effect on our health, not unlike the benefits we have been told can be obtained from exercise and a daily glass of red wine? What if reading were proved to be more beneficial than exercise? Imagine the sudden spike in reading everywhere as the health conscious and the longevity seekers allow their gym memberships to lapse and head to the library and the bookstore?

A doctor’s assistant recently told me that she only likes books and films that are cheerful and uplifting because there’s enough doom and gloom in the world without looking for more. She said she hardly ever reads fiction because it’s so often depressing. She prefers books on philosophy. Like what, I asked. She said, Well, actually, I like books that tell you how to be a better person.

Three: Can art make you a better person? Art will not necessarily make you a better person. When I was a child my favorite aunt was a great fan of Wagner, and though my mother and father teased her for going to see fat women in braids and Viking helmets sing for five hours at a time, she secretly indoctrinated me into her cult of Wagner. I can still picture the cover of her record of Tristan und Isolde. Later, of course, I discovered that Wagner was extremely anti-Semitic and a favorite of the Nazis, and so forth, facts with little bearing on my falling out of love with Wagner as an adult. Recently, I learned from a documentary something that everyone else has probably known about forever: the manic intensity of Hitler’s passion for Wagnerian opera, how he felt his whole life changed after seeing a performance of Rienzi, whose hero, a medieval Roman tribune, leads his people to rise up against their oppressive rulers. Hitler would say of that performance, “It was in that hour that it all began” and claim that Nazism could not be understood without understanding Wagner.

Hitler had notoriously terrible taste in visual art, a predilection for the creampuff nudes of kitschy French painters like Bouguereau. There is a famous story about Hitler’s visit to Berlin’s National Gallery in the 1920s. Enraged to discover that Germany did not possess any work by Michelangelo, his favorite artist, Hitler was mildly consoled to find a painting by Caravaggio—Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio—whom Hitler thought was the same person as Michelangelo Buonarroti. Next, he became enchanted by Correggio’s erotic depiction of Leda and the Swan, though when his guide discovered him, transfixed before the painting, Hitler insisted he was only admiring the subtle play of light and shadow. Finally, and most revealingly, he sought out Rembrandt’s The Man with the Golden Helmet, an image which, Hitler claimed, proved that Rembrandt was a true Aryan and, despite the many works he’d done in the Jewish Quarter, had had no real interest in the Jews, after all. But Hitler’s henchmen had great taste—refined enough to know what they wanted when they looted the museums and private collections of Europe.
It’s true, or I want to believe that it’s true, that there that is something humanizing about the intimacy a book creates between the author and the reader, between the reader and the character, something humanizing about experiencing the vision and the handwork of another human being. We are so accustomed to speaking about the humanities that we take it for granted and no longer think about why these arts and fields of study are called that.

I would like to believe that reading a novel by an author from any of the countries in what George W. Bush termed the Axis of Evil may persuade us that the men and women and children who inhabit these so-called evil lands are—beneath the surface of custom or culture—very much like us and our friends and loved ones. That is, no more or less evil. But how much will that realization influence our actions? The example of Hitler and Wagner is a perfect example of how little control the artist has over what his audience sees in the mirror he has created.

Working on a book about the diary of Anne Frank, I met a group of inspiring young people who worked for the Anne Frank Foundation and were convinced that Anne Frank’s diary could turn other young people away from prejudice and violence. In their company, I too was convinced. But some crabby skeptical inner voice couldn’t help asking who, high on the chemical rush of violence, on the brink of committing a hate crime or perpetrating a genocidal massacre, would be stopped by the memory of a young girl’s diary.

In any case, it is neither the responsibility nor the purpose of art to make us better human beings. And it’s no wonder that art that takes on this solemn task so often winds up being didactic, preachy, cloying, and ultimately less effective than art with a less exalted notion of its purpose. Careers and talents have been ruined when an artist—Gogol, to take one famous and tragic example—was intoxicated and ultimately silenced by an exaggerated sense of importance. As Chekov said in one of his letters, “You abuse me for objectivity, calling it indifference to good and evil, lack of ideas and ideals and so on. You would have me, when I describe horse thieves, say, ‘Stealing horses is an evil.’” But that has been known for ages without my saying so. Let the jury judge them; it’s my job simply to show what sort of people they are. I write: you are dealing with horse thieves, so let me tell you that they are not beggars but well-fed people, that they are people of a special cult, and that horse stealing is not simply theft but passion. Of course it would be pleasant to combine art with a sermon. But for me personally it is impossible owing to the conditions of technique. You see, to depict horse thieves in 700 lines, I must all the time speak and think in their tone and feel in their spirit. Otherwise, the story will not be as compact as all short stories ought to be. When I write, I reckon entirely upon the reader to add for himself the subjective elements that are lacking in the story.”

Four: Though art cannot teach us how to be better human beings, it can help us understand what it means to be a human being. If you were to read every novel and story ever written, you would have a pretty good—if not entirely complete—idea of the range of qualities and ideas and emotions that characterize our species. Stare at a Rembrandt or a Rodin or a Helen Levitt photograph long enough, and afterward people look different, if not necessarily more explicable to themselves or us.

In that art—and here I am speaking not of music or abstract painting but of the narrative and figurative—can describe certain experiences that seem to be common to human beings (birth, death, procreation, falling in and out of love) it can show us that we share these experiences with other human beings. In that art can concern itself with emotions and longings and acts that we might not choose to discuss with our families or our neighbors, art can diminish the solitude of being a human being.

Five: Art can move us. Surely it must be possible to walk into the cathedral of Chartres or Borromini’s Chapel of Saint Ivo, or stand in front of Caravaggio’s The Crucifixion of Saint Peter, and feel nothing. But it might take some effort. To say that we try to avoid art that is depressing or disturbing is a backwards compliment to its power to affect us.

Perhaps, at some point, each one of us experiences his or her own version of the Stendhal syndrome, the hysterical psychosomatic response to the power or profusion of art, a disease first identified with and endemic to Florence, where even today a few cases are annually diagnosed.

For years I suffered from an inability to hear Mozart performed in public without bursting into tears. The quality of the performance made no difference at all, as I discovered hearing a middle school string orchestra play a simplified excerpt from the Jupiter Symphony. Once, after a crowd of Caravaggesque youths had nearly rioted and almost broken down the church doors before they were admitted to a church where a crowd of exquisitely dressed Romans had assembled to hear Mozart’s requiém, I found myself sobbing out loud. At moments, I’ve wondered whether these feelings would have been less intense if Mozart had been rich, successful, and sure of himself, like Handel, whose work I also love.

Six: Can art make us smarter? My kids were still in school when a study was published proving that students somewhere (Stanford, I think) scored better on standardized tests than did
the control group who hadn’t listened to Mozart. I prided myself on not being the kind of parent who made her kids play *Don Giovanni* on the way to take their SAT’s, though—confession—I did suggest that one of my sons put some Mozart on his Walkman. Having taken so little advantage of the available information, I was relieved when a more recent study questioned the results of the earlier research, though I’d liked the idea of Mozart, dead in his pauper’s grave, revived to help American students facing standardized testing.

Clearly more research is needed. Is a Wallace Stevens poem a stretching exercise for the brain? Will a half hour spent in front of a Velasquez painting help you ace the math test? Will reading Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* make you realize—as any reader or judge or prospective juror or citizen of a democracy or any form of government should know—that two different conclusions can be drawn from the same set of facts. If we equate intelligence with information, always a mistake, there is no doubt but that art is probably the most painless way of achieving and assimilating information. Read *War and Peace* and you learn something about the Napoleonic Wars. Look at a portrait by Bronzino and you find out how a certain class of people dressed in the 16th century. Read Philip Roth’s *American Pastoral* for an education in, among other things, the inner workings of a glove-making factory. Read García Márquez to discover an earlier meaning of Banana Republic, and Roberto Bolano’s *2666* to learn about the murders of thousands of women that have been taking place for decades along the US-Mexican border. A film like Jean Renoir’s *Rules of the Game* or Michael Haneke’s *Cache* can help us understand why people, at certain historical moments, make certain moral choices. And Otis Redding can step in to answer Freud’s question about what women want.

Art can make you smarter, if by smart we mean aware, responsive, cognizant, quick, and so forth. Art can make you aware of, or wake you up to the effects of history, of social class, of race, of gender, of good and bad luck. Art is the cerebral, spiritual, and emotional equivalent of the toners we splash on our faces to open up our pores. Art opens the heart and brain cells. Put Mozart on your iPod, and you’ll do better on the exam.

**Seven:** Art is a time travel machine. Surely, there is no better way, including the ouija board or the séance, to get in touch with people who have been dead for hundreds of years. If you want to know how a seventeenth-century Dutchman saw light, look at a Vermeer. If you want to know how it felt to be a bored housewife in a French town, centuries ago, read *Madame Bovary*. If you want a preview of an alternate or possible future, read *Dolce Vita*. If you want to know how it felt to live in a slave-holding society—that is to say, this country before the Civil War—*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* can tell you more than the most incisive, comprehensive, and meticulously researched history book ever written.

**Eight:** Art not only can transport you through time, it can transcend and erase time as you discover that those characters squabbling over the inheritance in a Balzac novel are your relatives. Or that Billie Holliday knew how to sing a phrase in the way that would most affect you and only you, knew how to bend and hold a note until you couldn’t help but notice.

One of the beautiful things about Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past* is how its consideration of the relationship between art and life extends outside of the book to make you consider the relationship between its art and your life. Reading the opening section, in which the child insomniac is waiting for the sounds that indicate his mother is coming to kiss him goodnight, we are restored to that moment in childhood when we lay awake in the dark listening for the longed-for or dreaded noise. Thus you could say that we begin the book by achieving the hoped-for result of the project that the narrator attempts in volume after volume, which is telescoping and recovering lost time, a project in which he eventually succeeds, thanks to the linden tea and the Madeleine, whereas we readers have already succeeded, at least partly, by reading the novel’s opening section.

This fall I taught an undergraduate course called Strange Books and the Human Condition. My intention was to find the strangest books I could think of, by the strangest authors, and to see what they have to tell us about literature and about what it means to be human. Each week, I’ve felt myself barely resisting a serious weekly recurrence of the Stendhal syndrome as I’ve listened to my students translate precisely the Morse code that these (in some cases) tormented or marginalized writers—from Kleist and Gogol to Bruno Schulz, Jane Bowles, Robert Walser, and Felisberto Hernandez—were trying so hard to tap out over the static and the howls of their demons.

**Nine:** Can art protect us? Art can protect us. If it can’t, why have so many people, probably starting with the first person who drew that bison on the wall, assumed that it could. The conversation about whether tribal or indigenous art is actually art is, to my mind, as arid and pointless as the conversation about whether it should be forbidden to mention the word beauty. Consider those towering wooden figures made by the Asmat people, those nail-studded totems from Benin or the Niger, the icons and reliquaries in the treasure vaults of cathedrals, or a Fra Angelico fresco on the wall of his brother monk’s cell, and tell me that art doesn’t have magic power. Idolatry is surely the most extreme form of art appreciation. According to the painter Alex Melamid, the way we know that artists are the priests of art is that they all wear black. Regardless of whether we believe that our novel can make the rains come and help our crops to grow, art is the driftwood humans cling to when they worry, as they always have, that our species is drowning.
Ten: Art can give us pleasure. Now we have come full circle, for to define esthetic pleasure is as freighted, as complex, as arguable, and as impossible as defining beauty. Emily Dickinson likened poetry to freezing and partial decapitation. There is pleasure in watching the films of Chabrol and Kurosawa, and a related, if different pleasure, in admiring the skill with which Chardin paints a bubble or a dead rabbit. There is pleasure in observing the small but precise incisions with which George Eliot lays bare a soul, or the zippy turns of phrase with which Dickens sketches a vast interconnected population, or the plot twists and bold declarations with which Kafka and Kleist persuade us to accept the most implausible premise.

As my doctor’s assistant said, There’s enough gloom and doom in the world. How fortunate, then, that we have art to amuse us, move us, inform us, comfort us, protect us, and console us for what we already know: that life is strange and hard and often dark, and we should be grateful, more than grateful, for those pinpoints of radiance, the cord of runway lights that guides us back through time and death to the hand which first drew that antelope on the wall.

Ten and a half: Looking over these pages, I realize that I may have seemed to be absolving art of all necessity to do anything but be art. If it can’t make the world a better place, or improve our moral lives, or educate us or uplift us, what then? Whether or not these efforts are the responsibility of art, the fact remains that they are our responsibility—not as artists or readers or writers, but as human beings. To care about our fellow creatures, to attempt to lessen their suffering and improve their lives, to choose compassion over cruelty, generosity over greed—is not a choice but a duty. To place that burden on artists and their work is just another way of shrugging off the heavy, confusing, and necessary weight that is ours, each one of ours, all together.

Francine Prose, acclaimed novelist and nonfiction writer, received Washington University’s International Humanities Medal on November 30, 2010, at Graham Chapel on the campus of Washington University in St. Louis.
Academic Publishing in Transition:
Faculty Book Celebration Keynote Address, November 29, 2010

By Alan Brinkley

It is a great pleasure, and a great honor, to have been asked to give the keynote address in this celebration of scholarship and publishing. All of us in academia know how important it is that scholars have the opportunity to publish their work—whether in books or in journals or in any other forms that make important scholarly work available to the world. But of course, we also know that the publishing world—and not just the academic publishing world—is changing rapidly.

This is not, of course, the first time that there have been radical changes in the character of the media. As some of you may know, I published this year a biography of publisher Henry Luce and his magazines—and in the process I learned a great deal about how the magazine world transformed itself in the early twentieth century. Luce’s magazines, Time, Fortune, and Life, were among the many newly minted magazines that created a form of national communication that had not existed before. No one imagined, in 1923, when two recent Yale graduates at the age of 23 created Time magazine, that it would help revolutionize the way in which Americans (and people in other parts of the world as well) would understand the world. The Luce magazines were the recipients of many criticisms, many of them deserved, but no one would doubt that they were important new vehicles of communication. They were only the beginning of a vast structure of information dissemination and interpretation that helped Americans to learn to understand an increasingly complex world.

At the same time that magazines were reinventing themselves, book publishing was reinventing itself as well. As late as the late nineteenth century, university presses barely existed, and only a relatively small number of books were published by academic authors. Some commercial presses picked up academic work, but most academic scholars did not publish at all, and those who did struggled to find places to publish.

But academic publishing experienced something of a revolution in the early twentieth century. This was largely a result of the emergence of a professionalized culture within the universities themselves—the establishment of the Ph.D. as the necessary credential for entrance into academia, the expectation of publishing in order to establish an academic reputation and gain status, and, finally, the emergence of university presses and academic journals in response to this occupational need for the dissemination of expertise that enabled scholars to publish their work and place their ideas in a broader critical arena. This model grew steadily through the twentieth century and produced generations of extraordinary scholarship.

The historian Olivier Zunz, in a book published a few years ago entitled Why the American Century? (University of Chicago Press, 1999) argued that the emergence of American universities was to a great degree responsible for the growth of American industry, government, and culture. The “American Century,” Zunz claimed, “was founded on Americans’ increasingly sophisticated ability to turn knowledge of the… world into [economic, political, and cultural growth], thus challenging Europeans’… leadership” in the creation of knowledge: A network of great colleges and universities grew up in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that created new areas of knowledge and expertise. Unlike the more cloistered universities of Europe, American universities not only fertilized academia but also served the larger world.

I speak of these issues from a number of perspectives—as a scholar who, like many of you, publishes books and articles and essays and reviews; as a former provost who served as the chair of the board of Columbia University Press; and, currently, as a trustee of the Oxford University Press, the largest academic press in the world. In those positions, I have seen both the tremendous problems that university presses face and also the opportunities that can, I believe, keep academic publishing alive and healthy.

Books as we know them are not an endangered species. I doubt anyone alive today will see a time when printed books will disappear. More books were sold last year than in any year before. But while many kinds of books are growing in numbers (for example, conservative attacks on Obama or biographies of Sarah Palin), fewer and fewer monographs are finding their way into print. Major scholars from major universities can usually find ready publishers. But many scholars who are just beginning, or who are working in colleges or universities that are not well known, or whose work is in an obscure field with a modest readership—those scholars will find it increasingly difficult to find publishers. At Oxford University Press, long the publisher of an enormous number of monographs, editors are no longer so eager to publish books that they suspect will not have an audience outside of the academic world. In my own field of history, I recall the Oxford advertisements in the AHA (American Historical Association) and OAH (Organization of American Historians) programs in which there were sometimes 8-to-10 pages of new titles listed in tiny print. Today, Oxford publishes about a...
quarter of the monographs they published ten or fifteen years ago—and still publishes more such books than almost any other press.

Oxford is a large, profitable, international press with no likelihood of failing. Some other university presses are flourishing, too, but not usually because of academic book sales; they survive because of endowments, or subsidies from their universities, or from the revenues from journals, or—in the case of at least one distinguished university press—from profits from their large warehouse. But the university presses that are flourishing, whatever the reason, are vastly outnumbered by the university presses that are struggling. So far, universities have usually stepped in to protect their presses from bankruptcy; no university wants to be the first to close down its press. But it seems almost inevitable that there will be a thinning out of university presses before long. Already, many struggling presses are publishing fewer books as a way to stay alive.

Many scholarly monographs have tiny markets, mostly consisting of library sales. For many years, libraries bought enough copies of any monograph to make publication financially viable. That is no longer the case. Academic libraries—struggling with the inflated costs of journals—cannot buy as many monographs as they once did, and that, of course, reduces the incentives for presses to publish them.

As a result, the kinds of books that get published in print form are likely to be narrower in the range of subjects they represent. And so it’s not surprising that all of those who work in print media—people who work in newspapers or magazines or journals or book publishing—are looking ahead to digitalization. Amazon reported not long ago that their sales of books to the Kindle now exceed the sale of books in print. Those books are, of course, also published in print editions. But the shift toward digital reading, which is growing rapidly, will undoubtedly lead eventually to a shift toward digital publishing alone—especially now that the Kindles and iPads and Nooks (and the inevitable copies that will begin emerging soon) are spreading fast. These devices have made it more comfortable for people to read pages on a screen. Perhaps the most striking example of the shift to digital-only publishing has been the announcement by Oxford University Press that the vast Oxford English Dictionary—perhaps the most revered dictionary in the world—will never again have a print edition. But there are many other examples. Encyclopedias are almost all now in digital form—and struggling in the face of competition from Wikipedia, which may not be reliable but which has the great advantage of being free, unlike traditional encyclopedias, which are struggling badly behind their pay walls.

About a decade ago, I was part of a committee that oversaw an experiment in the digital publishing of monographs. With support from the Mellon Foundation, and under the supervision of Robert Darnton (who is now the director of the Harvard Libraries), Columbia University Press agreed to publish several dozen monographs (all of them originally dissertations) in digital form only. Most of them were from small humanities fields with small readership, and they seemed an obvious group to test the viability of what then was a quite new way of publishing. The manuscripts were edited by Columbia University Press in the same way conventional books are; but the press also made use of capacities that could only be included in a digital book—virtually unlimited illustrations, in some cases film, in almost all cases links to primary sources. Darnton, in setting out a model for how to use digital forms for scholarship, suggested a three-step process for publishing: a relatively short printed book that would lay out the core of a project; a digital supplement that would elaborate on many of the issues the short book raised; and a platform for primary sources related to the project. The actual publications did not follow that form; but there were many innovations that were meant to make a digital publication actually better than books that were published in print. But as you might guess, the ambitious effort to make these digital books successful and innovative ended up being more costly to create than the traditional printed monographs. Even more troubling were the difficulties that the authors faced in getting their work reviewed, which in turn created problems for tenure cases. In the end, Columbia University Press had to go back to Mellon for a grant to allow them to print short runs of the digital monographs to allow them to be seen as “real” books.”

Ten years later, things have not changed very much. Many journals, of course, have already moved rapidly into digital-only formats. In science and medicine, for which there are innumerable journals, only a small percentage of them are still published in print—the most prestigious journals such as Nature or Cell. But most non-scientific journals still have print editions, and virtually all scholarly books are still in traditional formats. How long will that last? No one knows. But the economic pressures on publishing—and especially on academic publishing—suggest that many books now traditionally printed will eventually be published either digitally or not at all.

I have only occasionally published in a digital-only format myself, mostly short essays or blogs—never a book or a serious journal article. Nor have I ever used a digital reader for my own reading, at least not yet. But I don’t fear the transition that is sure to come. Reading is reading, whether it’s on paper or on a screen. It is already the case that many publications that used to be printed are now available only digitally, and it seems very likely that, if not books, at least newspapers and magazines will likely soon leave print behind. Many such publications have

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The shift to digitalization in newspapers and magazines is fraught with difficulties. Printed newspapers have been struggling for some time as classified advertisements, local retail ads, and other longtime profit generators have largely disappeared. Subscription and newsstand copies of traditional newspapers do not even cover the cost of printing. But revenues from online papers are even less profitable than the relatively weak paper revenues. Digital publications get their revenues almost entirely from advertising, and web-based ads do not yet provide enough revenues to support the publications in which they advertise. So there is much legitimate worry about the future of news, in particular, given that there is no longer (or at least not yet) any sustainable economic model for most newspapers and magazines.

But for the academic world, there is no such downside. Digitizing work that once appeared only in printed books does not degrade the content of such books, nor do they require a new economic model. On the contrary, digital publishing can bring down the costs of publishing scholarly material and thus make it more likely that many more small-readership monographs are likely to be published. And despite the Mellon experiment’s unhappy results, over time, I feel certain that digital publication will create many opportunities to enhance the way in which scholarly work is presented to the world. In many fields—especially scientific ones—this enhancement has already happened.

The real problem facing monographs is the way in which the academic world receives non-print material. An important challenge for scholarship will be how to persuade colleges and universities to accept non-print material as published scholarship. That must include the willingness of journals to review digital publications. And it must include the willingness of those who oversee the tenure process (as I did at Columbia for many years) to accept digital work and treat it as in no way inferior to printed work.

In a digital world, the pressure to publish a “book,” as opposed to journal articles, for example, may weaken. Most humanities fields are book cultures. Books are the sine qua non of academic success; and in many cases, of course, books are absolutely essential as a way of presenting research and ideas. But we are all aware, I am sure, that there is much scholarship that could be equally, if not more, influential if it were published as articles in journals rather than as books. There are many disciplines that have already moved away from books and into journals. Think of economics, sociology, philosophy, anthropology, and even political science—fields that publish books far less often than a decade or so ago. It is mostly humanities fields in which “book cultures” still dominate scholarship. And it is those fields (among them my own) that face the challenge of meeting the changing world of publishing.

A great deal is at stake in the survival of academic publishing, and not for academics alone. We should think for a few moments about the impact that scholarly publications in the humanities have had, the many ways in which they have changed the world.

In my own field of history, numerous academic publications have been important forces in the larger world: C. Vann Woodward’s The Strange Career of Jim Crow (Oxford University Press, 1955) helped strengthen opposition to segregation by revealing how legal measures can in fact create social change; works by William Appleman Williams, Walter LaFeber, and many other Cold War revisionists have helped millions of readers understand that such Cold War ventures as the Vietnam War have not been in the nation’s, or the world’s, best interest; Alfred Chandler’s magisterial business histories have contributed to the ways in which corporations have improved their organization and efficiency; the path-breaking work of such early women’s historians as Gerda Lerner has contributed much to the emergence of feminism; John Higham’s extraordinary history of nativism remains the most important study of this enduring issue, and the book is still of great relevance to this day; the pioneering historians of gay America have helped many men and women to find greater acceptance; and other studies—in many fields—have had as much, or more, influence outside the academic world as within it.

There is little debate that much of what the academic world produces is of great value to the larger world. But today there is a growing sense among many people that education should give highest priority to science, technology, mathematics, engineering, and other practical fields. A British commission considering the future of state support for universities has recently recommended providing no support for the humanities so that all the funding can go to the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) disciplines that, the commission states, are most likely to contribute to the economic growth of the nation. Similar arguments are emerging in the United States as well.

But what of the humanities? Humanistic scholarship is the most imperiled by the changing character of the publishing world although it has as much to contribute to society as the STEM disciplines have. The humanities are not simply vehicles of aesthetic reward and intellectual inspiration, as valuable as those attributes are. The humanities address ambiguity, doubt, and skepticism—essential underpinnings of a complex and diverse society and a turbulent world.

In the aftermath of two world wars and a great depression, many people lost confidence that scientific expertise could alone create a just and ordered world. As a result, after 1945, the academic world turned with enthusiasm to humanistic studies, which seemed to many scholars—and to others outside the academic world—the best way to ensure the survival of democracy. In our uncertain times, humanistic scholarship is no less essential than it was six decades ago.

We cannot imagine society without thinking of the great achievements of scientists and engineers. But it is also impossible to imagine trying to do without humanistic works that define our cultures and values. And that is why so much is at stake in the ability of publishers to continue publishing—in whatever form—the work of humanists that serve the needs of a troubled world.

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Making the Case:
Can the Humanities Be Saved by Special Pleading for Their Exceptionalism?

Review of
Martha C. Nussbaum, Not For Profit: Why Democracy Needs The Humanities
(Princeton University Press, 2010)
158 pages including bibliography and index

In her recent “manifesto” about what she perceives as an alarming decline in the global valuation of the humanities, Not For Profit: Why Democracy Needs The Humanities, Martha Nussbaum presents her image of a bleak, almost dystopian tomorrow. In her rendering of the near future, the world is inhabited by “generations of useless machines” who operate a global growth-oriented economy based on the profit motive and who treat others as “mere useful instrument[s]” or “obstacle[s] to [their] own plans.” In its imagination of a global society directed and controlled by growth-obsessed automata, Nussbaum’s grim depiction sounds very much like the plot of Hollywood science-fiction films such as Steven Spielberg’s A.I. Artificial Intelligence or James Cameron’s The Terminator, in which robots become increasingly important to (and perhaps even take control of) the functioning of human society. However, Nussbaum’s book is no work of science fiction, and the “useless machines” it posits are not robots but actual human beings who, in her more realistic vision, pose a more acute and real threat to the future of global society than do the robots of the wildest science-fiction fantasy.

In Nussbaum’s projected future (which is admittedly not too distant), both the developed and the developing worlds will consist of “nations of technically trained people who do not know how to criticize authority, useful profit-makers with obtuse imaginations.” This class of nominally educated, docile technocrats and growth-obsessed plutocrats, Nussbaum fears, will be (and, to some extent, already are) trained exclusively for their function in furthering technological advances and economic growth rather than for their larger role in a complex democratic society. They are the product of myopic and narrowly defined educational systems whose exclusive purpose is the goal of creating a workforce trained to advance profit and to ignore the drastic human consequences of its obsessive drive toward economic growth. Such educational structures are dangerously imbalanced in the welfare of democracies and the health and well being of their citizens, since they create populations unable to think critically, imaginatively, and empathetically and who thus are not in a position to perform the crucial tasks of promoting and sustaining democracy. Nussbaum’s book identifies this trend toward what she calls “education for profit” or “education for economic growth” as one of the most alarming threats both to the stability of democratic institutions in the United States and worldwide (she focuses in particular on India and Europe) and to “the creation of a decent world culture capable of constructively addressing the world’s most pressing problems.” At the same time, Nussbaum proposes a corrective to the dangerous anti-democratic inclination of global education in her passionate but well-reasoned plea for a return (or in some international cases, an initial turn) to the humanities and a humanistic curriculum in primary, secondary, and higher education. In her view, only the “spirit of the humanities,” in its broadest definition and application and at its pedagogical best, is able to generate “searching critical thought, daring imagination, empathetic understanding of human experiences of many different kinds, and understanding of the complexity of the world we live in.” It thus can save us from her vision of a bleak future of a soulless, profit-driven global society mired in what she calls “moral obtuseness.”

The “humanities-as-savior-of-humanity” narrative is of course not a new or even particularly innovative argument, and it is often deployed reflexively (at least among those sympathetic to the humanities) as a platitude that should be obvious to everyone: art, literature, and intellectual inquiry are simply critical for our understanding of who we are as humans. Nussbaum also subscribes to this narrative, but rather than accepting it a priori as self-evident or beyond question, she endeavors in her book to explain why it is so. Why exactly are the humanities central to our functioning as human beings and not a minor enterprise that is marginal to the ostensibly more important business of our economic sustenance (or, more accurately, our unchecked and unquestioned economic growth)? In her attempt to answer this question, Nussbaum explores relevant issues in developmental psychology, the history of American and international education, pedagogical theory, and political thought. In short, her book itself is a model of interdisciplinary humanities inquiry, demonstrating the most exemplary aspects of the type of critical, intellectual engagement for which she so passionately advocates. At the same

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time, however, she attempts to make her arguments more widely accessible, as is fitting for someone making the case that the humanities are vital and significant for all and not just the province of a highly educated, otherworldly, or—even worse—irrelevant elite (and as is particularly fitting for Nussbaum herself, who has endeavored throughout her career to aim at a wider audience in her writing on ethics and political philosophy). At 134 pages, her book is a compact, animated, and mellifluous defense of the humanities that makes a powerful case for the ethical imperative of providing the younger generations of the world’s democracies with a critical, engaged, liberal-arts-based education.

Nussbaum bases her argument not on an analysis of the content, purpose, or inherent value of the humanities disciplines themselves (in fact she rarely discusses the particular contribution of individual disciplinary inquiries to the larger objective of educating citizens for democracy, although she does argue in general for educating children in economics, politics and philosophy, foreign languages, art, and literature); rather she concentrates her energies on making the case for the importance of developing the type of critical thinking that is fostered best by a humanistic education. For this reason, she begins with a discussion of just why the practice of critical thinking is important for the sustenance of democracy in the first place, focusing in particular on how the education of the individual has a direct effect on the ways in which he or she interacts with the world. Posing the question of this relationship negatively, she asks, “What is it about human life that makes it so hard to sustain democratic institutions based on equal respect and the equal protection of the laws, and so easy to lapse into hierarchies of various types—or, even worse, projects of violent group animosity? What forces make powerful groups seek control and domination? What makes majorities try, so ubiquitously, to denigrate or stigmatize minorities?” To answer these questions, which collectively constitute a complex she terms simply the “clash of civilizations,” Nussbaum turns to developmental psychology to investigate how infants and children, who initially are narcissistic but powerless, attempt to transcend the attendant feelings of anxiety and shame with a drive toward completeness and fullness in which they simultaneously repudiate themselves and learn to project their self-disgust onto others who are more socially powerless. Nussbaum refers to this complex process of the development of the self as the “clash within” and argues that such individual psychological complexes contribute to collective societal pathologies such as racism, misogyny, and homophobia. She makes the case for the “other side of the internal clash” in which the child develops a “capacity for compassionate concern, for seeing another person as an end and not a mere means.” Critical for facilitating this ability to empathize with and view others as persons in their own right and for fostering an emotional aptitude that allows for a broader, more encompassing interaction between self and other is, in Nussbaum’s view, the process of education in its broadest sense: “[A] positive upbringing in the family, coupled with a good education later, can make children feel compassionate concern for the needs of others, and can lead them to see others as people with rights equal to their own. To the extent that social norms and dominant social images of adulthood or masculinity interfere with that formation, there will be difficulty and tension, but a good education can combat such stereotypes, giving children a sense of the importance of empathy and reciprocity.” Nussbaum then goes on to argue that the arts and humanities in particular are essential for cultivating the developing child’s positive engagement with her fellow citizens, for they offer the child the opportunity to imagine the experience of others and to productively engage with differences of gender, race, ethnicity, class, and culture. Coupled with rigorous training in the skills necessary to mature into a citizen and the meticulous cultivation of an aptitude for critical thinking, such sustained exercises in the imagination provided by humanistic endeavor allow the child to gradually transform into the type of Rousseauian subject advocated by Nussbaum.

Nussbaum makes a convincing case for the importance of a humanities-based education for the development of a thoughtful, critical, engaged, and empathetic citizenry; her argument that the current focus of education produces a “greedy obtuseness and technically trained docility that threaten the very life of democracy, and that certainly impede the creation of a decent world culture” is intriguing and provocative. At the same time, however, while I would like to wholeheartedly endorse her view of the importance of the humanities for the ways in which we engage in the world as individuals and as citizens, I am compelled to wonder whether her solution to what she sees as the widespread “forces that lead to violence and dehumanization”—a concerted effort to revive the humanities in education—can really “feed the forces that lead to cultures of equality and respect.” After all, in my own field of Holocaust Studies I am able to find examples that provide a challenge to Nussbaum’s conclusions; it is well known that some of the most notorious Nazi perpetrators, including, for example, the famous doctors at Auschwitz who performed experiments on prisoners and worked actively to supply the gas chambers, were well educated and deeply steeped in literature, music, and philosophy (although it should also be noted that their conversance with the best of the Western canon was certainly not paired with an active capacity for critical thinking or a knowledge of democratic values, both of which Nussbaum deems as important as the humanities for the development of a society of empathetic engagement). I may want to believe, as does Nussbaum so strongly, that the humanities can actively shape our world in a positive way, but I must admit that the jury is still out on that; we simply don’t know enough about the connection between humanistic inquiry and its effect on the attitudes and behaviors of people in the real world of social interaction to decisively make that call. In any case, however, Nussbaum’s book certainly provides the impetus for us to investigate the matter more closely.

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Nobody Gets Out of This Life Alive: Guitarist Keith Richards’s Tales of Excess and Music-Making

Review of
Keith Richards with James Fox, Life (Little, Brown and Company, 2010).
564 pages with index and photos.

As this issue of Belles Lettres goes to press, Keith Richards is still alive. Most authors hope that reviewers won’t need to mention this detail, but the Rolling Stones guitarist and songwriter has been famous for over four decades for simply surviving a purported regimen of every proscribed (but rarely prescribed) drug known to humankind. While Life, as he calls his new autobiography, has been a common title for memoirs from Benvenuto Cellini’s Vita to Bill Clinton’s My Life, readers familiar with Richards’s reputation for near-fatal excess may understand his use of the word as resigned and ironic, evoking such expressions as “that’s life” or the ever-popular “life’s a bitch and then you die” (a phrase that neatly sums up Richards’s special blend of world-weariness, misogyny, and impish gallows humor).

The book’s dust jacket encourages readers to think of Richards as a survivor; its front cover features a stark black-and-white snapshot of young Keith, a glamorous wastrel who stares blankly from kohl-rimmed eyes as he lights a cigarette, while the back shows a recent color portrait of Richards flashing a bemused smile: a haggard but triumphant rock veteran.

In his public role as self-destructive bad boy, Richards provides vicarious access to the pleasures of the untrammeled id for his less adventurous admirers. Moreover, he makes one’s own indulgences seem square and perhaps even socially beneficial by comparison. You may be on your fourth martini, but at least you aren’t snorting your dead father’s ashes (see Life, p. 546). (Richards explains that this was a spontaneous gesture of homage rather than an experimental attempt to get high, but given his track record some skepticism seems appropriate.) Richards clearly remains fond of heroin; musician hits “rock bottom”; III. musician repents, cleans up act, returns to music wiser for wear. Although Richards gestures toward this narrative with some unpleasant stories about kicking heroin cold turkey, he views the experience more as a disagreeable job that one has to do occasionally than as a chastening or transformative experience. Indeed, Richards argues that until his addiction finally reached an inconvenient level, heroin was a useful professional tool in the recording studio: “It was my wall against all of that daily stuff, because rather than deal with it, I shut it out, to concentrate on what I wanted to do…It made everything possible.” Other drugs receive similar accolades. Barbiturates, for example, have “character,” and “every man who is worth his salt in downers knows what I’m talking about.” Richards clearly remains fond of

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As is widely known, Richards has had difficulty maintaining (or even caring about) a stable personal life. Readers seeking sordid details about his notoriously turbulent long-term relationship with actress and fellow junkie Anita Pallenberg will find some here, but Richards doesn’t reveal much about his own emotions. His apparently loving and placid marriage to current wife Patti Hansen also receives ample coverage, but it isn’t very interesting to read about, with the exception of a story in which Richards, meeting his future in-laws for the first time, walked into their house swigging from a liquor bottle and then smashed a guitar on their dining room table. Much of Richards’s contact with women, however, has comprised an endless series of one-night stands. Richards protests that “it’s not like I was collecting—I’m not Bill Wyman or Mick Jagger, noting down how many I’ve had” and adds that “I’ve never been able to go to bed with a woman just for sex….I want to hug you and kiss you and make you feel good. And get a nice note the next day, stay in touch.” Richards would make a more convincing paragon of chivalry, however, if he didn’t continually refer to women as “bitches.” “We used to go to Saint-Tropez to score all the bitches.” “Freddie [Sessler] would do things for Mick [Jagger] and not even let me know, put him in touch with this whore or this bitch.” Even Pallenberg, who was Richards’s domestic partner for over a decade, gets labeled a “sexy fucking bitch.” (I think that Richards uses “bitch” fewer times than Miles Davis does in his autobiography, but that’s not much of an accomplishment.) In one of the most disingenuous passages in a book with no shortage of them, Richards claims that the Stones’ many “anti-girl” songs, such as “Under My Thumb” and “Stupid Girl,” actually provided valuable encouragement for feminists: “Maybe we were winding them up. And maybe some of the songs opened up their hearts a little, or their minds, to the idea of we’re women, we’re strong.” By the same logic, you should thank the arsonist who burns down your house for alerting you to the dangers of fire.

Richards’s sexism is predictable—after all, the Stones even perform a song called “Bitch”—and thus boring; in the London Review of Books, Jenny Diski rightly dismissed his putdowns of women as “deliberate baiting” and “dreary bravado.” I was more interested when he discussed his life as a son and father. While Richards professes devotion to his late mother, Doris, who introduced him to American jazz while he was still a toddler, their relationship was thorny. One of Richards’s early memories involves Doris killing his pet cat and then telling him, “Shut up. Don’t be so soft. It was pissing all over the place.” Richards’s father, Bert, was “not one to express his emotions,” and Richards recalls that “not talking to me or even recognizing I was around was his form of discipline.” After a twenty-year estrangement, Richards nervously reunited with Bert in 1982, discovering, to his relief, that “now he was one of the greatest rummies I’d ever met” and that “suddenly I had another friend….a father figure didn’t come into it anymore.” By this time, Richards had already fallen under the wing of the man whom he calls his “second dad,” Freddie Sessler, a Polish Holocaust survivor and entrepreneur whose business ventures included a hair extension center, “snake venom for curing multiple sclerosis,” and “the doomed Amphicar, the amphibious vehicle that was described, in one review, as ‘the car that may revolutionize drowning.’” Richards is justifiably fascinated with Sessler’s life story, which he recounts engagingly, but it’s clear that Sessler’s main attraction for Richards was that “once a month, Freddie would deliver a full ounce of pure cocaine” without asking for money. Richards’s preference for drinking and drug buddies over conventional “father figures” took a troubling turn when he became a father himself. In a disturbing passage, Richards recalls how his seven-year-old son Marlon helped him evade customs during the Stones’ 1976 tour of Europe: “In those days there were countries; it wasn’t just borderless Europe. I gave him a position, a job

“My Library in Connecticut.”
Richards’s reputation for debauchery often threatens to overshadow his genuine contribution to the world of music, and indeed, it’s when he’s discussing music that Life really comes alive. to do. Here’s the map. Tell me when we get to the border…. Marlon was on the case. He would say ‘Fifteen clicks from the border, Dad.’ That was when to pull over, have a shot and either dump it or re-sort your shit….He acted beyond his age. Necessary when we were being busted.” While both common decency and the Behind the Music narrative of sin and absolution would seem to obligate Richards to express regret at having made a criminal accessory of a second-grader, he instead remembers this era with parental pride, recalling that “it was a great thing to watch him grow up, to say, I need your help, boy” and that Marlon was “a great minder.” If Richards acknowledges that a life devoted to selfish gratification might have harmed his son, he doesn’t let on.

Richards’s reputation for debauchery often threatens to overshadow his genuine contribution to the world of music, and indeed, it’s when he’s discussing music that Life really comes alive. Richards pays warm homage to his African-American and Jamaican musical influences while vacillating between a romantic identification with black culture and the acknowledgment that, as a white Englishman, he remains an outsider. He claims, on the one hand, that “to the Jamaicans, the ones that I know, I’m black but I’ve turned white to be their spy, ‘our man up north’ sort of thing. I take it as a compliment” and adds, more poetically, “I’m as white as a lily with a black heart exulting in its secret.” On the other hand, he admits of the early Stones that “as long as we were all together, we could pretend to be black men. We soaked up the music, but it didn’t change the color of our skin.” While such passages leave Richards open to criticism as a white appropriator of black music, they at least display both an intensity of feeling and a sense of humility absent in much of his narrative. Richards writes with particular warmth and appreciation when he’s discussing other musicians, especially guitarists. Fellow Stone Ron Wood is an “incredibly sympathetic player” who “can surprise you at times.” Waddy Wachtel, of Richards’s lesser-known band the X-Pensive Winos, is “one of the most tasteful, simpatico players I know. And he’s completely musical. Understanding of it, empathetic, nothing ever needing to be explained.” Even Mick Jagger, with whom Richards has a strained relationship, comes off well, with Richards explaining that he is a “brilliant” lyricist and “one of the best natural blues harp players I’ve heard.”

Richards’s best friend (or “his primary relationship,” as Liz Phair put it in her New York Times review of Life), however, is the guitar. After decades of performing and listening to blues and rock and roll, Richards still exhibits an almost childlike wonder when elucidating how Jimmy Reed voiced a B7 chord or how T-Bone Walker played double-stops. Richards states bluntly that “it transformed my life” when, around 1968, he began playing in the open G-major, five-string tuning that he uses on many of the Stones’ most famous songs. The tuning has erotic, almost mystical significance for Richards: “it gives you this beautiful resonance and ring….and if you’re working the right chord, you can hear this other chord going on behind it, which actually you’re not playing. It’s there. It defies logic. And it’s just lying there saying, ‘Fuck me.’” (Gendered interpretations of harmony are now common in music scholarship, but Richards may be the first theorist to suggest that two chords join him in a ménage à trois.) Elsewhere, Richards explains more abstractly that “silence is your canvas” or that “with five strings you can be sparse; that’s your frame, that’s what you work on.” I enjoyed passages such as these, which managed to suggest fresh ways of listening to songs that most rock listeners have already heard a million times.

Richards seems to be even prouder of his career as a songwriter than of his skills as a guitarist. He’s earned the right. He is, for example, the co-composer (with Jagger) of “Satisfaction,” surely one of the great works of twentieth-century modernism, with its stark, immaculate fuzz guitar riff underpinning a lyric that daringly conflates the emptiness of capitalist consumer culture with sexual frustration (kind of like Herbert Marcuse,
Fame in 1993, because it was signed by Sammy Cahn on his deathbed,” and he describes a phone call he once received from Hoagy Carmichael as “being summoned by the gods.” Like many great musicians, Richards has big ears, and he remains seriously engaged with music even as the Rolling Stones increasingly rest on their laurels.

For the most part, Life is fun to read, but it lacks a central theme or a clear structure beyond a blow-by-blow chronological account of Richards’s life, so at times it becomes aimless. (Diski describes the book’s style, cruelly but not inaccurately, as the drunken ramblings of an “over the hill geezer.”) The book’s conversational tone suggests that Richards’s co-author James Fox assembled the book from transcribed interviews. The result is hardly a work of prose although Richards manages a few striking or amusing turns of phrase (by 1969, Stones guitarist Brian Jones “was at that point in his life when there wasn’t any”; for Richards, “when shit did hit the fan, it always hit it very solidly”). I wouldn’t recommend Life to anyone without prior interest in its subject, but it will be diverting and occasionally illuminating for Rolling Stones fans or readers generally interested in rock and roll.

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You start to build the consonants around the vowels. There’s a place to go ooh and there’s a place to go daah. And if you get it wrong, it sounds like crap.” I was surprised to learn about Richards’s love for Tin Pan Alley songwriting of the pre-World War II era. He reveals that “the award I was proudest of was when Mick and I were inducted into the Songwriters Hall of Fame in 1993, because it was signed by Sammy Cahn on his deathbed.”

Dedalus Special Issues on Race in America


Spring, 2011, Race, Inequality, and Culture, guest-edited by Lawrence Bobo, Harvard University, featuring William Julius Wilson, Martha Biondi, Douglas Massey, Taeku Lee, and others.
Dubbed the “poison pen biographer” by detractors, Kitty Kelley is perhaps best known for the many biographies she has written of celebrities and famous politicians. To date, Kelley has produced biographies of American icons Frank Sinatra and Elizabeth Taylor, former First Ladies Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis and Nancy Reagan, the Bush family and the British royal family. *Oprah: A Biography* represents the first time Kelley has turned her attention to an African-American subject. Kelley’s biography of Oprah Gail Winfrey tells the story of a woman who shot to fame and glory because of an emphasis on “sex shows” and sensationalism. Citing Winfrey’s 1985 show on sexual abuse and “Incest Victims” as the first to blur “the long-standing line in television between discussion and confession, between interviewing and self-revelation,” Kelley credits Winfrey as a pioneer in daytime talk shows. Her biography chronicles Winfrey’s life, detailing Winfrey’s early years spent under her grandmother’s care in Mississippi, Winfrey’s turbulent teenage years during which she was shuttled back and forth between her mother in Milwaukee and father in Nashville, her meteoric rise as the host of her own show, her philanthropic endeavors and political clout, culminating with Winfrey’s endorsement of Democratic presidential candidate Senator Barack Obama in 2008.

Despite its comprehensive scope and its intent to cover nearly every moment in Winfrey’s substantial life, divulging intimate and previously concealed information in an attempt to demythologize a prominent figure in popular culture, there is one important element glaringly absent from Kelley’s biography—Oprah Winfrey’s authorization. Like her previous biographies, Kitty Kelley’s *Oprah: A Biography* is “unauthorized.” Generally understood to be a biography written without the express consent of the subject, and oftentimes written against the subject’s wishes, the term “unauthorized biography” is fraught with negative connotations. Given the expectation that a biography will not merely provide a laundry list of the important events in its subject’s life, but will also accurately portray the subject’s experience of those events, the subject’s cooperation would seem necessary to the venture for purposes of verification and fact-checking. Furthermore, collaboration with the living subject may also help humanize the subject in the biographer’s mind and preempt attempts to turn the person into a case-study. Despite these sound reasons for pursuing authorization, Kelley defends the practice of writing without consent in the foreword to her book: “In writing about contemporary figures, I’ve found the unauthorized biography avoids the pureed truths of revisionist history—the pitfall of authorized biography. Without having to follow the dictates of the subject, the unauthorized biographer has a much better chance to penetrate the manufactured public image.” Kelley celebrates her book’s unauthorized status, which she claims results in “an independent presentation” of the subject’s life that “does not genuflect to fame or curtsy to celebrity” as opposed to “bended knee biography,” which is her demeaning term for the authorized biography.

As Kelley suggests, there are merits to the unauthorized biography. At times, an unbiased look may prove helpful because of the objectivity it provides. The independent biographer can look at the subject under discussion and contextualize the events which shaped her life in relation to the social, racial, and economic changes in society at large. Kelley’s biography succeeds in this aspect. Her portrayal of young Winfrey places Winfrey’s life in the context of the civil rights era, showing how the integration of schools in both the South and Midwest, occupational strides for women and racial minorities due to the federal implementation of affirmative action, the manner in which governmental policies changed the face of not only American education but American media, all combined and laid the foundation to produce Oprah Winfrey the media mogul.

At other times, the biographer’s objectivity can unjustly produce unnecessary sociological, anthropological, and ethnographic scrutiny. A myopic and overly detached viewpoint may encourage the biographer to force an individual’s life to conform to a standard believed to be typical or representative for a particular racial or ethnic group. When this occurs, the biographer runs the risk of turning her subject into a type and attempting to “diagnose” her subject for the reader. Unfortunately, Kelley is guilty of this.

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Without any expertise or training that would render her qualified, Kelley attempts to uncover Winfrey’s psychological makeup in this biography, attributing a quality she sees in Winfrey and characterizes as “aggressiveness” to a problem of color fixation. Kelley argues that Winfrey is color struck and that feelings of inferiority and insecurity because of her darker skin color lead to an overly developed sensitivity that induces Winfrey to compete, outperform her peers, and win at any and all costs. Perhaps because Kelley is not a member of the racial group that has been not only legally oppressed because of interracial prejudice and skin color bias but also subjected to intra-racial prejudice based upon skin color preferences, she is dismissive of what she perceives as Winfrey’s obsession with skin color and its dynamics. Equally problematic is Kelley’s desire to attribute Winfrey’s success to her history as a victim of sexual abuse, arguing that Winfrey uses her show as a substitute for psychotherapy.

Since Kelley never actually interviewed Oprah Winfrey, she bases her biography largely on previous interviews given by Winfrey over the past twenty-five years, which she asserts allows her to use Winfrey’s words with a greater measure of accuracy. Kelley’s biography claims to be based on 2,732 files representing every single interview Winfrey ever gave via newspaper, magazine, radio, or television in the United States and the United Kingdom (which, for some reason, Kelley designates as inclusive of Canada and Australia). Kelley concludes that going to the printed source was ultimately better for the book since speaking directly to Winfrey could have only produced “fragmented memories.” Winfrey’s past interviews are supplemented by interviews Kelley conducted of Winfrey’s associates and relatives. Although there is some truth to the assumption that—freed of the guidelines and boundaries set by the subject—the author of the unauthorized biography obtains a certain freedom from publicist-generated sound bites, it is also true that such an author enters another sort of quagmire when she has to sift through the myriad interviews for the “truth.”

Kelley’s biography provides the very one-sidedness that biography is supposed to counter. Kelley’s biography is full of unintentional irony, such as when Kelley accuses Winfrey of shoddy journalism and making a career out of sensationalism, accusations which Kelley’s detractors have similarly leveled against her. Lurking between the pages of Kelley’s biography is the untapped and unexplored debate between “truth” and perspective, and it is Kelley’s failure to acknowledge the shifting nature of “truth” that makes this book a disappointment. Kelley’s defense of the unauthorized biography seems to suggest that interviewing sources who may have personal grievances against the subject and who may wish to exact revenge by distorting the truth or “remembering” falsehoods, For example, though Kelley fears knitting together Winfrey’s “fragmented memories,” she does not entertain the notion that she faces the threat of inaccurate recall when interviewing Winfrey’s father and aunt, older relatives who might be expected to have memories even more “fragmented” than Winfrey’s due to time and age. When the “public reflections” Kelley has collected from Winfrey’s published interviews do not “jibe with the private recollections” of Winfrey’s relatives and friends, Kelley consistently decides that it is Winfrey who has “shaved” her truths. It is as if Kelley believes that every person who has been a part of Winfrey’s life except Winfrey herself is telling the truth.

In choosing the subjects she wishes to interview, Kelley has unjustly stacked the deck. Kelley fails to conjecture how skewed the testimony may be from the father who read his daughter’s rape as a sign of her promiscuity, the mother and sister who exploited her for money, the aunt whose book was rejected for airtime on Winfrey’s show, or the ex-boyfriends who either cheated on or physically assaulted Winfrey. Derived as they are from people who evince a “sour grapes” philosophy by holding grudges against Winfrey, Kelley’s “factual” accounts must be read a store-bought dress during this time. These allegations are challenged by Winfrey’s relatives as “lies” because Winfrey was the
only child in a household surrounded by extended family members ready to dote upon her to compensate for the absence of her mother, and because Winfrey was dressed in clothing that had been donated by a white family. Winfrey’s sister also accuses her of exaggeration although the sister was not yet born during the time period Winfrey describes and the two sisters lived together only later in Milwaukee. Kelley presents the testimony of Winfrey’s relatives to suggest that their stories correct Winfrey’s falsehoods, failing to see the ways in which both statements from the different parties may in fact be true. It is arguable that a mother’s love cannot be replaced by the love of another family member. The presence of Winfrey’s extended relatives may not have been adequate compensation to the young girl Winfrey was, and the quality of the donated garments Winfrey received does not detract from Winfrey’s statement that she never had a dress that had been bought in a store expressly for her. Kelley fails to consider the possibility that family members who only occasionally saw Winfrey’s grandmother may have experienced her differently than one who lived with her daily, or that the death of Winfrey’s grandmother and the grief it produced in Winfrey’s family members may not have contributed to the account given by other family members.

Despite the sweep of this biography, Kelley’s presentation of Winfrey’s activities is, oddly, more selective than comprehensive. For example, Kelley devotes a significant portion of attention to Winfrey’s early Hollywood successes and flops, but fails to include two of Winfrey’s latest and most recent credits for producing, i.e., her collaborations with Denzel Washington on The Great Debaters (2007) and Tyler Perry on adapting Sapphire’s novel Push into the film Precious (2009). Some of the “dirt” Kelley reveals about Winfrey is a clear and distasteful violation of privacy, such as Kelley’s revelation of which political candidates Winfrey has voted for in various elections, a right to privacy which Winfrey shares along with every other citizen of the United States. The ballot Winfrey casts contains information about which no reader has the right to know.

Missing from this book is the objectivity that is the hallmark of journalism and the ability or willingness to compare the subject to his or her peers. Kelley never puts Winfrey’s action in context and thus, without appropriate context, Winfrey’s actions are seen as more egregious than they actually are. For example, Kelley depicts Winfrey’s romantic relationship with Stedman Graham as an abnormal one, but the famous domestic partnerships of Tim Robbins and Susan Sarandon (together for twenty-three years before splitting), and Goldie Hawn and Kurt Russell (together for twenty-seven years) make it clear that Winfrey is not the only star to choose a long-term relationship over marriage. In light of other celebrities’ faults, which include shoplifting, drunk driving, releasing sex tapes, embezzlement, anti-Semitism, and physical and sexual assault, Winfrey is painted as villainous because she refuses to financially support her enemies and detractors, takes legal measures to ensure her privacy, and snubs those who have hurt her feelings. Kelley wishes us to see Oprah Winfrey as a very bad woman, but instead she shows us a woman whose faults and weaknesses are miniscule when compared to those of other celebrities or when compared to those of politicians we have elected to office.

Ultimately, it remains to be seen just who the ideal audience for this biography may be. In a hyperbolic attempt to express Winfrey’s influence and the prevalence of Winfrey supporters, Kelley identifies a world dominated by Oprah Winfrey in which Oprah fans are termed Oprah-philes and Oprah-holics. Given the unauthorized nature of the biography, it stands to reason that such staunch supporters would shun such a book, and the others, the few Oprah-phobes floating around, would be less than surprised at what Kelley reveals. In an attempt to show us the Oprah Winfrey we didn’t know, Kelley shows us that Winfrey is at turns insecure, confident, driven, and emotional, that she has wanted love, attention, and privacy. In short, Kelley depicts a woman much like any other human being. What differentiates Oprah Winfrey from the pack, according to Kelley, is not her desires so much as the power and influence that enable her to stop projects or silence people. Kelley’s biography shows us an Oprah Winfrey who is larger than life, whose position as America’s best girlfriend affords her more influence and access than any national leader enjoys. Kelley’s censure is leveled not at Winfrey’s power but at the great lengths to which Winfrey goes in order to maintain it, such as the mandatory lifetime confidentiality contracts for employees, former employees, and guests of her show. Ultimately, Kelley’s conclusions fail to astound. Winfrey, she says, has a “warm side” and “a side that can only be called cold as ice,” which leads Winfrey to sometimes be “generous, magnanimous, and deeply caring” and at other times to be “petty, small-minded, and self-centered.” Kelley’s biography paints Winfrey as narcissistic and egocentric, as if this is a rare description of a media mogul, actress, producer, and celebrity. Kelley’s biography uncovers the fact that Oprah Winfrey is “huge, complicated and contradictory,” which is to say that Kelley has discovered what readers already knew without the benefit of reading such a biography, that Oprah Winfrey is human, just like the rest of us complicated and contradictory.

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“Never a Closed Door to the World”: An Interview with Pianist Peter Martin on Jazz and Japan

Peter Martin was born in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1970. After classical music studies, he turned to jazz and has not looked back. Peter took second place in the 1993 Thelonious Monk International Jazz Piano Competition, and in the decade that followed played as a sideman with trumpeters Nicholas Payton and Roy Hargrove and with saxophonist Joshua Redman. He has recorded two albums for the St. Louis-based MAXJAZZ label: Something Unexpected and In the P.M. In 2009 he released a solo piano CD, Set of Five, on his own label. He is currently pianist and music director for the singer Dianne Reeves, and arranged and played on her Grammy Award-winning soundtrack for the film Good Night, and Good Luck. In January 2011, Peter played at the White House for the State Dinner that President Obama held to welcome the president of China, Hu Jintao. His website, petermartinmusic.com, is a valuable source of information about Peter and about jazz.

This interview took place in St. Louis in December 2010.

WZ: Can you recall the first trip you made to play in Japan?

PM: Yes, sure. The first time I played in Japan was in 1994, and it was with the Roy Hargrove Quintet. That was really a whirlwind tour. We flew to Japan and got in the day of the gig; that is not advisable. We actually went straight to the Blue Note jazz club, in Tokyo. That was the former location—no, maybe two former locations—from where it is now. We must have landed at Narita about one or two o’clock in the afternoon—and then that long drive into the city, in heavy traffic. We went in to do sound check, and later we just tried to stay awake as we played the gig.

But it was a fun tour. We were in Japan for about two and a half weeks, which to me seemed like a long time to be in another country. We were in Tokyo for a week first and got a chance to settle in there, playing every night. Then we went to Osaka for a week and after that four or five days in Fukuoka, down in the southern part of Japan. So this was very much a circuit of the Blue Note jazz clubs that we did. The clubs are all affiliated. It was a little bit spooky because the clubs all kind of look the same—and like the one in New York, of course.

We had really appreciative audiences throughout the tour. And I remember that clearly about the tour, although it was quite a long time ago now.

WZ: Did you get any time off during the tour?

PM: No, not really; we had no off days as such. We played in Tokyo, and then we had a travel day to Osaka—that was like being off, but not really. We had some time during some days, and as I was younger then, I liked to go out and try to do things, just explore.

I knew what I might like to see or do. When I grew up playing music, I started on violin. I played Suzuki method violin. My mother is a Suzuki violin teacher, and she had actually traveled to Japan several times to study with Suzuki himself years before. So I had pictures of Japan in my mind from her stories. I knew some people in Japan whom she’d put me in touch with. So I was definitely interested in finding my way around in Japan. When I was at Juilliard, my roommate there was a Japanese cellist. He was still living in the States when I first went to Japan, and I had talked with him about my trip.

WZ: Did you explore on your own or go with the other musicians you were playing with on the tour? Did you know any Japanese people who could go with you?

PM: I knew a few Japanese people, friends of my mother, the people she put me in touch with. I do remember one time on that first trip, Ron Blake, a great saxophonist who was playing with Roy, and I took a kind of day trip. Actually, I’m remembering now, my father played in the Saint Louis Symphony and toured in Japan with the orchestra, and he gave me some notes and ideas, too. Ron and I just took a train to Kyoto from Osaka. We had to get up early so we could be back at night to play. We visited the Golden Palace; maybe we took a little tour, or we just looked around. Then we took another train up this mountain, as far up as you could go. So we get off the train in this tiny country town. Now Ron is tall, like six feet four inches tall, and the people are just looking at him like he’s from another planet!

WZ: In all the years you’ve been going to Japan to play, and you’ve made a lot of visits since that first one, do you think jazz has maintained its popularity with the fans there?

PM: I think, overall, jazz is still popular in Japan. There have been some changes. But I think the changes that I’ve seen are more peculiar to the groups that I’ve toured with. If you get hooked up with certain promoters and venues, that’s not necessarily typical of what the real scene is. That’s something I’ve gathered from meeting and getting to know some Japanese musicians. Half the times I’ve gone to Japan, I’ve been on these Blue Note club tours, and they are not necessarily really indicative of the jazz scene in Japan.
I think it’s like New York here, with big clubs like the Blue Note that all the tourists go to, just so they can say, “Well, we went to a jazz club.” The same thing when I was living in New Orleans. We definitely got the tourist crowds down there. But that’s cool too, because sometimes once people hear the music and like what they hear, they’re going to come back. Or they’re going to buy your CD and become a fan. What we do is based on people liking the way it sounds. And that’s it—that’s what transcends languages and different countries. Some people go to a “cool jazz club” and they think about the movies, you know, smoke-filled jazz clubs, and they’re not going to come back. They may not hear what they enjoy listening to.

The main thing I’ve seen change in Japan is the level of the Japanese players, and they continue to get better. At the top venues and gigs in Japan, you see more—a while ago, it was more American players who were either living there or touring; now there is more confidence in the Japanese players. A lot of them come to study in the States; they’ve gone to Berklee and all that.

WZ: I’ve heard that about 10 percent of the Berklee student body comes from Japan.

PM: Yeah. Wow. That doesn’t surprise me. I think it all kind of cycles through. A few students come, and they go through a program and do well, so the other kids coming up after them want to do that too.

When I was at Juilliard, there was no jazz program, just the classical program, and I was in the piano program there. There were so many Korean classical pianists in the program then! You had certain schools just feeding the best players in, like, “I want to go to Juilliard because it’s Juilliard, and it’s in New York, and that’s the place to go.”

WZ: The whole “career” thing. When you have played in Japan, you’ve mostly been a part of various groups. But you’ve recorded under your own name here in the States. Do you have plans to go over as a leader?

PM: That is something I really want to do. I hope it’s going to happen soon now. We’ve been getting close over the last couple of years. One of the hardest things is that when you go to work in Japan, they’re a little more restrictive than in the States or in Europe, where to get a gig, you just show up, you don’t need a work permit or anything. It’s not that a work permit is hard to get in Japan, but if you’re going to work for one organization, on one tour, they’re funny about your staying and then doing another tour. It’s like everything has to be separate. And that’s what kind of tripped us up over the last few years. Then there’s just the expense of getting there, making it worthwhile, and keeping a balance in the rest of your schedule with other things. But it’s definitely something I want to do because there is a great audience in Japan for exactly what I like to do, the piano trio.

WZ: You’ve released two albums (Something Unexpected, 2001, and In the P.M., 2005) on the MAXJAZZ label, which is based here in St. Louis. Both are basically piano trio albums, with some augmentations, and they are included in the label’s distinctive Piano Series. Does MAXJAZZ distribute to Japan?

PM: They do, yes. When I travel in Japan—the last time I was there was earlier this year, and I always go into Tower Records and Disc Union (I love that record store!). Tower Records in Japan is doing really well, and yet they’re bankrupt in the States. Everyone’s always surprised that Japan still has Tower; we thought they were all out of business. So I check these stores out and check if the MAXJAZZ recordings are available. They are, and they’re somewhat prominent in the jazz sections of the stores.

WZ: Are you continuing to record with MAXJAZZ, or will you continue to self-produce your recordings, as you did with last year’s solo album Set of Five?

PM: I’m not sure. That is something that will be decided soon. I’m working on a new project that should be done early in 2011. I’d like to do it with MAXJAZZ, but we will see if the timing works out well for them and for us. I’ve talked with some other labels as well. This actually is a cool time because there’s not that much of a difference between being on a label and doing it yourself in terms of what you can do. The part that I’m most interested in is how the end product of the music sounds. In terms of marketing and where the album is placed, that can make a difference; but even that is not so significant.

WZ: And there’s the downloading of music from websites. Some of your older albums are available that way on your website.

PM: Right, right. Some of them we have access and rights to, and some of them we don’t. We’re actually trying to get all of them. It may cost some money. Some of them, especially some of the older Japanese albums, are not available except as imports, and they’re like really expensive, man, like forty bucks. I mean, they’re good, but they ain’t worth that!

“We” are a small team, just Dan Martin and I. We’ve got a lot of things on our list, and the recordings are among them; we have a lot of different projects going. Right now the Sheldon series takes up a lot of time. For me, it’s the music and the programming, thinking about the music I want to do and the guest artists. So it’s that and my commitment to working with Dianne Reeves.

WZ: You travel with Dianne much of the year.

PM: I do almost everything of hers. If I have something of my own to do, I can get a sub occasionally, like Geoff Keezer—he’s my first call sub, and really a great pianist, and Dianne loves him. But I’m expected to be with her. I’m her music director, and I need to be there.

You should talk with Geoff about Japan! He’s married to a Japanese woman, and they have two children. Geoff lived in Japan for about six years. Geoff speaks Japanese, at least a fair amount.

WZ: I imagine that Dianne has quite a following in Japan.

PM: Yes, and she loves to go to Japan and has been popular there for a long time. But as with other major American jazz artists, the big demand and the big paydays there may not be—this is my impression only, I can’t quite speak authoritatively—continue on p. 24
what they once were. There have been big economic problems in Japan, too.

It’s funny. What we do, even with Dianne, someone of her stature, is really very “small” in the big picture of the entertainment world. It’s very focused and it’s very low-cost, compared to almost everything else, as far as bringing people from another country to Japan. Like, when we show up to do a gig, we’ve got our luggage, minimal gear. We’re very self-contained. So even with the economic problems—in this country, in Europe—going down—I’m not going to say that the problems haven’t affected things—I mean, you see it. But in terms of the number of gigs, I’m still getting calls for the same number of gigs. My theory on it is, we’re still relatively a low-cost thing. People still want to do something. They might be cutting out some of the higher-costing stuff. And, especially, for me, in working with Dianne, the great jazz festivals are still happening in Japan, and if they want to go with a well-known vocalist, she’d be the last thing they’re going to cut out.

WZ: And Dianne still has a pretty big following in Japan.

PM: Yeah, yeah! I mean, for jazz. She’s sold a lot of records in Japan. So, in terms of the promoters and the people who want to present jazz, she’s like the gold standard. She sounds great. She’s done it enough, so they know she’s going to show up and do really well for them.

WZ: Dianne records for the Blue Note jazz label, which is very big in Japan. I interviewed the head of Japanese Blue Note, Somethin’ Else Records, Hitoshi Namekata, [who has produced hundreds of jazz recordings in Japan]. Have you had any dealings with Blue Note over there?

PM: Oh, Name, I know Name.

WZ: Is he still as active now?

PM: He is, but also not quite, because of the way that the company has been restructured, the parent company, EMI. You see, there was a time when Toshiba—I’m not sure if Toshiba and EMI are still affiliated. I think Toshiba owned the whole thing, and that was like one piece of the empire. I think it’s basically the British arm of EMI that’s controlling Japanese Blue Note now. So Name doesn’t have quite the control of things that he once did. And yes, Dianne is on Blue Note. She is, I think, the longest-tenured artist on Blue Note.

WZ: Since we’re talking in December, I’ll mention that I’ve been listening to her Christmas album, and I know you were very involved in the production of it.

PM: Yeah. I think it’s good. I hate Christmas music, but I co-produced the album with Dianne and wrote a lot of the arrangements, so it was a challenge.

WZ: The strings, too?

PM: Yeah, yeah. I did that strings arrangement—like two hours before the quartet arrived! That was some pressure writing. There was so much other stuff going on with that recording, I just forgot. I got up that morning, and I was dealing with all the other stuff, and I was like, “OK, strings are coming in this morning, great. Where’s the arrangement?” And then I thought, “Shit, I’m the one who’s supposed to write it!”

But I’m not exactly sure what the status of Blue Note in Japan is now. The Japanese side of Blue Note used to sign artists—wait, what’s her name—I just got an email from her, she’s a really good jazz pianist… Junko, Junko Onishi. She’s making a comeback now. I saw her last summer in Japan. She’s married to this guy who’s a big actor in Japan. But she was signed, Namekata signed her, she was one of the first I was aware of, a big star there in the ‘90s. But they were also signing American artists through the specifically Japanese side of Blue Note. That’s how much funding and power they had over there then. Name was kind of the Bruce Lundvall [the president of Blue Note Records since 1983] of Japan then. But the company has changed a lot because the parent company has had so much financial trouble.

WZ: Have you toured in other Asian countries besides Japan?

PM: Yes, definitely. I’ve been to Korea a lot, quite a few times; China, Thailand, Indonesia—several times in Indonesia.

WZ: Have you found these experiences pretty similar to those you’ve had in Japan?

PM: Japan has a much more advanced, mature jazz audience. There’s much less of a novelty factor—there’s maybe some novelty factor about jazz, but it’s much less in Japan. There’s an audience in Japan that really knows the music. They have a jazz infrastructure, so to speak, and they have their own jazz musicians. It’s just one of the top jazz scenes, especially in Tokyo, in the world.

China, which we’ve been traveling to a fair amount for the last few years with Dianne, is an emerging place to play. We did a really big concert in China, in a big concert hall in Shanghai, and it was the first major appearance Dianne made in China. But with the audience, you could just tell they didn’t know—they were interested, because they were there, but they didn’t know when to clap, or even how to respond. You could feel that.

WZ: Well, it must have been that way at first in Japan, too.

PM: Yeah, maybe, but Americans have traveled there so long, and you have a whole generation of distinctive Japanese players. And there are a lot of clubs in Japan—there are a bunch of clubs in Tokyo alone!

WZ: I’ve heard that there might be as many as 150 clubs there.

PM: I wouldn’t be surprised.

WZ: Some of them are really small, the size of the coffeehouse we’re in.

PM: Right, right.
Japan, the rooms are really small, and the walls are really thin. The reputation for being loud and for partying, whatever. In because, I guess and maybe rightly so, American musicians have always put us at the end of the hallway, and on separate floors, we’d be staying at the same hotels in certain cities, and they’d agencies, and they can be “restrictive.” We started to notice that Yes. Actually, on one of my early trips there, we were PM: You mentioned Japanese jazz students earlier. Are you teaching now, in addition to your many other activities? PM: Yes. I teach in the music program at Northwestern University. I teach all the jazz piano majors, and a few of the minors too, private lessons. So I go up to Evanston twice a month. I basically do two days of lessons there. A lot of flying! But it’s the quickest way to get around. As a musician, I’m used to it.

The flying can get to you. I have the attitude that I try to control certain things in my life. Time for my wife and my kids is one thing. When you’re traveling, you can’t control everything—unless you have a private jet and a pilot at your beck and call. But even so, you can’t control the weather. So, to me, I just let go. If things are delayed, they’re delayed. In almost twenty years of playing and traveling, heavy touring, I’ve only missed one gig. And that was kind of a fluke thing.

WZ: Do you have any Japanese jazz students at Northwestern? PM: No, not at this time.

WZ: When you’ve been to Japan to play, have you done any teaching—master classes, private lessons? Some American musicians have done that in Japan. It’s hard, because, as you’ve said, schedules can be so tight.

PM: Yes, very tight. I’ve never done anything like that formally. But I’ve talked to fans here and there after gigs about aspects of playing.

WZ: In writing music, have you ever been influenced by your experience of the Japanese culture, particularly music?

PM: No, I don’t think so. Not directly. But that’s interesting.

WZ: I’m reminded of Horace Silver’s story of coming back from a gig where the guys in his band had had too much to drink. He came back to the hotel and he wrote the tune “Too Much Sake,” which is on his album The Tokyo Blues. Have you observed the reactions in Japan to other types of American music?

PM: Yes. Actually, on one of my early trips there, we were staying at a hotel. The way we travel, we work with certain agencies, and they can be “restrictive.” We started to notice that we’d be staying at the same hotels in certain cities, and they’d always put us at the end of the hallway, and on separate floors, because, I guess and maybe rightly so, American musicians have the reputation for being loud and for partying, whatever. In Japan, the rooms are really small, and the walls are really thin.

On the occasion that I’m thinking of, Snoop Dogg and Dr. Dre were staying in the same hotel. Dr. Dre was staying in the room across from mine. So they had done the same with him, put him at the end of the hallway. We went over to hear Snoop Dogg and Dr. Dre at a club in Roppongi, and they had a huge following there. That was twelve, fifteen years ago, but hip hop has such a global pervasiveness and popularity. People who don’t travel to a lot of different places, the way musicians do, don’t have any idea how pervasive hip hop is in the world now, how much it dominates popular culture. It’s really amazing.

WZ: So, just summing up a bit, would you say that touring in Japan is quite different from touring in Europe?

PM: Yes, I would. I do love traveling in Europe, too. Germany, France, Italy—I’ve enjoyed them all. There are great varieties to experience in each country—the people, the audiences, the food, the wine. The distances are smaller between places, and there’s just such variety, which is nice. You still have this sense that American pop culture is just so pervasive. It’s a little depressing at times because you feel it starts to impose upon local cultures, especially in bigger cities, just like in Japan.

But the Japanese people seem to have a good sense of balance. Obviously, they have their own culture, which is so old, and so unified. Japan is an island. It’s isolated. But because Japanese technology has been advanced for so long, they have powerful ways of connecting with many different cultures. They’ve never had a “closed door” to the world.

WZ: This is a serious question, and I’m going to ask it to close on. Have you been to a baseball game in Japan?

PM: No, but I would love to do that. I know baseball is played on a high level over there. I’m a huge baseball fan. I even went—this was on my eighth birthday—to the game in St. Louis when Lou Brock got his 3,000th hit!

But here’s a sports note to close on. I had a great time skiing in Japan once. I had a couple of days off between two tours in Asia. Instead of coming home for like twelve hours and flying right back, I went to Japan a couple of days early, and this was in the winter. I’d been in Tokyo a lot, and it’s great, and I’d seen a lot of the tourist stuff. I’d never gotten into a really small town in Japan. I just decided it would be fun to do some skiing. I took the train up to Nagano, and then I went farther up north. I’m trying to remember how I found out about this—maybe it was online, or I just heard about it. You could reserve online, and I did that all in a couple of days before I got there. I stayed at a little Japanese inn. They have hot springs baths there, and the skiing was just fabulous. It’s one of the few things that are cheaper in Japan than in the U.S. I had to rent everything, but I had such a fun day, just on my own. I’d love to do that again sometime!

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Review of
Jonathan Franzen, Freedom: A Novel
(Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010)
562 pages

Like a bird on the wire/
Like a drunk in a midnight choir/
I have tried in my way to be free.
—Leonard Cohen,
“Bird on the Wire” (1969)

How could he leave? How could he go?
Everything he hated was here.
—Philip Roth,
Sabbath’s Theater (1995)

In the late summer weeks leading up to the release of Freedom, the follow-up to the National Book Award-winning novel The Corrections (2001), Jonathan Franzen received a wave of publicity that today is customarily reserved for film actors or the stars of reality television. Reports fluttered that President Obama had been spotted buying an advance copy while vacationing in Martha’s Vineyard (the job has to have a few perks) and there were rumors, quickly confirmed, that Oprah would select Freedom as her next Book Club entry, a gesture that concluded one of the strangest feuds in recent American literary history. The pre-publication media blitz surrounding the novel reached something of a fever pitch when Time magazine put Franzen on its cover, an honor that put him in league with such American heavyweights as Faulkner, Hemingway, Morrison, Nabokov, Salinger, and Updike. Under the tagline “Great American Novelist,” the cover presented a pensive-looking Franzen, his eyes averted to the side emphasizing the sense of discomfort that pervades the five-page feature. While the Time cover capped off the buzz surrounding the novel’s publication, it also helped kick off another wave of anti-Franzen fervor that has obscured a more meaningful discussion of the novel. One of the more notable of the objections came from Jennifer Weiner, best known for her novels In Her Shoes (2001) and Good in Bed (2002), who coined the phrase Fransenfreude for the amount of critical attention being poured on Freedom. “Schadenfreude is taking pleasure in the pain in others,” Weiner quipped, “Franzenfreude is taking pain in the multiple and copious reviews being showered on Jonathan Franzen.” Weiner’s wisecrack, which said nothing about the quality of Freedom, helped initiate a fervent debate about how women novelists such as Weiner—who are often slapped with the derogatory chick-lit tag—have been largely ignored by publications such as the New York Times and by English departments.

The ensuing debate had its many merits, including a revealing study of the New York Times book review section that disclosed a disturbing gender gap, but it had little to do with Franzen or his novel, and it seemed that Fransenfreude might be better defined as the pleasure that some writers and critics drew from seeing Franzen squirm. That Franzen would have become a writer capable of generating such a heated reaction would have been hard to predict before the publication of The Corrections. Born outside of Chicago, but largely raised in the St. Louis suburb of Webster Groves, Franzen enjoyed an early literary career that was a series of modest successes, resulting in his garnering a reputation as a writer popular with critics and grad students but not with a broader readership. His first two novels, The Twenty-Seventh City (1988), a tale of urban corruption that centers around the St. Louis police department, and Strong Motion (1992), which centers on a series of earthquakes afflicting the Boston area, were ambitious works that attempted to illuminate the complex (and often malignant) systems that seemed to govern life in America’s urban centers. Moreover, both works belied a heavy debt to Franzen’s postmodern predecessors (Thomas Pynchon, William Gaddis, and, in particular, Don DeLillo), and Franzen seemed to be positioning himself, alongside David Foster Wallace and Richard Powers, as a keeper of the flame of a certain brand of American experimental fiction.

However, after completing Strong Motion, Franzen suffered a crisis of faith in his ability as a novelist and in the novel’s power to engage the culture at large, a culture that no longer seemed invested in the novel as a primary form of entertainment or social critique. Franzen chronicled the crisis in a noted 1996 Harper’s article, originally called “Perchance to Dream” but later re-titled “Why Bother?” when it appeared in his 2002 essay collection How to Be Alone. “If you’re a novelist and even you don’t feel like reading, how can you expect anyone else to read your books,” Franzen confesses midway through the essay. “I believed I ought to be writing a third novel. And not just any third novel. It had long been a prejudice of mine that putting a novel’s characters in a dynamic social setting enriched the story that was being
told; that the glory of the genre consisted of its spanning of the expanse between private experience and public context.”

The result of this crisis was The Corrections, a sprawling narrative that pits the decline and redemption of the Lambert family against the backdrop of the millennium. What distinguished The Corrections from Franzen’s earlier work, however, was not his ability to situate his fiction within a larger social context (which he had achieved in his first two books) but his ability to create a series of credible and fully formed characters. In his review of The Corrections, James Wood describes the book as a “correction” of the brand of postmodern fiction practiced by DeLillo which often put little emphasis on the notion of character. “This is welcome,” Wood writes of the turn in Franzen’s fiction. “More than welcome, it is an urgent task of contemporary American fiction, whose characteristic products are books of great self-consciousness with no selves in them; curiously arrested books which know a thousand different things—How to make the best Indonesian fish curry! The sonics of the trombone! The drug market in Detroit! The history of strip cartoons!”—but do not know a single human being.” Indeed, the ways in which Franzen was able to distill the best elements of DeLillo and Gaddis into a compulsively readable novel was perhaps his greatest achievement, and it lent the impression that The Corrections, for all of its seemingly old-fashioned emphasis on character, was signaling a possible new direction for American fiction.

While it is debatable whether or not The Corrections represented a new movement for the American novel, it was an invigorating read, and it should not be surprising that Freedom largely continues the approach that Franzen employed in his breakthrough book. Freedom’s epigraph comes from the final act of Shakespeare’s The Winter’s Tale (1609-11), and Franzen leans on the plot of Shakespeare’s late romance—in which a king suspects his queen of marriage appears to be slowly deteriorating: Walter, exhausted by his son’s insolence and his wife’s increased drinking, withdraws into his work while Patty rekindles her crush on Walter’s best friend from college, a tobacco chewing, alternative rock singer named Richard Katz (a character loosely based on Franzen’s good friend David Foster Wallace, who committed suicide in 2008, and whose death, Franzen has said in several interviews, inspired him to finish the book).

The suburban discontent that Franzen depicts at the beginning of Freedom is perhaps overly familiar terrain, and it would be easy to discount the novel as clichéd if Franzen weren’t able to empathize so fully with his characters. Nevertheless, Freedom lacks the neat symmetry that had characterized its predecessor, and it contains a few more narrative tricks, the most notable of these being Patty’s autobiography. Entitled “Mistakes Were Made,” a title that could just as easily apply to the United States foreign policy after 9/11 as it does to the personal missteps that Patty charts, the memoir is in many ways the most audacious piece of fiction that Franzen has composed, and its placement so early in the novel (the section begins on page twenty-seven and goes on for nearly two hundred pages) could have easily derailed the narrative. Franzen’s decision to have Patty write her memoir in the third person, a gesture that reflects Patty’s at times crippling sense of self-consciousness, leads to the occasional awkward passage as Patty the autobiographer attempts to distinguish her writerly present from Patty the character. Furthermore, her voice at times seems too indistinct from the narrative voice that pervades the rest of the novel, a voice that is also highly self-conscious.

The problems facing a male writer attempting to write from a female perspective are well-documented; nevertheless, the section in the end largely works because Patty emerges as a refreshing storyteller whose perspective on herself and her family offers a corrective lens through which we are able to view the rest of the narrative. In an especially effective sequence, Patty recalls how reading War and Peace helped facilitate her affair with Richard Katz. “The autobiographer wonders if things might have gone differently if she hadn’t reached the very pages in which Natasha Rostov, who was obviously meant for the goofy and good Pierre, falls in love with his great cool friend Prince Andrei,” Patty writes of the reading experience in her autobiography. “Pierre’s loss unfolded, as she read it, like a catastrophe in slow motion. Things probably would not have gone differently, but the effect those pages had on her, their pertinence, was almost psychedelic.” Moments such as this are genuinely moving, and they are representative of Franzen’s skill in charting the nuances of his characters’ psychology. The Berglunds remain deeply flawed, and at times they are highly unlikeable, but in their misguidedness they are often painfully recognizable.

After the conclusion of Patty’s autobiography, Freedom gains momentum as the narrative moves to 2004, the year of the Kerry/Bush election (although the race remains strangely absent from the narrative). With the expansion of the war in Iraq as a backdrop, Franzen illustrates how the Berglunds become enmeshed in the moral morass that surrounded the invasion. Throughout the novel, Franzen casts freedom as a negative force. It enables a husband to leave his wife, a son to cut ties with his family, a nation to go to war. Franzen argues that it is only our ability to check our freedom, continued on p. 28
to limit our appetites, that allows us to navigate life with a modicum of happiness or contentment. While this argument is not particularly original, Franzen does provide a compelling portrait of how easily an individual and a nation can betray their best ideals in the name of some illusory greater good. At one point, Joey visits the home of his college roommate, whose father happens to run a think tank “devoted to advocating the unilateral exercise of American military supremacy to make the world freer and safer, especially for America and Israel.” Over Thanksgiving dinner, the father articulates the reasons for invading Iraq, his reasoning giving voice to the strange brew of cynicism and optimism that propelled the decision to invade: “Freedom is a pain in the ass. And that’s precisely why it’s so imperative that we seize the opportunity that’s been presented to us this fall. To get a nation of free people to let go of their bad logic and sign on with better logic, by whatever means are necessary.” Joey quickly absorbs this perspective and becomes involved in a misguided plot to sell questionable motor parts to the military in Iraq.

While Joey receives an education in the finer points of neo-conservative thought, his father is becoming enmeshed in a scheme to build a nature preserve for the cerulean warbler, a rare songbird that migrates between the Appalachians and South America. The planned West Virginia preserve, which is being funded by an oil tycoon named Vin Haven, a friend of both George Bush and Dick Cheney, would allow coal companies to strip the mountain of its coal using a technique termed mountaintop removal, an environmentally devastating process in which “ridgetop rock [was] blasted away to expose the underlying seams of coal, surrounding valleys filled with rubble, biologically rich streams obliterated.” Despite his misgivings about the project and his employer, Walter pursues the project as a way of gaining momentum (and funding) for a population control movement, an idea that had some traction during the late 1970s but that has since been largely disregarded, that has been his passion since he was an undergraduate. Both father and son end up betraying their ideals, and their plots collide in a fashion that feels somewhat contrived as they find themselves unwittingly in league with a Halliburton-like corporation.

While the plot at times strains credibility, the final two hundred pages of Freedom are a pleasure to read as Franzen chronicles the consequences of the Berglunds’ poor choices. Mirroring the motion of The Winter’s Tale, whose final two acts take place sixteen years after the first portion of the play, Franzen concludes the novel with two relatively brief sections that move ahead six years in time, bringing the narrative up to the present moment. Freedom ends on a note that recalls the magical conclusion of Shakespeare’s play as the Berglund family find a way back to each other. The conclusion remains deeply satisfying, yet it leaves much unanswered. In summarizing the last six years, the narrative briefly touches on the final crisis and on Obama’s election, but the concluding sections feel strangely, and at times beautifully, isolated from the culture at large. That Franzen did not address all that has happened since 2004 cannot be so easily recovered.

Moreover, Franzen’s return to the domestic in the novel’s final two sections reinforces the notion that for as much as he is interested in covering larger social forces, his true strength as a novelist, and what makes him a writer of note, is the way in which he is able to render, with great care and empathy, the complexities of belonging to a family. “Expecting a novel to bear the weight of whole disturbed society—to help solve our contemporary problems—seems to me a peculiarly American delusion,” Franzen observed in “Why Bother?” “To write sentences of such authenticity that refuge can be taken in them: Isn’t this enough? Isn’t it a lot?” The questions here, ones that linger throughout Freedom, are certainly worth asking as we consider the novel’s cultural potency in this new century. In its depiction of a family on the verge of collapse, Freedom largely achieves the authenticity that Franzen had imagined fifteen years earlier when he composed that essay. This accomplishment might not be especially groundbreaking, but it is one worth celebrating.

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1 A useful summary of the Franzenfreude controversy can be found in an article by Emily Bazelon, Hanna Rosin, and Margaret Talbot that appeared in the October 8th edition of Slate, entitled “Fact-checking the Franzenfreude.” (http://www.slate.com/id/2270194/).
2 Stephen Burn’s recent study of Franzen’s fiction, Jonathan Franzen at the End of Postmodernism (2008), makes the connection between Franzen, Powers, and Wallace explicit as he reads Franzen’s career alongside the development of these two other writers.
6 “While we’re still seeking all the facts, it’s obvious that the execution of these policies were flawed and mistakes were made.”—President Ronald Reagan, December 1986, commenting on the secret arms deals with Iran. (Italics added)
Solving the College Education Problem, Once More with Feeling:
More Money for Less Knowledge but Better Booze

Review of
Craig Brandon, The Five-Year Party: How Colleges Have Given up on Educating Your Child and What You Can Do About It (Benbella Books, 2010)
235 pages with endnotes, appendix and index

My diploma is now in a coma…
—“Collegiana,” 1928 pop tune

I might be the last of my kind: a person with a C on her college transcript who didn’t complain to the professor about it. I had gotten a C, D, and F respectively on each of the three exams for the course, so you can imagine my elation when I saw that I had passed. Since, I was fresh out of high school, I didn’t know then that I had actually failed. It was just a coded fail—the gentleman’s C. The fail without the flunk.

Then again, I don’t know and never knew anything about Human Evolution (the course in question). I don’t know if gorillas walk on their fists or their knuckles (or possibly neither) or which monkeys have prehensile tails. And I got a C without even having to learn any of that stuff. I still think it was a decent trade-off.

But some would argue that my grade inflation story is proof of the general decline in higher education. After all, I didn’t learn anything, and I didn’t have to repeat the course. I would even go so far as to say that I didn’t have the faintest idea how to learn the mountain of details that I was tested on for the exam. And by skating by I never had to learn how to learn them.

So did I fail by not failing? Did I cheat myself by falling for the mirage of the grade? Did the university in the end really fail me in that course? Craig Brandon, author of The Five-Year Party: How Colleges Have Given up on Educating Your Child and What You Can Do About It, would argue that I did fail and that universities are consistently failing their students by not giving them an education and even encouraging them to slack off so long as they pay the tuition bill.

While writing the book Brandon discovered that “a large segment of the higher education industry was involved in a massive fraud in which parents, students, and taxpayers were being hoodwinked into paying for one thing—a college education—but were actually getting something entirely different—a five-year (or longer) party, where education was no longer required.” Brandon explains that schools encourage kids to take it easy so that they have to add an extra year or two to the typically four-year program. Although Brandon clarifies that not all schools are party schools, he also adds: “[F]ew colleges, from first-rate research universities to the Ivy League, remain untouched by the changes in educational priority I describe here.”

Grade inflation and dumbed-down courses are just two of the charges that Brandon makes against higher education. The expense, the resulting debt, and the rowdy behavior of students including binge drinking and sexual assault are also criticized.

None of this is new to anyone who has been paying attention. There has been a lot of outrage about higher education in recent years, and the loan scandal uncovered by then New York Attorney General Andrew Cuomo a few years ago (also covered in the book) didn’t help. Brandon might be aware of the fact that his book is not covering any new ground and compensates for it with sensational statistics and stories.

For instance, when Brandon writes about rape on campus, he claims that gang rape is a “common crime committed at fraternity houses,” adding that “there seems to be no documentation on how often this takes place, because no one, not even the victim, ever discusses it in public, but estimates range from once a semester to several times a semester for each fraternity.” For someone who used to be a journalism professor, Brandon seems a little too at ease with an accusation that is not supported by any evidence. Brandon explains that one of his students once told him what frat boys look for in their gang rape victims, a scandalous piece of hearsay that will sell books, even if it doesn’t have any basis in actual fact.

The panegyric about the earlier days of higher education that begins the first chapter of The Five-Year Party is also less than helpful. Brandon claims, “A generation ago, when parents sent their children to college, they knew what they were getting for their money. College was the magic doorway that opened up the American dream, and those who passed through its gates could expect wealth, success, and a life full of meaningful engagement with the world.”

While this may have been how colleges were perceived, Brandon insists that this is the way universities actually were. (No wonder he thinks universities are in such decline! Before, they were nothing short of magical.) Granted, in the past, getting continued on p. 30
a bachelor’s degree did help many students get ahead in the job market more than it does today. Nonetheless, realistically, a university can promise only one thing: that it will offer a student an opportunity to get a good education. Whether that student applies that education to a successful and meaningful career after graduation is completely outside of the university’s control. A university can’t even promise that its students will actually learn anything since there have been gut courses, slackers, and cheaters in college since pretty much the beginnings of universities. Professors and townies have been complaining about rowdy, drunken college students who do not study since the Middle Ages.

Brandon fails to realize that the perception of college as a “sure bet” to a life of wealth and meaning is what prompts so many parents to send their unprepared kids to college—any college—in the first place. This perception has allowed for the creation of party schools, but rather than point out that such a notion was always, necessarily, inaccurate, Brandon seems to be trying to insist that universities return to offering something that they could never genuinely provide in the first place, a magical gateway to a life of meaning.

Perhaps the major fault of Brandon’s book is its obsession with scapegoats. At one point Brandon blames the 1994 Oscar-winning film *Forrest Gump* for students not wanting to learn: “*Forrest Gump* unwittingly spawned an entire generation for whom learning and knowledge are superfluous and who sincerely believe that life will simply hand them their own box of chocolates.”

Brandon repeatedly accuses students of being lazy, engaging in binge drinking, and generally acting like entitled brats. *Seasame Street*, college professors, and reality TV are to blame, but mostly this behavior is the fault of college administration: “A new kind of administrator began taking over the reins of power at American colleges” in the early 1990s, Brandon explains. “These new administrators had more in common with Gordon Gekko [Michael Douglas’s famous character in Oliver Stone’s 1987 film, *Wall Street*] than they did with Aristotle.” According to Brandon, these administrators encourage professors “to make their classes student-friendly, and that means no outside reading assignments, no difficult concepts, … and no tests.” He concludes, “Flunking out, which used to be the primary consequence for disengaged students who slacked off, has been nearly eliminated by party school administrators who think failing a student is a nonsensical rejection of a paying customer with cash in hand.”

The gutting of college as a temple of learning is mostly the fault of these administrators. They are the smarmy used car salesmen preying on students and exacting exorbitant tuition rates from the unsuspecting parents—all in an effort to line their own pockets: “One study found that salaries for college adminis-

Perhaps the major fault of Brandon’s book is its obsession with scapegoats.
Review of
Jeremy Black, War: A Short History
(Continuum, 2009)
167 pages plus bibliography and index

Starting with its wry title, War: A Short History understates. The history of war is of course anything but short, especially for Jeremy Black, professor of history at the University of Exeter, who has written to date over ninety books of military history—a prodigious output by any measure. Yet in A Short History, Black’s ultimate concern is volume of a different sort, not the spatial kind that lines bookshelves, but rather that rare breed of intelligence that constantly suggests there is so much more to say. It is a noteworthy contribution to the canon of war studies, not just for what it says in its brisk 167 pages, but moreover for all that it leaves out.

Black divides the history of war into six chapters. The first four take up war before 1800, leaving only the last third of the book to what general readers would recognize as “modern” war. These early parts establish Black’s method more as comprehensive outline (beginning with hunter-gatherer societies) than targeted history. For example, the second chapter, which surveys not only Europe but also China and “the Creation of the Islamic World” from 630-1490, needs a bare eighteen pages. Later, the Korean War begins and ends in a single paragraph. The Rape of Nanjing, a six-week long massacre during the Second Sino-Japanese War that left as many dead as the Union suffered over the entire course of the American Civil War, gets three words—one word for every hundred thousand who died. The book’s overwhelming scope both dictates the pace and requires the reader to imagine the details and fill in the gaps. Commenting on the Cold War and the remarkable fact that despite provocations such as the Cuban Missile Crisis, the United States and the Soviet Union never launched full-scale hostilities against one another, Black writes, “the lack of war or, rather, the wars that do not happen, are frequently a key element in military history.” The same could be said for the reader who has never heard of Nanjing (or the ancient Hephthalites, or the battle of Adrianople), or who perhaps has heard about such places and such people, but only fleetingly and long ago. Even specialist readers will come across wars they had forgotten or wars they had never known, wars that, as a result, “do not happen” for them without the benefit of Black’s book.

A Short History is a lesson in the limitations of reading and writing about war, for despite its ambition, not every war can “happen” between its pages either (my American eye noticed the absence of the Mexican-American War and the Spanish-American War, to name but two). Black understands the restraints of this particular approach. No military historian could ever document the complete archive of organized human slaughter, and, slowly, the reader comes to realize the same. There is simply too much (repeat: three hundred thousand dead in three words). Whereas recent commentators such as Judith Butler and Paul Kahn have embroiled themselves in trying to define what war is, what behaviors it includes, and who is affected, Black refuses to become disoriented by the enormity of his task. The book’s cogent introduction certainly raises the question of what we talk about when we talk about war, but without being overly concerned with having the final word. Is an armed insurrection such as the Indian Mutiny of 1857 a war, properly speaking? What about the War on Terror? Who gets to decide what is a war and what is not? Who gets to decide which wars are important? (Black remains mostly impartial on this matter with a few notable exceptions such as an undue emphasis on the Latin American wars for independence begun during the 1820s and the Chinese Civil War following World War II). The introduction settles the ethics of war rather like Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart decided the question of pornography: we know it when we see it. The wars surveyed in A Short History are all united by their “warfulness,” a term Black imagines interchangeably with “bellicosity” to denote the conscious willingness across human societies to enter into hostilities with an opposing enemy. War inhabits the book as an inevitable intention, rational or otherwise, to submit to the costs of human aggression. Black is certainly not wrong—anyone who lived in the United States during February and March of 2003 can relate to the feeling of an unstoppable collective warfulness—but he is not in this regard terribly novel. There are shades of Freud here, who first interpreted bellicosity as repressed aggression in Civilization and Its Discontents (1930). Likewise, Carl von Clausewitz in On War (1832) understood war to be the willful and rational use of force.

continued on p. 32
Even though I would have liked Black to linger longer on establishing his criteria of war, he ultimately is more parts Clausewitz than Freud. Indeed, like Clausewitz in the nineteenth century and John Keegan today, Black is by his constitution an historian first, a diagnosticsian second. His interests necessarily gather around global patterns and large-scale developments. One of the more compelling episodes in the book occurs at the end of the third chapter when Black drops his mask of objectivity and engages with other historians explicitly. Here and in his other work, Black argues for a totalizing vision of war that stresses “continuity” and “gradualism” rather than rupture. The book directly takes issue with the so-called “Military Revolution” hypothesis, made popular by the military historian Michael Roberts in the 1950s, which maintains that Europe underwent a period of radical tactical and technological innovation between 1560-1660. Roberts and his followers point to the advent of standing armies and the improved lethality of “portable firearms” and “the introduction of volley fire” during this period. Black does not deny that the practice of war has changed over time, only that such change has come in watershed moments. The American and French Revolutions are thus downplayed in chapter four, and Black reads World War I in chapter five not as the first “modern” war but as the culmination of a larger trend toward immobility. Other commentators have singled out trench warfare in the Great War as the unique and distinguishing mark of twentieth-century combat, but Black notes there was entrenched fighting in Virginia near the end of the American Civil War as well as during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5. Scale and complexity notwithstanding, no war is unique.

An offshoot of Black’s argument for gradualism is his recurring distrust of Western teleology. The earlier chapters in particular want to leave the West behind in a concerted effort to denationalize and deemphasize the cultures and battles we usually label as major and successful—Britain and the defeat of the Spanish Armada, for example. Yet “[t]here is no more reason why the naval history of sixteenth-century Europe should be written around the English defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588… than the Spanish-Venetian-Papal defeat of the Ottoman fleet at Lepanto off Western Greece in 1571, the largest galley battle of the period.” The book’s incredible breadth of minor Anglo and non-Anglo warfare before 1800 critiques the dominant notion of a Western Way of War (Black’s term). Not only did European powers often fail in their imperial endeavors, their war customs usually benefited from contact with Far Eastern and Middle Eastern belligerents. As a result, any final “analysis predicated on European capability and development [alone] is questionable, Whiggish, and teleological.” The recurring complaint, most prominent by book’s end, is how the writing of war’s history has been in cahoots with Western determinism.

A Short History warns against a strictly linear periodization of war, and cautions policymakers and supporters of RMA accordingly. “If modern [i.e. contemporary] warfare is not necessarily total, total warfare is not necessarily modern and can therefore be separated from any developmental model of conflict.” In the words of Bruno Latour, Black might say that war has never been modern (which is also to say it has never been refined or rendered obsolete). A war: A Short History is ultimately a trim and erudite thought experiment about how one might reduce the totality of war into a single bound volume. It cannot be done, but that is part of Black’s point. Readers will not leave with a sense that they better understand any particular conflict (least of all the current wars the world wages), but they will leave with a better understanding of how the continuities of warfulness connect earlier societies to our own. To read this book is akin to sitting on a jury in the trial of human bellicosity, in which Black’s series of war summaries testify beyond a reasonable doubt to our shared refusals to repent. As Black ends A Short History, he admits with the dignity of a fatigued statesman that the world’s current wars must be “set in a wider context of failure,” as there is no end to war’s “likely future development.”

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Review of
Gail Milissa Grant, *At the Elbows of My Elders: One Family’s Journey Toward Civil Rights* (Missouri History Museum, 2008)
251 pages including index and photos

Near the end of her family memoir, *At the Elbows of My Elders*, Gail Milissa Grant tells the story of her participation in the black student takeover of Brookings Hall in 1968. “I was a sophomore at Washington University in St. Louis, and we blacks had formed a student union and presented our demands to the university administration, who largely ignored what we wanted. In December 1968, a campus cop roughed up a black law student without cause and, frustrated over the authorities’ indifference, we took over the university’s administrative office.” Specifically, what happened was that on December 5, forty African-American students took over the campus police headquarters in Busch Hall. The next day they moved their protest to North Brookings by taking over the university’s accounting offices. Over 300 white students, partly in sympathy, chose, at that time, to occupy the Chancellor’s suite located on the upper floors of the same building. When the black students asked the white students to leave, the white students refused to do so. I assume that the black students asked the white students to leave so as not to distract or otherwise distort or misdirect the nature of their own protest. Perhaps also the black students did not wish to seem as if they needed a form of enabling from benevolent leftist whites. Why the white students refused to leave is unclear. Maybe they didn’t want to lose face. Maybe they wanted to show solidarity, and this was the only way they felt they could. Maybe they felt they had as much right to protest as anyone else. In any case, the white students departed Brookings several days before the black students did. It is striking that in Ms. Grant’s account of this sit-in, this racial tension between the protesting students is not mentioned, as so much of her book deals with how she and her family had to deal with and combat racism in St. Louis. It seems as if this would have been a way to talk about how the complexities of race and racism affected her “liberation” generation in ways that were

Ms. Grant makes a point of using the “ugly duckling/swan” metaphor several times in the book.) But here Ms. Grant seems to be saying that her parents’ struggle is, indeed, hers and that she cannot let her father, in his urge to protect, as he had done as ably as any parent can, against the slings and arrows of America’s race problem, refuse to allow her to fight the good fight, as it were. She is, in her protest, continuing his legacy. In this gesture, she acknowledges both the success and failure of her father’s generation, as all children do with their parents at some point. Her father, after all, despite his herculean efforts, did not succeed to the point where her own efforts are superfluous or merely self-indulgent. This encounter is meant to be one of the book’s truly touching moments, to be sure. Not for purely sentimental reasons but rather because it does so much, so earnestly, to defend and define the black middle class as a kind of political vanguard, which I assume is one of the major purposes of Ms. Grant’s book itself. At the time of the protest, the younger generation of “liberationist” blacks did not think very kindly of middle-class blacks, no matter if the liberationists themselves were middle class. Sociologist E. Franklin Frazier’s 1957 treatise-cum-diatribe, *Black Bourgeoisie*, was required reading among
And if you hadn’t said that to me, I guess I’d still be riding up
and down on that damned car of yours. And now, Mr. Hart, I’m
a lawyer for the City of St. Louis. I probably make a bigger salary
than you do.” A passage like this reveals why the black middle
class can be seen simultaneously as heroic and psychologically
warped by envy and resentment, not just racism. Why should
he care what this white man thinks about his achievements or
whether these achievements would even matter to him, but
clearly the confrontation reveals that Grant does care in ways
that undermine the humanity he has fought so hard to gain.
Yet any reader cannot help but feel a bit of grim satisfaction in
the confrontation, as Grant did what all of us would love to do: Tell our enemies
face-to-face to kiss our ass.

David Grant decided to become a
Democrat in the 1930s at a time when
blacks were overwhelmingly Republican.
He joined a small group of black Democrats
that went around trying to convince blacks
to switch parties, a difficult chore that
required de-mythologizing Lincoln and
showing how little the Republican Party
had done to earn the loyalty of blacks.
Roosevelt’s New Deal helped the process
along considerably, aided even more by his
wife, Eleanor, who had much more sympa-
thy for blacks and their struggle than her
husband. As the Democratic Party began
to capture black voters, Grant’s influence grew.
He became more prominent as he began to
lead protest marches and pickets around
businesses that failed to employ blacks or
employed them in insufficient numbers. In
1931, he organized a picket line to protest the hiring policies of a
new Woolworth’s drugstore that refused to hire blacks as clerks.
He was among those who fought for the establishment of the
Homer G. Phillips Hospital that served black patients and trained
black doctors. Grant was to continue to be a highly visible activist
throughout the 1940s. In fact, he was one of the leaders
of the local unit of the March on Washington Movement,
launched by socialist and union leader A. Philip Randolph in 1941,
to protest segregation in the armed forces and discrimination in
the defense industry. Among the strongest chapters in the book
are those describing Grant’s civil rights activities, particularly the
account of the local March on Washington Movement unit and
the chapter on The Hub, the People’s Finance Building on North
Jefferson Avenue where Grant opened his law office in 1943,
after being fired from the Circuit Attorney’s office for protesting
a lynching in Sikeston. (It was at this time that a young, freshly
minted lawyer named Margaret Bush Wilson went to work for
Grant.) The People’s Finance Building was a sort of black
brain and talent trust. The tenants included the local National
Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the St. Louis
American newspaper (black), and several other black businesses.
Most of the rest of the book is taken up with Ms. Grant’s account of her mother’s life (the daughter of an undertaker), the lifestyle of the black middle class—their vacations, their parties, their social organizations, their interactions with black celebrities (who, during the age of segregation, frequently had to stay in the better black homes because most hotels refused them as guests)—and her own coming of age in an all-white neighborhood in South St. Louis, where her parents moved in 1947, the difficulty of childhood during the very last days of legalized segregation and the beginning of integration. The book exhibits a common contradiction in the black mind: Ms. Grant paints black urban life in all-black neighborhoods in glowing colors. The black middle class gave wonderful, splashy parties, was as cultivated and accomplished as its white counterpart, and in places like Chicago’s South Side “[full] of upscale businesses and theaters, one could live a lifetime within its borders.” Ms. Grant compares herself as a child with other children who lived in segregated black St. Louis: “They all seemed so bold and sure of themselves. They had their own social clubs, like Jack and Jill and Tots and Teens; used slang that I didn’t understand; and were fairly content to inhabit a segregated north side where the world was, indeed, their oyster.” Doubtless, the isolation and tension she felt being the rare black kid in South St. Louis gave her real moments of misery and despair. But of course one is led to this: if black urban life was so wonderful in its segregated state, why did blacks press for integration? Why did Grant buy a house in South St. Louis? This is a question Ms. Grant posed to her father, and his reply was along the lines that the house was a bargain and that he was not going to let race prevent him from taking advantage of something that a white person could have as a matter of course. But, in full disclosure, black urban life was restricted, more crime-ridden, unhealthier, with less wealth, fewer institutional resources, less cultural exposure, and fewer public services than comparable white spaces. In short, it cost black people themselves more to live segregated lives than it cost white people to have black people confined as they were, even if they enjoyed a fair amount of freedom in the space of their confinement. To be segregated in the way blacks were was to be told that you were less than human, and that some other group had the right and power to define how human you were. I suppose Ms. Grant’s own dedication to integration and living an integrated life, rather than deciding to return to her “roots” or seek some ethnic authentication, reveals how she resolved the contradiction. (Ms. Grant, for instance, was upset by the fact that the whites that she lived around never thought her to be beautiful because her looks did not conform to white standards, but had she lived around blacks she might have discovered—with her “good” hair and paper bag brown hue—that she was admired for being a black woman who wasn’t dark, nappy-haired, with Negroid features. In other words, many blacks would have admired her for how her looks approximated a white woman’s. This may not have made her any happier.)

Ms. Grant’s book is extremely valuable in the obvious way of revealing important swaths of black St. Louis history and culture, but it is probably more significant for what it says and shows about the interior of black middle-class life, about what makes a life worth living, about the rewards of being black and middle class in a world that for a long time denigrated one and ignored the other. The fact that the book is not an apology for being part of the black middle class but rather a thoughtful account in honor of its endurance is refreshing.

Gerald Early is Merle Kling Professor of Modern Letters and director of the Center for the Humanities at Washington University in St. Louis.
The Center for the Humanities will conduct a Summer Institute entitled “The Sock Hop and the Loft: Jazz, Motown, and the Transformation of American Culture, 1959-1975.” The National Endowment for the Humanities’ Division of Education Programs awarded a grant of $215,175 to fund the institute, which will bring together thirty school teachers from various humanities disciplines including English, History, Social Studies, Art, and Music, to explore two streams of popular music within the larger context of the transformation of American taste and changing ideas about the role and importance of music in society.

This institute is critically important for two large pedagogical reasons: 1) As a way to teach teachers how to use the rise of popular music in the 20th century to teach aspects of the racial and commercial history of the United States; 2) As a way of understanding how these two streams of music and their impact on and response to American taste affected literature, film, fashion, cultural aesthetics, even language.

The institute’s instructors include Gerald Early, director of the Center for the Humanities, Patrick Burke, WU assistant professor of Music, Sowande Mustakeem, WU assistant professor of history, Benjamin Looker, assistant professor of American studies at Saint Louis University, Matthew Calihman, assistant professor of English at Missouri State University, Farah Jasmine Griffin, professor of English and African American studies and chair of African American studies at Columbia University, Ingrid Monson, Quincy Jones Professor of Music at Harvard University, and other noted scholars.

Each year the NEH’s Division of Education Programs offers teachers opportunities to study humanities topics in a variety of Summer Seminars and Institutes that are held at various universities around the country. The Center for the Humanities at Washington University in St. Louis is pleased to be among those selected to host an institute for teachers.