

# The BOOKPRESS

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## Babylon, D.C.

David H. Kinraid

*Then the herald loudly proclaimed, "This is what you are commanded to do, O peoples, nations and men of every language:*

*As soon as you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes and all kinds of music, you must fall down and worship the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up.*

*Whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace."*

(Daniel 3:4-6)

In November 2000, Saddam Hussein announced that oil sold by Iraq would no longer be priced in US dollars (USD). All future transactions would be based on the Euro. Since at the time the Euro was worth only USD .83, commentators saw this, quite rightly, as a case of political point-scoring taking precedence over economic common sense. But in the topsy-turvy world of absolute dictatorships the political imperative will always eclipse the economic, particularly if the dictator concerned is not fussy about the effects of his actions on the country's economy. It was, however, notable at the time that Iraq did not convert its reserves, some \$10 billion, from USD to the Euro, so it was clearly a gesture against the dollar rather than an all-out attack.

Overnight, Iraq's oil income went into decline, since at the time the Euro was dropping in value and was expected to continue to do so. Lower currency value also means lower interest income on reserves in that currency. All in all, Baghdad stood to lose an awful lot of money.

Iraq's action seemed to be calculated to drive a larger wedge into the division between the US/UK and the Euro-zone over the sanctions against Iraq that had been in force since 1991. This was undoubtedly part of Saddam Hussein's plan. It may, in fact, have been all of it. The US/UK had maintained a hard line on sanctions, while the Euro-zone was in favour of softening them for humanitarian reasons. Any deepening of this rift was an obvious political gain for Iraq. And since, ever since the Gulf War, Iraq bought what little imports it had been allowed to acquire almost exclusively from the Euro-zone, the move from the USD to the Euro was not as damaging to the Iraqi economy as might otherwise have been the case.

Oddly enough, the Euro began to rise in value against the USD (or, rather, the USD declined against the Euro) shortly afterward, fully against expectations. Since, at the time of writing, the Euro is priced at slightly more than par with the USD, Iraq, before its collapse, had received considerable windfall financial benefits from the change.

### Fear and Loathing at the Fed

It is almost certain that Saddam Hussein understood little of macroeconomics and he

probably cared even less. But, in converting from the USD to the Euro for Iraqi oil sales, he incidentally (and accidentally) highlighted an issue that must have been worrying macroeconomists at the Federal Reserve for some years—the continued status of the USD as the medium of international exchange, otherwise known as the "reserve currency."

What this means is that across the world prices for international trade in commodities and services—such as, topically, oil—are quoted in USD, and the USD is often the means of exchange between buyer and seller. Unless the US itself is the purchasing party, the purchaser must somehow acquire the dollars to pay for the goods or service. To do this, it must either buy dollars on the foreign exchange market in return for some other currency, or it must sell goods into the US in exchange for dollars. This has been an ongoing windfall for the US for many years at virtually no cost to the US except for printing the moolah.

Historically, over the past 30 years the value of the USD on the foreign exchange

markets has been maintained at a high level regardless of the US's overall economic performance. This is because it has been in no one's interests to let the value of the USD fall, simply because it is the reserve currency. While there have obviously been constant fluctuations in the value of the USD on the forex market over the years, it has never fallen too far and it has always bounced back reasonably quickly from any falls, at least in the medium term—in the past.

Why did the USD become the *de facto* reserve currency in the first place? The basic reason is that the US used to have the largest diversified economy in the world, and its currency was backed by genuine hard economic value from industrial production. Also, from 1960 to 1976, the US had balance-of-payment surpluses amounting to almost \$60 billion. This made the USD high-valued and comparatively stable, and people requiring a reserve currency look for stability and value. It is arguable that this is no longer the case. Many of the major product lines that were once in such huge demand from the US—such as steel and

steel products and latterly electronics—are now produced overseas much more cheaply. The Rust Belt in the east and the closed-down electronics factories in the west are the semi-silent testimony to this change in circumstances. The US is no longer the world's economic engine although it is still the largest single economy. The crown that the US once wore as supplier to the world has been broken down into small pieces and the remnants have been passed on to other countries, notably the "tiger economies" of the Far East.

The US has, in fact, become a net importer of goods and services and in the past decade has run up over \$1 trillion—a mind-boggling amount—in overseas debt. It can be (and often is) argued that the USD is therefore well over-valued. As is usually the case in human economic affairs, its continuing high value is entirely due to people's perceptions and expectations of its value rather than as the result of a cold, hard assessment of its economic backing.

*continued on page 6*



Jack Sherman



# Would You Like Books With That?

James T. Siegel

Cornell University's Olin Library today offers a different experience from a few years ago. There is often noise of such volume from the newly-installed coffee shop to cause complaints at the circulation desk. It is noise whose sense is obscured by the blend and volume of individual voices. One knows there is something being said without knowing exactly what it is. Excited chatter forms a curtain through which one must pass to go to the stacks.

When I observed the library in 1981 it had a different tonality.\* The lobby was quieter and the stacks were full of people. Today the carrels next to the stack windows are usually vacant. I am told that the once much-coveted faculty studies are also no longer in much demand. In 1981, when I asked my students to talk with people in the stacks about the library, they easily collected fantasies people had as they passed amongst the books or, for relief, looked out the windows. On the other hand, some people, especially the more literary, had to force themselves to go into the stacks. The sight of so many books, so much to read, so many thoughts, overwhelmed them. Precisely the same sight excited others. The library had an erotic quality which today it retains, but which has been displaced from the stacks to the lobby. In that way, the lobby of the library to an extent duplicates the stacks. Or rather it moves what happened there to the lobby.

Now it is the public areas that are emphasized, the change in the lobby being the most important, though one should not forget the new additions, the Kroch. It is often said that America lacks a style for civic architecture. Given that lack, it was the hotel that seems to have furnished the model for the library. The Kroch, housing the Asian collections, features an atrium that lacks only trees to match the finest Hyatt. There, too, the difference between the spectacle of the atrium and the barrenness of the stacks is marked. The books, in the parlance of today, are "warehoused." In the original building, the check-in desk of the hotel was of course transformed into the check-out desk. This reversal does not matter much. One pro-

\*See "Academic Work: The View from Cornell," *Diacritics*, Spring, 1981.

ceeds through elevators to the private areas. Or what were that before the library became open stack.

Open stacks means that the research library is now accessible to undergraduates as well as to faculty, marking an expansion of library users. But it was not until computerization that the status of books themselves has mutated. Inside the collections, one is no longer shut off from the world and thus open to the fantasies that arise when one is alone with oneself. "Need Internet Access?" a sign outside the elevator leading to the books, advertises. "No data jack! NO PROBLEM!!! Wireless is now available throughout Olin Library." As a result one can, for instance, get and send email, reassuring human contact, albeit at a distance, against the silent words stored on the shelves. Olin, Kroch and Uris Libraries now distribute a handout entitled "Beverages, Food, and Cell Phone Policy," the first line of which reverses a longstanding ban: "Beverages may be consumed in Olin and Uris Libraries." However, "all food consumption is restricted to the Libe Café...." "Please be courteous in your use of cell phones in the library" they urge, with little effect on the one-sided conversations in the stacks.

Let us return to the lobby. The manual catalogue, necessary to find books acquired before 1973 and not yet part of the computerized system, has been moved to a dingy section of the basement, next to the current periodicals which were put there to make room for the Libe Café. Where the manual catalogue was there are now tables with computers. These computers are heavily used by people, some of whom seem not to have stopped talking since they left the coffee shop. The ambience has changed accordingly. One no longer feels in the presence of books. The lobby is no longer merely the entryway to the stacks. For many, it has become a destination. From the computers one can, for instance, consult books and articles on line as well as items on reserve for courses that have been scanned and are thus available without having to come to the library at all. People do come, nonetheless, in order to use the library computers. The collections are stations for information retrieval while the books themselves have developed into what Heidegger called a "standing reserve." They form an incipient data base, which means that the baffling secrets they promised are now ready to be revealed.

One can think that the library is second only to the art museum in having transformed the nature of its treasures. In the 1950s, museums in America were quiet places, visited by many fewer people than today. With the advent of special exhibits, "underwritten" by corporations, that has changed. Museums have found a way to make money without selling the pictures themselves. Museum gift shops, the rise in the price of admission (the Met was at one time free), and the promotion of membership organizations have turned pictures into capital. Similar commercialization may be in store for the library—the café may be a harbinger—if "for profit" services now rumored among library staffers—for example, delivery of books to the dormitories for a small fee—come into being.

The museum has revalued its holdings, but the art works must, of course, remain valuable for its marketing strategy to work. This reevaluation is accomplished by making the "experience" of looking at pictures effortlessly comprehensible. The uniqueness of a picture gives way to recognition; the viewer knows what he sees from the first moments of looking. The banishing of the old catalogue to the basement is the first step in a comparable movement in the library. It implies that there are no longer unique books, only those that are more or less timely. Earlier views naturally give way to later

ones, attuned to contemporary mentalities. Browsing, through which one might come across surprises, gives way to the key-word search as a way of finding books. Through the intervention of the computer one encounters only the relevant. The ambience of reading changes in concomitant ways. Noise, distraction, coffee are no longer hindrances, but the acceptable—even desirable—accompaniment to the activity of information retrieval.

Yet the university needs the library for more than practical purposes. It not only contains thoughts and information accumulated over time, it has come to stand for the processes which result in such accumulation. It is a repository but, as such, it is also the sign of human efforts to search out what remains endlessly hidden.

The double nature of the library is indicated by its system of classification. The Library of Congress system of classification indicates that all of the collection is retrievable. But its potentially infinite expandability shows that there is still more to come (there are two letters, 'O' and 'W,' which have not yet been used) and that the library will make a place for it. What that might be, we do not know. The notion of the library itself works against the present innovations as well as for them. It is not clear, in other words, that the secret of books has vanished for good.

Without the library the university would be a technical institute or perhaps a component of eCornell. The transformations it is undergoing now perhaps foreshadow changes in teaching that would make it one or both of these. But perhaps not. It depends on the efforts of scholars, and in particular those in the humanities, to resist current trends. The humanities have always had a difficult time justifying themselves. Somehow they thrive at Cornell without anyone being able to say with certainty, or at least with lasting certainty, what they should do for students. That there is less and less justification for the humanities does not seem to deprive them of the possibility of being taught.

I give a course that traces ideas from Hegel through Derrida with reference to the place of anthropology. Last semester my students did particularly well, and I asked them why. "Well," said one, "If I didn't, my parents would be mad after spending all that tuition." He added, "Of course, if I hadn't taken this class, I would not have read any of

these people." What the consequence for him might be of his reading is indicated by the "of course;" the work is a mere aside compared to the value for money. Still, in some way or another he has added what he read to himself. Perhaps the American egalitarian ethos is responsible for the strange place of learning. Students are not expected to apply their own experience to what they learn; to do so would be to insist on differences of background. Cornell reflects this in its architecture; being shut off from the city by comparison, for instance, with continental institutions, it makes it possible to teach students anything—including the humanities—provided that learning is compartmentalized. And it is this condition which favors the changes in the library, including its potential commercialization.

That education can be bought and sold is, of course, preposterous. What is gained from the study of literature, for instance, cannot be measured in terms of how much tuition it is worth. One can, however, reliably predict how much a recent Cornell graduate in engineering or, for that matter, law, will earn. There is a place for the humanities nonetheless within this framework. Not in the expertise ("critical thinking," for instance) it might effect, and perhaps not merely in the class-bound assumptions of what one gets for being a Cornell graduate. It comes, rather, in the phrase, "what my parents will think." Read generously: "parents" here means a generalized authority. It is a way of saying that learning is appreciated outside of oneself, even if its monetary value is indeterminate and even if it does not speak directly to one's experience or to one's future. We might locate a notion of truth just there.

James T. Siegel is a Cornell anthropology professor and director of the university's Modern Indonesia Project.

## The BOOKPRESS

### PUBLISHER & EDITOR

Jack Goldman

### ASSISTANT EDITOR

Elizabeth Herrington

### PRODUCTION & DESIGN

Felix Teitelbaum

### POETRY EDITOR

Gail Holst-Warhaft

### CONTRIBUTORS

Steve Coffman, Thomas Eisner, Rhian Ellis, Peter Fortunato, David H. Kinraid, Felix Kolb, J. Robert Lennon, Patrick Robbins, Daniel Schwarz, James T. Siegel, Cushing Strout, Alicia Swords

### ILLUSTRATORS

Kasey Fowler-Fin, Fernando Llosa, Jack Sherman

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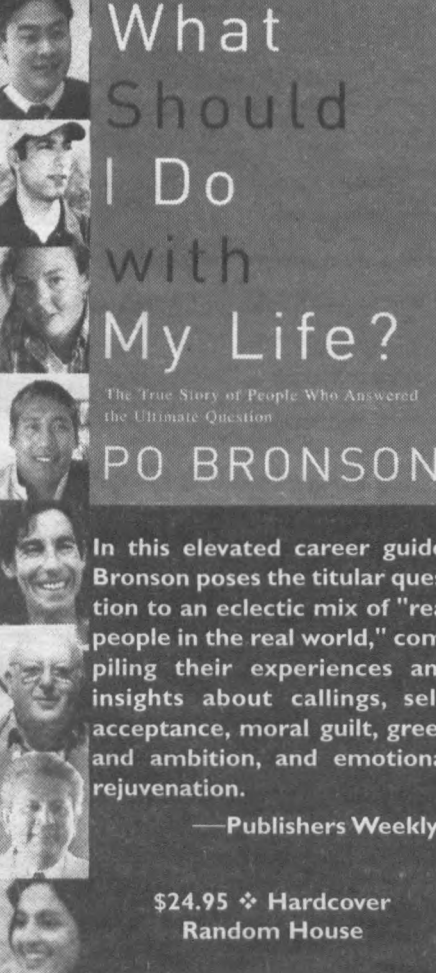
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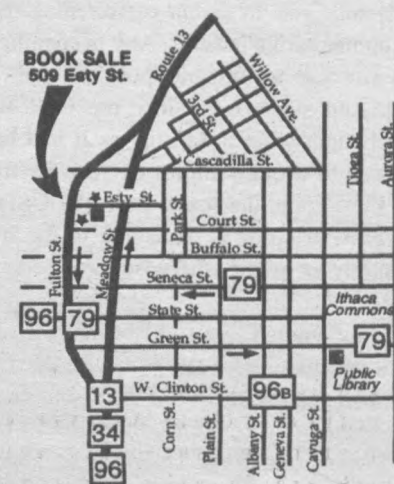
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# Do Peace Movements Matter?

Felix Kolb and  
Alicia Swords

March 19, 2003 will become a historical date. On this day the Bush Administration began to impose its imperial claim to control the entire Near East through a preventive war of aggression. We should not forget that whatever the final outcome, the war was illegal and unnecessary and grossly violated international law and the UN Charter. Propaganda from the US corporate media was so effective in manipulating the American public that even many opponents of the Iraq war have been surprised that (at least so far) no evidence of weapons of mass destruction was found in Iraq at all. Or, as Susan Wright, a disarmament expert at the University of Michigan was quoted in the British newspaper, the *Independent*: "This could be the first war in history that was justified largely by an illusion."

The disgust and unbounded outrage against the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq made hundreds of thousands of demonstrators protest against the war on the streets of Amman, Berlin, Damascus, Paris and Mexico City, as well as London, Sydney, New York, San Francisco and Washington. While no one wondered about the people in the Arab world who displayed their feeling of impotent rage, the continuing opposition in the US has surprised commentators.

In general, one would have expected that the long series of demonstrations and actions in the USA would come to a quick end as soon as the war began. And indeed, opinion polls showed an increase in public support for the war shortly after it started. But unlike past wars, where even most opponents rallied behind the president after the war started, a considerable minority of American people resisted this impulse. Contrary to what many people feel and think these days, the fact that protests continued during the war is a reason for confidence, and is only one of several indicators that the global peace movement, with its unprecedented strength, has had important successes and consequences.

Admittedly, the peace movement could not prevent this war from happening, although many of us devoted considerable energy and time to opposing the war for many months. If we compare the peace movement's main goal—preventing this war—with the cruel reality, it seems just natural to conclude that the peace movement failed. Of course President Bush and American corporate media won't do anything to contradict this conclusion, because it is very convenient for them. However, to really understand and appreciate the impact of the peace movement we need to take a different perspective. First, we must imagine how the Iraq conflict would have unfolded without the actions of the peace movement. Second, we must ask what the likely long-term consequences of the recent peace movement will be.

Counterfactual reasoning is always difficult, but we feel safe enough to propose several alternative outcomes had there been no strong global peace movement. In the first place, Bush probably would not have attempted to gain a UN mandate at all, possibly precluding the resumption of UN weapons inspections. This process gave the peace movement critical time to continue to organize and mobilize. World-wide rejection of war on Iraq dashed the Bush administration's hopes for gaining international legitimacy by bribing countries to pass a UN resolution for an invasion. The global rejection of war prevented the war resolution from gaining the necessary majority in the Security Council, as the demonstrations on February 15 made absolutely clear. Without the pressure of the German and French

peace movements especially, Schröder and Chirac might have relented and the Iraq War could have been legitimised by a UN mandate, extorted by the US. A similar argument can be made for other important swing vote states on the UN Security Council such as Mexico, Pakistan and Chile.

In addition, there may be long-term implications of these protests that we cannot yet measure, but should not underestimate. For emphasis, let's look at historical examples of long-term impacts of peace movements:

- The creation of the League of Nations a decade after widespread opposition to World War I.

- The U.S.-Soviet strategic nuclear arms reduction negotiations starting in 1970, following worldwide anti-nuclear demonstrations in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

- The US "Vietnam syndrome," a reluctance to intervene militarily, after massive protests against the Vietnam war.

The current global peace movement has helped significantly to raise the barrier for future military interventions. We hope this can thwart the plans of the neoconservative hard-liners in the White House. At the beginning of April, British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw signalled that Britain would have "nothing whatsoever" to do with any military action against Syria or Iran. Spanish prime minister Jose Maria Aznar, faced with a 91% majority of his people opposing the war, is likely to lose next year's elections because of his support for President Bush, and thus probably won't be willing to support another aggression.

The peace movement still may not be strong enough to stop the Bush administration from launching its next "preventive" attack against Syria, Iran or North Korea. But international support for subsequent wars will be even smaller than it was this time, further strengthening the peace movement. As the Washington Institute for Political Studies (IPS) has documented, the so-called "Coalition of the Willing" is composed of just 46 of 191 UN member nations—representing 19% of the world's population. Yet even in those countries public opinion was overwhelmingly opposed to the Iraq War. Although we cannot be sure, the most likely next target of the Washington hawks seems to be Syria. Right now US threats could be seen as a strategy to prevent Syria from supporting Arab resistance to a military occupation government in a de facto re-colonized Iraq. But, if the US economy continues to stall, Bush may resort to another "preventive war" as part of his strategy for winning re-election in 2004.

In order to be prepared to prevent further wars, it is not enough to recall the peace movement's achievements, we must also ask ourselves why the peace movement wasn't able to prevent the Iraq war and what lessons can be learned from this experience. There is a series of fundamental reasons, which we probably won't be able to change in the short run:

- The warmongers did not hesitate to use false evidence to make their case for the war. One of the most shocking examples was the information obtained by the C.I.A. about supposed Iraqi purchases of five hundred tons of uranium oxide from Niger. The faked documents, which the International Atomic Agency later proved to be falsified, were presented to members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee a couple of days before the Senate approved the war resolution.

- Instead of asking hard questions, the corporate-owned mass media, with few exceptions, has done everything it could to provide a broad audience for the Bush Administration's propaganda and lies. New York Times columnist Paul Krugman was right in pointing out that American public opinion support for war was largely a consequence of the biased US media. 71% of the

American public believes that Saddam Hussein was involved in the 9/11 terrorist attacks and a majority did not know that none of the hijackers were from Iraq.

- When it comes to war, the US doesn't have an opposition party. The Democrats feel that they cannot challenge Bush on national security issues. And indeed they don't have an alternative conception for foreign and national security policies. This has been made worse by the increasing power of the presidency in conducting foreign policy.

- Many people are confused about what democracy means and how it is achieved. US foreign policy uses "promoting democracy" as an excuse to intervene to gain control of resources and strategic influence in the Near East. At the same time the US has no problem supporting dictatorships in countries where it suits US interests—as for example in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Uzbekistan. A large segment of the American public is not aware of this hypocrisy and therefore buys into the "promoting democracy" rhetoric.

These problems are so deeply rooted in the American political system and the political economy of mass media that only long term solutions can bring about the necessary fundamental changes. We must work for changes in campaign financing and the electoral system to increase the chances of dissent, to encourage third parties, and to provide realistic alternatives to the "lesser evil" choices provided by the two-party system.

For this, we need alternative mainstream news sources. The radio program 'Democracy Now' is great, but possibly too radical to appeal to the American mainstream. The idea of MoveOn Media Corps to hold mass media accountable to fair reporting and basic journalist standards is important, but won't transform US news media in the ways needed. We need more think-tanks and more coherent conceptions of foreign policy to counter the neoconservative elites and to convince the American public that "promoting democracy" does not justify killing innocent people. These long-term strategies are necessary, but in the current situation we also need more short-term approaches. We offer the following list of ideas to begin debate:

- Be cautious with civil disobedience. There is no doubt that civil disobedience to protest against an illegal war is morally legitimate and sometimes strategically necessary. However, since the vast majority of the American public supports the war, civil disobedience can alienate potential supporters of our cause.

- Have a clear message. Even when the peace movement succeeds in getting public attention on the local, national or international level, it is self-defeating to try to convey a long and complex message. Linking up all sorts of grievances with the call for peace makes it possible for the media to portray the movement as having no clear message.

- Start to work on a positive agenda. In the long run it is not enough to be against war. The peace movement must offer concrete ways to resolve conflicts in a non-violent manner even as it addresses the underlying causes of wars.

- Reach across the divides. War has the potential to unite groups that have traditionally been divided in the US. Because war only benefits a small elite, there is great potential to build a strong movement across distance, race, class and ethnicity. One strategy might be to support a "Peace Summer," to educate people and build popular resistance to war. For example, the Kensington Welfare Rights Union is calling for a Poor People's March for Economic Human Rights this summer to continue the late Martin Luther King's efforts to build a united movement for peace and economic justice.

- Be Early. An achievement of the recent peace protests is that they started and reached a considerable momentum long before the war started. Next time we must be even earlier. We may gain the greatest leverage in the US if we begin to lobby Congress now about opposing new war resolutions.

- Be the media. The corporate media is concentrated in three major networks which are owned by many of the same corporations that profit from wars. The current movement has taken advantage of the Internet, through listservs and Indymedia, but our alternative media must reach a mass public, not just those who have easy computer access. Therefore more traditional techniques of leafletting and door-to-door canvassing might be more effective for reaching people we could not reach in the past.

- Be international. Of all the demonstrations the February 15th ones had the greatest impact, not only because of the sheer number of demonstrators, but also because demonstrations were taking place in more than 600 cities all over the world.

- Don't forget the Iraqi people. The peace movement should work very hard to prevent the US from exercising colonial power in Iraq by imposing a puppet regime. American and British forces should be replaced immediately by a UN peace-keeping mission to oversee the formation of Iraqi self-government in agreement with neighbouring countries, especially Syria, Iran and Turkey. Most urgently, the Bush administration must be prevented from turning Iraq into its own economic fiefdom: fully privatized, foreign-owned and open for business. It would be outrageous if key economic decisions were made by the occupying forces before the Iraqi people have the opportunity to choose their own government.

- Recognize the emotional work we have to do: We need to recognize the importance of countering the hopelessness and despair that may from time to time affect those committed to working for peace as a result of the constant propaganda barrage from the mainstream media. It is a crucial part of the work of our movement to bring people together, to help them notice that they are not alone, to listen to each others' fears and doubts, and to support each other in thinking clearly about how we can work together.

—  
**Felix Kolb** is a visiting fellow at the *Institute for European Studies* and working on his dissertation on the policy outcomes of social movements.

**Alicia Swords** is a PhD student in *Development Sociology* studying learning among social movements in Mexico and in the Americas.



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# Broadway Boogie Woogie

Daniel Schwarz

When I was ten years old, I remember hearing hilarious laughter from my father while he was reading downstairs in the living room. When I went down to ask him what he was reading, he answered "Damon Runyon." It was a scene that occurred every few years when he would take all of Damon Runyon's books out of the library. My father rarely laughed out loud and at ninety is no more a person noted for fits of hilarity than he was fifty years ago. When I re-read Runyon's stories a generation later, my young sons heard me laughing out loud.

Now my sons are adults and I await grandchildren with whom to share my enthusiasm. But today I still read Damon Runyon (1880-1946) with the same response, a link to my father and a link to the New York of the Depression my father knew and grew up in, a world where, as Runyon put it, one did the "best one could." Indeed, on the streets of Manhattan, my father, who came from a most modest family whose economic circumstances were, like so many others, undermined by the Depression, sold the very magazines in which Runyon's New York stories appeared. My father used and still uses Runyonesque expressions like "What's eating you?" and spoke of a dishonest person as someone who would steal anything unless it was "nailed down." And this is hardly surprising since many of our common phrases either originated with Runyon or were made popular by him.

Runyon was a towering figure as sports-writer, journalist, and fiction writer in the period between the World Wars. Given that two of the nominations for the Best Picture in the 2003 Academy award competition, *Chicago*, the winning jazz-age satire of moral myopia, and *Gangs of New York*, the violent ethnic drama, owe a direct debt to Damon Runyon, it is a good time to survey his achievement and influence. As we begin to understand the role of popular culture in creating the image we have of ourselves and earlier eras, we should celebrate the genius of Runyon, who mapped the interior life of the modern city, who in the period between the wars created the image of New York City that most of America and even Europe held, who saw the comedy of the relationship between the criminal and respectable worlds—especially during Prohibition, and who helped invent the media extravaganza that accompanies celebrity trials.

Runyon's newspaper columns appeared widely across the United States; his short stories found an immense readership in major popular magazines; two of his short story collections sold over a million copies; he was widely published in England by Lord Beaverbrook in the *London Evening Standard*, and he was translated into several languages. Nor should we forget that his stories were the source material for the Frank Loesser musical *Guys and Dolls* and that at least sixteen of his stories were turned into films.

We can hardly exaggerate Runyon's popularity and importance in shaping American popular culture during the first half of the twentieth century. His writings took the form of columns, poems, anecdotes, and stories for mass consumption, including those that fed our voyeuristic interest in celebrity and criminal culture. Runyon vividly rendered the voices of diverse ethnic and socioeconomic groups. He was in touch with the feelings of those who may not have had a university education and who were not privy to highbrow culture.

Runyon wrote over seventy short stories between 1929 and his death in 1946 for popular magazines like *Collier's*, *Cosmopolitan*, and, very occasionally, the

*Saturday Evening Post*. While the locations of these stories vary to include various race-tracks in Florida, Maryland, and upstate New York, the point of view and style are always that of Runyon's New York narrator, and it is thus appropriate to think of them all as Broadway stories. Broadway was the quintessence of the melting pot, welcoming ethnic diversity more than other sections of the city, and Runyon reveled in its variety. The road to prosperity for Lower East Side Jews, Italians, and others often went through Times Square.

Runyon identified with the outsiders and have-nots, the people who live by their wits during hard times; as he characteristically writes of Nicely Nicely in "Lonely Heart" (1937): "What he does for a livelihood is the best he can, which is an occupation that is greatly overcrowded at all times along Broadway." Often without means or credit or steady jobs, Runyon's characters live from hand to mouth and, at times, from bet to bet and from scam to scam.

Runyon invented a special language to render the variety, commotion, and speed of the modern city. A great listener, his auditory imagination caught the syncopation and texture of speech as if speech were musical notes. His prose needs to be read aloud to be appreciated for its phonic sophistication—its pace, its play of sound, its heavy and frequent stresses, its rough growly texture, its invented names. Like that of Piet Mondrian's painting "Broadway Boogie Woogie" (1942-43), Runyon's style is dynamic, colorful, and exuberant. For his locutions, he borrows and combines terms from vaudeville, jazz, headlines, gangster argot, sports, and diverse ethnic discourses, especially Yiddish and Italian. His sentences team with life, move in several directions at once, and overflow with intensity. Without sacrificing the manic comic energy that he borrowed from vaudeville, he writes with the circumlocution and loquacity of New York culture that loves talk for its own sake. Like a jazz musician, his narrators relentlessly play on a central theme, but divert into solo flights or riffs that are oblique variations of the theme.

Runyon's style owes something to ragtime; "ragging" or syncopating means emphasizing the off beat. As Ann Douglas notes, "Ragtime scored for the piano was built on a syncopated, rhythmically inventive, right-hand treble played against a steady 2/4 march rhythm on the left-hand bass."<sup>1</sup> What Runyon does is stress the off syllables—the usually unaccented minor words—against the expected pattern of

1. Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty* (New York: Farrar, Starus and Giroux, 1995), 367.

iambic stresses, creating a prose in which every word carries a pronounced stress.

Transitional words like "who," "when," and "whom" in the following sentence, even the seemingly innocuous "and"s and "for," become part of the "ragging rhythm"—a kind of complex duet—that breaks the expected stress pattern and creates a hard-driving urban sound:

[S]ome very unusual things often happen to guys who get money off of The Brain [Runyon's pseudonym for Arnold Rothstein who was reputed to have fixed the 1919 World Series] and fail to kick it back just when they promise, such as broken noses and sprained ankles and other injuries, for The Brain has people around him who seem to resent guys getting dough off of him and not kicking it back ("A Very Honorable Guy" [1929]).

The iteration of the term "kicking back," which refers to paying back a loan, even as it playfully resonates with what happens to those who fail to pay The Brain in a timely fashion, is an example of the richness and dark humor of Runyon's style.

Runyon's use of vernacular, slangy and even boozy, heavily accented Broadway speech inverts the expectations of high art and expresses his underlying skepticism about social position and respectability in a world where wealth and power get affirmative action. As if mocking locutions of the polite world, Runyon uses odd archaisms, like "dast" for the past of "dare" as in "I dast not leave John Ignatius Junior for a minute" in "Butch Minds the Baby" (1930). When we read aloud, we see how Runyon has invented a style that is noisy, tumultuous, cacophonous, brassy, and shrill—a phonic metaphor for Broadway. He uses both the slang and the grammatically lax conversational speech that were characteristic of conversation heard in the Broadway beat he knew. His stylistic play—violating agreement in terms of verbs and subjects—subverts our expectations in the way that the behavior of his subjects often does; both transport us from our respectable world.

Often Runyon's involved sentences barreling along—moving first one way and then another, but finally coming into the station like a subway—are miniatures of his plots. The structure of his stories—and even of individual sentences—reflects a fascination with emerging from a clandestine world where the narrator is an intrepid explorer of the city's underground mysteries. Runyon not only listens with his magnificent ear to the slang of these New York streets but embroiders and transforms it until it becomes his own inimitable dis-

course. Sentences seem to wander away, as if they had a drink or two, or as if they were fatigued at four in the morning, but eventually they get their bearings. For example: of the Louse Kid, a "promising young guy in many respects," the narrator of "The Old Doll's House" (1933) observes:

He is supposed to be a wonderful hand with a burlap bag when anybody wishes to put somebody in such a bag, which is considered a great practical joke in Brooklyn, and in fact The Louse Kid has a burlap bag with him on the night in question, and they are figuring on putting Lance McGowan in the bag when they call on him, just for a laugh.

As much as anyone, Runyon defined the image we hold of New York as the commercial and entertainment capital of American culture, but he did so in such a way that its success is inextricably related to its aggressive, cynical, and materialistic darker side. Runyon understood that his New York was as much a state of mind as an actual site in time and space. He not only helped to invent the double image of New York as romantic, exciting, and glamorous, and, at the same time, dark, edgy and dangerous, but he also strongly suggested that this weird duality exists nowhere else.

Runyon's Broadway stories anticipated the noir films of Humphrey Bogart, especially *High Sierra* (1941), which provocatively questioned standard views of public morality and were ambivalent about violent criminals. Runyon also influenced the director Jules Dassin, especially in films like the noir 1955 black-and-white *Rififi*, where the French gangsters seem like New York figures transported to Paris. "*Rififi*" means "rough and tumble," and the characters in *Rififi* virtually step out of Runyon's stories and films. Dassin, like Runyon, engages his audience on the side of the gangsters. The gangsters live by their own code and the informer is killed by the lead gangster, a Runyonesque down-and-out figure in ill health who has been recently released from prison. Runyon, like Ernest Hemingway, lauded the rugged individual and believed in codes of trust and honor, even among criminals. Thus one always pays one's markers.

Runyon also sympathized with the dispossessed and admired those who excelled—even if it was in sports gambling and manipulation—like Arnold Rothstein and Al Capone.

Runyon stylized both the language and the behavior of gangsters, depicting them as merely another part of a complex

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# Across the Great Divide

Steve Coffman

The following is an exchange of emails with an old Indiana high-school friend, now a noted economist with the Urban Institute in Washington, DC. Over the years we have engaged in several other fits of frustrating correspondence. With so much past in common, it constantly seems that we should be able to find more agreement.

Our most recent exchange before this ended in October, with B. enthusiastically favoring the impending war and me rejoicing him with opposing arguments, both of us exchanging more sources and attachments than either could possibly respond to until, in futility and dyspepsia, we both gave up.

And then this:

From: B. (Apr 9, 2003) Subject: A Poem

Steve,

Much remains to be accomplished in Iraq, but I would hope you would feel a slight amount of pride in the destruction of an evil and brutal regime of Stalinist proportions. Here is a poem for the occasion—

A tyrant brought down to earth.

As Saddam's statue lies shattered in the Baghdad dust, a sonnet written nearly 200 years ago best sums up the fall of the vain-glorious tyrant. Percy Bysshe Shelley was inspired to write "Ozymandias" by the broken colossus of Pharaoh Rameses II in Egypt, but the poem stands today as a fitting epitaph for Saddam's rule and its wrecked idols:

I met a traveller from an antique land  
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone  
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,  
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,  
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,  
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read  
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things.  
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed.  
And on the pedestal these words appear:  
"My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:  
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"  
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare  
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

From: S.C. (April 10) Reply:

B.,

Yes, Saddam is gone.

So are thousands of innocent civilians and tens of thousands of Iraqi soldiers. Thousands of babies dying of cholera and diarrhea from ruined and polluted waters.

War still raging in the north south and west. But I'm sure the Turks and Kurds will work it out under our benevolently imposed democracy.

I'm not just proud, I'm tickled pink. Who knows, under the loving paternal eyes of our occupation, the Iraqis may soon be as happy and grateful as the Palestinians.

Let's see. What other brutal dictators are left in the world. Who should we liberate next? The menu is so full I hardly know where to start. Now that we've had the appetizer, we can get on to Syria, Cuba, North, Korea, Iran, Colombia, Venezuela (and France, ha ha). With selzer water, a little nibble of Pakistan and a second bite of Afghanistan. Then onto the main dishes: China! Indonesia! Russia! This is so much fun I don't know where to stop. For dessert, we could do a few of our friends: Egypt, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Salvador, Honduras.

By the way did you ever see the picture of Donald Rumsfeld embracing Saddam in 1983, to congratulate him on his fine mustard gassing of Iran? Ah, but he was our monster then. So he deserved our arms and support. And the Iraqi people (who you love

so much) weren't yet enlightened enough to deserve liberation.

I don't know. As hard as it is, I'm trying keep my pride from bursting until I see how this goes. The Ozymandias invocation is certainly appropriate. Not exclusively for Saddam, of course. Let's not forget that Tikrit was also the home of Saladin who defeated Richard The Lion-Hearted. Was that the First Crusade or the Second? And it was Shelley's British Empire that, in its last crumbling days, left us so much of the present map of the Middle East, including Iraq. So, now it's our turn to be Ozymandias.

From: B. (April 10, 2003)

Steve,

I am glad I provided you with a vehicle to let off steam. Still, I am a bit stunned by your reaction. I guess there are no facts that can persuade you that US actions in the world are on balance positive (though all actions have costs and benefits). But I do have two questions.

Would you have preferred we not intervene in Bosnia and Kosovo and are you glad we did nothing in Rwanda? More broadly, are you unhappy about the developments in Eastern Europe since 1989?

From: S.C. (Apr 11, 2003)

B.,

Yes, illegal, immoral, preemptory war by my fist-happy country against a pathetic pulp of a people does rather take the edge off my natural ebullience. Something I got from my mother, I guess.

As to your two, actually three, questions, even though their relevance escapes me, my steamed up state stirs me to reply:

Bosnia and Kosovo—I recall as a situation that the international community was urging us to get involved in for some time before we finally did. I guess the "ethnic cleansing" has now stopped for a while. At least we avoided landing 250,000 troops into that quagmire with some idiotic plan of stabilizing the Balkans with our shock & awe & hubris.

Rwanda—No, nothing about genocide makes me "glad", and it surely does seem that we could have done something. Two questions for you: Why do you suppose we didn't? And do you really think the current administration would have jumped to the call on purely humanitarian grounds? That without some overarching economic interest, Bush, Inc. would have found the saving of a few hundred thousand Tutsis to be—in Rumsfeld-speak—"terribly compelling?" In any case, how can you possibly compare Rwanda to Iraq? Rwanda was a situation of murderous mass hysteria begging for immediate emergency action, Iraq a chronic former client now deemed to be in the way of our hegemonic Middle East policy. Are you really suggesting that the supporting of a UN peacekeeping force in Rwanda is somehow equivalent to our preemptive pulverizing of Iraq?

Eastern Europe—If it's your implication that I somehow supported Soviet communism and its subjugation of Eastern Europe, you're hopelessly off-base! And I also resent the implication that only a pinko could be against our present theocratic, oilocratic, politically-cynical pummeling of Iraq. Never having been there, I freely accept your premise that Eastern Europe is better off to be out from under the big bear's foot, and probably would be even without the great current influx of western investment. However, to the point at hand, I would suggest that another reason for Eastern Europe's current recovery is that it did NOT find itself the object of a "liberating" invasion in a preemptive war! Really, can you imagine what Czechoslovakia et. al. would look like today if we had lobbed a few MOABs, etc. into the

Kremlin? What would America look like? Or the world? Presumably, our president and his ilk would be smiling, though—in apocalyptic rapture six feet under.

Turbine still churning.

Steve

From B. (April 11, 2003)

Steve,

Before I offer a reaction to your comments, let me say that I realize that reasonable people (and not just pinkos) can agree or disagree on the wisdom of the war, especially before we knew the initial outcome, but even after the fact. The removal of Saddam gives Iraq the opportunity, not the certainty, of building a decent society. We know that even countries with a longer history of civil institutions have experienced problems, especially economic. I believe US efforts to prevent Saddam's expansionism and collusion with terror and to liberate Iraq from his rule will yield benefits that very much justify the costs. You obviously believe otherwise and I respect your view. Still, I cannot but recognize that, just as many strong opponents of the war are angry that proponents of the war question their motives and their patriotism, I notice many anti-war activists do the same to those who favored action.

Glad your turbine is still charging.

Now for my reactions.

[Illegal, immoral, preemptory...]

I strongly disagree about the illegal, immoral and preemptory angles. Attached is the legal opinion by the British. The war was not preemptory because Iraq never abided by the cease-fire agreement in 1991. As for the idea that it was a war "against" a pathetic pulp of a people, you have it reversed. The war was against their very well-armed masters, their brutal fascist, Bathists. The war was "for" the pathetic people facing oppression by Saddam. They seem to believe it was for them as well. I guess we both feel we are appropriately interpreting their feelings. I believe the evidence is on the side that they feel it was against Saddam and not against them.

[Bosnia, Kosovo. . .]

So here is where you are unwilling to give a straight answer. I assume you are meaning to concede that ethnic cleansing has stopped and that is a good thing. What you do not note is:

1) we could not get the UN Security Council to agree to the action;

2) that we bombed Serbia and Kosovo for 77 days;

3) that we fought against a dictator who had never invaded another country, never supported outside terrorism, did not have expansionist ambitions, and never developed nuclear or chemical weapons. Moreover, Milosovich did not have a 25-year history of the level of brutal Stalinism that brought fear to every corner of his society in nearly the same way as Saddam. In addition, part of the violence against the Kosovars was brought on by Kosovar terrorists. That is not to say that we did not stop a terrible action. But, it is to say that the case for action in Iraq was far more compelling both for defensive reasons and for moral reasons.

[Rwanda. . .]

Here, too, you hedge. Of course, we could have done something. I was asking you, should we have done something? You then change the subject and ask about Mr. Bush. It was under Mr. Clinton's watch that 800,000-1,000,000 people were slaughtered in something of genocidal proportions. The first question is why did not the French and Belgians act, since they have been in these territories and the French had even helped the group that ultimately committed the genocide. We are certainly culpable as well. I believe Clinton was still reacting to the

Somalia debacle and simply did not want to risk any action for any purpose. He disgustingly instructed his State Department people specifically not to use the "genocide" term, since it might force actions. The situations are hardly equivalent. But both do involve entering another country to remove regimes doing terrible things to their people. Saddam has certainly killed (outside of wars) in the hundreds of thousands and tortured at least tens of thousands as well. Another similarity is the requirement to fight in a country that has not directly attacked us or even another outside country.

You use the term "peacekeeping" about Rwanda but no doubt any military force trying to stop (often kill) those committing these murders would have had to be well armed and would no doubt have killed innocent civilians in the process.

[Eastern Europe. . .]

If I thought that an internal revolt would have had any chance to remove Hussein in the next decade or so, I would probably have a different opinion about the war. Not every tyranny can be taken out at an acceptable cost. I realize you do not regard the cost of our operation in Iraq as acceptable relative to the outcome achieved. I hope you will find some consolation in the fact that the costs have not been largely borne and the future will yield more in the way of benefits.

B.

From: S.C. (April 13, 2003)

B.,

I know I should just let this go. I'm sure you feel the same way. No exercise could be more futile, but I think we just exasperate each other beyond reasonable restraint.

As to the legality and morality of this, I guess that will have to be decided by our courts, lawyers, historians vs. the overwhelming majority of the rest of the world. It is interesting to me, though, that the basis of your case rests on a UN Security Council resolution—the same body whom we distrust, disdain and consider irrelevant—and which, as you know perfectly well, indisputably disagrees with that very interpretation of its own resolution. Not preemptive, though? The Bush Administration has been constantly arguing its right to preemptively attack Saddam ad nauseum for over a year! And now, after the fact, you're claiming that Saddam was still at war with us? I guess a good team of lawyers can argue anything, but this is *prima facie* preposterous! Did Saddam attack us when I wasn't looking? I could have sworn that it was the other way around. Has he been starving our people for the last decade and imposing illegal fly-zones on our country?

Since you want to go to 1991, it's interesting that our stated reason for war then had nothing to do with Saddam's weapons of mass destruction. Or our need to liberate the Iraqi people. That's when we knew full well that he still had chemical and biological weapons because we had helped him develop them to use against Iran. And he even had an air force and missiles capable of delivering them. We feared for Israel, yes. And we concocted a bogus case that he had eyes on attacking Saudi Arabia. And, of course, the essential reason was because of Saddam's invasion of Kuwait, to save the Kuwaitis—and, perhaps incidentally, to protect British/American corporate oil interests.

Oops, I let the "O" word sneak out. Well, despite the administration's deafening silence about it, the 1991 war and this one are about oil. Nothing could make it more clear than the fact that we immediately managed to secure the oil regions in the south (and maneuvered to keep the oil regions of

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# Babylon, D.C.

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Money (or money-equivalent financial instruments) has been printed for decades in quantities that far exceed the US domestic requirements, largely to service its status as the reserve currency. When money supply outstrips demand and the markets realize this, devaluation and inflation occur simultaneously. When this happened in Germany in the 1920s, hyperinflation occurred,

to call in the surplus USD-denominated cash instruments and dispose of them tidily in a non-devaluing and non-inflationary way. The US economy would probably shrink a little and there would definitely be some inflation, but it need be neither deep nor prolonged.

Of course, this implies a willingness to go with the flow and to accept, with moderately good grace, that change is inevitable. This is not the US way of doing things, however.

the Euro are known, collectively, as the Euro-zone. Not all the members of the EU have adopted it yet, however. Of these hold-outs, Great Britain still remains the major non-Euro-zone member of the EU. Nonetheless, the overall economic clout of the EU rivals that of the US and, by extension, the Euro has become a powerful currency after its first faltering steps. The collective economic clout of the Euro-zone, even without Britain, exceeds that of the US

it seems, in and of itself, to have provided both a *casus belli* and a way of making Congress and the Senate fall over themselves to support what was otherwise an unsupportable act of naked aggression. The damage to Americans' freedom arising from the Homeland Security heist against the body politic is neither here nor there in this context except for its providing the administration and its organs with the ability to suppress dissent by calling it "unpatriotic."

There has been endless speculation as to the real reasons for going into Iraq. The main favourites here are:

1. It's the *oil*, stupid.
2. Israel's fears for its security.
3. President Bush sees Iraq as his father's unfinished business seeking completion.
4. President Bush wants to make his own mark on history.
5. President Bush sees it as his duty as a (fundamentalist) Christian to suppress evil regimes such as that of Saddam Hussein.
6. It is one of the planks of the program for American world dominance advocated by a neo-conservative think-tank called the Project for the New American Century (PNAC).

There is an argument to be made for each of the six reasons above, provided you don't delve too far into the morality. But, from a geopolitical standpoint, only the first is truly supportable. There is a case to be made, morality aside, for securing a reliable oil supply even though only about 25% of the US's oil comes from the Gulf region. Yet, as British Prime Minister Tony Blair has said, if that were the main reason then it would be cheaper and easier to simply cut a deal with Baghdad. You also have to consider the fact that, over the past few years anyway, the US has spent billions of dollars on military deployments to ensure that the oil flows from its sources to the US.

The Israeli argument is nonsense. Israel was keen for the US to invade Iraq in the hope of weakening its Arab neighbors, thereby strengthening its position in the ongoing conflict with the Palestinians. Even during Gulf War I, the Scud missile attacks on Israel were opportunistic, unsupported, and probably intended as nothing more than propaganda to impress the Arab world with Saddam Hussein's Arab credentials in an attempt to break up the alliance against him.

The third, fourth, and fifth reasons for the US decision to invade Iraq are the most imponderable. That George W. Bush is a fundamentalist Christian seems to be a fact. Fundamentalism—Christian, Jewish, Islamic or Hindu—implies the suspension of the normal critical faculties in favor of allowing faith to prevail and, historically, tends to go hand-in-hand with violence. Bush appears to embrace these tendencies.

It may well be that George W. sees Iraq as unfinished family business, but it also seems likely that he genuinely believed that it was his bounden Christian duty to put down the "evil" regime in Baghdad. Of course, one should also remember that his public utterances about the reasons for invading Iraq have been less than consistent in detail and very unconvincing, although perhaps this shouldn't be a surprise. Syndicated columnist and former UPI White House correspondent Helen Thomas, who has seen eight presidents come and seven go during her tenure there, has labeled him as the "most incompetent" of them to date.

It is no coincidence that several leading members of the Bush administration, including the secretary of defense and the vice president—as well as the president's brother—are supporters of the ultra-conservative (now called neo-conservative) PNAC. PNAC's vision of a world dominated by



"War in Iraq", Fernando Llosa.

although the amounts involved then were trifling in comparison with the amount of US currency currently out there in the world. The US is in danger of a sudden and disastrous increase in inflation that would result in the need for a drastic devaluation of the USD if the markets act on their knowledge of the USD's vulnerability and sell it down.

So this is the Fed's nightmare: What happens if the USD is suddenly dumped as the reserve currency and foreign investors rush to repatriate their money? At the least, economic chaos in the US would occur, signalled by a major devaluation of the dollar (figures of between 20% and 25% have been bandied about in the economic literature) and, of course, inflationary pressures. The severity of the inflation is less easily estimated.

The damage would not be confined to the US, either. Any country holding significant reserves in USD would find itself in the same boat. The reality is that if the US economy sneezes then eventually the whole world will catch cold. Even more unfortunately, the country that probably holds the most reserves in USD is Japan, already caught in a deflationary downward economic spiral because of a worldwide fall in demand for Japanese products. And Japan is the second-largest economy in the world.

Any country that is a major supplier to the US would find itself in economic trouble equally quickly as US demand for imports dropped. Very soon, the world would fall into a recession which, it is estimated, could potentially be every bit as bad as the Great Depression or, given the much tighter integration of the world economy thanks to the wholesale adoption of information and communications technology, even worse.

But the USD's fall from grace need not be this dramatic. A gradual transition from the USD as reserve currency to some other currency, or even a basket of currencies nominated and formally acknowledged as the reserve currency, would allow the Fed time

Besides, there has never been a serious challenger to the USD's pre-eminence in the reserve currency stakes before, and therefore there has never been any need to worry about it, except in a dry, academic, quasi-theoretic kind of way. But now there is real competition to the USD, and it's called the Euro.

## Tell me again, exactly who are your parents?

The Euro is the bastard offspring of miscegenation between the most unlikely of partners. If, in 1945, anyone would have been mad enough to suggest that within 20 years Germany, France, Ireland, Italy, Britain, Holland and Belgium would find enough common cause to enter into an economic *Anschluss* which subsumed long-cherished perceived national interests, he or she would have been immediately locked up and the key thrown away. Yet it happened. Economic alliance, including a number of common currency-parity protocols, was one of the first steps taken after the initial formation of the European Economic Community (EEC). Despite the internal and external birthing pains the EEC, aka the EC (European Community) and now aka the EU (European Union), was born.

At its heart is the European Commission and Parliament. The European Parliament is based in Strasbourg with frequent excursions to Brussels, but it is a rather ineffectual talking shop and will remain so until political union is finally achieved, if that ever happens. The real power in Europe lies with the European Commission—the EU's bureaucracy—based permanently in Brussels. Politically and economically, the EU has been and continues to be dominated to a large extent by two of the most dogged of enemies prior to 1945, France and Germany.

The next logical step for any close economic alliance is monetary union. This partially occurred in 1999 with the adoption of the Euro. The countries which have adopted

despite the lack of policy cohesion among the members of the EU. This strength is an important point, and one that would not be lost on countries seeking to replace the USD as their reserve currency.

So, if one were to look around one for a replacement for the USD as the reserve currency, then the Euro would have to be a natural choice. This is especially true if Euro-zone members happen to be one's major trading partners. And because EU members are bound by treaty to keep their deficits within a very small percentage of GNP—unlike the unregulated chaos in the US—it is likely that, over time, the Euro will prove to be the most stable currency in the world, which from the perspective of a reserve currency must be a very attractive feature, indeed.

## But, why beat up on Iraq AGAIN, fer cryin' out loud?

Iraq invaded Kuwait for two reasons: Better access to the Gulf coast and for its oil reserves. There have been unrefuted claims that, in fact, Baghdad thought it had US agreement to its taking over Kuwait. At no time had Saddam Hussein obviously looked covetously at Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Syria or Jordan. A major and understandable Iraqi motive for attacking Turkey, for instance, is that the damming of the Euphrates inside Turkey threatens Iraq's very existence by reducing Iraq's water supply. The war with Iran, if inexcusable, was also understandable from a geopolitical standpoint—no dictator can afford to ignore neighbouring regimes that are based on principles completely outside of his control, such as fundamentalist Islam, because such things are catching and therefore dangerous. Oddly enough, although Saddam didn't win the war he nevertheless effectively eliminated Iran and the mullahs as a threat to his power.

The US was willing to override the UN (nothing new there, of course) to put an end to the regime of Saddam Hussein. 9/11 was a godsend to the Bush administration, since

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America and American culture, embedded and enforced by American military might, is breathtaking in its arrogance. It may be the underlying reason why most of Bush's administration has been so enthusiastic in its support for the Iraqi adventure. But the script written by PNAC completely ignores the fundamental flaw in the very concept of world domination which has been tried, and has failed, twice in the last century: the rest of the world just won't let it happen.

## Enter Mr. Nice Guy

Colin Powell's involvement in the White House's orchestrated litany of lies, including his unconvincing performance at the UN in support of the White House-supplied "evidence" of Baghdad's perfidy, has been very surprising.

Heretofore, Powell enjoyed the respect of Americans and non-Americans alike. If he had chosen to stand for the presidency on the Republican ticket or as a well-funded independent, he would have been a serious contender. He also has real combat experience and understands that war is no board game. So one must question why he has lent his name and risked his reputation to help along the White House's push for a war that he probably regarded as wrong, or at best, misguided.

Leaving aside all the nonsensical reasons put forward by President Bush and his English sidekick, Tony Blair, as to exactly why Iraq suddenly reemerged as a deadly threat to the US's concept of world security, for someone such as Colin Powell to actively support rather than simply quietly ignore the Iraqi situation, there must have been a compelling reason. It is this which leads inevitably to the contemplation of macroeconomics, the single area in which the US is most vulnerable, but which has never been mentioned by the White House in the con-

text of the Iraqi situation.

It is not physical or social terrorism which directly threatens American security. Even another Twin Towers-type terrorist attack would not dent the US's ability to function as a country. It is what it perceives as *economic* terrorism that the US quite rightly fears. Its economic fate could well be decided by foreign nationals sitting in offices elsewhere around the world. A further and perhaps more ironic twist is that a lot of the damage would be done through the US financial system itself.

In 2000 Baghdad committed the single most unforgivable sin in the list of things the US Really Doesn't Like Other People Doing. It thumbed its nose at the dollar, and in doing so showed others the way. Among those who appear to have learned the lesson, besides North Korea, have been Iran and Saudi Arabia, both oil-producing nations of some note. The three countries—Iraq, Iran and Saudi Arabia—control nearly 50% of known world oil reserves. The odds are, in fact, that Iraq holds a much greater percentage than the currently known 11%, but no geological surveys have been carried out there since 1979.

To whom would the Iraqi situation be an object lesson? It would certainly be intended that Iran, which has already converted a considerable chunk of its copious oil-generated reserves from the USD to the Euro, should take note. Iran, of course, is part of the much-trumpeted "Axis of Evil", along with Iraq and North Korea. Saudi Arabia is also hedging by buying Euros and, depending on who you believe, is possibly the fourth, if unannounced, member of the above-mentioned axis. The message is clear: "Threaten the USD's hegemony too far, and you're next!" And if the PNAC agenda is being followed, Syria must also be nervous.

Next, let us look at the US's possible moves following the conquest. First, as a given, Iraq would move back to the USD for

its reserve currency. But looking beyond that, Iraq currently contributes something less than 5% of the world's oil supplies because of the sanctions. In theory, it should be producing 10%-11% at a minimum. Once taken over, Iraqi oil field production could be brought on stream at any level the US chooses if Iraq were to be withdrawn from membership in OPEC (which the US itself never joined). Increased production of Iraqi oil would serve the US to control the world spot price for crude oil.

This would break OPEC's price/production monopoly which, for better or worse, guarantees a fair price for members' oil, while at the same time eking out the world's only-too-finite oil reserves for as long as possible. OPEC, which America regards with loathing, may also be the US's real target because some of its member nations, like Iraq in 2000, are considering a move away from the USD. The shift would involve either the adoption of the Euro or the nomination of a basket of currencies, that might or might not include the USD, to underpin an independent "petrounit" oil currency. Were this to happen, all of the ills discussed above could befall the US as a result of the dumping of the USD as the reserve currency.

OPEC will also have been watching events in Venezuela with interest. Venezuela has been bartering oil *directly* for goods from its trading partners, using no reserve currency except the oil itself. Though somewhat experimental, this expedient seems to function adequately, as well it might given that many of Venezuela's trading partners are Central and South American countries which have few external funds and even less access to either USD or Euros. In any case, it appears to work well enough for the CIA to have attempted to orchestrate a coup against the current Venezuelan President Chavez, which fortunately failed. Hell hath no fury like the dollar scorned.

## Yeah, but will it work?

Depending on how far the US administration is prepared to go in its implementation of the PNAC model for global rule after "liberating" Iraq, any country—particularly those countries in the so-called "developing world" that have regional aspirations—that moves away from the USD as its reserve currency (or does not support US policies) may be seen as a threat to US security. Syria, Iran and even Saudi Arabia are already being warned to heed the example of Iraq. The enforcement of these policies will require permanent militarisation, large increases in the national debt, and the possible disruption of US commerce.

To the frustration of US policy makers this will probably drive more countries to withdraw investments from the US and to move toward the Euro for their reserve currency. If, as seems more than likely, the UK and Norway—two of the world's more significant oil producers—join the Euro-zone within the next few years, the US could find itself further isolated. It remains to be seen if the US will attempt to meet these economic and political challenges through the give and take of international diplomacy, or if it will follow the PNAC prescription and attempt to rely on naked military power to impose its hegemony on the rest of the world.

Maybe Saddam Hussein was not the latter-day Nebuchadnezzar after all. In his determination to cast into the fiery furnace all who refuse to worship the almighty dollar, George W. Bush may have usurped the role of that ancient Babylonian ruler. But has the self-avowed born-again president forgotten that Shadroch, Meshach and Abadnego survived the flames?

—  
**David Kinraid** is an IT consultant and part-time writer with qualifications in both economics and information science. He lives in the UK.

# Across the Great Divide

*continued from page 5*

the north out of anyone else's control) while, at the same time, 26 out of 30 hospitals in Baghdad had to close for lack of water, electricity and adequate security. Ditto Basra. And the antiquity museums of Baghdad were being looted and its irreplaceable library being burned—these not deemed of sufficient importance for "coalition" forces to secure. What could be any more symbolic of the true purposes of our anti-intellectual, corporation-driven Bushites?

Oil, Israel and strategic/hegemonic control of the Middle East. Surely, that's what this is about—and, frankly, I find it hard to believe that you think otherwise. Your sudden passion for the plight of the poor Iraqi people. Why not other tyrannically-oppressed peoples? Tibet? Saudi Arabia? China? Nigeria? Or the murderous repressive regimes that we've helped to support in Colombia, Guatamala, Haiti, El Salvador, Roumania, East Timor, Panama? Etc., etc.

Do you mean for me to believe that you have more sympathy for the Iraqi people—who, if truly given the democratic choice, would overwhelmingly oppose Israel in every way—than you do for, say, the gentle Tibetans or peace-loving Guatamalan Mayans (over a million of whom were killed with our weapons and trained killers)?

Or is it that you envision, not Middle Eastern democracy, but Middle Eastern democracy—under the control of US hegemony, that would siphon wealth and power from Iraq and other Arab countries to us, while simultaneously eroding their ability to effectively oppose Israel? If that's what you really mean, then let's not beat around these Bushite pretensions that Saddam was any kind of real threat to the US or that our affection for Iraqis demands our intervention while the plight of other peoples did not.

As for Rwanda, with so much blood pouring in the streets, it seems impossible that we (via the UN) could not have done anything to at least stem the slaughter. I'm cer-

tain that if Rwanda had the world's second-largest oil reserves and was of any great strategic interest to us, we would have done something.

As for the Balkans—I don't know. Did we need to do all that bombing? It does seem that UN intervention is helping to stabilize things there for now. Such a post-Yugoslavia internecine mess is just what I fear will be the true legacy we leave in Iraq.

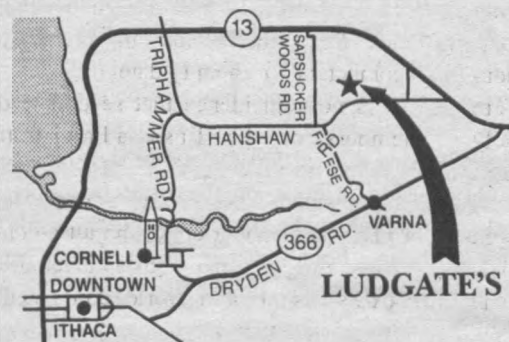
If, instead, it leads to a Middle Eastern democracy with peaceful acceptance of Israel, less international terrorism, greater US security, freedom and well-being, I will happily eat crow at any place of your choosing and dance between bites. In fact, if only the first of those things were to come about as a result of this illegally concocted adventure, I would still gladly admit that something good had come from it—and that, on balance, the tens of thousands of casualties, lost antiquities, and scorched earth were not in vain.

Right now, though, what I see building is an unbelievably destructive religious war. I

hope I'm just being paranoid, but when people who can't wait for the Apocalypse and the Rapture (in one poll 32% of Americans) are also one button-push away from fulfilling their ardent insane delusions, I do wonder how America could've come to this. And, on balance, that scares me more than a hundred Saddam Husseins. And that's why I'm so overheated about this, and so convinced that mankind is in desperate need of making real peace. Maybe we could start by reappropriating most of the trillion-dollar military budget for the research and development of peace promotion. Maybe if the CIA and UN inspectors went out looking for peace, they might even find some buried somewhere. I think expecting war to create peace is like looking for snow in the Amazon or a good corned-beef sandwich on the moon.

Steve

—  
**Steve Coffman** is a writer who lives on a farm in Yates County, NY.



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# A.V. Kids

## Patrick Robbins

### The Tenacity of the Cockroach: Conversations with Entertainment's Most Enduring Outsiders

By the Onion A.V. Club  
Three Rivers Press  
407 pages, \$16.00, paper

Remember the audiovisual club at your high school? They weren't the gifted athletes, the school-spirit nuts, or the bullies. What they were, as Dan Aykroyd once said in a *Saturday Night Live* sketch, were "seven guys who really gave a damn if the mikes had feedback in the gym." An insular group, their social skills were poorly developed, and most of the students and teachers would be hard-pressed to describe any of their individual characteristics. "An A.V. kid" was usually description enough for the quiet guy with his nose in a Piers Anthony paperback.

Oh, but in the back room, where Mr. Irvin kept the slide projectors and VCRs, these guys led a whole other life. Here they were loud and excitable, with a lot to share and a rapt audience ready to listen. They had entire movies committed to memory and brought them into conversation any chance they got ("Ow, I cut my finger!") "It's just a flesh wound!"). They embraced new ideas and their purveyors. They were comfortable with the idea of women in the abstract (an extended conversation with a TV star was not impossible), but not in the concrete (dating a cheerleader was unthinkable).

The key characteristic of an A.V. kid, though, was his passion. If you were an A.V. kid, you worked hard to find your heroes, the

people who said what you wanted to say, who expressed themselves far better than you ever could. Then you learned everything about them. (This was not an easy task, as the heroes nearly always fell short of the mainstream—something which only served to reinforce the notion that only a select few thought like you and understood you.) Then you made it your goal to introduce your hero to as many people as you could. "You've got to read/watch/listen to this," says the A.V. kid to his peers, seeking either to make a connection or to strengthen it. When you find someone who shares your devotion to your hero, you recognize the shorthand; this is someone who can appreciate me.

The Onion, hands down the funniest thing on the Web ([www.theonion.com](http://www.theonion.com)), knew what they were doing when they named their entertainment section The Onion A.V. Club. Here the writers drop the satire to give serious, thoughtful reviews of film, music, and books. And every week they conduct an in-depth Q&A interview with a pop subculture icon. These icons generally run outside the prevailing current, but they all have sizeable cult followings. ("What's a cult?" cult director and interview subject Robert Altman once asked. "It just means not enough people to make up a minority.") These are people the Onion A.V. Club wants to bring to the attention of as many others as possible. Now they're going for an even broader audience; they've taken dozens of their interviews and put them together in a book, *The Tenacity of the Cockroach: Conversations with Entertainment's Most Enduring Outsiders*.

There's much to recommend in this collection. First of all, many of the subjects simply don't get the opportunity to hold forth like they do here. If there's one over-

riding theme to the book, it's the frustrating struggle to be heard, to get past the people who control the content or the purse strings. Given the chance, they unleash. Musician Andrew W.K. is asked only three questions; his answers run seven pages. This leads to the next good point—the subjects are articulate, and none of them have publicists hovering over their shoulders, reminding them what they can and can't say. Their resulting candor is both entertaining and instructive. Some examples:

- Musician Jello Biafra: "We have an entire audience of people who call themselves 'punk' because they've written the name of a British band that broke up 15 years ago on the jacket they bought the day before at the mall, who only want to hear one kind of music. They're as conservative as Republicans or fundamentalist Christians."

- Writer Ray Bradbury: "I'm not a science fiction writer. I've only written one book that's science fiction, and that's *Fahrenheit 451*. All the others are fantasy.... Fantasies are things that can't happen, and science fiction is about things that can happen."

- Director John Waters: "I'm not in this contest, this Battle Of Filth.... They're all in the Battle Of Filth, they're duking it out. I've retired. I'm a filth elder. I'm the Henry Cabot Lodge of Filth."

Everybody here waxes most eloquent, with the results sometimes predictable (Harlan Ellison is irascible in an amiable sort of way; Russ Meyer is even more randy than you might guess) and sometimes not (Tom Waits collects arcane trivia: "Did you know honey is the only food that won't spoil?"). There are also some remarkable anecdotes shared in these pages: Ronnie Spector describes a little concert she gave for Beach

Boy Brian Wilson that's both sad and beautiful; Robert Forster tells a chilling Marlon Brando story that becomes a tremendous life lesson. And the Unknown Comic, of "The Gong Show" fame, has a story about being threatened by Frank Sinatra that's worth the price of the book all by itself.

If *Tenacity* has any faults, it's that, true to the ethos of an A.V. club, there's a lack of women's voices—of the 68 interviews, 7 are with females. Even here, though, there's a noticeable difference from the mainstream media—the women are being judged not by their appearance, but by their accomplishments. The people at the Onion are genuinely more interested in learning more about what you've done than the gossip and sensationalism that are used to keep too many show business careers afloat. It's the subjects' minds they're attracted to, male or female.

There are going to be people who won't consider reading *Tenacity* because they've never heard of half the people being interviewed. On the other hand, some will recognize their heroes here, then read on to find new heroes, new viewpoints to open their eyes and minds, and soon they'll be doing their best to pass the knowledge along. They may never have belonged to an A.V. club in high school, but whether they know it or not, they have a strong grasp of the A.V. mentality.

—  
**Patrick Robbins** was not in his A.V. club in high school, but over the years he has cultivated a deep-rooted appreciation for Bugs Bunny, Jim Bouton, John Lennon, Liz Phair, and Philip Seymour Hoffman.

# The Turkish Gambit Exposed

## Cushing Strout

### The Turk: The Life and Times of the Famous 18th Century Chess-Playing Machine

By Tom Standage  
Walker and Company  
224 pages, \$24.00, cloth

The origins of chess, whether in terms of place or time, are shrouded in legends and inconclusive hypotheses. My favorite explanation is that it originated among Indian Buddhists, for whom all killing was criminal, as a substitute for war. When you first learn the game of chess you do learn to see it as a campaign in which there are short-range tactics and long-range strategies. The writer of a fourteen-page article on chess in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* for 1911 declares that the master must be able "to apply his knowledge in the face of the enemy and to call to his aid, as occasion demands, all that he has of foresight, brilliancy and resource, both in attack and in defence," as a general must do "on the battlefield, the strategy and tactics being not dissimilar in spirit." The pieces themselves suggest that the pawns are foot-soldiers, but the castle, knight, bishop, king, and queen are more redolent for me of medieval and Renaissance courts.

When I was on a fellowship in Bellagio, I visited a chess store in hopes of finding a set in that vein. The proprietor led me to a showcase, saying, "here is a set that is just the sort of thing I'm sure you will want to have." When he opened the box, I saw that it was crafted in the shape of American cowboys and Indians. It was of course something an Italian, fond of "spaghetti westerns" in the movies, might want. When I explained that, as an American traveler in Europe, I wanted instead to see a historically European style, he eagerly opened another box. Its pieces

were in that style, but they were huge, glittering in gold and silver, and astronomically priced. In the end, I settled for a very small set of wooden pieces, painted red and blue in a primitive but charming style that suggested an Italy of the provinces. I enjoyed making felt pads for them and searching for a box to hold them that would also be a checkered board.

I remember using the set once to play with my wife (she won), but the only real use the set had was back in America when our grandchildren would come to visit. They loved to play with the pieces to illustrate their own imaginary games. When I was growing up, I did like to play chess, but as an older adult, it's not the game but the pieces that still have charm for me. If I were able to afford it, I can imagine enjoying the hobby of collecting unusual chess sets, including untraditional ones, such as those I have seen representing figures from Lewis Carroll's books and from the adventures of Sherlock Holmes. The set would then be more like figures in a toy theater than like soldiers in an army.

Chess is in the news now because the world chess champion, Gary Kasparov played a return match with a computer called Deep Junior in one of those events that seem to pit man against machine in some mythological way. Now it is not surprising that these monsters of calculation, which can analyze many millions of situations per second, can play chess very well; what is wondrous instead is that the human ability for pattern recognition enables Kasparov to compete so closely with them.

Last year Tom Standage told the story in scrupulous detail of the history of a long-standing competition between human players and a mechanical chess-playing machine in the form of a turbaned Turk, whose abilities fascinated audiences here and abroad from 1770 to 1854. It was destroyed in a fire

in Philadelphia, after having been restored, exhibited, and explained by Dr. John K. Mitchell, appropriately enough, the family doctor of Edgar Allen Poe, inventor of the mystery story.

It was widely assumed in those days that it would be too difficult for a machine to play a game as mentally challenging as chess, yet the Turk could usually beat human beings. The next step would be to conclude that therefore it wasn't a machine after all. A human being, hidden in the machine, must be the explanation. Poe was the first to come close to the explanation in "Maelzell's Chess-Player" (1836). The constructor of tales of ratiocination was just the person to speculate on how the mechanical Turk could have simulated reasoning. There was actually some ingenious machinery in the figure, having to do with the use of magnetism and a pantograph for moving the pieces, but the primary agency of the Turk's movements, as Poe realized, was the arm and mind of a hidden human being, the secretary of the operator. The exhibitor first displayed the innards of the machine by opening doors in it, but this was a disarming ploy, "calculated to distract the attention and mislead the judgment of the spectators," as Robert Willis had pointed out in 1821. (He later became a professor of applied mechanics at Cambridge University.)

The Turk was not an item in the history of science and technology; it was an episode in the history of show business. It was linked to magicians from the very beginning. Wolfgang von Kempelen, an Austrian civil servant in the court of Maria Theresa, was invited to witness a conjuring show that included automatons, so that he could explain the tricks to her. The Empress challenged him to make good on his claim that he could build a more impressive automaton than any yet made. It was first displayed in 1770 as a chess-playing automaton. After

Kempelen's death, the Turk was bought from the inventor's son by Johann Nepomuk Maelzel, an engineer and musician, who carried on the traveling exhibition of it.

The story arose in Henri Decrep's *White Magic Exposed* (1784) that a dwarf was hidden under the robes of the Turk from whence he slid into the machine to operate it. The influential modern conjuror, Robert Houdin, elaborated a story about a legless Pole, a wounded soldier, who was declared to be the hidden operator, and John Dickson Carr in his detective story, *The Crooked Hinge* (1938), continued the legend. Carr frequently used lore about magicians in his novels and in this one the villain was a fortune-teller and illusionist with artificial legs that enabled him to hide undetected inside an automaton. An illusion that depended on the use of a dwarf or a legless man, however, would be unduly restricted for theatrical purposes. John Gaughan, an illusion builder, built a replica of the Turk and displayed it in 1989 at the Los Angeles conference on the history of magic without having to depend on such special requirements. He emphasized, as Standage points out, how much showmanship and deceptive misdirection were crucial to the performances of the Turk.

In our time the devotees of artificial intelligence have argued that it is possible for machines to answer questions in such a way that they sometimes cannot be distinguished from those made by humans. Some enthusiasts for microtechnology, like Ray Kurzweil in a *Partisan Review* symposium on Knowledge and Information Technology, published in the Spring of 2000, have prophesied that in thirty years we will be able to send "billions of the little nanobots, or nanorobots the size of blood cells, inside the human brain" to map "every salient neural feature in the brain." Eventually, we will

*continued on page 9*



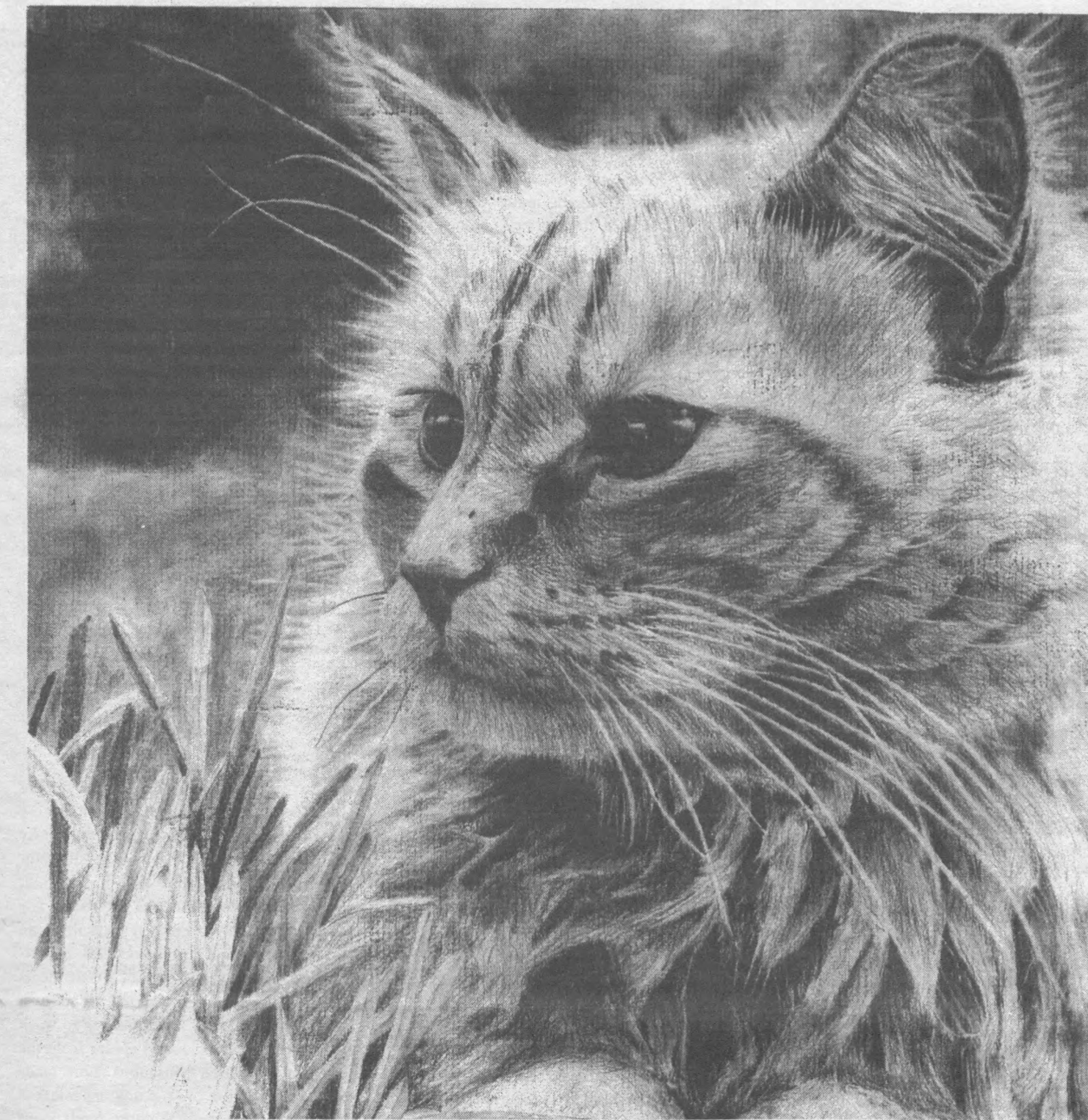
# The Cat

Thomas Eisner

I came to know Harald Poelchau because he was my wife's uncle. I remember him as a quiet, soft-spoken man, deliberate in his ways, and liberal in his views. A political realist, he was deeply aware of the universality of human weakness, and of the need for compassion. He had faith in the future. When he spoke, he did so slowly, his eye fixed on yours. He did not make it a habit to reminisce, but when he did he could touch the depth of your soul. It was from him that I was to hear the story about the cat. The story stayed with me over the years, although I am forced by loss of memory to fictionalize some of the names.

Trained as a clergyman, Poelchau had studied with the theologian Paul Tillich, but unlike Tillich, who emigrated to the United States, he chose to remain in Hitler's Germany. To someone like Poelchau, imbued with an instinctive sense of decency, staying in Germany meant having to find ways to right the wrongs. As an ordained minister, Poelchau served for the duration of the war as prison chaplain at Tegel Prison in Berlin, one of Hitler's most infamous jails. Poelchau accompanied countless men and women to the scaffold or the guillotine, comforting many on the eve of their execution, and smuggling out their letters of farewell to family and friends. He served as a living link between the condemned and the outside world, keeping communication channels alive for those festering in confinement. The prison post provided Poelchau and his wife with a certain measure of cover for their efforts to find hiding places for Jews and Jewish children, and many others who had run afoul of the regime. Poelchau was even involved in the failed attempt upon Hitler's life in July 1944. By some miracle he remained undetected and was spared the fate that awaited his co-conspirators, many of whom, condemned to death, spent their last days at Tegel. As irony would have it, it was Poelchau who provided them with their final hours of companionship.

In early 1942, Poelchau made the acquaintance of a young man, Helmuth Polsner, a former soldier in the Wehrmacht, awaiting execution for desertion and espionage activities. He was resigned to his fate, but deeply distraught by his inability to communicate with family or friends, in particular with Eva, a young woman whom he



Kasey Fowler-Fin

had befriended and who was unaware of his whereabouts. Poelchau undertook to deliver a letter to Eva, and he continued to smuggle letters back and forth between the young friends until the day of Helmuth's execution.

Eva was from a Jewish household, and Poelchau eventually befriended her parents, Leopold and Brigitte Rosenthal. In pre-Nazi days, Leopold was a widely respected

lawyer, and the entire family had thrived in the cultural ambience provided by Berlin at the time. Although Brigitte was not Jewish, the couple had opted to raise their two children in the Jewish faith. As a consequence, in accord with the Nuremberg laws, the children were regarded by the Nazis as fully Jewish, and as such they were greatly endangered. The son had chosen early on to flee Germany and word had it that he was safely hidden in Holland. Eva hesitated to leave, but was finally prevailed upon by her parents to do so. Deportations had become ever more frequent, and everyone knew by then what deportation meant. Together with a group of similarly threatened young women, Eva was able to procure a set of false identification papers, originally issued to Belgian forced laborers, by which she hoped she might be able to escape to Belgium. Hiding, it was said, was considerably easier in Brussels. But when the group arrived at the railroad station, they found the Gestapo waiting for them. They had been betrayed. The entire group was arrested, and Eva was never seen again.

Poelchau continued to visit the devastated parents, in full realization that there was frustratingly little that he could do. He recalled vividly how the Rosenthals derived strength from the last "friend" still in their midst, their beloved cat, Moepsle, whose residency dated back to the days preceding the Nazi madness.

Docile and outrageously spoiled, Moepsle loved nothing more than to be caressed and cuddled in someone's lap. With the children gone, Poelchau noted, Moepsle had become the sole reminder of a happy past, a distraction from the cruel reality that had become the Rosenthal's daily fare.

There was to be no limit to that cruelty. Not long after Eva's arrest, the Rosenthals were officially notified that by the decree of April 15, 1942, it had become illegal for Jewish households to keep pets. The Nazis, in their infinite compassion, had resolved that it would be inhumane to expose pets to Jews. The Rosenthals were told that by such-and-such a date they would need to kill or otherwise dispose of their cat, failing which they risked the heaviest of penalties.

Unable to deal with the thought of losing Moepsle, the Rosenthals did not know what to do. But, some time before the deadline set for their cat, they were startled by a knock on the door. It was the police, and they had come for Leopold. A few days later, Brigitte found a slip of paper in her mailbox, informing her that her husband had died while in detention.

Leopold Rosenthal had been the last Jew in the Rosenthal household. Brigitte was now alone, with only days to go before she would have to deal with Moepsle. The State, however, was monitoring events, ever fastidious about legal details. Another paper slip made its appearance in the mailbox. With the death of her husband, Brigitte was informed, her household had become "aryanized". That being the case, the cat would be allowed to live.

Shortly before his death in 1972, the State of Israel honored Harold Poelchau with the planting of a tree at Yad Vashem, and his name is entered in the list of "righteous gentiles" on display in the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C.

Thomas Eisner is a biologist at Cornell.

## The Turkish Gambit

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have "twenty-first century bodies for our non-biological intelligent entities—virtual bodies and virtual reality bodies created through nano-technology, which is building physical entities atom by atom." He also foresees in a few decades the replication of the human brain so that "machines will appear to be human." What is utopian about such prophesiers is not their science and technology but their breezy confidence that, on the whole, all these changes will be desirable and beneficial. I take as a litmus test Kurzweil's example of the shrinking of electronics so that they will be in your glasses and your clothing: "Everyone will be walking around connected to the Web at all times." Not even a hint of irony or satire. One sees students walking around with their cell phones as a dubious precursor of this development.

Standage's book is very intelligent because he understands that while Deep Blue, the computer that lost to Kasparov in

1996 and beat him in 1997, appears to be a "thinking machine," it actually represented a team of engineers and programmers, who had human intelligence, and they were Kasparov's real opponents. "Deep Blue, like the Turk, relied on an illusion" because "it had human experts hiding inside it." The Mechanical Turk was only an ingenious form of show business, and its secret was more or less out by 1821. But it at least has the merit of reminding us that technology and its promises have their own capacity to deceive us. In this sense Standage, a reporter for *The Economist*, is entitled to suggest that "the wily automaton has had the last laugh after all."

Cushing Strout is professor emeritus of English at Cornell University. His most recently published article is "'Two Wings of the Same Breathing Creature': Fictionalizing History," *Partisan Review* (Winter, 2003).



# Ironies in the Fire

## J. Robert Lennon

### A Box of Matches

By Nicholson Baker

Random House

178 pages, \$19.95, cloth

While talking with a librarian recently at a dinner party, I happened to mention Nicholson Baker's *Double Fold*, a book about the preservation—or lack thereof—of books and newspapers in libraries. The book had created something of a stir in library circles when it was published a couple of years ago, so I thought my comment might elicit some kind of reaction. I wasn't disappointed. A demure cough, an eye-roll. "Oh, him," said my librarian friend. That was pretty much the end of our conversation.

Indeed, everyone seems to have a strong reaction to Nicholson Baker. The sexually explicit, and very funny, novels *Vox* and *The Fermata* threw plenty of people into a tizzy, including Stephen King, who (rather gratuitously, I think) dismissed *Vox*, in the introduction to one of his story collections, as a "fingernail-paring." This same book returned to seamy prominence in the dark summer of 1998 when a copy was revealed to have passed between The President and The Intern. And Baker's new book, *A Box of Matches*, has provoked two diametrically opposed outbursts from the same newspaper: Michiko Kakutani's ritual disembowelment in the daily *New York Times*, and Walter Kirn's ecstatic volley in its book review.

On the surface, all this passion seems awfully unlikely—both in print and in person, Baker is mild-mannered. Even his most impassioned piece of nonfiction, *Double Fold*, approaches the reader first with a tentative tap on the shoulder, and then a deferent bow, before it begins its ardent, and effective, harangue. But this politeness on the page is deceptive. Baker is a radical writer, a throwback in manner but a rebel in approach. His books lack plots, or any kind of traditional character development. They are stridently erudite, but never pretentious. They are self-absorbed, but never claustrophobic. Like all excellent books, they are completely idiosyncratic, following an internal logic rather than one imposed by tradition. A Baker book wanders, stumbles, circles back, consults its map as it scratches its head—and then, as if by divine intervention, manages to actually get somewhere.

Baker has a problem, though: his first book was perfect. *The Mezzanine* is a small masterpiece of observation and cogitation, a footnote-riddled study of consciousness that inserts an entire universe of perception into a twenty-second escalator ride. It is brief but infinitely large, clutching the entire world into its skinny arms. Its subject, however, is not that world, but the main character's—and, in this case, the author's—understanding of it. A bitter irony, then, that this is exactly the problem. *The Mezzanine* revealed Baker's mind in its entirety, but that mind is the only one Baker has got, and he has continued to use it to write more books. Much in the way those naked pictures of Madonna—in particular, the one where she's eating a slice of pizza at the side of the road—ruined her allure, *The Mezzanine* has made it difficult for Baker to reinvent himself. "More of the same," a few critics have moaned.

There is something to this argument. It is possible to read *Room Temperature* as *The Mezzanine* with a baby, or *Vox* as *The Mezzanine* with a libido. But this seems to me a stingy point of view, both with regard to Baker and to oneself, as a reader. Surely, *The Mezzanine* is an original novel, but I prefer to think of Baker as an original writer, one whose particular awareness of the world imprints itself more powerfully on his works than might be the case with most writers. Indeed, I've read everything he's written, and still think he's pretty terrific.

*A Box of Matches* is described by Random House, on the book's flap, as "reminiscent of the early novels that established [Baker's] reputation," thus plunging it right into the very more-of-the-same quagmire that has dogged its author for twenty years. Certainly, this is how Michiko Kakutani chose to read it. The book is about a man named Emmett, who rises each morning before the sun to light a fire, pick lint out of his navel, and ruminate. He thinks about his wife, their children, and their pet duck. Also urine, suicide, coffee mugs, ants, bank statements and shampoo. He records his momentary physical states: "Now my coccyx hurts," "An itch just made a guest appearance on my cheek," "I have a very stuffed nose now." There are a lot of descriptions of fire, and I like these more than anything else in the book. Here's the beginning of chapter 20:

Good morning, it's 4:39 a.m. and I just watched a cocktail napkin burn. After its period of flaming was past, there was a long time during which tiny yel-

low taxicabs did hairpin turns around the mountain passes, tunneling deeper and deeper into the ashen blackness.

To my astonishment, Kakutani singled out this very passage to illustrate Baker's ineptness. Her point is clear—why describe a burning napkin, and if you must, why reach so far for the metaphor?—but I disagree with it. A good description justifies itself, and this one is exactly right, as much of a stretch as it may be.

Indeed, a lot of this book is exactly right. Baker's descriptions are wonderfully inventive and precise; most importantly, they never shy from corniness, drawing from an aesthetically broad collection of sources, lowly and elevated, prim and disgusting. There is a lot of light in *A Box of Matches*, some of it mundane ("the white spreadsheet of moonlight on the floor"), some of it spectacular (a rising sun "narrowing first and then oozing out as if from a puncture in the seam of the horizon"), much of it refracted through the prism of Emmett's unabashed nerdiness (the stars as "private needle-holes of exactitude in the stygian diorama"). It is this prism—the warped pane of Emmett's personality—that must drive the novel, since nothing really happens, and nobody really changes, and no other characters actually appear in real time. They are all asleep, even the duck.

But Emmett is plenty. He is bright, content, yet melancholy. It's not just the suicide fantasies—Emmett's mind is always turning toward death, the death of pets, of family members. He thinks about his grandmother's broken back, and his grandfather, author of medical textbooks on fungal disease and autopsies. Emmett himself is an editor of medical textbooks, and is surrounded by the possibility of death; he is always mourning the passing of things: buildings, his mother's rug, getting to wash his son's hair. He rescues a spider from the fireplace. A routine household chore leads to a contemplation of "the ungraspableness of history." This sentimentality lends itself well to his thoughts about the duck—her comfort, the coldness of her feet, the point of her existence. He identifies quite powerfully with this duck. To wit:

Last night I was lying in bed when I heard a terribly sad sound, as of a cat in distress or an infant keening in the cold: long, slow, heart-rending cries. I half rose and held my breath and listened intently—was it the duck?—but the sound had stopped... And then, as I resumed breathing, I realized that I was

hearing a whistling coming from some minor obstruction in my own nose as I breathed.

It is of course irresistible to equate Emmett with Nicholson Baker. The book feels precisely as though Baker came down the stairs of his house every morning before sunrise to light a fire and write a chapter, and stopped when he ran out of matches. At one point Emmett is reading a book on web design. When I'd finished reading I looked up [nicholsonbaker.com](http://nicholsonbaker.com) and discovered a brand-new, obviously homespun homepage; the hit counter had barely reached 300.

But that is fine by me, and we can assume that it's fine by Baker as well. He is a writer who has made a career out of personal observations, and now, at the midpoint of that career, he is sitting back and calmly taking stock, with a book about a guy who's sitting back and calmly taking stock. That calm is the book's strength—only in moments of such calm can we see clearly—but is also its weakness. Part of what made *The Mezzanine* great is its air of desperation—the overwhelming sense that its author had been waiting all his life for the right moment to get it all down on paper. My other favorite Baker book, *U and I*, is similarly lively—it is a sweaty-palmed memoir about the author's obsession with John Updike, and stands as Baker's riskiest and most revealing work.

This desperation is not to be found in *A Box of Matches*, but so what? A lifetime of desperation is not what this writer needs. In *The Mezzanine*, in *U and I* and *Double Fold*, Baker tapped his anxieties, and he will do it again. This book is different, though, and it ought to be. It is quiet and observant, the product of an agile and unusual mind in a moment of repose. It steals into one's consciousness as sleep does, inviting the logic of dreams.

Think, if you will, of Nicholson Baker as a duck—a pet duck that represents your own vitality, your own mortality. You hope that his feet are warm, that his drinking water won't freeze in the cold, that there are insects enough in the woodpile to keep him fed. Read this book and be assured: your duck is alive and well. His faculties are all intact, his wings are in fine shape, and his metaphors are as corny as the feed in his bowl, just the way you like them.

J. Robert Lennon is the author of two novels, *The Light of Falling Stars* and *The Funnies*.

## Boogie Woogie

continued from page 4

socio-economic system, providing liquor, speakeasies, gambling opportunities, show-girls, and sought-after sports tickets. We see this interest continuing in the popularity of Mario Puzo's novels—the source of Francis Ford Coppola's flamboyant *Godfather* films—Martin Scorsese's corrosive *Goodfellas*, the blood-soaked *Gangs of New York*, Barry Levinson's rough *Bugsy*, the chic toughness of the HBO series *The Sopranos*, and the hard-edged jazz age musical *Chicago*. Indebted to Runyon's depiction of speakeasy culture during Prohibition, *Chicago* takes a cynical and bemused attitude to the underworld and its complicit relation to the respectable world, like the news media depicting reality as a kind of theatre for a voyeuristic audience.

*The Sopranos* owes a great deal to Runyon's humanized criminals. In stories like "Situation Wanted" and "The Brain Goes Home," Runyon took the lead in examining the behavior of criminals outside a cops and robbers setting. He implied that

our interest as readers depends on our covert wish for simple solutions, even if they be lawless, and on our repressed and sublimated desire for estrangement from the responsibilities of respectable culture. Do we not see this in Tony Soprano's suburban neighbors' fascination with his mob ties? His neighbors invite him to social events and to play golf with them at an exclusive club, not only because they can ask him questions, but also because they can feel that they are taking a walk on the wild side. As in Runyon, the respectable world in *The Sopranos*, with its insider trading tips and offshore banking, often mirrors the criminal world (episode 10, 1999).

When we think of *Seinfeld*, *Sex in the City*, and Woody Allen's films, we realize how Runyon's flamboyant characterizations and his aggressive one-line retorts that flout social convention helped define what we call the New York style. Indeed, Allen's *Broadway Danny Rose* (1984) with its idiosyncratic hangers-on and weird street characters, pays homage to Runyon's world.

Runyon understood the appeal of gangster chic. Do we identify with mobsters such as Tony Soprano or Don Corleone because they fulfill our fantasies of settling issues without ambiguity? Or, because of their seeming control of autocratic family structures? Why do we secretly and not so secretly sympathize with socially marginalized figures, often identified in Runyon as belonging to one or another ethnic group with its own tribal customs? Whatever the reasons, Runyon knew the appeal of outsiders and have-nots—of those who during hard times live by their wits, courage, and even ruthlessness—and made his characters speak to and for us.

Daniel R. Schwarz is Professor of English at Cornell University. He is the author of *Broadway Boogie Woogie: Damon Runyon and the Making of New York City Culture, Imagining the Holocaust and Reconfiguring Modernism: Explorations in the Relationship between Modern Art and Modern Literature*.

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# Over There

Rhian Ellis

## Lily Dale: the True Story of the Town That Talks to the Dead

By Christine Wicker  
Harper San Francisco  
282 pp., \$24.95, cloth

On my birthday a few years ago, I decided to see a psychic. I was spending the day in New York, so I stopped into one of those psychic storefronts you see in Manhattan, one with a giant hand in blue neon hanging in the window and a folding sign on the sidewalk. The clairvoyant herself was a thin young woman with an Eastern European accent and startlingly green contact lenses. Little of what she told me was memorable—something about a trip to South America, something about getting in touch with an old lover—and none of it came true. But one thing she told me I've been unable to dismiss or explain. She guessed my husband's birthday, apparently out of thin air.

"April or May, right?"

"That's right."

"May seventh," she said confidently, and correctly.

There is just no explaining this. I didn't give it away in anything I said; she had no way of seeing his wallet and driver's license. My husband's birthday had no greater meaning or import. But this woman seemed to know it. I'm not even sure I know what to do with this anecdote—what does it prove? I'm a skeptic, a terrible, hide-bound skeptic, even a cynic, but now there's a footnote to my skepticism: I have a sneaking feeling I might be wrong.

I suspect it's a similar sense of doubt and nagging curiosity that provoked journalist Christine Wicker to spend two years visiting and investigating Lily Dale, New York, a town built by spiritualists. Spiritualism is a religion and philosophy (and, some believers would argue, a science) that claims life continues after death, and moreover, that the dead continue to hang around and communicate with the living via mediums. Lily Dale Assembly, which is just up the road from its far larger, more famous, and more profitable sister the Chautauqua Institution, is one of the few survivors of the nineteenth-century Upstate fad for utopia-founding. Established in 1879 as a summer camp for free-thinkers, mesmerists, clairvoyants, mediums and the like, Lily Dale quickly grew to a bustling little year-round community, and has changed almost not at all in over a hundred years. It bills itself as the World's Largest (at approximately 300 year-round residents) Center for the Religion of Spiritualism, and claims almost 20,000 visitors each summer. A visitor today can experience an old-fashioned séance ("development circle" in the local lingo), a hands-off healing session, a lecture on reincarnation, a "message service" in which spirits dispense tidbits of advice to a series of mediums, who pass them on to visitors, or any of a number of classes and workshops on paranormal and New Age topics. It is, frankly, one of the last things you might expect to find in Chautauqua County, New York's western-most county and hardly a haven for the flaky or alternative.

Nonetheless, Lily Dale is there, and in spite of at least fifty years of doomsaying, it's thriving, and arguably stronger than ever. Speakers like Deepak Chopra visit regularly. I suppose what is most amazing to me is how Lily Dale has managed to survive a century's worth of changing spiritual trends without changing itself. The houses are all old, mostly Victorian and dilapidated, the roads are dirt, and no one has managed to get very rich off the place. Windows are filled with cats and signs saying things like LORRAINE GAULT-MEDIUM-RING AND COME IN. I have never seen anything else like it. Everyone I've ever spoken to about Lily Dale mentions the amazing sense of peace and serenity that permeates the town. Some explain it by saying Lily Dale

was built on an old Native American holy site, but I have a simpler explanation: it's the huge old trees. Lily Dale encompasses a section of old-growth forest, and under the high-spreading branches and beautifully filtered light you feel sheltered, peaceful, and otherworldly, as if you're standing in a cathedral. That the Dale is situated on a beautiful lake, with a view of rolling green hills, doesn't hurt either.

Christine Wicker—who is a wonderful writer and a charming tour-guide—does an excellent job detailing Lily Dale's peculiar charms, which are many. It is, I think, an easy place to mock, but it is also an easy one to wax awfully lyrical about, and Wicker avoids both these extremes. She makes a real effort to get to the heart of the matter, which is this: in spite of the goofiness, the fraudulence, the sentimentality of spiritualism, there is something absolutely integral going on here. The mediums of Lily Dale have devoted their lives to questions of existence—the meaning of life and death—and they ought not be too easily dismissed. Something is happening here. It's just hard to tell what.

(In the interest of full disclosure, I should mention that a few years ago I, too, wrote a book about Lily Dale, though my book was fiction. While I did plenty of research, I didn't interview any actual mediums: I didn't want to feel I had to represent anyone's opinions or beliefs, and I wanted the freedom to make people look bad, if I had to. I didn't want anyone seeing themselves in my work, either. But I did spend two summers in Lily Dale. One summer I lived at my parents' house, a ten-minute walk away, but the next summer I rented a room in a house with three mediums. Both summers I worked at the entrance, lifting the gate and selling entrance tickets. As a non-believer, I felt out of place. No one spent much time explaining what they were up to, or defending themselves against people like me. I wanted to ask, So, where are the ghosts? If all this is real, why is it so difficult to prove? Why do spirits so often give only their initials when contacting the living? Why don't they ever say, I'm Lillian Halburton, and I died of lung cancer in 1988, remember me? No one ever explained this stuff, and I obviously drew the conclusion that they didn't because they couldn't: it's a scam.

The only problem with my scam theory was that the people of Lily Dale seemed so nice. They had such frank, open faces, and they used to bring me candy bars and warm muffins while I shivered in the gatehouse before dawn. Could such friendly, decent people be up to no more than chicanery? They obviously believed what they were doing—they believed it utterly. And they weren't crazy or dumb, at least as far as I could tell.

It was hard to accept that they were shysters, so I came up with a new theory: that the belief itself was the point. I decided that what was going on between the medium and the sit-

ter was a form of psychotherapy, a kind of empathy lesson:

*I have this feeling, the medium says. It's about you... do you know what I mean?*

*Yes, I do,* responds the client. *That's exactly right...* and the two people have connected, have formed a mysterious but intimate bond. Perhaps there aren't enough opportunities for this kind of connection in regular life. Anyway, whatever was going on, lots of people believed in it and valued it, and if I didn't—if I got nothing out of it—who loses? Me.

So that's where I was, before I read this book.)

Wicker's writing is packed with anecdotes—ghost stories, many of them—as it should be, and she is smart, friendly, tough, and empathic. She's the perfect open-minded skeptic; she wants to believe in this stuff so badly, but really... talking to dead people? We know little of Wicker's own story, and I think that's a good thing: though she, her personality and her mind, are on every page of the book, it is not really about her. Strangely, it's not exactly about Lily Dale, the town, either: the history she gives is not much more than what I've given you here, and the geography is even more sketchy. (I would have enjoyed a map, and contemporary photographs.) This book's real project is something more subtle than either history or memoir. Just what, Wicker is asking, is going on here? How can these mediums, who are practicing an outmoded religion, talking to the dead as they have since 1879, possibly help modern people live their lives? Can they really be doing something that conventional science—she calls it "consensus reality"—can't account for? She, like me, finds the contrast between the mediums' intelligence, their apparent honest good-heartedness, and their eye-rolling occupation worthy of examination.

To this end, Wicker profiles three different women who have come to Lily Dale to sort out their lives. One woman is almost destroyed by guilt over the death of her son, another can't get over the loss of her husband, and another's life falls apart soon after her first visit. In addition, there are a handful of other characters, mostly women, who are wonderfully fleshed out and present on the page. Their stories are perhaps not as moving or as interesting as they could be, and this is entirely to Wicker's credit: she refuses to engage in emotional manipulation. Everyone's happy ending feels provisional and incomplete, like life.

While Wicker doggedly tries to discover the truth behind spiritualism, the people she writes about seem almost entirely indifferent to it. They are so full of their own problems, so desperate to find some meaning in their suffering, that objective truth just doesn't matter. This contrast—between Wicker's

sleuthlike probing, and everyone else's calm gullibility—could come off as condescension, but it doesn't. For one thing, Wicker spends much of the book in a kind of nervous lather. She can't sleep well in Lily Dale, and people keep coming up to her and telling her significant things about herself. This could make the most hard-boiled skeptic begin to feel a certain amount of self-doubt. At times, Wicker's confusion and emotional lability threaten to derail her, and the project. There's a fine line, I think, between break-through and breakdown.

The book takes a delightful and surprising turn near the end. It won't be revealing too much to say that Wicker experiments with mediumship herself, and the results take the book in an entirely unexpected direction. Suffice it to say that Wicker, too, comes to experience a few things she can't explain—nothing too huge, she never does get to see a materialization—but maybe the small stuff is enough, she posits. Maybe psychic powers are uncontrollable, impractical, random, and unpredictable, but real nonetheless. And maybe knowledge of these phenomena is important to human life, in that it keeps people modest, and always seeking.

I was with Christine Wicker until, literally, the last couple of pages. Here she brings up something that I find myself completely resistant to, but something I don't believe has much to do with Lily Dale or spiritualism, either, so I don't feel bad spoiling it for you. A couple of Lily Dale residents tell the author about their Guardian Angels, and how these angels answer their prayers by finding parking spaces for them (apparently some Christians pray to Jesus to find them parking spaces, too). It is one thing, I think, to believe you can make contact with your dead loved ones; it is something else entirely to claim that higher beings (the archangel Michael, no less) are finding you places to park at the shopping mall, while thousands of other prayers from people actually suffering go unanswered.

Unfortunately, Wicker uses this example to explain and buttress the entire Lily Dale phenomenon: it shows, she says, the way Spirit works in ordinary life. This kind of mundane "miracle," she says, like spoon bending or table tipping, "may connect people with a force beyond them, or at least help them know there is such a force." I don't buy it; I don't even want to buy it. I'll give Wicker credit—she claims to have trouble with this notion, too—but the image of people asking angels for parking spaces left a very bad taste in my mouth, and this could not have been intentional.

—  
Rhian Ellis is the author of the novel *After Life*. She lives in Ithaca, New York.

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# What Rough Beast?

Peter Fortunato

## The Second Coming

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.*

*Surely some revelation is at hand;  
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.  
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out  
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi  
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert  
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,  
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,  
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it  
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.  
The darkness drops again; but now I know  
That twenty centuries of stony sleep  
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,  
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,  
Slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?*

—William Butler Yeats, 1920

Surely, I am not the only person to have thought of the last two lines of this poem when Israeli tanks and Palestinian militants were violently embroiled at Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity last year. And that the President of the United States seems to believe he's been ordained to crusade against evil, and that the President of Iraq recalls Nebuchadnezzar as a hero who enslaved the Hebrews anciently, must also be common knowledge. While some in the secular West might scoff at such identifications, many other people seem certain that the animosities at work in the Middle East are fundamentally motivated by religious zeal. They know well the power of religious symbolism, even if they can't disentangle themselves from the raw emotions it has been used to evoke.

I know that I am not the only one in this country to turn toward poetry for "news that stays news," now that the shadow of apocalypse has crept back into our consciousness and the present administration daily envisions a new shape the threat might assume. If ever we needed the grace and insight poetry can offer, it is now. As the age of materialism self-destructs due to the untenable demands it makes upon the Earth and its creatures, we need the power of poetry to enlarge our imaginations toward what might follow.

In "The Second Coming," Yeats the myth-maker intended more than the expression of personal angst. A modernist, he was given to the great task of early modernism, the reformulation of universal truths through subjective experience and the systemization of that vision. It seems wondrous and not a little horrifying that for three quarters of a century this poem has served as both lament and prophecy for the discord that plagues our era.

Traditionally, of course, the Second Coming refers to the expectation that Christ will return to Earth to judge the living and the dead, institute a period of Rapture for true believers, and defeat Satan—or the Anti-Christ, a Great Beast—when time as we have known it ends. (It is significant that a very popular series of contemporary novels has dramatized this expectation, and that, according to *Time* magazine, some readers in America take the details of this prophecy quite literally.) Yeats's poem does nothing to confirm for believers or non-believers that the hour at hand will accord with the scenario that John of Patmos saw and transcribed in his Revelation almost two thousand years ago. It is the indefiniteness of the unborn future that is most trou-

bling in "The Second Coming."

Steeped in the mythos of his culture, Yeats was more deliberately a seer and mystic than any poet writing in English since William Blake. Among other things, for Yeats, an Irishman, the "twenty centuries" which had elapsed since the birth of Jesus would have meant that the wheel of the zodiacal Great Year was turning and the astrological Age of Pisces about to end. An intelligent occultist as well as a poet, he would have also recognized that as the succeeding age approached, it would necessarily be felt as disruptive in many ways to the status quo. Its implications would consciously and unconsciously be resisted by the mind-set being superceded.

Astrologically speaking, Pisces, symbolized by two fish, one above and one below, has been an age of organization from the top down, an era when the depths of human experience were interpreted by generally accepted systems of authority. During the Piscean era, the masses have relied upon heroic and messianic figures for leadership and spiritual salvation. By contrast, its successor, the Age of Aquarius, can be regarded as an era of the individual whose spiritual fulfillment is to be experienced through independent service to the whole. The constellation of Aquarius is pictured as an androgynous or female water bearer, and the new age is a period when formerly occult or hidden truths are distributed openly and widely. During this time of tolerance, cooperation and love, the individual's relationship with the divine will not need to be mediated by authority figures. Astrologers believe this two-thousand-year period has only just begun, and that it is not being felt without concomitant pangs of birth.

"The Second Coming" was written during a time when Yeats was keenly aware of the difficulties besieging Ireland's nascent quest for national independence, a long bloody birthing indeed. As well, the old European order was dissolving due to the changes wrought by the recent Great War, which was to have been "the war to end all wars." The poem transcends specific events, however, and its first stanza especially has been quoted so often because it still speaks to the immorality of modern times.

To consider this period when "the centre cannot hold" as coinciding with the decline of Christianity's influence is not to exonerate other engines of social order and welfare from their mistakes and impotence. Furthermore, I do not think it is disrespectful to the liberating wisdom that Jesus still exemplifies. But Yeats, like Blake before him and many another spiritual seeker, experienced Jesus as someone rather different than the canonical picture of the godman whose life and testament is the ultimate intersection of Eternity with Time.

Elsewhere, with regards to the history of the Church, Yeats writes that

Perhaps dogmatism was the necessary check upon European violence, asceticism upon the Asian fecundity. When Christ said, 'I and my Father are One' it is possible to interpret Him as Shri Purohit Swami interprets his Master's 'I am Brahma.' The One is present in all numbers... Nor can a single image, that of Christ, Krishna, or Buddha, represent God to the exclusion of other images.

Following Plotinus, I would think that for Yeats the Christian story or idea certainly has an eternal dimension, but that in time its energies must inevitably diminish or be transformed. Perhaps Christ is being reborn, reconfigured in the human heart even now. Stanza two of the poem, however, describes a very different sort of vision.

I find that this "vast image" emerging from the World Soul, whose collective

memory the poet-seer has accessed, is not so much monstrous in terms of its form—it clearly evokes the familiar Sphinx of Giza—but is troubling mostly because of its gaze, "blank and pitiless as the sun." This is in stark contrast to the visage we might associate with a god of love, forgiveness and justice. We can of course see and feel the effect of how it would be if the actual statue at Giza came to life, "moving its slow thighs," the gigantic shape accompanied by "indignant desert birds," or their reeling shadows, more precisely, more darkly. These recall the falcon moving beyond the falconer's command in the first lines of the poem, but why are they "indignant?"

Apparently, to them there is something offensive about the movement of that "vast image" into consciousness—or else they themselves are disturbed by the same causes that provoke the appearance of the lion-man. Do they comprise a retinue of related shadowy forces? The poem haunts us with such images and unanswerable questions, just as the Sphinx itself has haunted people throughout all of recorded history.

We know that to the ancient Egyptians, the Sphinx, like the lion, was symbolic of the sun, and that the sun was not regarded as a god, but as the eye of God, or Re. While it is blinding to human eyes to gaze directly at the solar disk, the risen sun and its continuous journey through the visible world by day and the world of the dead each night had many implications for Egyptian religion. However, the entity of "The Second Coming" is not identical with the Giza Sphinx, nor the Great Beast of John's Revelation, nor the riddler of the Oedipus story. Yeats's symbol poses the question of how humanity is now to consider its bestial side, given that the Age of the Fish is past and "The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere."

With the poet, we are afforded by this "rough beast" a glimpse into the archaic depths of the Collective Unconscious, or Spiritus Mundi. This is fearsome to ordinary consciousness and introduces profound questions: To what purpose shall we put our brief lives? What is the proper role of our animal instincts? How satisfy the deepest hunger in our souls? How rise to the potential for such accomplishments as the ancients managed? And why, when we seem to have lost all innocence and to have forgotten our very reasons for being on this Earth, why should we assume that the passionate intensity of "the worst" might ever be subdued? The last five lines give us only the afterwards of the poet's vision to sear our memories:

*The darkness drops again; but now I know  
That twenty centuries of stony sleep  
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,  
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,  
Slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?*

It's as if the innocent babe of Bethlehem and the two thousand years of his era had actually been an affront to this entity.

The great deficiency of the modern era is that in emphasizing the technological expertise and material values of the West, we have forgone a commensurate development of our hearts and minds. For this reason, it should be no surprise that the present chaos in the world is for some desperate souls stimulating a retrenchment to outworn ideas about nationalism, ethnic identity, and fundamentalist religion. Here in America, we are scrambling to believe in something that can keep things from falling any further apart, in anything that might have once sustained the faith of our fathers. Many are waving the flag against evil and for commerce, for democracy and our pedigree of good deeds, and for our "national interests," however they might be construed by those presently in charge of wealth and military might.

Almost incredibly, there are those who deny the obvious reasons why so much of the world is turning against the United States; those who cannot imagine that if all are indeed created equal, we have no reason or right to make war on innocent civilians, even, or especially, in the name of peace. And some, alas, seem so obsessed with eschatological matters that they are ready to justify war, at whatever cost, as part of their plan to end evil, despite the condemnations of their bishops, rabbis and mullahs, not to mention the millions proclaiming that what the world wants is peace, not another Great War.

Traditionally, it was the job of a priestly caste to interpret the "correct" meaning of religious and cultural symbols for the masses. In modern secular society, we have come to rely chiefly on experts in lab coats, and lately wearing military uniforms, to discuss how life and death should be understood. But it seems always to have been that charismatic extremists are adept at using symbol and metaphor to entrance and provoke. In their hands, the symbol becomes an object of fixation or idol; the metaphor, a literal truth. This narrows the psyche's power to reconcile contrary meanings; in other words, without the capacity to think poetically, possibilities are limited and psychic development discouraged.

I think that Yeats would agree with me that the wheel of life turns ceaselessly regardless of our ability to interpret fully even those images given directly to our own consciousness. Yet without the ability to appreciate that human imagination is both an expression of nature and a spiritual capacity, we are deprived. Consequently, I believe that such impoverished souls are more likely to be manipulated by those who would choose for them what is to be signified, how it is to be valued, and against whom it should be defended. The most magnificent symbols originate in a passionate intensity for all that life might be despite its uncertainty. Those who see through these images as through magnifying lenses, see more, and more clearly.

— Peter Fortunato is a poet, teacher and holistic counselor living in Ithaca.

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