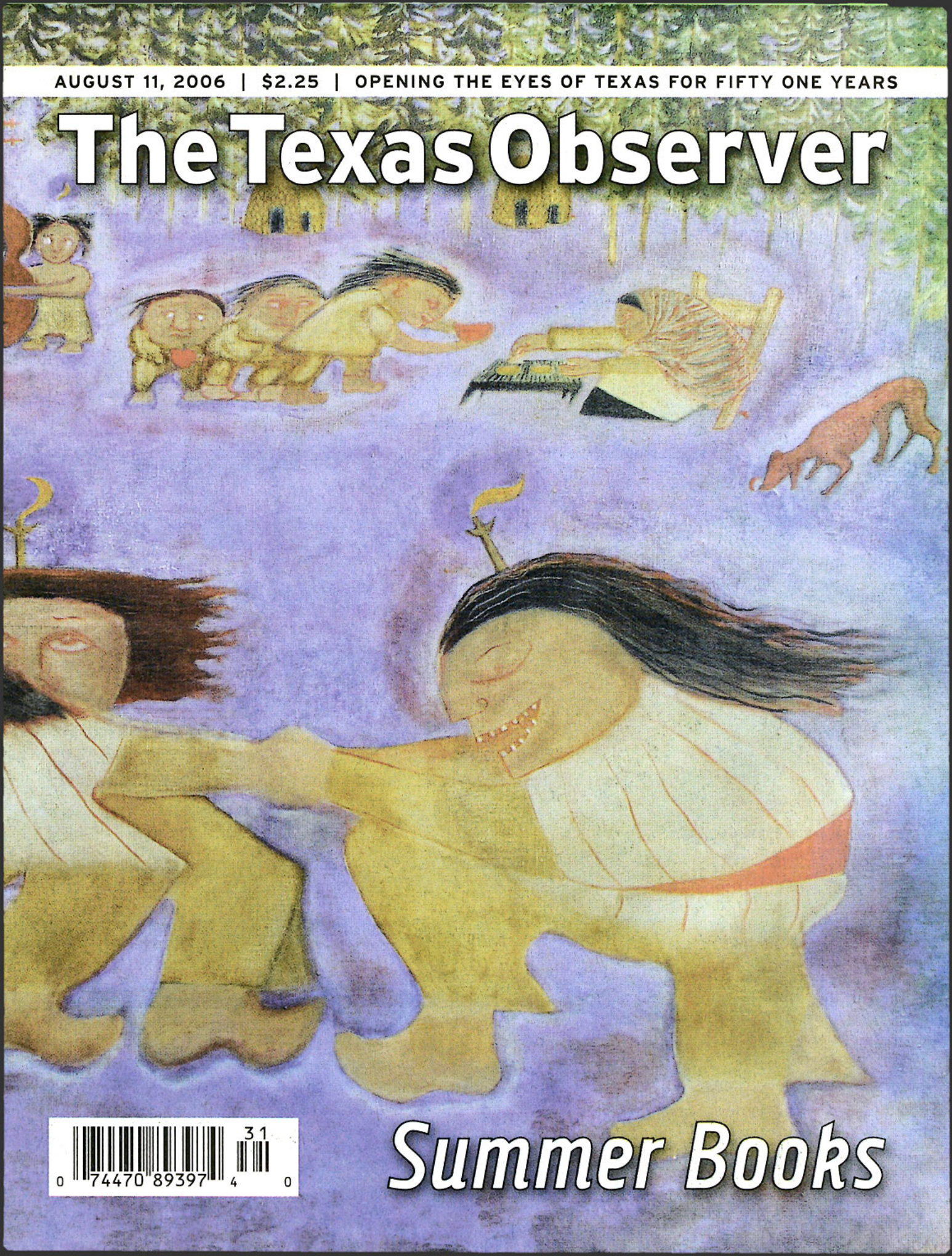
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The Texas Observer



Summer Books

AUGUST 11, 2006

The Texas Observer

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Dialogue

WAKE UP

James K. Galbraith's article about the Mexican elections ["Hanging Chads a la Mexicana," July 28] is a much-needed wake-up call. The election was a fraud, and hardly anyone—except millions of Mexican people—is calling the hand of those responsible. This is the new, clever tactic of maintaining oligarchical control while simultaneously crowing about democracy. It has happened here in the last two presidential elections, and the Democrats have rolled over in quick surrender. (Remember Kerry's comment? "They might call us sore losers.") If we want to keep democracy here and support it elsewhere, we better start fighting back and speaking up when this chicanery occurs—especially in the Americas.

Jim Simons
Austin

WHERE DOES THE MAP LEAD?

I know it would have broken with a longstanding *Texas Observer* tradition, but you might have asked a Mexican-American observer to comment upon the recent U.S. Supreme Court case ["Where Does the Map Lead?" July 14]. After all, the case was about Chicano voters, was (successfully) brought by the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, and argued by Nina Perales (regional director of the MALDEF San Antonio office) on one side and Ted Cruz (Texas solicitor) on the other. No wonder you had three Anglos commenting on the case.

For a Mexican-American to make it into the *Observer*, it appears one has to die (as my U.H. art department colleague Luis Jimenez obligingly did).

Michael A. Olivas
William B. Bates Distinguished Chair in Law
University of Houston Law Center

RESIST MUCH, OBEY LITTLE

What a surprise to open the July 14 edition of the *Observer* and find my hometown of Burleson so maligned for its dedication to the principles of a "city of character." I only wish this was the part where I could chastise Lisa Sorg for her one-sided reporting or godless liberalism or, at the very least, being guilty of the dreaded comma blunder. Not only is her grammar on

—continued on page 24

DEPARTMENT OF BACK-PATTING

The Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) recently announced that it has awarded its 2006 prize and publishing contract for the novel to Geoff Rips, former *Observer* editor. Rips is also a former publisher of the magazine and a current member of the board of the Texas Democracy Foundation. His novel, which will be published next year by New Issues Press (Western Michigan University), is called *The Truth*.

DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS

We should have noted that an earlier version of James K. Galbraith's story on the Mexican elections, "Hanging Chads a la Mexicana," [TO, July 28, 2006] was published as "Doing Maths in Mexico," in the July 17, 2006, issue of *The London Guardian*.

Summer Books

"Kill every dog, every cat," writes author George Saunders in a short story from his collection *In Persuasion Nation*. "Kill every mouse, every bird. Kill every fish. Anyone objects, kill them, too."

Now that we have your attention, we'd like to point out, as writer Edward Nawotka does in his essay, "George Saunders' Rebel Yell," that Saunders might be the perfect writer for our era—the age of pre-emptive warfare, the age of George W. Bush. The Amarillo native is blessed with the gift of "making the strange make sense"—a noble goal for any era and one that describes what we try to do here at the *Observer* 24 times a year.

Twice a year we do that by dedicating an issue to "Books & the Culture" (and even "the kulchur"). In the 40 pages of this year's Summer Books Issue, we go from George Saunders and *Persuasion Nation* to Héctor Tobar and *Translation Nation*, with a timely take on immigration by longtime contributing writer Debbie Nathan. Molly Ivins weighs in on media sinners and saints, with recommendations for superb summer reading ("Pick of the Litter"). Former *Observer* editor Dave Denison pulls together the long, strange saga of Mary Mapes and Dan Rather, and Ben Barnes and George W. Bush, in "Something About Mary (and Ben)." Former *Observer* intern—and soon-to-be published author—Emily Rapp describes the perils of writing memoir in the age of James Frey ("How James Frey Changed My Life"). In last year's Summer Books Issue we profiled El Paso native Christine Granados ["Texas Writers Observed," July 22, 2005]. This year we're proud to present "The Bride," from *Brides and Sinners in El Chuco*, Granados' wonderful short story collection, published last February by the University of Arizona Press.

There's much more to say about our writers, but a few words are needed about some of the artists whose work appears in this issue. Our cover art is by Anna Mayo. As a longtime *Village Voice* staff writer, Mayo reported on everything from Three Mile Island to Jesse Jackson to Jesse Helms. Her byline has also appeared in the *Observer*, and we're delighted to have her magical painting on the front and back covers. The photographs that accompany Debbie Nathan's review, "This American Life," are by Dulce Pinzón. Born in Mexico City, Pinzón now lives in Brooklyn. The images are part of an ongoing project, "The real story of Superheroes," which has been exhibited in Mexico as well as in the United States. Her portraits of immigrant workers dressed as comic book heroes may well be the perfect antidote for the Age of Anti-Immigrant hysteria. As Pinzón has written, her goal "is to pay homage to these brave and determined men and women that somehow manage, without the help of any supernatural power, to withstand extreme conditions of labor in order to help their families and communities survive and prosper."

Finally, a big *mil gracias*, a note of thanks to our art director and webmaster extraordinaire Matt Omohundro, who has assembled an amazing amount of text and art with remarkably good humor. And thank you to summer intern Victoria Sanchez, who's been diligently researching, fact-checking, and typing in manuscripts (yes, even in Wi-Fi City it's sometimes necessary to do things the old-fashioned way).

With this issue we take a well-deserved break. Your next issue will be dated September 8—just in time for what promises to be one of the strangest political campaign seasons in the history of Texas and the nation. Better be prepared.

To borrow a phrase from George Saunders, watch out for "squat little men with detachable megaphones growing out of their clavicles." ■

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FEATURE

Deal or No Deal

The art of scouting for rare books in the Age of the Internet

BY JAMES E. MCWILLIAMS

Should you have been one of the handful of rare book lovers to have patronized the Austin Book and Paper Show last March, you'd have encountered what the real estate folks call a buyers' market. So much so that as I browsed the shelves of the 35 vendors (down from 122 last year), it occurred to me that I was being followed. A dealer who had seen me fondle her $200 copy of Charles Darwin's *Animals and Plants Under Domestication* (1888) cornered me outside the bathroom to see if I wanted to haggle. As I hurried back to lowball the vendor from Houston, yet another panicked bookseller grabbed my arm with one hand and with the other waved in my face a $52 copy of A.W. Fulton's 1909 culinary classic, *Home Pork Making*, which I had also browsed. In the end I left with two boxes of loot, more leftover cash than I had expected, and, I'll admit, a slightly guilty conscience. When I mentioned this fire sale to Luke Bilberry, owner of 12th Street Books in Austin, he said, "Sure they sold out. They needed gas money to get home."

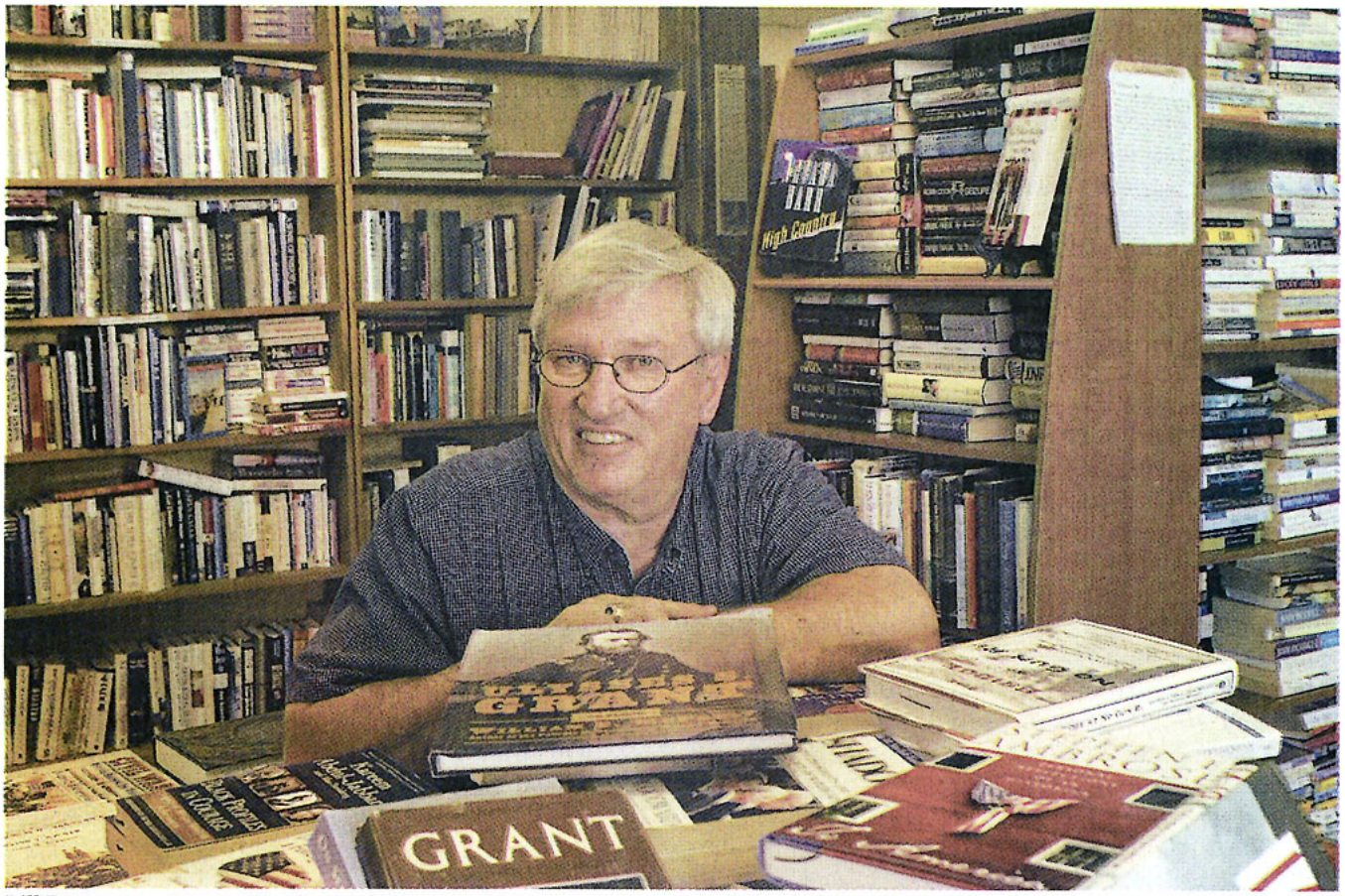
I initially interpreted the affair as yet another depressing sign that in the age of online bookselling, traditional dealers were as doomed as dinosaurs. Then I began talking to the dinosaurs. When they weren't chasing me around Palmer Events Center, many spoke with surprising optimism about the state of the book business. Of course, anyone who loves rare books can tick off a lamentable number of independent bookstores that have closed shop in the past 15 years. When I once briefly entertained the fantasy of opening a used and rare bookstore in San Marcos, several established bookstore owners I spoke with asked me matter-of-factly if I were independently wealthy. Nonetheless, the decline of "bricks-and-mortar" shops, accompanied by the rise of superstores, is only a small part of the story—a story in which the Internet (that supposed enemy of all things antiquarian) has emerged as a sturdy financial crutch rather than a villainous scapegoat.

Although antiquarian in temperament, dealers in rare books are by no means allergic to technology. Bill Estes, who has owned and run The Book Rack in Sherman for the last 27 years, is thrilled with what online book selling has done for his business. "I depend on people bringing stuff in," he says, "and you never know what you're going to get." Sure enough, this unpredictability is something that dealers universally relish. Now, he says, "when we get something good we don't have to wait for the right buyer to come along. We just list it on Amazon." Whereas Estes might have unloaded one rare book a month before going online, he says he now "gets orders all the time—five to six a week." He recently bought for $5 a book called *Doolittle's Tokyo Raiders*, an account of a World War II battle, that—after discovering the signatures of all the actual raiders on the inside flap—he listed online for $700. He has several buyers in the bidding.

Alan Culpin, whose Abracadabra Books used to be in Rockport before moving to Denver in 2003, is less overtly sanguine about the Internet, but he's embraced it with some reluctance. "We jumped on it from the start in 1995 because we had a manager who was computer literate," he says. He and wife Mary have since seen his rare book sales increase tenfold, which he attributes to the way the Internet allows "people who might not otherwise buy rare books" to do so without leaving their homes. Kevin MacDonnell, owner of MacDonnell Rare Books in Austin and an established and highly respected Texas dealer for 38 years, says that "for many booksellers the world is no longer flat. They've taken advantage of the Internet boom to increase sales." It's hard to find a dealer for whom this is not the case.

But money is not the be-all and end-all for book dealers. "It's not as if we're selling car parts," MacDonnell says. While the booksellers hounding me around Palmer that afternoon weren't as economically strapped as I'd assumed, they were still uncomfortable with how the nature of their work has changed under the influence of the Internet. Rare book dealers in Texas and elsewhere might have been quick to realize that the world is not flat, and they might have categorically tapped technology to expand their markets, quicken distribution, and reduce inventories. Indeed, while their bricks-and-mortar presence has declined, they are—through their rugged ingenuity—often thriving under the radar screen, behind closed doors, in garage offices, and out in rural locales where (as with Estes in Sherman) the rent is 25 cents a square foot. However—and here's the catch—they're bored. And if they're not bored, they're something even worse: demoralized about the future of rare book dealing.

Online selling of rare books might be a temporary windfall for many dealers, but it has also been a bust for the subculture of rare book dealing—an underworld of free-wheeling intrigue, gossip and egomania that once lent the trade a soap operatic intensity. If, as Larry McMurtry recently told me, book scouting is "an addiction," then the most dedicated dealers, even when they're lucky enough to move into the black, have gone to the booksellers' version of rehab. Life might appear healthier in a climate where everything is above board and information is democratized, but it's not nearly as



Bill Estes *photo by Steve Satterwhite*

gratifying for the elite aristocracy of dealers that has toiled for decades at the trade's emotional core. Perhaps no dealer touches upon the complexity of that core more than a man whose name raises the eyebrows of every serious book dealer in America: the late John Holmes Jenkins.

Jenkins is hardly a household name. After moving to Texas to attend the University of Texas in 1958, he went on to become an Austin-based rare book dealer known internationally for his world-class collection. He was a crusader for bibliophilic justice, leading the FBI on a sting mission to recover two Audubon manuscripts that a gentleman who claimed to have found them in an attic tried to pawn off on Jenkins in 1971. The documents turned out to have been stolen from Union College in New York by a book bandit with strong ties to the mafia. Jenkins served as president of the Antiquarian Booksellers Association of America from 1980 to 1982, where, building on his Audubon experience, he became a passionate advocate for the aggressive recovery of stolen maps, prints, and books. Driven by passion for all things Texan, he played a pivotal role in helping UT (whose press published his own biographies on Texas figures) acquire massive collections of rare Texas documents. The most notable of his coups was the Eberstadt Collection, an unparalleled archive of Texas and Western history that Jenkins bought for $10 million from Edward Eberstadt & Sons of New York. Between 1965 and 1988, Jenkins claimed to have sold over 500,000 pieces of Texana worth more than $30 million. Not only did Jenkins become a millionaire in the process, but he epitomized the glory of rare book dealing for a generation of budding scouts.

Inevitably, the largest antiquarian bookseller in Texas history had a dark side. Perhaps the most innocent of his sins was his penchant for gratuitous flamboyance. Trying to ensure that nobody missed the significance of his Eberstadt purchase, Jenkins transported the collection from New Jersey to his Austin warehouse in a fleet of semitrailer trucks escorted by Texas Rangers. Other aspects of his business were more sinister. Accusations of fraud and forgery stuck to him like white on rice, and it's likely that he knowingly sold several fakes of the Texas Declaration of Independence. On several occasions fire engulfed what the Antiquarian Booksellers Association of America reminded members was his "well-insured premises." (The booksellers subsequently removed Jenkins, whose footprints were found in the aftermath of one of those fires, from its ranks.) A well-known fixture at Las Vegas poker tables, Jenkins was recognized by his nickname, "Austin Squatty," a reference to the way he sat cross-legged when he played hands that routinely reached up to $25,000.

On April 17, 1989, Jenkins turned up dead in the Colorado River, just west of Bastrop, with a large caliber gunshot wound to the back of his head. "I wish it was cut-and-dried," said

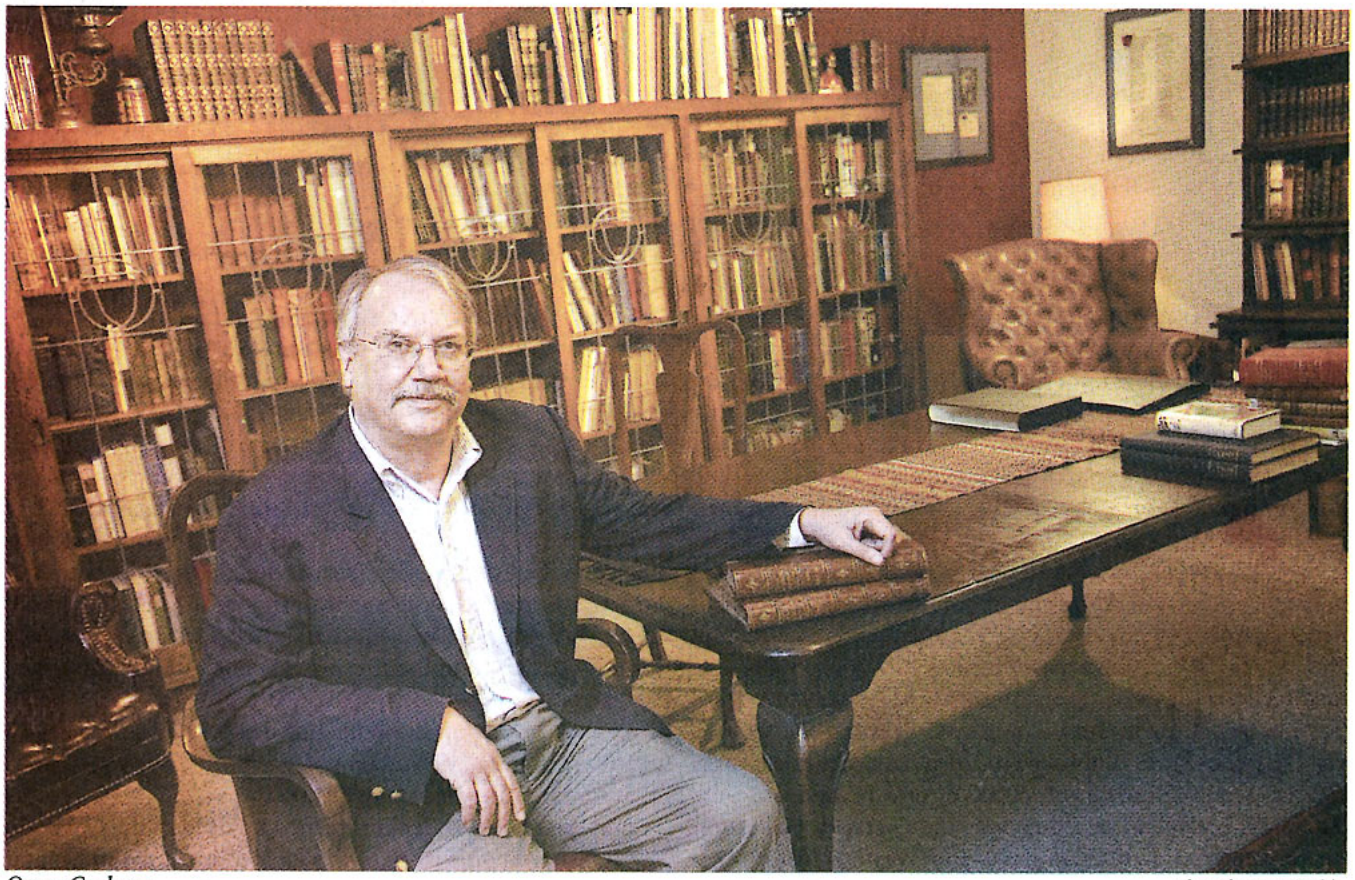
the Bastrop County sheriff of Jenkins' death, "but it's not." Officials ultimately called it a suicide.

Of course, Jenkins is no poster boy for the profession as it once was, or even a fair representation of its seamier underside. But Jenkins, whose addictions so tragically bled into each other, captured in extreme form many of the qualities that made rare book dealing such a rush before the digital age—the hunt, the gamble, the ego, the intrigue, the competitiveness, the grand gesture, and, maybe more than anything else, the precious worth of individually accumulated knowledge. "John Jenkins worked harder to make a dishonest dollar than an honest one," says MacDonnell, who managed Jenkins' literary first editions from 1980 to 1986, "but he was a great bookman." Despite his problems, MacDonnell continues, he understood that it was a vocation in which, as MacDonnell well appreciated, you not only got to "put your soul on the table and show everyone, 'here's what's in my heart,'" but "you got to travel, you got to have fun, you got to make some money, and you got meet people." It was all part of buying and selling books at a time when the vast majority of inventories were unknown.

Bilberry of 12th Street Books maintains a conspicuous online presence to complement his walk-in business, but he appreciates—one might say longs for—the good old days. Bilberry entered the rare book business in 1990, the year after Jenkins' death, as a clerk and later assistant manager of Houston's Detering Book Gallery. These were the twilight years, a time when young dealers apprenticed their way toward independence by learning the subtleties of the trade through an established master. Bilberry thoroughly benefited from his education under Oscar Graham, Detering's rare book buyer and a high priest of rare book dealing. But by 1994, having seen thousands of rare books pass under his nose, and having done his bibliographic homework on those books, Bilberry was ready to strike out on his own.

Should the year have been 1998 rather than 1994, Bilberry would likely have started by buying books online. However, not having access to such sites as bookfinder.com, alibris.com, or abebooks.com, he raised his stock the old-fashioned way—he hit the road. Armed with an Airstream trailer and a modest pocketful of cash, Bilberry crisscrossed the country, culling a collection of books by cold-calling libraries, visiting back-country used bookstores, perusing thrift shops and garage sales, and, through it all, learning that the best part of the rare book business was when you "played on your knowledge."

"Playing on your knowledge" is something that seasoned rare book dealers value as sacred. It's how they've traditionally rated themselves and is nothing less than a central part of a dealer's identity. "It's really knowledge that comes from the experience over many years of handling books," Bilberry says. Of course it's also knowledge that allows you to eat a guy's

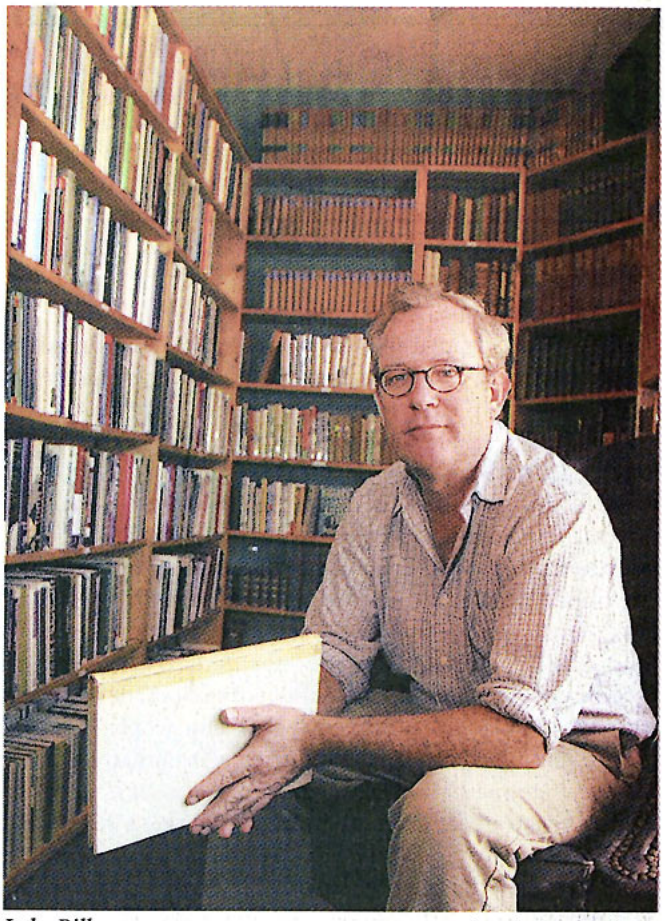


Oscar Graham *photo by Troy Fields*

lunch. "Oh, I scooped a lot of people," Bilberry says. Sure enough, within a few weeks of his journey he was paying for his trip by playing on his knowledge, all the while saving the real finds for his future store. After seven months of traveling, Bilberry returned to Houston with 4,000 books weighing down the Airstream. He started 12th Street Books in 1998 with a co-investor and now runs a brisk business that relies on a steady client base, an aesthetically pleasing bookstore free of gift-shop junk, and the Internet, where he offloads many of his books.

Bilberry and many other dealers I interviewed spoke highly of "the scoop." Scooping another dealer sounds like a Machiavellian thing to do—and it is. Which is the point. Scooping was never considered dishonest. In fact, it was—as Bilberry learned— generally assumed to be an intensely exciting part of the game. If one dealer knew his hand better than another, woe to the dealer who had lesser knowledge to play on. There was nothing ethically problematic, Graham says, about buying a book for $25 from an Ohio vendor that you'd seen a few days earlier priced at $100 in a New York shop. MacDonnell shrugs and calls it "arbitrage"—moving goods from one market to another. Today, though, it's increasingly difficult to scoop anyone—no matter how ignorant about books people might be—so long as they have access to a computer. With the Internet, supply (or at least a version of it) is a click away. A wealth of data has, in a sense, been uploaded from the minds of men who spent years accumulating it into a neutral database where any crackpot, as Culpin puts it, "who just inherited a thousand books from his grandfather" can use it to become an amateur dealer. Many genuine rare book dealers—those who have "played on their knowledge" to build their businesses on an honest foundation of hard-earned experience—have been emasculated as a result. "I must say that it's not nearly as much fun," says Graham.

The rare book situation, though, might be a whole lot worse than "not nearly as much fun." Experienced dealers with the deepest understanding of the rare book trade—people like MacDonnell and Graham and Culpin—see handwriting a distant wall, and they're fairly certain the message spells doom on many levels for a trade that's gone digital. All the initial cheering about what the Internet has done for short-term sales notwithstanding, more skeptical dealers see a classic "race to the bottom" scenario developing. It's a familiar macroeconomic concept: Supply increases while competitors outbid each other on goods whose price is falling. Dealers are moving their inventories more rapidly than ever with the Internet, but they're doing so in an environment where the market uncritically responds to what is "out there" on Web sites such as bookfinder.com and addall.com. Sadly, the dealers hit the hardest in the race to the bottom are those who have been in the business the longest, building their collections, like Bilberry, from the ground up. Old-timers who have taken a blue-chip investment approach—that is, those who have done their homework, scouted the territory, and accumulated an inventory with an eye toward future sales—have been devastated by information-age deflation. "Imagine having



Luke Bilberry *photo by Jana Birchum*

thousands of books that used to be worth $50 a piece that are now, many years later, worth $20," MacDonnell says. "Things were supposed to go the other way; it's like being an Enron employee without Kenny Boy to blame."

A free-market advocate might celebrate this trend and conclude, "Oh well, survival of the fittest"—and note the benefits that evidently accrue to the consumer. But, as is usually the case with so-called free-market interpretations, the situation is not so simple. One problem is that the information listed online is anything but perfect. As MacDonnell repeatedly told me, "What's visible is a complete illusion." For a variety of reasons, dealers rarely ever put their entire inventory online—a fact that screws up the supply right off the bat. All kinds of crazy scenarios can follow on the heels of this misinformation. For example, when an amateur dealer who has inherited from his grandmother a copy of *Home Pork Making* goes to bookfinder.com and sees only two copies of *Home Pork Making* listed, he'll think he's struck gold. He'll price it high and find a buyer. The buyer will check the supply, agree to the price, and the exchange will occur. The following week, a buyer interested in *Home Pork Making* might visit the same site to find six copies listed, and thus buy three copies for what the first buyer paid for one. The next day, another hapless *Home Pork Making* buyer will go to the site and find three copies listed, all of them priced through the roof. He'll

—continued on page 25

George Saunders' Rebel Yell

Born in Amarillo, he's the perfect writer for America in the Age of George W.

BY EDWARD NAWOTKA

In these strange and scary times overseen by our native son George W., it's appropriate that the most politically sensitive fiction writer publishing today is a Texan: George Saunders—the master of the surreal, satirical short story.

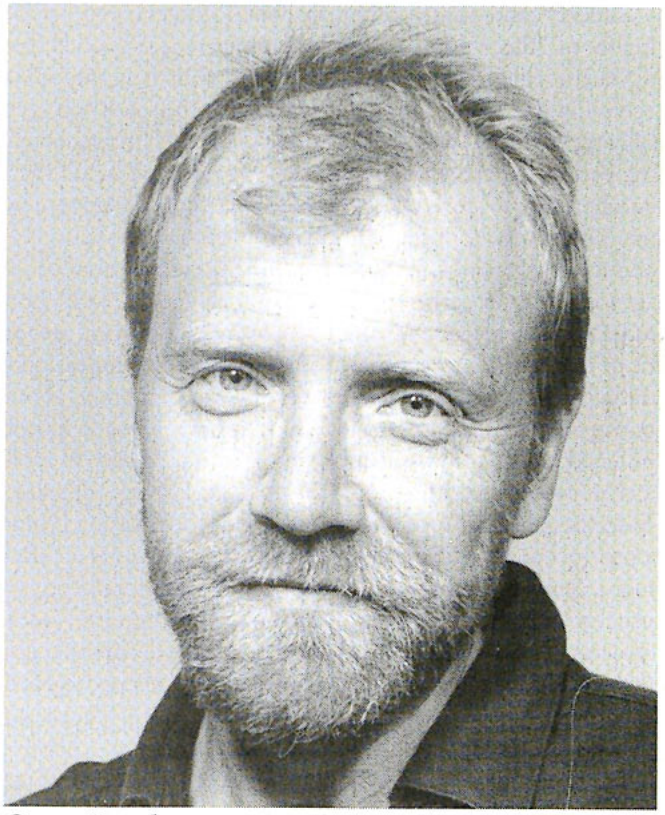
Saunders was born in Amarillo in 1958, but moved with his family to Chicago soon after. He returned to Texas each summer to spend two weeks with his grandparents and extended family, an experience he says "seemed very exotic—just the whole idea that everything about a place could be subtly different from your home—the climate, the accent, the availability of Dr Pepper." After graduating from the Colorado School of Mines with a bachelor's degree in geophysical engineering, he joined an oil exploration crew in Sumatra. During his years abroad he watched women in saris excavate roads. And as he later told *Salon*, he "learned that there was oppression." Upon returning to the U.S., he worked a variety of odd jobs, including doorman in Beverly Hills and knuckle-puller at a West Texas slaughterhouse. In the late 1980s, Saunders, who had been writing fiction all along, was accepted into the graduate school at Syracuse University, where he is now a professor of creative writing.

He has published three collections of short stories: *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline* (1996), *Pastoralia* (2000), and *In Persuasion Nation*, published in April by Riverhead Books, a division of the Penguin Group. He has also published a fable for children, *The Very Persistent Gappers of Frip* (recently reprinted by McSweeney's Books) and, in 2005, the novella *The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil*.

The title story in *Pastoralia* offers as good an introduction as any to his extraordinary body of work. In the story a pair of theme-park employees live during the workday as Cro-Magnon cavemen, communicating via grunts and combing through each other's hair for bugs. A fresh, dead goat is shoved through a "Big Slot" each day, which the faux cavemen then skin with a flint and roast for food.

Meanwhile, management communicates by fax; the cavemen, in turn, fax Daily Partner Performance Evaluation Forms to a supervisor named Nordstrom.

All is well in their little prehistoric Garden of Eden until Janet, the female re-enactor, begins having trouble at home and starts drinking. When complaints from customers reach Nordstrom about Janet's unauthorized behavior, he begins hectoring the anonymous narrator to demonstrate loyalty by ratting out his partner. Sadly, under pressure from dwindling goat supplies, the nameless caveman eventually relents,



George Saunders *photo by Caitlin Saunders*

and order is restored in his ersatz paradise.

The quirky scenario turns the Genesis story into a version of Orwell's *1984*. Saunders' vision of the future—nearly all his stories are set in an alt-America just ahead of our time—is a dystopia paved over by amusement parks, experimental labs, and corporate-sponsored suburbia, peopled by "kooks" suffering from anomie and working miserable jobs.

It's not quite cynical, nor is it entirely serious. And it may be difficult to tell from this small sample—Saunders' stories are so elaborate and so phantasmagoric, they are almost impossible to summarize—but the stuff is really funny.

A practicing Buddhist, Saunders tries to apply pacifist, lateral thinking to our political problems. This endeavor has been on full display in a series of provocative, tongue-in-cheek think pieces for *The New Yorker*, where he published most of his fiction, and *Slate* (See www.inpersuasionnation.com for a downloadable booklet of his nonfiction).

His "Manifesto: A Press Release from PRKA," for example,

Urged on by sycophants, including a media described as "squat little men with detachable megaphones growing out of their clavicles"

posits the existence of a political party named for "People who Refuse to Kill for an Abstraction." Elsewhere, the essay "Flooding the Zone: A New Approach to Global Democracy" suggests that the best way to bring peace to Iraq is to force all 300 million Americans to go there and win the hearts and minds of the Iraqis through constant and vigilant overfeeding (think of an ethnic grandmother's meals), which would induce lethargy and keep the insurgency at bay. Meanwhile, Canadians will renovate the Holy Land, while Kosovars, Palestinians, and Israelis enjoy a vacation in now vacated North America.

"The hardship will be great, but so will the reward," Saunders writes.

Indeed, these unusual times call for unusual fiction.

The most radical of Saunders's books is the stand-alone novella, *The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil,* published last year. Part Dr. Seuss, part Kafka, it's a surreal political parable about a pair of nations, Inner Horner and Outer Horner, populated by men, machines, and plants all fighting over limited land resources.

Outer Horner is a spacious country that surrounds Inner Horner, a country "so small it could contain only one Inner Hornerite" at a time. As one Inner Hornerite occupied the country, the remaining six Inner Hornerites would wait their turn in the nearby Short-Term Residency Zone, an area borrowed from Outer Horner. One day Inner Horner is struck by an earthquake that makes it three-quarters smaller and forces three-quarters of the sole Inner Hornerite in residence into Outer Horner proper. Phil, a middle-aged, "slightly bitter nobody," rallies the Outer Horner militia to view the flow of Inner Hornerites as an invasion and push them back.

Urged on by sycophants, including a media described as "squat little men with detachable megaphones growing out of their clavicles," Phil soon seizes power and imposes martial law. He surrounds Inner Horner with a "Peace Encouraging Enclosure" and begins "disassembling" all who are disloyal to him. It's genocide.

As Saunders wrote in an Amazon.com essay, the novella was inspired by "our tendency to turn our enemies into objects, so that we can then guiltlessly destroy them." The inspiration for Phil, he added, was "some Greatest Common Denominator for tyrants. I had in mind, at various times, Rwanda, Bosnia, the Holocaust, and because the above-described method of composition sometimes leaves a story becalmed or confused for long stretches of time, Islamic fundamentalism, the war on terror, the invasion of Iraq, red states vs. blue states, Abu Ghraib, Shia vs. Sunni, as well as smaller, more localized examples of Us vs. Them."

It's indeed strange, but somehow it makes sense. That may well be Saunders's true gift as a writer: making the strange make sense.

Written with his signature imaginative aplomb, his latest collection of stories, *In Persuasion Nation,* is even more acerbic than earlier works. The collection is divided into four sections, each prefaced by excerpts from a fictional neocon rant, "Taskbook for the New Nation." This book-within-a-book opens with Chapter 1. "New Man, New Growth-Community":

> *Our enemies will first assail the health of our commerce, throwing up this objection and that to innovative methods and approaches designed to expand our prosperity, and thus our freedom. Their old-fashioned clinging to obsolete ideas only signals their extinction. In the end, we must pity them: we are going forward with joy and hope; they are being left behind, mired in fear.*

These little snippets provide the sense of paranoid forces at work behind the façade of Saunders sleek, futuristic world.

Chapter 3, "Are We Not We? Are They Not Them?" offers up this advice about our unseen enemies:

> *They will attempt to insinuate themselves into the very fabric of our emotional lives, demanding the dissolution of the distinction between beloved and enemy, friend and foe, neighbor and stranger. They will, citing equality, deny our right to make critical moral distinctions. Crying peace, they will deny our right to defend, in whatever manner is most expedient, the beloved. Under the guise of impartiality, they will demand we disavow all notions of tradition, family, friends, tribe, and even nation. But are we animals, forced to look blankly upon the rich variety of life, disallowed the privilege of making moral distinctions, dead to love, forbidden from preferring this to that?*

Such vapid political platitudes appear in the stories themselves as well: "My Flamboyant Grandson" portrays a grandfather-grandson trip to a Broadway show in a futuristic New York City as little more than an orgy of advertising. When a Citizen Helper discovers that the grandfather has sabotaged

the strips on the bottom of his shoes (the strips control the types of advertising he sees), he gives the grandfather a citation that forces him to watch a corrective video called "Robust Economy, Super Moral Climate!" There's a distinct echo in the name of that video to the "Go Shopping, or the Terrorists Will Have Won" diktat extolled by the White House in weeks after the September 11 terrorist attacks.

The title story, "In Persuasion Nation," depicts reality as if it were a nonstop television ad, peopled by amorous Ding-Dongs and larcenous, talking polar bears, terrorized by the Godlike "green symbol."

"The Red Bow" is an allegory for the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. After a pack of wild dogs kills a young girl, her father, wielding his dead daughter's little red bow as a totem, lobbies fellow citizens to pre-emptively eliminate all the pets in town to prevent further attacks. There will be no mercy: "Kill every dog, every cat," advises the grieving mother of the young victim. "Kill every mouse, every bird. Kill every fish. Anyone objects, kill them too."

In the final story, "CommComm," an Air Force public relations officer is forced to spin atrocities into tolerable news. He is then murdered by a co-worker. His unexpected death, which turns him into a ghost, allows him to liberate other murder victims from a kind of limbo.

No it's not subtle, but it is sophisticated and almost entirely sui generis.

Or nearly so. Saunders does have literary forebears, two of whom can be traced to Texas.

The claustrophobic milieu of "CommComm" immediately brings to mind Terry Southern's screenplay for the 1964 film, *Dr. Strangelove*, and the paranoid tension on Burpelson Air Force Base as it braces for nuclear holocaust. And there are echoes of Donald Barthelme, a writer Saunders has described as "a god." Though the satire in Barthelme's absurdist stories is often intellectual or social rather than political, both writers employ a collage-like structure and esoteric, enigmatic plot lines. Juxtapose Barthelme's grimly funny "Some of Us Had Been Threatening Our Friend Colby" with "The Red Bow," and the resemblance in tone—as well as the twisted logic of its genius—is unmistakable.

Like Saunders, who has been consciously influenced by the Bush White House, much of Barthelme's work was at least a partial reaction to another event deeply disturbing to the American psyche—the Vietnam War.

Like Barthelme, Saunders has also received a rare imprimatur—a baton if you will—from another ground-breaking, radical, anti-war fiction writer: Thomas Pynchon, who has called Saunders "an astounding tuned voice—graceful, dark, authentic, and funny—telling just the kinds of stories we need to get us through these times."

Too true.

All this means it is important to invite Saunders into the pantheon of great, innovative, and rebellious Texas writers. He's one son of the Lone Star State of whom we can all be proud. ■

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FIVE QUESTIONS *for* GEORGE SAUNDERS

Texas Observer: *How did the time you spent in Texas affect your literary sensibility?*

George Saunders: First, my family down there is very vocal and funny and warm. That worked its way into my fiction just in the sense that humor was always seen as desirable, and as a valid way to work out problems or just enjoy yourself. My grandfather—who traveled around the Panhandle as a salesman—was a big influence, as were my uncles. They all knew how to convey joy via stories and jokes, etc., and in fact gave you the feeling that this was the whole point of life—this conveying of joy.

TO: *Did literature give you a sense of life being different beyond the conservative outlines of our Lone Star State?*

GS: Actually, when I was growing up I never thought of Texas as a conservative place at all. In Amarillo there was a good sense of what I'd call Steinbeckian wisdom—this sense that ultimately the big companies and bosses were, of course, feeding on the little guy. My grandfather worked all through the Depression—he had, at one point, four jobs at once—and so when I first read *The Grapes of Wrath* it was people I'd met in Amarillo that I imagined ...

TO: *Do you find Texas inherently "weird"?*

GS: I think it's inherently great—huge and outsized and bold and all those other adjectives people use. So yes, weird too—the one thing I loved about Texas when I was there in my 20s and trying to learn how to write was how oddly sci-fi and strange it was—the cowboy stuff, the countryside—and then those all-glass buildings and expressway-dominated cities, multinational cities ... for somebody who was, at the time, trying to channel Hemingway, it was a great reminder that literature has to be big and weird itself if it's going to give us even a taste of the real world.

TO: *Politically, how has it influenced your fiction?*

GS: Well, I guess it taught me that behind a label like "right-wing fundamentalist" are real people, some of whom I love. Many of my friends and relatives from Texas are located way to the right of me. And that's a great political lesson: Any group identity is at best an approximation, and a real artist (or a decent human being) would be hungry to go behind the Broad Characterization and try to understand everyone as a complex, evolving, work-in-process.

TO: *I also understand that among your unpublished fiction is a novel set in a Wal-Mart in Amarillo—true or rumor?*

GS: Well, not really. But there was a long stretch there where I was trying to "do" Amarillo in the voice of Hemingway, which just doesn't work.


What Starts Here Changes the World
University of Texas Press
The Southern Journey of a Civil War Marine
LEAVIN' A TESTIMONY
PATSY CRAVENS
STATE FAIR
Texas Monthly
TEXAS WOMEN
Introduction by EVAN SMITH
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The Bride

When she got too old for Halloween, she started getting serious about her wedding

BY CHRISTINE GRANADOS

Note: The following story is reprinted from Brides and Sinners in El Chuco: Short Stories *(University of Arizona Press)* *Copyright 2006 by Christine Granados. Reprinted with permission. All rights reserved.*

When the month of June rolls around, I have to buy the five-pound bride magazine off the rack at the grocery store. The photographs of white dresses, articles with to-do lists, and advertisements for wedding planners remind me of my older sister Rochelle's wedding. She had been planning for her special day as far back as I can remember. Every year when she was a child, Rochelle dressed as a beautiful, blushing bride for Halloween. She sauntered her way down the hot, dusty streets of El Paso, accepting candy from our neighbors in her drawstring handbag. The white satin against Rochelle's olive skin made her look so pretty that I didn't mind the fact that we had to stop every three houses so she could empty the candy from her dainty bag into the ripped brown paper sack that I used for the journey. She had to drag me along with her—a reluctant Casper—because Mom made her, and because I could hold all her candy. Her thick black hair was braided, and she wore the trenzas in an Eva Peron-style moño. She spent hours in the bathroom, with her friend Prissy fixing her hair just right, only to cover her head with a white tulle veil.

As Rochelle did this, Mom would prepare my costume. Spent and uninspired after a long day at work, Mom would drape a sheet over me and cut out holes for eyes. It happened every year without fail. The fact that I couldn't make up my mind what I wanted to be for Halloween exasperated my already exhausted mother even more. In a matter of minutes, I would list the Bionic Woman, a wrestler, a linebacker, a fat man, all as potential getups before it was time to trick-or-treat.

Ro, on the other hand, had her bridal dress finished days in advance, and she'd wear it to school to show it off. When people opened their doors to us, they would say, "Ay, qué bonita la novia, and your little brother un fantasma tan scary." I'd have to clear things up at every house with, "I'm not a boy." They would laugh and ask Rochelle if she had a husband. She would giggle and give them a name.

When she got too old for Halloween, she started getting serious about planning her own wedding. She bought bridal magazines and drew up plans, leaving absolutely no detail unattended. When it finally did happen, it was nothing like she had expected.

Rochelle was obsessed. Because all those ridiculous magazines never listed mariachis or dollar dances, she decided her wedding was going to have a string quartet, no bajo, horns, or anything, no dollar dance, and it was going to be in October. It was going to be a bland affair, outside in a tent, like the weddings up North in the "elegance of autumn" that she read about in the thick glossy pages of the magazines. I wasn't going to tell her there is no "elegance" to autumn in El Paso. Autumn is either "scramble a huevo on the hood of your car hot," or wind so strong the sand it blows stings your face and arms.

In the magazine pictures, all the people were white, skinny, and rich. All the women wore linen or silk slips that draped over their skeletal frames, and the men wore tuxedos or black suits and ties. She didn't take into account that in those pages, there was no tía Trini, who we called Teeny because, at five-foot-two, she weighed at least three hundred pounds. The slip dress Rochelle wanted everyone to wear would be swallowed in Teeny's cavernous flesh. And I never saw anyone resembling tío Lacho, who wore the burgundy tuxedo he got married in, two sizes too small, to every family wedding. The guests in the magazine weddings were polite and refined, with their long-stemmed wineglasses half full. No one ever got falling-down drunk and picked a fight, like Pilar. He would get so worked up someone would have to knock him out with a bottle of El Presidente. He was proud of the scars on his head, too, showing them off just before the big fight started.

Rochelle wanted tall white boys with jawbones that looked like they had been chiseled from stone to be her groomsmen; never mind the fact that we knew only one white boy, and he had acne so bad his face was blue. She also wanted her maid of honor to be pencil thin, although she would never admit it. Still, she was always dropping hints, telling her best friend, Prissy, that by the time they were twenty all their baby fat would be gone, and they would both look fabulous in their silk gowns. Never mind the fact that I, two years younger than Rochelle, could encircle my sister's bicep between my middle finger and thumb, and that Prissy rested her Tab colas on her huge stomach when she sat. My sister was in denial. And it wasn't just about her obese friend but about her entire life. She thought that if she planned every last detail of her wedding on paper, she could change who she was, who we were. Her lists drove me crazy.

She kept a running tally of the songs to be played by the band, adding and deleting as her musical tastes changed through the years. She carefully selected the food to be served

CHRISTINE GRANADOS

Brides and Sinners in El Chuco



to her guests. She resolutely decided what everyone in the family would be wearing. She even painstakingly chose what her dress would look like, down to the last sequin. But in order to marry, she needed a groom. And she was just as diligent about finding one as she was about the rest of the affair.

Every night before going to bed, she would pull out her pink wedding notebook and scratch a boy's name off her list of potential husbands. She went through two notebooks in one year. She was always on the lookout for husbands. One time, Rochelle and I spent an entire Saturday morning typing up fake raffle tickets to sell to Mike, who lived two blocks over. Ro had never met Mike, but she liked his broad shoulders—thought they'd look good in a tuxedo. So she made up a story that she was helping me sell raffle tickets for my softball team. Ro didn't let little things, like the truth, get in the way of her future. All the money raised would go into the team's travel budget. She even made up first-, second-, and third-place prizes. First place would be a color TV, second place, a dinner for two at Fortis Mexican Food Restaurant, and third, two tickets to the movies. She said Mike was going to win third place, and when she delivered his prize, she was going to suggest he take her to the movies since she was the one who sold him the winning ticket. I thought my sister was a genius, until we got to the door and knocked. When Mike answered, Ro delivered her lines like she had been selling raffle tickets all day long. When he told us he had no money, we were shocked. Ro didn't have a Plan B. Then, when his older brother came to the door and offered to buy all ten of the raffle tickets, we were speechless. All we could do was take his money, give him his stubs, and wish him luck. Ro was so upset her plan was a failure that she let me keep the ten dollars. Needless to say, Mike got scratched off her list.

Her blue notebook was where she compiled her guest list and either added or deleted a name depending on what had happened in school that day. I got scratched out six times in one month: for using all her sanitary napkins as elbow and knee pads while skating; for wearing her real silver concho belt and losing it at school; for telling Mom that Rochelle was giving herself hickeys on her arms; for peeking in her diary; for feeding her goldfish, Hughie, so much that he died; and especially, for telling her the truth about the food she planned to serve at her wedding. That final act kept me off the list for two months straight. She wanted finger foods like in Anglo weddings—sandwiches with the crusts cut off.

"Those cream cheese and cucumber sandwiches aren't going to cut it, Ro," I said through the cotton shirt I was taking off.

"My wedding is going to be classy," she yelled at me from across the room, where she was sitting on top of her bed, smoothing lotion on her arms. "If you don't want to eat my food, then you just won't be invited."

—continued on page 27

Pick of the Litter

As I occasionally survey the pack of sycophantic shih tzus in the Washington press corps, wriggling on their bellies to kiss the feet of those in power, I feel plumb discouraged about the future of journalism.

It's like a cross between Versailles under Louis XIV and high school: obsequious courtiers flattering their way to favor, plus the silly cliques of the "in crowd" and "out crowd." On the other hand, I am greatly cheered by the young journalists in the blogosphere who have now whelped a perfect litter of books worth paying attention to.

For my marbles and chalk, the pick is David Sirota's *Hostile Takeover: How Big Money and Corruption Conquered Our Government—and How We Take It Back*. Sirota is a new-generation populist who instinctively understands that the only real questions are "Who's getting screwed" and "Who's doing the screwing?"

The extent to which corporate power has taken over the country and is running the table cannot be exaggerated, and must not be ignored. Sirota has not only collected much new and useful information, he has put it into a package that provides handy weapons to fight back. *Sí, se puede.*

Eric Boehlert, who writes for the online magazine *Salon*, has taken on the MSM (mainstream media) and dipped it for ticks in his book, *Lapdogs: How the Press Rolled Over for Bush.*

He recounts some breathtaking journalistic malfeasance—ignoring the Downing Street memos, the Valerie Plame case, and many others. As usual, sins of omission dominate. The Washington press corps (which I think should be separated from "normal" parts of the press) is breathtakingly craven. In the face of intimidation and the lure of official approval, it has shown neither courage nor enterprise. I don't know how to account for this pitiable performance. One hears terrifying tales of when the press corps "turns," when it rips and attacks like sharks in a "feeding frenzy." Darn, not a shark in sight. Not even after *The New York Times* revealed the Bush administration is spying on our bank accounts, and the *Washington Post* reported that Bush is running torture-prisons overseas. The president's approval ratings are at 33 percent, and not a single shih tzu will yap at him.

Sometimes misunderstandings



between bloggers and the MSM are the result of simple ignorance. For example, there was the volley of disapproval from bloggers about the MSM's failure to pay attention to comedian Stephen Colbert's brilliant riff at the White House Correspondents Dinner. They weren't ignoring Colbert—as I understand it, Colbert was the final speaker, and no paper can get much in after 10 p.m. on Saturday night. Stories have to be written, edited, and printed; the presses roll; and then the trucks roll. It's OLD media, kids—we do not just punch a button at our shops.

It seems to me both MSM and the blogosphere could benefit from reading the new biography of Izzy Stone by Myra MacPherson, published by Scribner and available in August. Because Izzy was pretty much the perfect journalist, we can all learn from *All Governments Lie: The Life and Times of Rebel Journalist I.F. Stone.*

What a pleasure! What a joy to read about the old dog on the hunt. Surprising, too. While Stone famously broke story after story by actually reading government documents instead of taking what the press was spoon-fed, MacPherson reminds us he was also a shoe-leather reporter who went out to interviews, press conferences, and the daily bash, where he occasionally harassed spokesmen.

Today bloggers seem to me to be breaking more toward opinion than journalism, which I think is a shame.

A noble exception is Josh Marshall's Talking Points Memo, which is completely on top of its chosen topics. Of course, Stone practiced opinion journalism, as do I, but with him the hard reporting always came first.

I have no objections to anyone breaking into the guild of journalism without the credentials of journalism school or experience on a print daily (though I highly recommend especially the latter). I do object to those who jump from political hackery to flackery and expect respect. Truly, if you can't cover a five-car pileup on Route 128, you should not be covering a presidential campaign.

The danger of the blogosphere is reading only those you agree with. While there are right-wing blogs that are entertaining freak shows, it's hard to find substantial journalism there. I hate to list bloggers I like because I'm bound to leave out so many, but here goes: Daily Kos, Eschaton, Altercation, Political Animal, and Media Matters.

And by the way, apologies to those shih tzus with the hearts of lions. ■

Molly Ivins is a nationally syndicated columnist. Her most recent book with Lou Dubose is Bushwhacked: Life in George W. Bush's America *(Random House).*

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Something About Mary (and Ben)

BY DAVE DENISON

Truth and Duty: The Press, the President, and the Privilege of Power
by Mary Mapes
St. Martin's Press
371 pages, $24.95

Barn Burning, Barn Building: Tales of a Political Life, from LBJ through George W. Bush and Beyond
by Ben Barnes with Lisa Dickey
Bright Sky Press
256 pages, $24.95

What type of personality disorder shall we attribute to Mary Mapes, the disgraced former television producer for Dan Rather? She got burned by the infamous story about President Bush's National Guard records, was fired by CBS, and still, heretic-like, she refuses to recant. CBS and Rather publicly apologized for airing the story on *60 Minutes II* after questions were raised about the authenticity of key documents. Yet Mapes stubbornly maintains the documents are real. She views herself as the victim of a right-wing cybermob. From the opening chapter, her book *Truth and Duty* reads like a primal screed against the bloggers who pursued her, the mainstream reporters who piled on, and the colleagues and corporate executives who abandoned her.

Delusional? That was my first hunch. In denial? Surely. Maybe even paranoid. Several pages into her book, she describes her feeling on September 9, 2004, the day after the *60 Minutes II* report, when it came under attack: "This was like rounding a corner in the woods and spotting a new creature, all venom and claws and teeth. You didn't know what it was, but you knew it was out to get you." And a few pages later: "There *is* a well-coordinated attack machine out there in the media world, a monster that waits in the woods for an opening and then overpowers its victim."

Such complaints mean little if you believe, as I did when I started reading, that Mapes had screwed up. She had pursued an explosive story in the heat of an emotional campaign season, and she did something you can't do when the stakes are high: She relied on guesswork. She based a documentary report, I believed, on documents she couldn't prove were authentic. Therefore, she opened herself and CBS up to the firestorm that followed. Now she seethes with resentment that high-and-mighty journalists can be held up to the kind of withering criticism that politicians have always faced. It kills her that she helped bring Dan Rather's anchorman career to an inglorious end. The rest of us, I submit, looked on with either indifference or amusement. Dan was always a little ... funny.

So I was making my way through Mapes' book with the view that she was conducting a kind of public therapy. There are pages of prose that are meant to even the score. For example, there's a dishy little passage about her chance encounter at an airport with CBS President Les Moonves on an extramarital vacation with then-galpal Julie Chen, the early morning CBS anchorbabe and current Mrs. Moonves. Mapes reports the thrill of "seeing the company's illicit power couple out in the wild" and admits she and a co-worker fell over laughing when the lovebirds were out of sight. Her literary style is overdramatic and inartful, yet seldom dull. She does know how to move the narrative along. It's fun reading.

But is it persuasive? I didn't think so—until I got to the last third of the book. When Mapes finally gets around to spilling all the details about the controversial documents, her sob story morphs into a surprisingly compelling brief. I'll admit I didn't follow the details carefully when "Rathergate" (as the wingnuts called it) unfolded. This was an easy story to jump to conclusions on. In fact, it seems to me now that, at some level, I *wanted* to believe Mapes and Rather had blown it. Why? Because the alternative is to believe that a scurrilous bunch of screwball bloggers scared a professional news crew silly, and that the nation's top media outlets failed to tell the truth, and that in the end a false story won out over the true one. I read most of this book refusing to believe that. By the end I wasn't so sure. What if Mapes is not the one who's in denial here? Suppose the "disorder" that matters is the one afflicting American journalism. If nothing else, Mapes' book makes the case that something extremely important happened in the aftermath of this story and that it shouldn't all be swept under the rug.

The *60 Minutes* report in question tried to advance a story that has intrigued journalists for years: What was George W. Bush up to when he was in the Texas Air National Guard during the Vietnam years? How did he get into the Guard, and why did there appear to be a year when he did not report for duty? Why and how was he discharged early to attend Harvard Business School?

Mapes, a 15-year CBS News veteran, had collected as much of the official record as was available over several years, starting when Bush first became serious about running for president. She also knew that many of those who had firsthand knowledge of Bush's National Guard years were loyal to Bush and had closed ranks—while others were reluctant to talk for fear of retribution. Former Texas Lt. Gov. Ben Barnes had been telling people for years that he helped get Bush into the Guard, along with other privileged sons who were hoping to avoid action in Vietnam. But Mapes had never been able to convince Barnes to speak publicly.

For political journalists and for people in political life, there is a vital field of study that needs to be attended to: scandalology

As Bush's campaign against Sen. John Kerry heated up in the summer and fall of 2004, questions about the two candidates' military service were again on the table. Barnes was volunteering for Kerry and had spoken to an Austin gathering about Bush's National Guard record. Unbeknownst to him, someone videotaped his remarks, and the tape migrated to an Internet site. So Barnes finally agreed to a sit-down interview with Rather to talk about his role.

Around the same time, Mapes and her associates aggressively pursued West Texas cattle rancher Bill Burkett, who was rumored to have secret documents relating to Bush's National Guard service. Burkett was already known in Texas circles for having gone public earlier in 2004 with an account of witnessing the 1997 "scrubbing" of documents in the Bush file at Texas Air National Guard headquarters in Austin. Mapes asked around and decided Burkett was worth talking to. She arranged a meeting.

At a pizza joint in Clyde, Texas, Burkett produced copies of two memos from 1972 that were signed by Jerry B. Killian, who had been Bush's commander in Houston. Shortly thereafter, Burkett gave CBS four additional memos. The evidence, although not earth-shattering, was politically sensitive: Killian had apparently suspended Bush from flying because he failed to perform to required standards and to take an annual physical as ordered. Mapes was "on top of the world" when she got her hands on the "Killian memos," she writes. "I didn't imagine that I was setting myself up for a story that would blow my career to smithereens."

It did occur to her that the documents could be part of a "political dirty trick," she writes. She knew she'd have to have experts examine every detail before using of them. And before long she was informed by analysts that "there was no way we could ever date the documents physically and be *100 percent* certain from the pages themselves that they were produced in the 1970s." You can't rely on ink-and-paper tests for dating when you're dealing with photocopies of photocopies. Still, Mapes says, "Scientific proof isn't the journalistic standard in such a case." With military experts, she looked for any sign the details were off. And she relied on the judgment of two experts who believed the signatures and initials of Killian looked authentic. Everything checked out. Then she spoke by telephone with retired Gen. Bobby Hodges, who had been Killian's supervisor. She read him the memos and asked if he was familiar with them. He said he was. He recalled that Killian was a "hardnose" who was miffed because Bush didn't seem to be fulfilling all his service requirements. Hodges went on to defend Bush and urge Mapes not to rely on the memos. "You're creating a situation," he said.

With that confirmation, Mapes' executive producer scheduled the fateful *60 Minutes II* broadcast. It included Barnes' recollections about a phone call he made after a Bush family friend asked Barnes to help get young Bush into the Guard. Barnes called his friend Gen. James Rose, the head of the Texas Guard. Despite a long waiting list, Bush got in shortly after. The broadcast also reported on the contents of the Killian memos, without saying where they had come from or how CBS had obtained them.

This is where Mapes *et al* ran into those monsters in the woods. CBS, Rather, Mapes, and Barnes were subjected to what seemed like well coordinated attacks from the right. The reaction was instantaneous, tribal, sometimes profane, and mostly anonymous.

The Killian documents came under

attack within hours of the broadcast. A blogger going by the name "Buckhead" posted an authoritative-sounding analysis on a right-wing site that used typographical details to argue the documents were "forgeries." Before long, amateur typography sleuths all over the Web were disputing the Killian memos. Although they were looking at type that had been photocopied, scanned, and faxed, they were attuned to the subtlest of details. Similar-looking documents could easily be produced in Microsoft Word, they claimed.

Mapes does a pretty thorough job of debunking the debunkers. There's a lot of arcane document debate involved, but the argument comes down to this: CBS's detractors claimed that since the documents used "proportional spacing" (different widths allotted to different characters) and occasional "superscripts" (the tiny "th" in 111th) they were produced on a computer, not a typewriter. Mapes produces evidence that authentic official documents from 1972 and 1973 show proportional spacing and superscripts, demonstrating that some electronic typewriters could have produced such type styles. And, yes, it's possible for computers to make documents that look similar to typewritten ones. But, Mapes says, that proves nothing, "other than the fact that computers can replicate all kinds of things."

Nevertheless, Web-fueled suspicions spread to the mainstream press. Many had been working on the same story and quickly assumed the documents came from Burkett, who was portrayed as an anti-Bush zealot. Reporters found dissent among former National Guard members. In a crushing blow to CBS, Gen. Hodges suddenly got back on the reservation, telling reporters he no longer believed the memos were real. He hadn't seen them, after all—he'd only heard them read over the telephone.

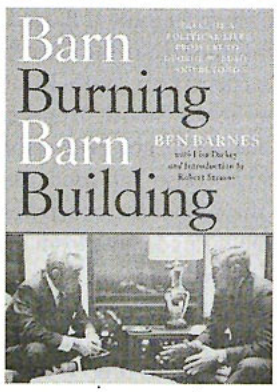
With a few different circumstances, Rather and Mapes might have been able to defend the story. But the bottom fell out when they got back to Burkett and pressed him for more information about where he got the documents. He had originally told Mapes they were given to him by another former National Guard member (whom Mapes had been unable to contact). When the pressure was on, he told CBS higher-ups that in fact he had been contacted by an unidentified man who said a "Lucy Ramirez" wanted to arrange a handoff of some sensitive documents. Burkett agreed to receive the papers in March of 2004 at the Houston Livestock Show. He took them from someone he didn't know, with no way of knowing where they came from or why they were being passed to him. It was only 11 days after the *60 Minutes* broadcast that Rather apologized on the CBS Evening News and said, "If I knew then what I know now, I would not have gone ahead with the story as it aired, and I certainly would not have used the documents in question."

This is the mistake Mapes can't quite own up to. She admits she was "furious" at Burkett "for misleading us [and] lying about the provenance of the documents." She knew she was sunk when she realized nobody could explain who put the documents in Burkett's hands, or why. In her opening chapter, she admits she knew she could never be 100 percent sure about the documents. But, she writes, "I felt that I was in the clear, that I had done my job, and that the story met the high standards demanded by *60 Minutes*." In the end, she holds to that position. She believes the "preponderance" of evidence suggests the memos are real. "I came to a well-grounded conclusion that these documents appeared to be true in every way," she writes. She had demonstrated "that the Killian memos were most likely real and deserved to be reported."

In the final analysis, going with documents that an unknown person produces, without a reliable first-hand authority to vouch for them, surely doesn't meet the highest standards of journalism. Almost certainly, if Mapes knew then what she knows now about how the documents fell into Burkett's hands, she would have held back. Yet she doesn't get around to saying that.

In a sad coda, CBS News, a division of the entertainment company Viacom Inc., assembled a panel to conduct an exercise in self-flagellation. Since CBS had already apologized, Mapes notes, the strategy "would prove the corporate equivalent of declaring yourself guilty and then setting up a trial." Led by former U.S. Attorney General Richard Thornburgh, a prominent Republican elder, the panel made no finding as to whether the Killian memos were authentic. Thornburgh at one point criticized the use of the Barnes interview because it didn't "prove" that Barnes helped

This Month At BookPeople



BARNBURNING, BARNBUILDING
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Texas A&M Press
Wed. Aug. 23 7PM

Ben Barnes has been involved in Texas and national politics for decades, and he brings all of that experience to BookPeople to talk about his book *Barnburning, Barnbuilding*. He will be discussing how his party has lost power in both the state and nation, and what must be done to gain that power back. This book provides a clear look at the past glory days of Texas, and a hopeful look towards its future. Come by and hear what he has to say.

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Bush get into the Guard, thus proving that Thornburgh himself had no useful insight into the practice of journalism. The panel concluded that the *60 Minutes II* crew had acted irresponsibly in rushing the story onto the air and made Mapes the fall-gal.

And what does Barnes have to say about all this? In his memoir *Barn Burning, Barn Building*, he looks back at the Vietnam years and regrets most of the stands he took. He supported the war partly out of loyalty to Lyndon Johnson. As he told Rather on *60 Minutes*, he regrets using his political influence to get Bush and others into the Texas National Guard.

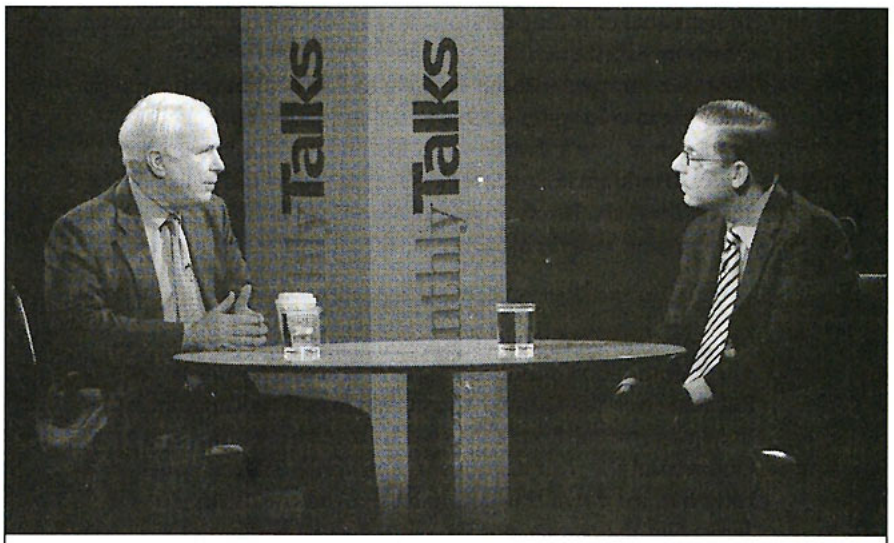
"I've never changed my story on the issue of helping Bush get into the Guard, and I never will," writes Barnes. "I thought at the time that I was simply doing political favors, but as I got older, I came to realize I'd been playing God. For every privileged boy like George W. Bush that I helped, another young man was shipped to Vietnam."

Barnes says he "got hit by a barrage from Republicans" for speaking out. But, he writes, "it wasn't half as bad as the fusillade that brought down Rather and his associates after they aired another segment during the show that relied on apparently falsified documents." He continues: "Dan Rather is a good man and a fine journalist, but it's clear CBS made some mistakes in airing that segment." (It's also clear Barnes has not read Mapes' book, which predates his. If he had, he might not be so sure CBS relied on "apparently falsified documents.")

In fact, Barnes goes on to say that although journalists haven't found a "smoking gun" to prove Bush shirked his Guard duty, "I believe it's clear that Bush didn't fulfill his duties in the Guard after he transferred to Alabama to work on a political race." He didn't say that on *60 Minutes* "because I wanted to stick to what I knew 100 percent to be true." But he says it in his book. He even recounts speculation "that Bush refused to take the physical because he was afraid it would show evidence of drug use. I don't know anything about that, but I do know that he wasted a lot of money and time—and a place in the Guard that could have gone to someone who took his responsibilities more seriously."

On the whole, Barnes' book is full of a lot of political bosh—John Connally was the greatest political leader of the modern age, and Ralph Yarborough was a foolish liberal who caused nothing but trouble for the Democratic Party—but there are enough poop droppings to make it all worthwhile. Barnes includes weightless homiletics about how to strengthen the Democratic Party, but the chapter that has lasting value, for my money, is his detailed account of how his promising career was brought to a halt by the Sharpstown financial scandal.

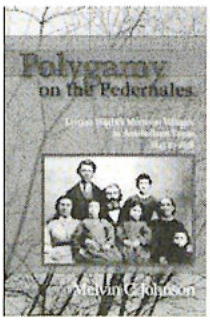
—continued on page 26



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Melvin C. Johnson lives in Nacogdoches, Texas, and teaches history and English at Angelina College in Lufkin, Texas. His research interests range from logging railroads to Texas mill towns to Mormon cowboys in the Texas Hill Country.

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THE NINTH DREAM: WAR (IN THE CITY IN WHICH I LIVE)

All my life—let me say this so you understand—*all my life*
I have heard stories of the river and how people were willing
To die to cross it. To die just to get to other side. The other
Side was the side I lived on. "And people die to get here?"
My mother nodded at my question in that way that told me
She was too busy to discuss the matter and went back
To her ritual of rolling out tortillas for her seven children, some
Of whom asked questions she had no answers for. We were
Poor as a summer without rain; we had an outhouse and a pipe
Bringing in cold water from a well that was unreliable
As the white man's treaties with the Indians, unreliable
As my drunk uncles, unreliable as my father's Studebaker
Truck. I was six. It was impossible for me to fathom
Why anyone would risk death for the chance to live like us.

I have heard people laugh when
They see the Río Grande for the first time. *That is the river?*
But that river has claimed a thousand lives, Mexicans caught
In its currents mistaking the river as something tame, and in
One second the river devoured them whole. The survivors
Have handed down this lesson: Nothing in the desert is
Tame. Not the people, not the sand, not the winds, not
The sun, not even the river that resembles a large ditch,
That's laughed at by visitors and locals alike. Nothing
In the desert has ever had anything resembling mercy
On Mexicans attempting to leave their land, to become
Something they weren't meant to be.

People are still crossing. People are still dying. Some have
Died suffocating in boxcars. Some have drowned. Some
Have been killed by vigilantes who protect us in the name
Of all that is white. Some have died in a desert larger than
Their dreams. Some were found, no hint of their names
On their remains. In the city that is my home, Border Control
Vans are as ubiquitous as taxicabs in New York. Green vans
Are a part of my landscape, a part of my imagination, no less
Than the sky or the river or the ocotillos blooming in spring.
The West is made of things that make you bleed. I no longer
Hang images of summer clouds or Indians carrying pots on their
Talented heads or Mexican peasants working the land with magic
Hands. On my walls, I no longer hang paintings of the Holy Poor.

We have been fighting a war on this border
For hundreds of years. We have been fighting the war so long
That the war has become as invisible as the desert sands we
Trample on.

I do not know how long all this will continue. Peace
Is like the horizon. We can see it in the distance
But it is always far and we can never touch it.

Every day
In what passes for a newspaper in the city in which
I live, someone writes a letter ranting against the use
Of the Spanish language because this is America, and I can
Taste the hate in the letter, can almost feel the spit
In the letter writer's mouth, and I know we could not
Ever speak about this without one of us wanting to hurt
The other in the city in which I live.

I will tell you a sad story: White people are moving away
From this city that has claimed my heart. They are running away
From my people. They are running away from all that keeps
Us poor. I want them to stay and fight. I want them
To stay and live with my people. *We have chased them*
Away. I want them to love the people who make the food
They love. *We have chased them away—are you happy? Are you*
Happy? And there are people waiting in line, spending
Their fortunes just for a chance to enter, waiting, just blocks
Away from where I sit, waiting to come over, waiting in Juárez
Just to cross the river, from China and India and all the nations
Of Africa and Central America and Asia. No poet, no engineer, no
Politician, no philosopher, no artist, no novelist has ever
Dreamed a solution. I am tired of living in exile. I am tired
Of chasing others off the land.

Let me say this again. Again. Again.
I want, I want this war to end. To end.

BENJAMIN ALIRE SÁENZ, poet and novelist, was born in Las Cruces, New Mexico, in 1954. His first book of poems, *Calendar of Dust,* received an American Book Award in 1991. He was a Wallace Stegner Poetry Fellow at Stanford University and has won numerous other awards, including a Lannan Poetry Fellowship. He teaches in the Creative Writing Department at the University of Texas at El Paso. "The Ninth Dream: War (in the City in Which I Live)" is excerpted from *Dreaming the End of War* (Copper Canyon Press, 2006). A lengthy interview with Sáenz was published in the March 28, 2003 issue of the *Observer.* ***—Naomi Shihab Nye***

Welcome to Iztapalapa

I know it used to be a dog. Ears, nose, body, tail—all clearly outlined. It's been flattened by so many vehicles that it's become a perfect wafer, a piece of urban collage that flashes by like one of those disaster scenes you see on television: entire populations razed by the vindictive fury of nature. But here on the eastern edge of Mexico City, cataclysm results from a different kind of disaster.

"Welcome to Iztapalapa," reads a gigantic sign. Rising over what in pre-Hispanic times was a marshy Eden is the "*Tianguis* of the Towers," a vast, itinerant market. Pieces of political propaganda, slogans about justice, progress, health and welfare blow away, meld into dust devils, and block the view of the volcanoes.

The place is a microcosm of not just Mexico, but of much of the world; a place where rural peasants who move to the city find themselves trying to participate in an economy that may not have room for them.

Three times a week the market appears and disappears along an enormous avenue known as "*El Eje Seis.*" Axis Six. It sounds like something from a sci-fi novel: *When Axis Six overtakes us.* I decide not to think about it.

The selection of merchandise—and its origin—is a mystery. The high-tension towers that lend their name to the market stand out in a sea of tarps, like masts in a sad and ragged fleet. Row upon row of stands give way to streets and alleys. A ferocious hurricane season has submerged the city in a relentless early morning rain, reminding me of something my high school biology teacher once said about Oparin's soup theory, something about our primordial past. Here it is right in front of us. And yet somehow it doesn't even make a dent in the crowd's enthusiasm. *Bara-bara! ... Bara-baraaaaa!* howl the vendors. Everything is "*barato*"—cheap, sold at a fraction of the regular price. That's why the place is so jam-packed at such an early hour.

THE TRIUMPH OF CHAOS

There's a man trying to sweep the ground, a seemingly impossible task. With one smack of the broom he pushes the water, but before he can smack it again, the murky liquid runs back into a puddle. He does this again and again, a hundred times. He's so earnest, so diligent, you'd think he was in charge of a fancy hotel, that he was sweeping an imperial boulevard.

I trip over his enthusiasm and fall flat on my face, inches away from a small, greenish substance next to the broom. My idealism leads me to think that the forces of nature are so extraordinary that even in this muck, life triumphs over chaos. My sense of touch tells me just how wrong I am. That little piece of green? Just another piece in the collage, like the dog in the asphalt. A scrap of carpet stuck in the ground after all that trampling and sweeping. But it serves its purpose. I land right in front of a stand selling sports equipment and am welcomed inside. Weights, barbells—it looks like something from an old Charles Atlas ad. The man in charge (judging by his appearance he failed to complete Mr. Atlas' body-building course) drops his broom and rushes to my aid. He calls me *güerita,* which I'm not. "Careful, *güerita.*" In Mexico, we're all "*güero*" (meaning a fair-haired person with white skin) until proven otherwise. Say the word and you evoke a national fantasy that running through our veins are platelets imported from other, seemingly better worlds. I thank the man for his concern, for his genuine kindness.

BALLET PARKING

I haven't been here five minutes when I feel a sharp blow to my hip. Like everyone in Mexico City, I live in a perpetual state of alert, which leads me to imagine—stupidly—that if I am robbed, mugged, or worse, I'll be able to do something about it. Enraged, I whirl around to confront my aggressor.

The man who begs my pardon is wearing a white shirt and jacket. *Impeccable,* despite all the mud. He's a waiter, and his 180-degree smile disarms me. He pushes a supermarket cart filled with cereal boxes, fastidiously organized into rows. All kinds of cereal. In the middle row are complementary items: milk, yogurt, granola, honey, bowls, spoons, napkins.

"Breakfast, ma'am?" he asks, gazing at me with big, dark eyes under his arched brows. I say no, thank you, and change directions to put some distance between myself and the murderous cart.

The culinary selection is worthy of a pasha. In huge pots, large pieces of meat boil and dance. What kind of meat? Who knows? Everything is submerged and tortured in oceans of oil that can kill whatever microbes might be floating around. Everything is garnished with onion, chili peppers, lime, salsa. Stacks of tortillas; vast vats of *atole;* rivers of electric-colored soft drinks; oceans of coffee brewed with water of questionable quality. The aroma is everywhere. On the customers' faces: unparalleled joy, the happiness of blind faith and innocence. How lucky.

At the far end of the market I see a series of black holes that look like caves. Portable caves, that's what they are. Dozens and dozens of trucks have been parked with the discipline of a ballet troupe in a powerful choreography worthy of Maurice Béjart. Their back doors open wide like jaws. Even though the signs on their chassis announce "Dry Cleaning," "Fresh Chicken," "Movers," "Home Gardening," the mobile grottoes regurgitate bundles of clothing, crates of toys, boxes of sound equipment, bathroom furniture, tools, auto parts, tennis shoes: millions and millions of tennis shoes. New or used. They've got it all.

OPIUM DREAMS

I'm distracted by the frenetic chatter, the language of rapid hand movements, as women pick and choose from great mounds of jumbled clothes. As soon as they get back to their own neighborhood, they'll resell the same stuff in an endless cycle of selling and reselling that never ends (unless something—or someone—finally falls apart). "Special Offer": That's for items of clothing that cost one peso (*one*). The most expensive cost 150 times more. But there are bargains here for the trained eye.

Featured in the women's lingerie section are gaudy polyester triangles in phosphorescent colors. Painful in more than one sense, they're barely threads with feathers, lace, and rhinestones. They're supposed to trigger lust, fire up the passion of a *soirée superbe*. But hanging there at the mercy of the wind, they merely suggest the kind of sexuality practiced at the nearby hotels—located so close to the Central de Abastos (one of the largest produce markets in the world) that a steady flow of lonely men is ensured.

Temptation Hotel, Pegasus Motel, Vitrales (tinted glass) Plaza, Monarch Plus Beauty Institute, Aztec Emperors School. Opium dreams to cloud over reality.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

I walk straight ahead looking for a way out. I hear an omnipotent, *omnipresent* voice over the hellishly loud music, the cries of vendors, the bawling children, the complaints of those who've been shortchanged, the quarreling couples who say "*Sí, amor*," "*No, amor*," with murderous resentment. Or in extreme cases, "*amore*." "I already told you no, *amore*."

I head toward the voice of salvation, which seems to come from above. (From an almost heavenly source, you might say.) I approach. A brilliant light blinds me. The tarps are gone. There's nothing left. Only that dazzling, blinding glare.

I lower my gaze and find a golden slipper, sunk halfway in the mud. It's a sign: the road to another dimension, the beginning of the end.

The place is a microcosm of not just Mexico, but of much of the world.

There, where the city of canvases and the parking lot of grotto-trucks end, another market begins. The mere sight of this god-forsaken wasteland is enough to cut through the varnish of political rhetoric. It's enough to condemn the way wealth is distributed—and so much more.

Attached to one of the towers, climbing like a vine, is a loudspeaker. Pouring out of it is a narrative that verges on the mystical.

> *If you suffer from fungus, from skin rash, scabies, and other generalized infections that can cause itching; if you suffer from pimples and blackheads, let me recommend a cream ...*

It couldn't be any clearer.

MEN OF SALT

I see a no man's land filled with people who look as if they were made of salt. The force of a tsunami or the fury of a hurricane would have probably been more merciful. In this human salt mine, the vendors sell whatever is left over. In other words: the garbage of garbage, assorted more or less by theme.

Perched above the mudslide, covered in grime, hundreds and hundreds of "vendors" offer loads of loot that no one could conceivably want to buy: a single, worn-out shoe; two mismatched spoons; vials of serum that might cure you—or kill you; boxes of medicine of undetermined origin and effect; broken pieces of a board game discontinued in the '70s. Dishes, toy parts, family photos. I'm impressed by a pile of dirty brushes, encrusted with paint. A major accomplishment for a conceptual artist. But seeing them here—like discarded workers—horrifies me.

A man who seems ancient, but probably isn't, sits and watches over a tiny stack of boots. He still wears huaraches, a wide-brimmed hat, white muslin clothing. Not long ago he was tilling the earth, tending his plot of land. Guessing by his appearance, I assume he's a recent addition to the world of *chachareo* (the buying and selling of anything, in any condition—every day, the job of more and more Mexicans).

An elderly couple inflates a wading pool. There's no water. No problem. They sit on a sofa, kiss and fondle each other, and watch the misery pass by. Nearby, a makeshift pen shelters three handsome fighting roosters that seem to be under arrest. Otherwise, why would they be here? In the next rows: mismatched office furniture; old-fashioned dolls with matted hair and one eye; expired, dented cans; pornographic videos in Beta format. (Compared to what's available in broad daylight anywhere in the city today, they seem almost innocent.)

> *For children who are weak, anemic, infected with worms; children who can't learn, who don't study; for these sickly children ... give them a dose of an authentic vitamin with royal bee jelly ....*

Tossed on the ground, among hundreds of empty bottles of fine perfumes, is a book: *Why Chiapas?* by the conservative ideologue Luis Pazos. I look up. I look around.

Two men are negotiating the sale of a suitcase that still smells of airplane

turbines. The prospective buyer wants to open it and see what's inside. The seller refuses: Take it or leave it. Behind them is another cart, this one a double killer. It sells *fresh* oysters even though the closest refrigerator—not to mention body of water—is miles away.

Pets: three white ducks, martyred by immobility in a cage that would be a tight fit for one. Parakeets on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Once green and beautiful, they're now dehydrated and ashen from the dust. Instead of flying above the luxuriant jungle canopy from which they were kidnapped, they're waiting to die in this hellhole. If you don't find what you're looking for, says the vendor, she can get you any animal in two weeks.

If you've got a splitting headache,
If your lungs ache,
If you suffer from dizziness, fainting spells; can't breathe,
If you're nerves are on edge,
If you can't cannot fall asleep ...
Try a capsule of royal bee jelly.

CUITLÁHUAC ON THE ICEBERG

The messianic voice nearly drowns out the *rancheras* blasting from old, rundown radios. Someone's playing a melancholy Beatles LP (on this side of the *tianguis*, there are no CDs). The ground is infested with broken records. *Let it be, let it be...* I want out. I'll have to retrace my steps. But can I?

A truck pulls up, and a man begins to empty its contents with a shovel, as if he were shoveling manure. They're books. Hundreds of them, with damaged, torn bindings. There's Tolstoy. Tolstoy! Scientific, leather-bound books, in Spanish, in German. Notebooks. Goethe. *Werther.* Wasn't it Goethe who reminded us that the devil isn't impersonal, but quite the opposite?

"Dangerous crossing," warns the sign. A van with "Jail" written on the windshield brushes past me. It goes back and forth to the Santa Marta Acatitla penitentiary, not far from here. Taking my life into my hands, I try crossing Axis Six. There's the dog-wafer.

I change my mind. Instead of crossing, I decide to climb up the pedestrian bridge. Poor Cuitláhuac. What would Moctezuma's brother say if he saw what has become of the botanical gardens of his incomparably beautiful Aztec palace? Of its clear pools of water? What do *we* say?

I turn to look at the market one last time from above and suddenly am overcome by the sense that this is no mere tianguis: This is an iceberg advancing slowly, but inexorably, over the city. One day it will swallow it whole. One day the whole city will be incorporated into this collage that—like it nor not—we're all part of. Meanwhile, I've got my bottle of royal bee jelly capsules. I was going to take one, but I better make that two. Let's hope they work. ■

Laura Emilia Pacheco is a writer in Mexico City. This article was translated by Tanya Huntington.

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—Dialogue, continued from page 2

track, but her take on the pulse of the community is virtually flawless as well.

I was publisher of *The Burleson Star* at the time the City of Character program was introduced and adopted here. When I returned to the office after covering that introductory meeting, I remarked to several staff members that it was nothing more than a money-making guise aimed at fundamentalist Christians and right-wingers. I wish I could say that I expressed that observation in print, but it would have been economic suicide and would have had no effect on the ultimate commitment to the program by community leaders.

Our business did not participate in the program, nor did we editorially endorse it. I did express my concerns privately to a few key citizens and found a sympathetic ear here and there. Like me, however, they were caught up in a tidal wave of community "standards" they were helpless to stop or even criticize. After all, character ranks right up there with the big four: God, country, mama, and apple pie. Who wouldn't be for it? Put it to music, and Toby Keith would probably record it.

Once, only half jokingly, I remarked in a newspaper column that "if the world really were flat and Burleson took one more step to the right, it would topple off into outer space." No one even objected.

The "character" program is a thinly disguised right-wing manifesto. Instead of the blind obedience doctrine championed by this so-called program of character, perhaps—before it's too late—we should heed the words of Walt Whitman: "Resist much; obey little."

Questioning authority is why there is an America. I don't understand why it's considered un-American today. But it's a disturbing concept.

James Moody
Burleson

P.S. I retired as publisher of *The Star* in early January 2005. I have no connection to that newspaper anymore, and I'm sure present ownership does not share my political beliefs.

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—McWilliams, continued from page 7

buy one. Then eight more will appear. Before you know it the invisible hand is smacking people around left and right for their gullibility. In short, with online trading the supply that one sees is nothing more than snapshot of a much larger, hidden story.

Beyond deflation and imperfect information, online book trading is rife with fraud. Old school dealers might have played on their knowledge to scoop a competitor, but young dealers entering the business through the Internet today too easily play on their fecklessness. Much of the fraud is petty, and it has everything to do with the way the Internet has allowed amateurs to invade the ranks of the professionals. Culpin estimates that about 20,000 online dealers have swamped what was once a cozy club of about 1,300 traditional dealers. "Most of them haven't a clue," he says of the arriviste hordes. MacDonnell, who owns the largest private collection of Twain first-editions in the world, thinks they do have a clue about at least one thing: stealing. He speaks passionately about fraud because he's so often been on the receiving end of it. Here's how it typically works: MacDonnell acquires a rare book, spends hours and sometimes days tracing its provenance, checking the bibliographies, verifying the authenticity of the binding, researching the print type, and authenticating the frontispiece. Then he writes a description, lists his sources, and places it in his paper and online catalogs. An anonymous online seller who happens to own an inferior version of the same book—perhaps one with the cover replaced—proceeds to swipe MacDonnell's description, post the book on ebay.com, and sell it for $5 less than MacDonnell's copy. Thus MacDonnell, with his diligent trips to research libraries and hours poring over bibliographies, sees his work demolished by a part-time dealer practicing what Culpin calls "a nice little side business." On one occasion the online buyer of a Twain first edition who suspected he'd been ripped off called MacDonell for advice. MacDonnell asked him if he had a copy of the *Bibliography of American Literature*, for starters. The buyer had no idea what he was talking about. After mentioning this detail, MacDonnell, a kind-looking man with a gentle smile, looked at me, crunched his eyebrows, and—with a wall of the world's best collection of Twain books behind him—said, as if he were addressing the duped buyer, "You shouldn't be fucking around with Mark Twain!"

In the pre-Internet days this was the kind of buyer that MacDonnell might have taken under his wing and educated rather than cussing out. If there is a single aspect of rare book dealing that traditional dealers miss the most in the Internet age, it's the social aspect of working with collectors. Graham recalls how his best customers were the ones who, as young book lovers, started tentatively but, with Graham's guidance, evolved over the years into serious and confident collectors. Decades of this kind of bit-by-bit interaction have enabled Graham to stay in business. "Most of my sales remain on a person-to-person basis," he says, with buyers he's known for a long time. "Buying books is about growing, learning, and being exposed to things." He relished being able to discuss books with clients who held "the object in hand" and worked with him to develop a philosophy of collecting. MacDonnell (who spent almost four hours talking nonstop to me about books) takes his educational mission seriously as well. Over the years he has advised collectors about how to build a reference library, how to recognize original binding, the intricacies of broken type and issue points, and how to amass the most comprehensive collection they can afford. The art of cultivating serious clients not only gives MacDonnell emotional and professional satisfaction. It pays off in the old fashioned way, too. Last year, over $250,000 of his total income came from five sales to long-term clients. For clients and dealers entering the business in the digital age, there's almost no chance to form these kinds of relationships. "The clients I only deal with online," says MacDonnell, "don't give a crap about me."

Is this the fate of the rare book trade? Buyers and sellers who don't give a crap about each other trying to dupe invisible clients online with bogus deals? Out in Archer City all of the concerns that currently plague the trade seem irrelevant. McMurtry still runs his bookstore, Booked Up, which now contains somewhere in the vicinity of a million books. None of these books factors into the supply that so many online dealers accept as truth because, as McMurtry says, "I've never used a computer or done anything on the Internet." When I spoke to McMurtry on the phone, he was out in Tucson visiting used bookstores and sending back a couple of boxes a week to Archer City. "I scout every day," he says. "There are always bargains for those who want to look—it's a matter of how much energy you want to put into it and where you want to look." *Where you want to look* ... One can only hope that an emerging generation of rare book dealers—few and proud as they might be—will decide to look in the right places, places that—as Texas dealers like Jenkins, Graham, and MacDonnell knew so well—can only be discovered by interacting with the world beyond the computer screen. ■

James E. McWilliams is a writer and historian living in Austin.

—Denison, continued from page 19

Barnes had become speaker of the Texas House at age 26 and was lieutenant governor by the time he was 30. When Sharpstown hit in 1972, he was preparing to run for governor.

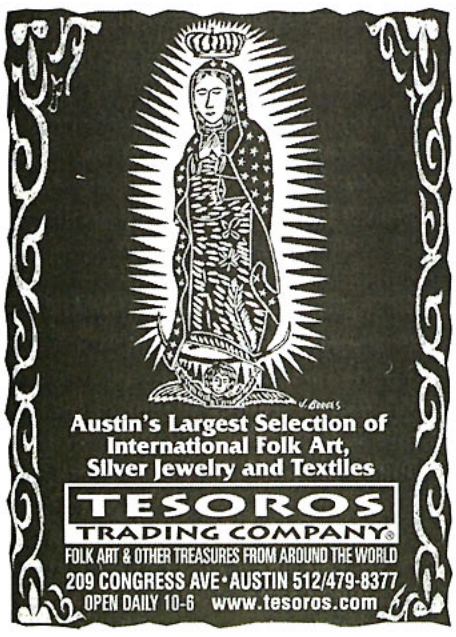
Sharpstown brought down House Speaker Gus Mutscher and others who had apparently accepted loans and stock tips in exchange for legislation, but Barnes shows that the investigations were pushed hard by the Nixon administration and that he, Barnes, was a major target. No evidence ever emerged that Barnes had done anything improper. But one of Barnes' core principles was always that Democrats need to serve the interests of the business community. So he was lumped in with the Sharpstown gang and came in third in the 1972 Democratic primary, behind Dolph Briscoe and Sissy Farenthold.

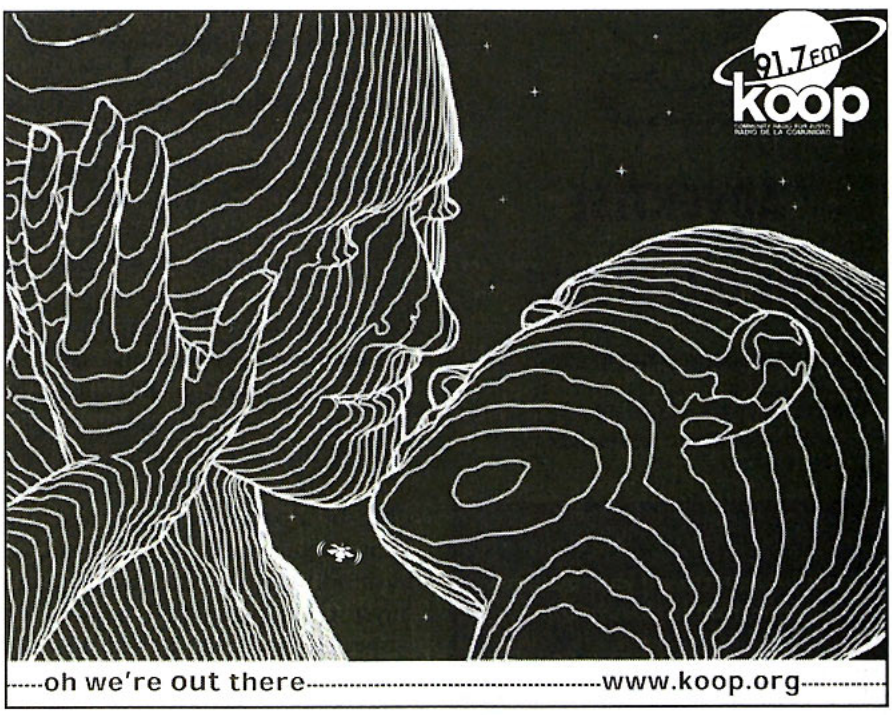
"The truth is," Barnes writes, "it's almost impossible to get your reputation back fully once you've been smeared—no matter how much you protest, or how right you might be."

Mapes' tale of how she lost her journalistic reputation has a few elements in common with the fall of Ben Barnes. In both cases, a not-quite-right version of events triumphed in the media and took root in the public mind. Mapes lashes out at the unscrupulous and dishonest people who publish on the Web. But there have always been times in journalism and politics, as Barnes attests, when false accusations win out over the facts. It may be that the Republican "noise machine" has been unduly successful lately in scaring key elements of the national media at just the right times. After all, President Bush's less-than-distinguished record of National Guard service somehow became less relevant in the last campaign season than what happened on John Kerry's Swift boat in the jungles of Vietnam. But the noise machine is here to stay. All the important action ahead depends on how well our remaining credible news organizations do their jobs.

For political journalists and for people in political life, there is a vital field of study that needs to be attended to: scandalology, if you will. Mapes and Barnes provide useful lessons in the mechanics of scandal and media manipulation. Ignore them at your peril. ■

Dave Denison is a former editor of the Observer. *To see a selection of his recent work, please visit his Web site: www.davedenison.net.*





—Bride, continued from page 13

I laughed. Her nostrils were flaring pretty steady, and she was winding her middle finger around her ponytail. Then she reached under the mattress for her notebook, and my name, Lily, was off the list, just like that.

"I wouldn't want to go spend hours at some dumb wedding when I was half starving anyway. Everybody's going to faint before the dollar dance starts."

She stopped writing, "There isn't going to be a dollar dance." Then she wrinkled her wide nose, "Too gauche."

When I came back into the room after I had looked up the word, I told her, "I'm telling Mom you think she's tacky. You're carrying your gringa kick too far." Before shutting the bedroom door, I poked my head in and yelled, "I'm glad I'm not invited. I don't want to go to no white wedding."

Later, I asked her how she expected to go on her Hawaii honeymoon without a dollar dance. "You plan on selling the cucumber sandwiches at the wedding?"

She wiped the sarcastic smile off my face when she said, "No. I'm going to have a money tree." I told her that she was ridiculous and that she was going to be a laughingstock, not knowing how close my words were to the truth.

She didn't care what anyone thought. She said her wedding was hers, and it was one thing no one could ruin.

She kept up her lists as usual, but stopped physically adding to them in tenth grade—dropped and discarded as "too childish." By then, the lists were committed to memory, and I knew that she mentally scratched ex-friends and ex-boyfriends off of it. Lance, Ruben, Abraham, Artie, Oscar, Henry, Joel, and who knows who else had all been potential grooms.

It turned out to be Angel. He was beautiful too—the Mexican version of the blond grooms in her magazines, right down to the cleft in his chin. He was perfect as long as he didn't smile, because when he smiled, his chipped, discolored front tooth showed. Rochelle worried about it all the time. She'd pull out photographs they had taken together, and the ones he had given her, to study them, trying to figure out the right camera angle that would hide his flaw. Anytime she mentioned getting it capped, he would roll his large almond-shaped eyes and smile. They would kiss and that would be the end of the discussion.

I knew this because Rochelle always had to drag me along on her dates. It was the only way our mother would allow her out of the house with a boy. I was a walking-and-talking birth control device. When we got home, I would replay the night's events for my mother. Funny, Ro relished the details of her wedding, but she never could stand for my instant replay of her dates. She would storm out of the living room when I would begin and slam the door to our bedroom. I usually had to sleep on the couch after our dates.

On prom night, Rochelle was allowed to go out with Angel alone, and she was so excited that she let me watch her dress for the big event. Tía Trini came over and rolled her hair. Prissy was there with her Tab in hand for moral support, and Mom was making last minute alterations to her gown. It was a salmon-colored version of her wedding dress. After she was teased, tweezed, and tucked, she looked like a stick of cotton candy from the top of her glittered hair down to her pink sling-back heels. When Angel saw her, he licked his lips like he was going to devour her.

Because I, her birth control device, wasn't in place during this date, the two got married when she was only a junior in high school, and she was four months pregnant. Rochelle and Angel drove thirty minutes to Las Cruces to be married by the justice of peace, with Mom in the back seat bawling. Even though Rochelle didn't get her elegant autumn wedding, she stood before Judge Grijalva in her off-white linen pantsuit, which was damp on the shoulder and smeared with Mom's mascara, erect and with as much dignity as if she were under a tent at the Chamizal. It didn't matter to her that the groom wore his blue Dickie work pants with matching shirt that had his name stitched in yellow onto the pocket. She looked at him like they were the only two people inside the closet-sized courtroom.

She didn't even blink when a baby began to wail in her ear during "Do you take this man ...."

And she never took her eyes off Angel when the woman next in line to get married, who was dressed in a skin-tight, leopard-print outfit, said, "Let's get this show on the road already. Kiss her, kiss her already."

And it didn't bother Rochelle that after Angel kissed her, he looked at his watch and said, "Vámonos. I need to get back to work," because he needed to get back to Sears before the evening rush. ■

Christine Granados lives in Rockdale.



As the World Churns

BY BEATRICE EDWARDS

The Disposable American: Layoffs and Their Consequences
By Louis Uchitelle
Knopf
304 pages, $25.95

"Job Churning" ... this is an unfortunate phrase, isn't it? It has connotations of nausea.

The Disposable American by Louis Uchitelle shows that layoffs have affected the U.S. work force in much the same way that arsenic poisons victims. The impact is incremental. Cumulative. First comes debilitation, then nausea, feeble-mindedness, paralysis, and death. The worsening condition occurs gradually, so that by the time the sufferer realizes something is wrong, it is too late to do anything about it.

That is exactly the way in which the American labor movement has weakened. The application of the layoff as a legitimate management tool has taken place with increasing scope over 30 years, systematically and unilaterally. Neither the unions nor the government has administered an effective antidote. In the process, we have all acquired a savvy new vocabulary to describe the affliction—downsizing, right-sizing, outsourcing, and offshoring. *The Disposable American* by *New York Times* economics writer Uchitelle adds more familiar terms to the layoff lexicon: depression and poverty.

Uchitelle points out that there was a quaint era long ago when, for example, humans answered phones and Congress seriously debated legislation such as the Humphrey-Hawkins Full Employment bill. A time, in other words, when unions had the political power to oblige the government to intervene in the economy, from time to time, in ways that favored employment security and decent wages for U.S. workers, instead of promoting mergers and acquisitions for U.S. corporations.

During this enchanted epoch in American history, the layoff was rare. When a company suffered a demand slump, workers were furloughed—for weeks, perhaps, or even months—and then called back when factory orders rose again. That was bad enough. Still, Uchitelle reminds us, certain niceties were observed. A full-time worker at minimum wage could maintain a family of four above the poverty line. When strikes occurred, companies were bound by protocol not to fire strikers and hire replacements. Collective bargaining prevailed in manufacturing, and the U.S. Department of Labor represented the interests of workers and unions, at least part of the time.

The 1980s brought Ronald Reagan and his entourage to the presidency, however, and they in turn brought us deregulation on the one hand and mass dismissal on the other. It was around this time that the American worker became "disposable." It is true that American workers had been disposable before: throughout the 19th century and into the Great Depression. But the disposability of the 1980s was different:

> *What has been happening since the late 1970s, on the other hand, is a long and dismaying fall back to the early days of the twentieth century, and the tragedy is that people know what they are losing and that the loss damages them.*

In the 1980s, factories did not simply suspend certain production lines, they closed down. Economic depression rolled over the Northeast and the Midwest. Steel moved from Ohio to Mexico and Brazil. Shoes went from Maine to Jamaica, and electronics from California to Peru. Since then, everything has gone from wherever it went first to China. The *Disposable American* chronicles the spreading reach of the layoff, from low-skilled to skilled workers, from blue-collar to white-collar, from manufacturing to services.

The creeping poison of mass dismissal takes various forms, many of them invisible: the buyout and early retirement. Attrition, hastened along by lack of investment. The not-so-subtle kick in the ass with a goodbye package of measly unemployment benefits and a couple of coupons for computer classes. Because many layoffs occur without formally declared symptoms, the official figures from the Bureau of Labor Statistics dramatically understate the extent of the damage.

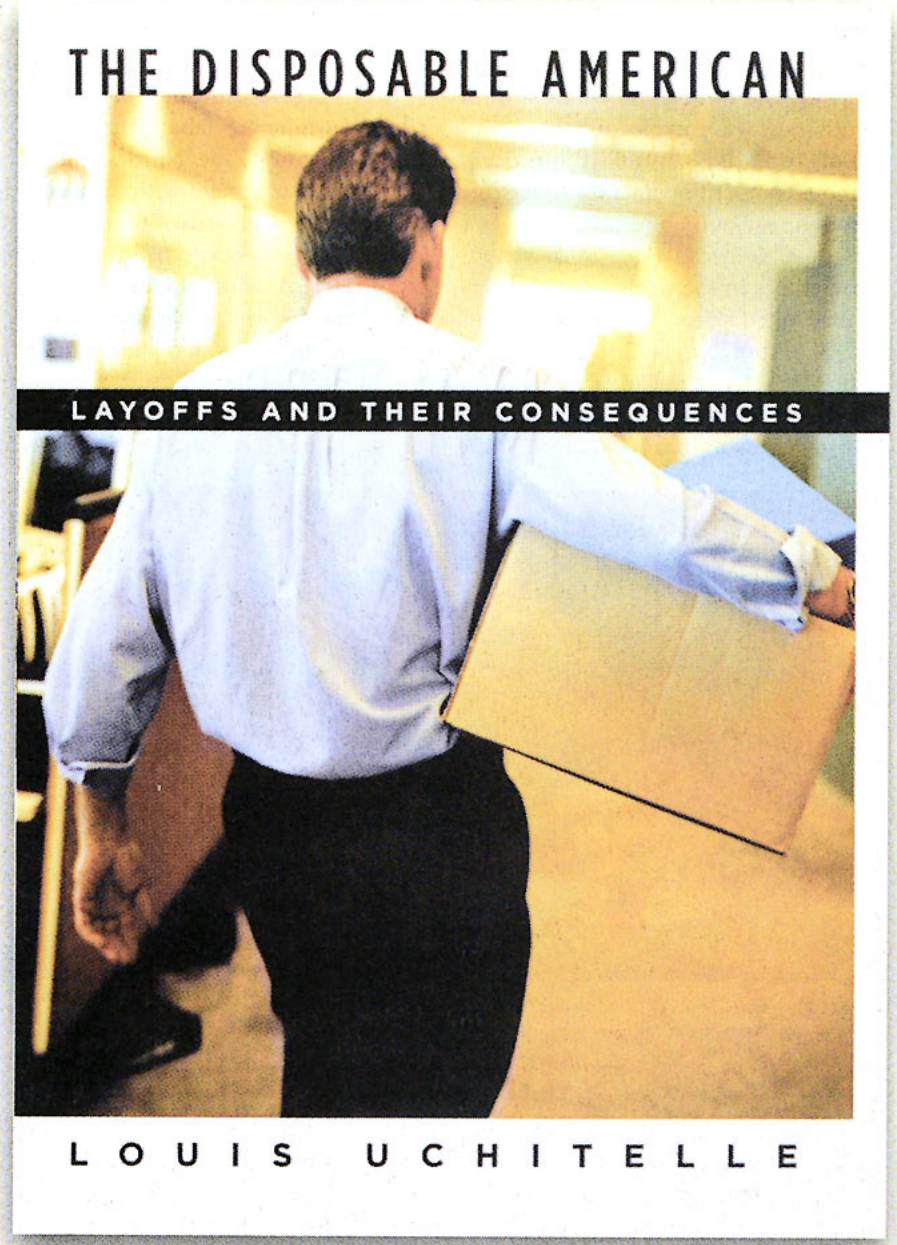
This book delivers a healthy correction to the shameless myth-making that has accompanied the destruction of U.S. labor and unions through layoffs. The perky cheerleading for globalization manifest in Thomas Friedman's *The World is Flat* is the most current example of this endless stream of drivel, generated to convince the laid off, the redundant, the summarily retired, and the 45-year-old trainee that "job churning" is good for the economy and for us all.

This is an unfortunate phrase, isn't it? Churning. It has connotations of

nausea, a queasiness that "globalization" really ought to inspire. The very word—"globalization"—is mythical, suggesting that this development has come from everywhere and therefore from nowhere at all. It fell from the sky, inflicted on us by God and by markets.

Because of globalization, U.S. corporations must become more "competitive." They do this by firing people. Whether the term used is "restructuring" "reorganizing" or TQM-ing (Total Quality Management), the end result is the firing of people, presumably to compete with other people who will also, in all likelihood, soon be churned. Seldom do we ask our political leaders and our CEOs who the hell we're competing with. Who are the market forces pushing this relentless drive toward competitiveness, i.e., higher and higher profits, lower and lower wages? If we did ask, we would find out that American workers have become disposable because American corporations have made them so. Not Japanese, European or Chinese companies. Companies based in Europe and Japan are bound by much stricter labor laws and customs than their American counterparts. In April, after the French government proposed legislation making it easier to fire young workers, the French unions and their allies virtually shut down the country, and the proposal died. In Japan last year, a proposal from U.S. analysts to restructure Sony Corp. by closing factories met resistance from Japanese analysts, who proposed growing the company instead. They considered the morale of the Sony work force to be too fragile to start firing workers.

It is U.S. corporations that drive the savage globalization that has made the American worker uniquely disposable. U.S. corporations pushed hardest for the entrance of China into the World Trade Organization so that they could exploit the cheapest labor in the world under predictable and enforceable rules. U.S. corporations lead the way in projected foreign direct investment in China. The U.S. trade deficit rose to $63.8 billion in May. At current rates, this year's deficit will hit $763 billion, up 6.5 percent over 2005, because U.S. corporations have gone abroad to produce.



This is the other side of the story. In *The Disposable American,* Uchitelle not only documents the destruction of the American labor movement and the American worker since the 1970s. He also, indirectly, tells the story of U.S. corporate management: its relentlessness, and in many cases, its cruelty. The Jack Welches, who visited "efficiency" on their employees but thought themselves entitled to lives of wretched excess; the Mike Milkens, who couldn't distinguish between venture capital and grand larceny. "Chain Saw" Al Dunlap of Sunbeam Corp. (whose touching memoir is titled *Mean Business)* and Robert Allen of AT&T Inc., whom Uchitelle quotes asking a journalist during an interview about the layoff of lifetime AT&T employees, "What do you want me to do, go on television and cry?"

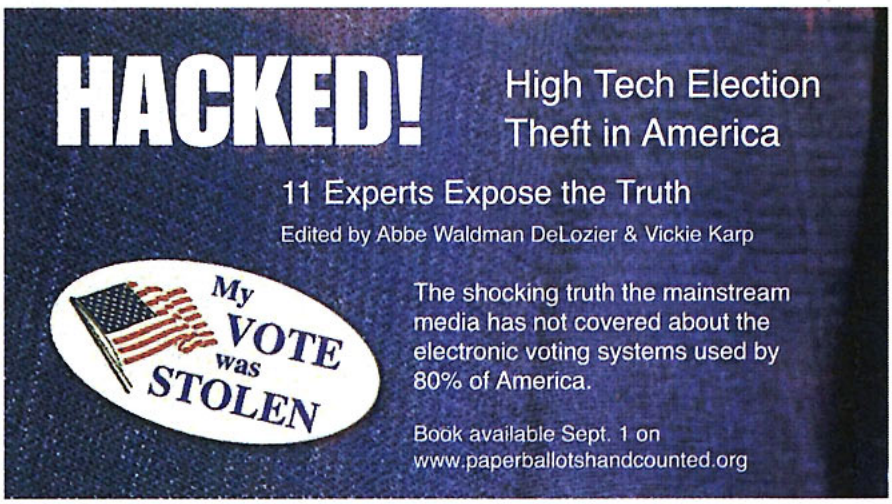
Well, yes, because this is really sad. The layoff is the consequence of labor's lack of power in government and the corporation's skill in public relations. As corporate interests took over the government from Reagan to Bush to Clinton to Bush, they perpetrated two corresponding but equally transparent deceptions:

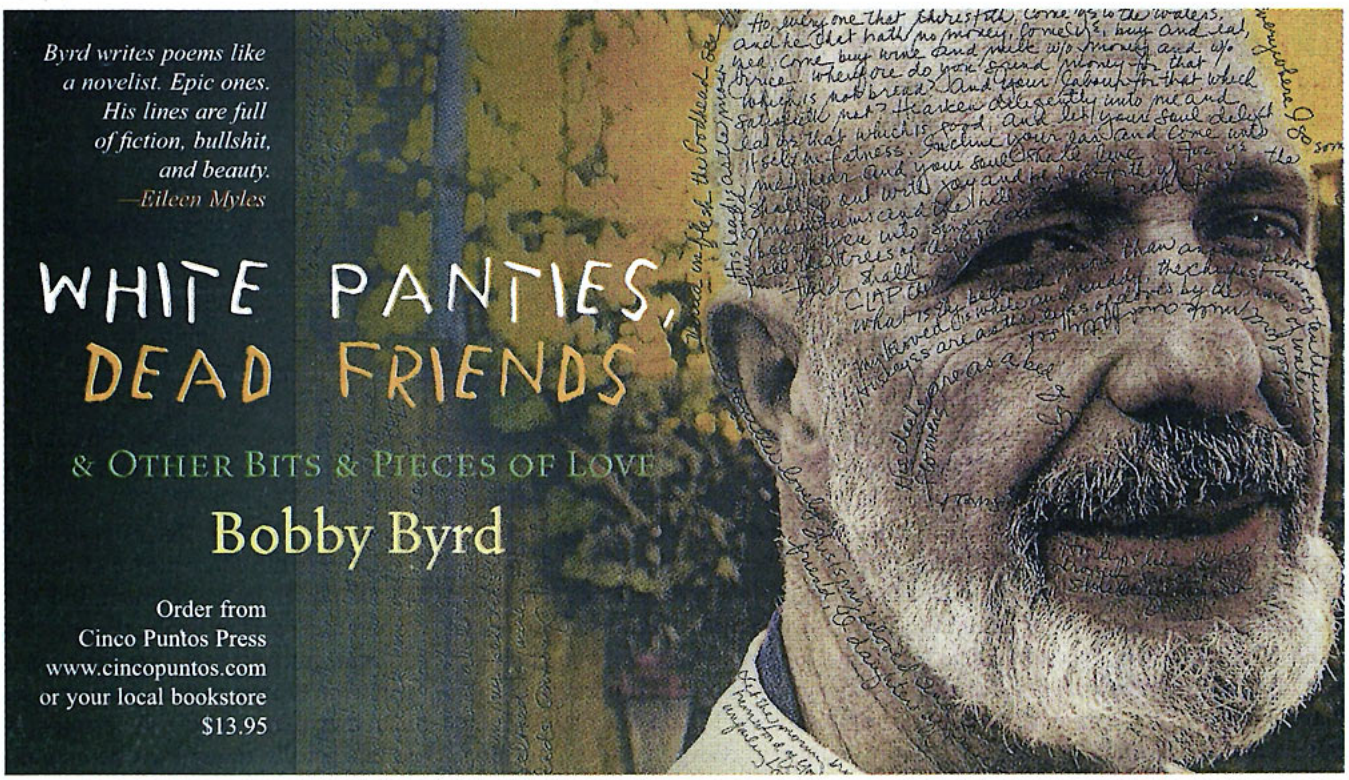
that the drive for competitiveness came from somewhere outside this country that "we" did not control; and that competitiveness was good for us.

But "we" did control ruthless and ruinous competition for a very long time through regulation and tax policy. This was possible because the most vicious competitors in the world are right here in the United States. Nike Inc., for example, is a competitive U.S. corporation with 245 factories in China, Hong Kong, Thailand, and Indonesia. Since Reagan, the government has subsidized these competitors rather than stopping them. One of the best chapters in this book is "A Green Light from Clinton." President Clinton, whom U.S. labor helped to elect, pushed through the North American Free Trade Agreement without incorporating labor standards. The agreement opened U.S. markets to goods imported from Mexico without addressing the difference in wages between the two countries. In the United States, the minimum wage is $5.15 an hour; in Mexico it's less than $4 a day. U.S. manufacturing capital fled to Mexico in 1995; the Economic Policy Institute estimates that this single agreement cost the U.S. more than a million jobs. "[Clinton] also abandoned a campaign promise to stop corporations from hiring permanent replacements for workers on strike, so they could lay off strikers." Clinton and his people talked of more humane layoffs rather than no layoffs. Under Clinton, we all became familiar with the "socially responsible corporation." These were companies that provided child care and mental health counseling to former employees now transmogrified into enterprising new job seekers and self-employed subcontractors relieved of their sick leave, medical insurance and pensions. Some especially caring firms provided coaching in resume building and interviewing.

Contrary to what John Kenneth Galbraith told us (may he rest in peace), there is no countervailing force left in America to curtail the savage globalization of U.S. corporations. With sickening irony, the AFL-CIO itself laid off over 160 of its staff members in May 2005.

Somehow, somewhere, resistance has got to organize. But so far there is no sign of it. On June 8, the United





Automobile Workers agreed to buyouts from General Motors Corp. for all of its 24,000 workers at an auto parts supplier. Two months earlier, GM had offered buyouts ranging from $35,000 to $140,000 to all of its 113,000 hourly workers. It's better than nothing, but even if you got the $140,000, you would have just about enough to put one-and-a-half kids through a private college before you would be broke. And you're never going to make what you made at GM again. The now disposable American must confront the fact that:

> *Most of the unfilled jobs pay low wages and require relatively low skill, often less than the jobholder has. ... Seven of the ten occupations expected to grow fastest from 2002 through 2012, according to the Labor Department are in the below $13.25-an-hour category.*

A hefty percentage of the high-skilled union workers interviewed by Uchitelle after their layoffs wound up "throwing boxes" for United Parcel Service Inc. for about $13 an hour. Or they wound up in other jobs at comparable low-skill and low-pay levels. Education and training are not the antidote because the high-skill, high-wage jobs just aren't here. They're gone. U.S. corporations exported them to low-wage countries, and the U.S. government helped them do it.

Tax policies encourage foreign rather than domestic investment, so corporations benefit from exploiting workers in low-wage countries while paying lower taxes on their investment abroad. Trade policies allow the import of goods with minimal customs duties. No import restrictions are placed on goods produced by child labor or forced labor. In short, globalization is not a phenomenon that happened "out there," forcing U.S. companies to compete reluctantly by cutting jobs and wages. U.S. corporations took over the U.S. government, worked tax and trade policies to their own advantage, and suckered us all into accepting their invented version of the inevitable.

Maybe it's not too late quite yet. It is true that we have swallowed the poison of the layoff, and we've been through the debilitation and the nausea. But if we're not yet too feeble-minded, we could still fight the paralysis. ■

A native of Houston, Beatrice Edwards now lives in Washington, D.C.

DOCUMENTING DISPOSABILITY

Waging A Living, a documentary by Roger Weisberg for the PBS series P.O.V. (Point of View), tells the tale of four low-wage service workers in the Northeast and California struggling to make each paycheck last until the next one arrives. The film presents disturbing statistics: Twenty-five percent of American workers earn less than the federal poverty level for a family of four; since 1979, there has been a 50 percent increase in the number of workers in poverty. The minimum wage is now 30 percent lower in real terms than it was 25 years ago. For many American workers without college degrees, this economy no longer provides upward mobility and opportunity. More and more, available jobs for high-school graduates are in the low-paid service sector only, where earnings of $8 to $11 an hour are generous. And while these wages might support a summer-school student whose room and board are paid by parents, they will not provide for a family.

The documentary follows workers trying to make it as a nursing home aide, a security guard, a halfway house manager, and a waitress—the jobs still open to them because, at least so far, U.S. corporations have not figured out how to ship old people, delinquents, and food service abroad. All four face similar problems: Their children are sick, and they have no health insurance; two are about to lose their houses and their cars because it's not possible to cover a mortgage and a car payment on $11 an hour. Without cars, they cannot get to work. Without houses, the kids can't go to school. None of these workers has any kind of job security, even at the pittances each earns. And three of the four are not unusually hard-luck stories. Two women lost their middle-class incomes in a divorce; one man is a recovering alcoholic. The fourth—a "welfare-to-work" single mother—is trying to keep her job, earn an associate's degree, and raise her children alone.

The documentary shows what has happened to the American working class as the United States replaced General Motors Corp. with Wal-Mart Inc. as the country's largest employer. We lost sick leave, health insurance, pensions, and decent wages. In return we got—what? Competitiveness and "everyday low prices"?

It's worth pointing out that the people profiled here are able-bodied, literate, sane, high school graduates in their prime. One is a union member. We're not talking serious "disadvantages" in abilities. Their worst crime was to hit the job market after the decent jobs for the moderately skilled had departed or been automated, and after over 20 years of relentless Reaganism, NAFTA-esque globalization, political meanness, and corporate greed had ripped up the safety net.

The three women come to a happy ending—although as they themselves point out, it's not necessarily an ending. One finds a generous, understanding boyfriend. An emergency housing subsidy comes through for a woman who has been caring for her disabled daughter and her grandchildren for years. And another manages to reduce her hours and continue her schooling. But there are no guarantees. The worst enemy is insecurity. Whatever they, or any of us, have today—a paycheck, a doctor, a roof, a meal—it could be gone tomorrow. As Mary Venitelli, the waitress, sums up nicely, "I've got no freakin' money. This can happen to anyone in a heartbeat."

—Beatrice Edwards

Note: Waging a Living *is scheduled to be broadcast nationally on August 29. Check local listings.*

This American Life

BY DEBBIE NATHAN

Translation Nation: Defining a New American Identity in the Spanish-speaking United States
By Héctor Tobar
Riverhead Trade
349 pages, $15

Mexican New York: Transnational Lives of New Immigrants
By Robert C. Smith
University of California Press
375 pages, $19.95

On a road trip through the Midwest boonies in the early 1990s, I was astonished to see signs plastered in Liberal, Kansas, advertising a local concert by the Mexican pop band Los Bukis. Though the Bukis had been performing in Chicago for over a decade, that was to be expected, since Chicago was an immigration magnet even by the '70s. But the band's tour to cornfield, white-bread Liberal was new: evidence that Mexicans were seeping into the tiniest crannies of the U.S. Back then the realization felt esoteric. Now it's common knowledge. And for many, common panic.

The rational response to any social hysteria is to marshal calmative facts. "Only 57 children are kidnapped and killed by strangers each year—not 50,000." "Public health statistics show that marijuana is not a 'gateway' to heroin." "Homicide rates for women in the U.S. do not rise on Super Bowl Sunday." Likewise, one response to Sensenbrenneresque ranting is to cite data showing that immigrants do not harm the economy, are not linked with high crime rates, and so on with an endless counting of beans (or in this case, perhaps, frijoles).

Beans can help, but anti-immigrant feeling is generally less about fact than about symbol and political expediency. In the long run, number-crunching never cures hysteria. Freud treated it by having sufferers tell the story of their lives: turning wooly experience into a genre of literature, the clinical tale. He doubted such stories would produce joy. Only—as he put it—"ordinary unhappiness," but that was enough. As another genius of letters implied, every happy person is the same, but each unhappy person is unhappy in her own way. The differences are what make life uniquely livable.

Literary-grade narratives of the neo-immigrant experience will not stop hysteria either, but they're not obliged to. It's sufficient for them to just *be,* in all their wooliness and ordinary unhappiness, evoking the immigration status of the reader's soul, whether that soul has been here—hopeful, striving, and neurotic as hell—for just a few years or as long as the Cherokee.

Héctor Tobar's work feels like that. As a reporter for the *Los Angeles Times* (currently as Mexico City bureau chief), he's certainly fluent with facts. But he's also a novelist. As well, he's the son of Guatemalan immigrants and grew up in Los Angeles, where to be Guatemalan is to be a Chicano. Or Hispanic, Latino, whatever. In the family's neighborhood in Hollywood, Tobar's mom styled her hair in a beehive. His dad wore argyle sweaters, studied business English obsessively, and lionized Che Guevara. He told little Héctor that Che was a heroic guerrilla, and to Héctor that meant traveling from Argentina to Cuba to Bolivia by swinging through trees. Big Héctor now knows what guerrillas are, and he understands that Che worship (including, once, a discussion about how nice it would be to hijack a plane to Cuba) was his U.S.-naturalized and U.S.-angsted father's way of proving "he had not become a total gringo."

Tobar takes as given that Latinos like his parents are in all the crannies now and that many still cherish security-blanket icons that might seem foreign to the U.S., even hostile. But—on the surface, at least—Tobar feels no need to justify these immigrants' presence here to people who have doubts. Instead, he tells complex, existential tales: mostly about the immigrants, but also about gringos who seek redemption by expelling newcomers, and those who pursue it by running welcome wagons. The stories he recounts are at once timely, humble, bittersweet, and timeless. They're much like Sholem Aleichem's work about an earlier immigrant wave, except they're not fiction, they're reporting—sometimes even investigative reporting.

In one chapter, Tobar dresses down, goes to McAllen, and signs up with a labor recruiter there to work at a Tyson Foods Inc. chicken-butchering plant in Ashland, Alabama. For three days he rides a bus with people like middle-aged Gregorio, 19-year-old Linda, and Linda's husband Frankie. Gregorio, a former goat herder from deep in Coahuila, is arthritic and can't quite figure out why he keeps chasing minimum-wage work in the United States when he could just as well retire in Mexico. Tobar thinks it has to do with proving manhood, and with the seductions of the open but dark U.S. road. Gregorio is using immigration to make of himself a Ulysses. Linda and Frankie, meanwhile, are on the lam from Frankie's rep as a gangbanger in Crystal City. Alabama means new beginnings, complete with a Bible and the loving ministrations of Mr. Bob, pastor of the local Church of Christ. Everybody lives in a crappy rural trailer park, where the only thing to do is commute to the Piggly Wiggly or to a rumbling, slippery, chicken-o-cidal job that "erases portions of your memory if you do it too long." Latinos have signed on for the erasure, thereby transforming Dixie's demography and, eventually, the region's own memory.

Elsewhere in *Translation Nation,* Tobar profiles Agent Scott Marvin, of the "new," "better-trained," "better educated"



Noé Reyes, from the State of Puebla, works as a delivery boy in Brooklyn, New York.

Border Patrol. Marvin has been to grad school; he says things like, "At night the lights of Tijuana shine like jewels, and the lights of San Diego are equally radiant." He also proudly points out the Border Patrol's ground sensors and thermal-imaging equipment—hi-tech jewels that force would-be immigrants back to Mexico or to detours through the Arizona desert and perhaps to their death. And Tobar presents Benjamin Reed, who DJs an afternoon radio show in Rupert, Idaho, catering to Mexican immigrants. Reed starts his program with a recording of accordion music and goats braying. Though he's an Idaho native with no Latino heritage, he has developed an idiomatic fluency in Spanish and calls the language *un alivio*—a relief, "the lifting of a burden." (Tobar fails to mention that CNN's Lou Dobbs, who engages in nightly anti-immigrant tirades, was raised in Rupert, though he now lives in New Jersey. Does he ever go home to visit kin? Does he secretly spin his radio dial there to Estación la Fantástica?)

Tobar is also interested in a burden that Latino immigrants themselves are slowly laying down: the weight of their longstanding civic apathy in the United States. Low voter turnout even among naturalized citizens, grotesque bossism, and corruption in communities whose politicos are fellow ethnics—such is the legacy of *caciquismo* in the old countries, combined with fear, humiliation, and grinding overwork in the new one. *Translation Nation* came out months before the mega-demonstrations this past spring, in which immigrants filled the streets in big cities and the tiniest burgs, demanding a sympathetic national immigration policy and chanting slogans about how they're here and they're staying no matter what. Are these protests a harbinger of new political energy—not just for Latinos but for the body politic in general?

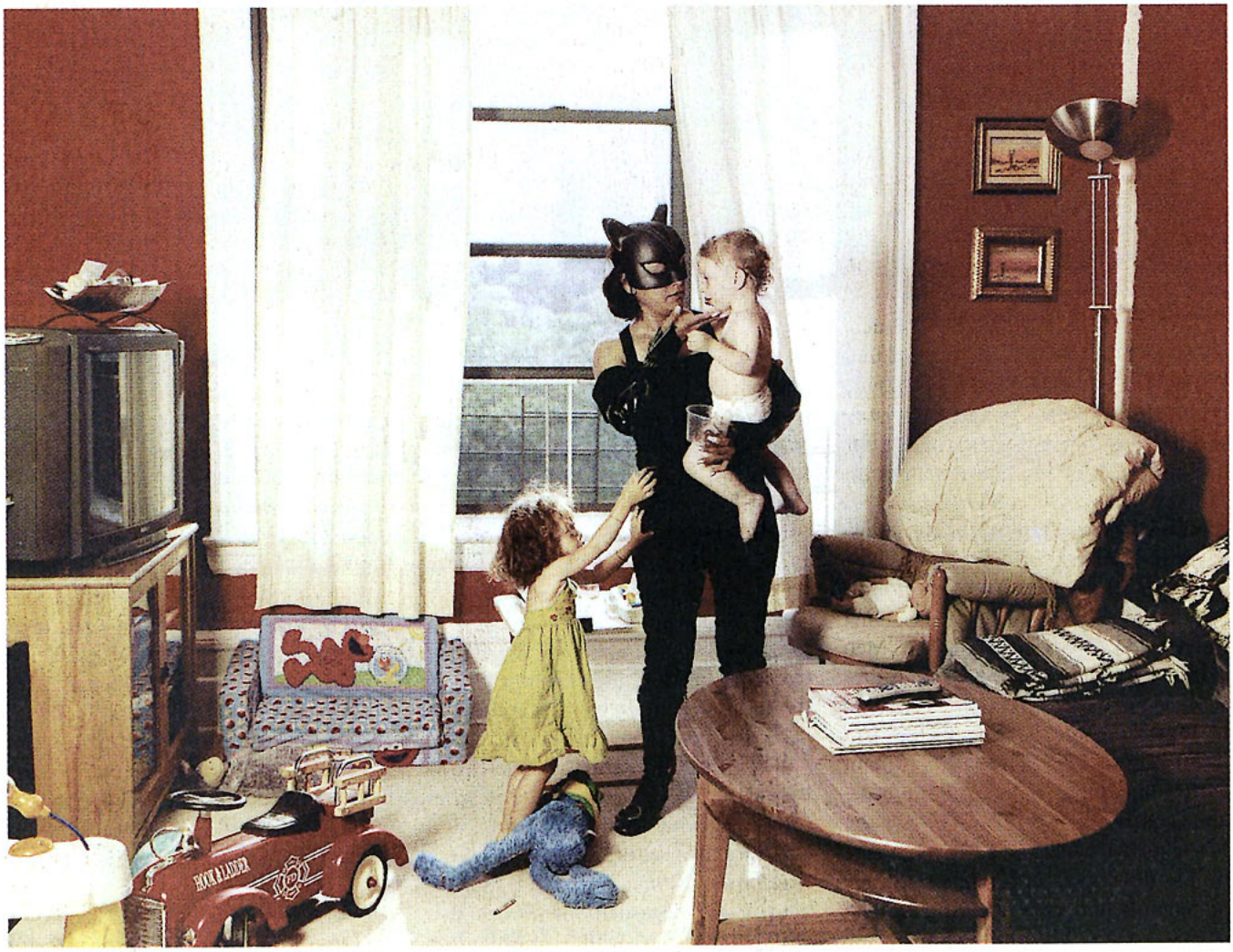
The answer is tough to predict. Back in the crannies, though, Tobar found tenacious and heroic democrats like Carmen Avalos, of South Gate, California. Her town was run by a Latino political strongman who stayed in power by having his foes' homes firebombed, or their heads pierced by bullets. Avalos was a high school biology teacher who decided on a spur of the moment to help clean things up. With no knowledge of how to run for office, she did so anyway and managed to get elected city clerk—meaning she would supervise

elections in South Gate. During the campaign a disemboweled teddy bear appeared on her lawn; after she won, the town administration wouldn't tell her where her inauguration was to take place, and later they tried to recall her from office. Avalos persisted, eventually overseeing an election that kicked out the strongman. She attributes her strength to her father, a former peasant from Mexico with a second-grade education and 19 siblings. One died in infancy of malnutrition and had to be buried by Avalos' father—then seven years old—in a cookie box.

"Hunger knocks me down, but pride picks me up," her father used to tell Avalos in Spanish. Tobar doesn't say so directly, but he focuses on hunger for pride as a motive force that pushes immigrants to civic-mindedness. He loves to quote Alexis de Tocqueville, who concluded in the 1830s that participation in local politics was what defined Americans: "The New Englander is attached to his township not so much because he was born into it, but because it is a free and strong community, of which he is a member, and which deserves the care spent in managing." Many Latino immigrants import from their home countries a proud legacy of participation in unionism and revolution; once here, they inject that experience into U.S. politics. Others come with nothing. But this nation will translate them into citizens, just as they will translate everyone else into Pan-Americans. That's the deeper political vision beneath Tobar's storytelling. It undergirds the ordinary but fascinating unhappinesses of the characters in his book. And in the end it reassures all those panicky gringos who keep counting beans.

Robert Smith's work is quite different. He's a sociologist dealing with New York City, a place far trickier—neurotic?—than the country as a whole. Nothing in New York is easy, not even Mexicans. Smith spent over a decade doing fieldwork among people who hail from a small municipality in the state of Puebla, which he pseudonymously calls Ticuani. People from there started coming north in the 1960s, and migration speeded up after pioneers got amnesty under the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act, then sent for their families.

Today, half the municipality's population is still on its sleepy pueblo turf. The



Minerva Valencia, from Puebla, works as a nanny in New York.

other half is in the United States, mainly in *la capital del mundo*. Immigrant *Ticuanenses* live in the five boroughs, but the boroughs might as well be countries: Brooklynites won't visit friends and relatives in Manhattan or Queens, and vice versa, because the subway commute feels—as a teenager named Linda puts it—"mad far." Yet come December, people sojourn thousands of miles back to Ticuani to reunite for the traditional, seasonal fiesta. During the rest of the year, they collect money in New York to support infrastructure projects in the hometown. They also send kids who misbehave in New York back to Ticuani to be rehabbed by an imagined simpler life. Smith looks at these activities and the effects they have on Ticuanenses who have settled here.

Discussing "transnationalism" these days, the fashion is to celebrate how immigrants' links to their native communities enrich both the old country and the new one. Hooray for all those soccer teams in Dallas that are named after towns south of the border! Let's give it up for the hundreds of mutual-aid groups that send funds home, building schools and clinics so the folks left behind can stay put! This is more feel-good neo-Tocquevillism. But as Smith shows, things are more complicated, and cheerleading doesn't explain much.

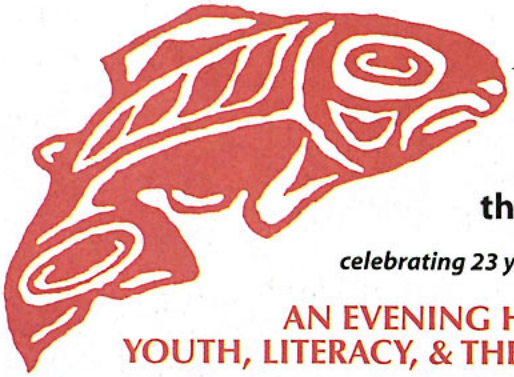
One of the most fascinating things about *Mexican New York* is its sensitivity to matters of gender. Traditional, rural Mexican Catholicism fosters a partriarchy whose repressive practices against females can be compared in their severity to the mores of the Taliban. Many young Mexican women who've moved to the United States talk about how happy they are to be out from under the macho thumb of the *rancho*. Men also often change their ways when they come here. They learn not only that both parents must get jobs and share housework, but that much employment for immigrant men is in food service—complete with aprons and stints at the stove. Despite these role changes, young women whom Smith interviews in New York complain that their parents let their brothers leave the house, but not them. The macho ideal of cloistering daughters survives among Ticuanenses in the U.S., where the adolescents have a distinctly urban and English word for the practice: "lockdown." In New York City, where public life can be the most liberating life in the world, many Mexican girls are kept in a spiritual Rikers.

On annual visits to Ticuani, though, parents let daughters walk the streets, attend parties with other kids, and stay out late. The United States is a prison; Mexico is freedom. Freedom with a price: They're only allowed to roam because male kin also undergo a transformation on the trip from New York to Ticuani. Brothers and boy cousins assume the job of "keeping an eye" on the girls—which, of course, returns men to their traditional roles. Conflicts arise, fights break out. And because old machismo and its new insecurities underlie the dynamic, things can get violent enough to cause injury and death.

Meanwhile, back in New York, gender troubles are exacerbated by racial and ethnic tensions that are rarely talked about, but which Smith has the courage to coolly dissect. "Latino" is a cheerful, "transnational" expression, and so, perhaps, is "people of color." But in New York, some groups of Latinos and people of color have it in for others. Young Puerto Rican men often beat up, rob, and insult Mexicans, as do African-Americans. On the other hand, some white ethnic groups have high rates of recent immigration and skins dark enough to make them sympathize with people from places like Ticuani. Italians in New York don't mind a few Mexicans in their midst, and Greeks give them jobs in restaurants that often allow advancement. Mexicans who live in mainly Italian neighborhoods may settle into a comfortable sense of assimilation to mainstream U.S. culture.

But in neighborhoods where Puerto Ricans predominate, young-man macho posturing often resurfaces as a defensive response to harassment. In New York, however, the machos don't look or act like ranchero singer Vicente Fernández. Instead, they obsess about not wanting to be seen as *putos*—"faggots," as they translate it to English for Smith and his assistants—and they form gangs. For models they use Hollywood films such as *American Me* and *Blood In, Blood Out*. They can end up wreaking mayhem, and when parents send them to sweet, picturesque Ticuani to straighten out, they start gangs there, too.

Indeed, all is not so great in Ticuani, even with the new well, potable water



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Sergio García, from the State of México, works as a waiter in New York.

system, and rehabbed church—all paid for by native sons and daughters in New York. Almost two-thirds of Ticuani households depend on remittances from relatives in the United States. Countless other towns in Mexico survive the same way: Today, dollars sent by kin living outside of the country are one of Mexico's biggest sources of foreign earnings. But as Smith explains, a remittance economy "dollarizes" Mexican communities, inflating prices that residents pay for goods. The dollars create a "remittance bourgeoisie" who live comfortably, and a "transnational underclass, who receive no remittances." As a result, the poor in places like Ticuani can't afford to take on the *faina*—the centuries-old, traditional obligation of contributing to projects like building a well. The task is assumed by people north of the border, removing an important piece of local *civitas* from the very people who remain in the locale. And poor young men who have stayed in the pueblos become especially vulnerable to the lure of north-of-the-border culture—including the transnational gangs that now make even Ticuani's streets risky.

It all sounds depressing, but for Smith it's not the whole story. Ticuenses' ties to their pueblo create some problems, but help tremendously with others. Héctor Tobar found people like Rev. Bob and the gringo DJ welcoming Mexican newcomers, but everyone knows that such hospitality is exceptional. Most undocumented immigrants live in constant worry of being chased down by the authorities and deported. More and more, the state tells them no: no medical care, no drivers' licenses, no college for the kids. And most important, no ballots—even for noncitizens who are documented. Without a sense of franchise, Mexicans have little motivation to assimilate, integrate, or whatever they're supposed to do now that the melting pot is passé. Ties to places like Ticuani at least give them a sense of belonging, a sense of being in Tocqueville's "free and strong community... which deserves the care spent in managing."

This country is eager to administer newcomers' labor. But until the newcomers are allowed to help administer the U.S., running bits of Mexico from a world away will somehow have to do. The situation is depressing, yet so everyday during these strange, imperial days as to seem quite commonplace. Still, ordinary unhappiness is always uniquely interesting. And Smith does a great job with the details, not just counting the beans of immigration, but spilling them as well. ■

Contributing writer Debbie Nathan is the author of Women and Other Aliens: Essays from the U.S.-Mexico Border. *She lives in New York City. Photographer Dulce Pinzón was born in Mexico and now lives in Brooklyn. The photographs in this article are from a series called "Superheroes."*

How James Frey Changed My Life

Last year marked my first on the job market as a teacher of creative writing. I spent most of the fall in rural Pennsylvania sending out hundreds of resumes and cover letters, watching wistfully as beautiful red, gold, and yellow leaves fell outside my basement office window at Bucknell University, an idyllic campus where I was spending a semester as a writer-in-residence. I felt more like a frantic job-seeker-in-residence trying to squeeze in a few hours of daily writing to maintain respectability. My ability to apply for jobs hinged entirely on the fact that my memoir had been sold the previous March and was on its way to becoming a book with an actual ISBN. The book, *Poster Child,* is the story of growing up with a disability. I often describe it as "a coming of age story with a twist." As I edited the final drafts of the book, I felt both incredibly grateful and fiendishly excited. Finally! I thought. I'm marketable! I thought about my Austin writer friend Kate. Her idea was to get a *piñata*, fill it with rejection letters, and invite some friends over to whack at it while sipping *mojitos*.

"The market's tough right now," I was told as I trolled job Web sites and printed out announcements. "It's a hellish time to be looking for a job in academia." So instead of celebrating, I continued preparing for interviews, fueled by what many assured me might be irrational hope. On my bathroom mirror I posted a note using bright red marker: YOU WILL GET A JOB. My first thought when I woke up each morning was, "You will NAIL every interview you are lucky enough to get!" I called my brilliant friend who was studying for his Ph.D. in English literature at Harvard and asked him to give me an hour-long crash course in literary theory; I copied out the notes on color-coded cards. Because I was applying for jobs as a nonfiction writing instructor, I read countless books about effective ways to teach this ever-expanding, diverse, and (as I would discover later) hotly debated genre. I designed seven literature courses until a friend told me I was becoming obsessed. I looked up from my computer and shouted, "It's a tough market, and I don't have a Ph.D.," until she practically dragged me from my office. I memorized entire paragraphs about my work and what it was "about:" its themes, potential impact, and originality. I knew who my "literary parents" were and how I would teach composition to first-year students who didn't like to write. I interviewed Bucknell English professors to try to anticipate possible questions. I could articulately speak to my strengths and weaknesses as a teacher. I could recite my resume almost line for line. In fact, I recited it about 10 times waiting in stop-and-go traffic on a slippery highway during an ice storm between Lewisburg and Harrisburg.

On the drive home from Pennsylvania to Wyoming for the holidays, after which I would stay with my parents until I actually found a job—a fact that did not make me any less frantic—I dragged my crates of research into a cheap interstate motel in Iowa and continued reciting, memorizing, reading, obsessing. After the temperature in the room continued to drop, the maintenance man knocked on the door and told me the heat would not be fixed that night and that many guests had left for other, warmer accommodations.

"I'm studying," I said. "I'll be fine, but could you bring me some extra blankets?"

"You're going to stay?"

In a road-weary daze, I said, "I don't want to live with my parents."

"Who does?" he said, as if my reply had made perfect sense.

I made it home, and after weeks of more phone interviews, I traveled to an on-campus interview and was promptly asked the one question for which I was not prepared.

It was this: "How does the controversy surrounding James Frey affect the way you think about memoir?"

Standing behind a podium, facing a crowd of professors and students, I felt my face drain of color. Who was James Frey? I thought frantically. A hot new literary critic my friend had neglected to tell me about? What controversy?

"James Frey," I said thoughtfully, trying to appear as if I were crafting an intelligent response. *Interview Tip #4: If you don't know the answer to a question, buy yourself some time by repeating back the question.* "You want to know how my writing life is affected by James Frey?"

Everyone nodded.

As I would later learn when I Googled Frey post-interview, I was one of the few people in America who had not read the Oprah Book Club-sanctioned book, *A Million Little Pieces.* Like I said, I'd been in my office or in the library, avoiding the television and radio in my single-minded pursuit of employment.

Frey's sprawling, 400-page-plus tale of addiction, woe, and non-traditional recovery sold millions of copies—more than any other title in 2005—and enjoyed multiple weeks on *The New York Times* bestseller list; the last time I checked, it was still there. I was not aware of the media frenzy surrounding the purported multiple lies in Frey's "true story" that were, over a series of weeks, uncovered by the investigative efforts of the diligent writers at The Smoking Gun Web site. Throughout the book, Frey describes himself as a drug addict and a criminal and an alcoholic. According to TSG, the truth is not nearly as interesting as the fiction: "Frey writes with a swaggering machismo and bravado that absolutely crackles. Which is truly impressive considering that, as TSG discovered, he made much of it up. The closest Frey has ever come to a

jail cell was the few unshackled hours he once spent in a small Ohio police headquarters waiting for a buddy to post $733 bond." Initially, Frey refuted TSG's charges, saying, "I stand by my book, and my life."

However, standing in the lecture hall during my interview, I realized that although I had not read James Frey's book (books? I wondered), I had read enough about memoir and had been working for long enough on my own memoir to know where I stood about writing it.

"I have not read his work ..." I began. Did the audience gasp or was that my imagination? I barreled on. "But as all writers know, a major challenge of writing memoir involves negotiating the boundary between fact and fiction. The lens of memory is always distorted through time and imagination. In fact, imagination plays just as much a part in the crafting of nonfiction as it does in fiction." I had read a discussion of this very issue in a book called *Tell It Slant*, a book I'd read cover to cover before the interview.

"So are you saying that you think it's OK to put fiction in memoir and call it nonfiction?" someone asked.

"Well," I said. "Thoreau did spend two years at Walden Pond, but he only wrote about one of them. The reader assumes that he collapsed certain events and moved them around for the purposes of the story."

This same persistent person looked ready to ask a follow-up question until another angelic student asked me to talk about something else.

Less than a week later, on January 26, I walked through the front door after a visit to the gym to hear my mother yelling from the family room, "Get down here!" She was watching Oprah, her 4 o'clock weekday afternoon ritual. "This guy wrote his memoirs, too," she said (my mother always says "memoirs" instead of "memoir") "and he's in big trouble with Oprah!"

Still sweating, I walked down to the family room to find my mother gesturing at the television with the remote. She turned up the volume.

"Check this out," she said. "This writer lied! Oprah picked it for her book club, and now she's pissed off because it's actually fiction."

"Oh," I said. I knew what she was going to ask next.

My mother looked at me. "You better not have lied in your book," she said. "I hope I don't have to walk around town with a bag over my head if Oprah gets a hold of you and you lied!"

"Don't worry," I said. We both turned to look at the screen.

There, on the bright set of the Oprah show, sat a dog-faced James Frey. He was slumped in a couch after what appeared to have been about 20 minutes of interrogation. Oprah wanted the truth, she said, and I'm pretty sure she meant the truth with a capital "T." Although he'd made my interview experience unpleasant, I felt sorry for Frey—he looked absolutely wretched.

"Did you lie?" Mom asked, muting the television at the commercial.

"No. I mean, I changed some things around, took some liberties."

"What's that mean?"

"It means that you need to tell a good story."

"That sounds like a bunch of hooey to me, young lady. What liberties?"

"Well, like making a composite character, changing timelines so that events happen in a different order, like a few months apart instead of a year, reconstructing dialogue from bits I remember, that kind of thing. I mean..."

Mom interrupted me. "Am I part of a composite character—or whatever—in your book?"

"No, you're you, Mom."

"Well, then how do I know you got me right?"

I shrugged.

"Hmph," she said.

Although I continued to insist that my book was as truthful as it could be, I woke up at 4 a.m. with a knot of panic in my stomach. Unable to fall back to sleep, I wandered to the study to check my e-mail. In my inbox were a few messages from friends. "Did you see Frey on Oprah? Do you think people will think YOU lied?" and "Watch those facts! You don't want to end up like James Frey!" The knot of panic grew.

I sat down right then and went through the manuscript with a fine-tooth comb, trying to track what, if anything, I had embellished. For one scene, I eliminated a character whose real life counterpart is still living and would certainly recognize herself (as would others). I changed the scene; I did this because I believe that memoir is about telling a story (yes, a true story), but it is not about exacting revenge on people you knew 20 years ago. In re-reading the scene, I realized that this young woman's long-ago cruelty to me was not crucial to the story and to include it felt malicious. In another incidence, I was legally bound to change the physical descriptions of a prosthetist—again, to protect the real-life counterpart of the character in my memoir. I was, and am, at peace with that, and it is here that the critics who insist that if a person is called Jane in real life, then she must be called Jane in the memoir, seem simply mean-spirited in their insistence that the same factual yardstick be used to size up memoir as well as other forms of nonfiction like journalism or history.

How *did* my own writing methods match up with Frey's? Okay, so Frey apparently lied about causing the death of several classmates and about his time spent in rehab. He said he spent 30 days in jail, and he didn't. I tried to think of a parallel fabrication in my own book. To be in Frey's league, I might have written that I lost my leg to an explosion, rather than to a birth defect. In any case, I was all clear there. My facts were in order. Apparently Frey shopped his book around as fiction to 17 publishers as an "autobiographical novel," only to have it rejected until it was repackaged as memoir. Check, I thought, all clear there.

As I went through the pages again, trying to ferret out every little thing that may not have happened precisely in the way in which I had described it, I realized that my point about memoir at my interview was absolutely true. Memory is a product of our imagination—how could it not be?—and therefore serves as an imperfect filter of facts, details, and events, no matter how much we may

rely on its solidity and validity. But does its elusive nature make it any less likely that it bears some truth? I had written and revised the pages of my book so many times that it had *become* my memory. I had shown the manuscript to family members, my doctors, and finally, my mother, and changed facts, places, even dialogue to match their recollections, even when they differed from mine. So was it lying to replace my recollections with theirs? Who's to say that their memories were any more reliable then mine? Was I going to receive letters from people who appear in the book, claiming that I hadn't gotten it "right" or told the "truth" about a recounted event? It was at this point that some of my pity for Frey dissolved.

In *The Situation and the Story,* Vivian Gornick writes, "The memoirist ... must convince the reader they have some wisdom, and are writing as honestly as possible to arrive at what they know. To the bargain, the writer of personal narrative must also persuade the reader that the narrator is reliable ... In nonfiction the reader must believe that the narrator is speaking the truth."

In the wake of the nonfiction vs. fiction debate, Gornick herself has been called to defend her writing methods in her well-known memoir, *Fierce Attachments.* Her argument is that although the raw material of a life must be true, how the author shapes these experiences is what makes memoir literature, and not journalism or a statement of historical fact.

The crucial element that moves memoir from a collection of lies to a work of nonfiction is the quality of the pact made with the reader. If I had written that a dragon had bitten off my left foot or I'd lost it during a dangerous skydive, that pact would be useless, based on lies alone. Can you draw wisdom from a life that was not your own? In this sense, Frey had broken his pact with the reader. How could he learn something that might be illuminating to the reader during a confrontation with the cops if it never happened? How could he be devastated by his role in a teenager's death if he had played no part?

The next day I went to the local Cheyenne bookstore and listened as two women discussed the previous day's Oprah show. They, too, would have appreciated the truth, they said, and swore to never read anything else Frey wrote. Now, slipped into every copy of *A Million Little Pieces* is a statement from Frey: "I believe, and I understand others strongly disagree, that memoir allows the writer to work from memory instead of from a strict journalistic or historical standard. It is about impression and feeling, about individual recollection. This memoir is a combination of facts about my life and certain embellishments. It is a subjective truth, altered by the mind of a recovering drug addict and alcoholic. Ultimately, it's a story, and one that I could not have written without having lived the life I've lived."

In February I was offered a job. This summer I've been teaching memoir, trying to help teach graduate students how to negotiate that tricky, blurry boundary between fact and fiction. And you can bet we discuss James Frey—as a cautionary tale, a case study, and as a call for vigilance to "facts and pacts" in our writing. In the end, memoirists are not historians, but that does not eliminate all allegiance to fact. Most importantly, writers of memoir must uphold their end of the pact with the reader that they have done their utmost to ferret out as much information as possible—from family members, books, and other sources—as they craft their narrative.

So, how did James Frey change my life? He not only made me more conscious of the debate over what is memoir and what is not—a notion that is with us for the long term and, I believe, for good reason—but he made me more conscious of places in my own nonfiction writing where I bend the truth to fit the story without even thinking. Did I send out 100 resumes? Well, 85 to be exact, to be truthful. Will my mother agree with this account of our conversation? No. In fact, after reading this she said, "You watched the whole show with me. And I didn't say 'Hooey.'"

"Yes, you did," I said.

"No," she said. "I'm right. Don't exaggerate." ■

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