

Five Dials

PAUL MURRAY

Don't worry, there's humour to be found
in economic meltdown

PAUL THEROUX

The fantastications of Southern Literature

MARGARET EBY

Who owns *A Confederacy of Dunces*?

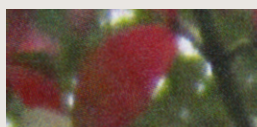
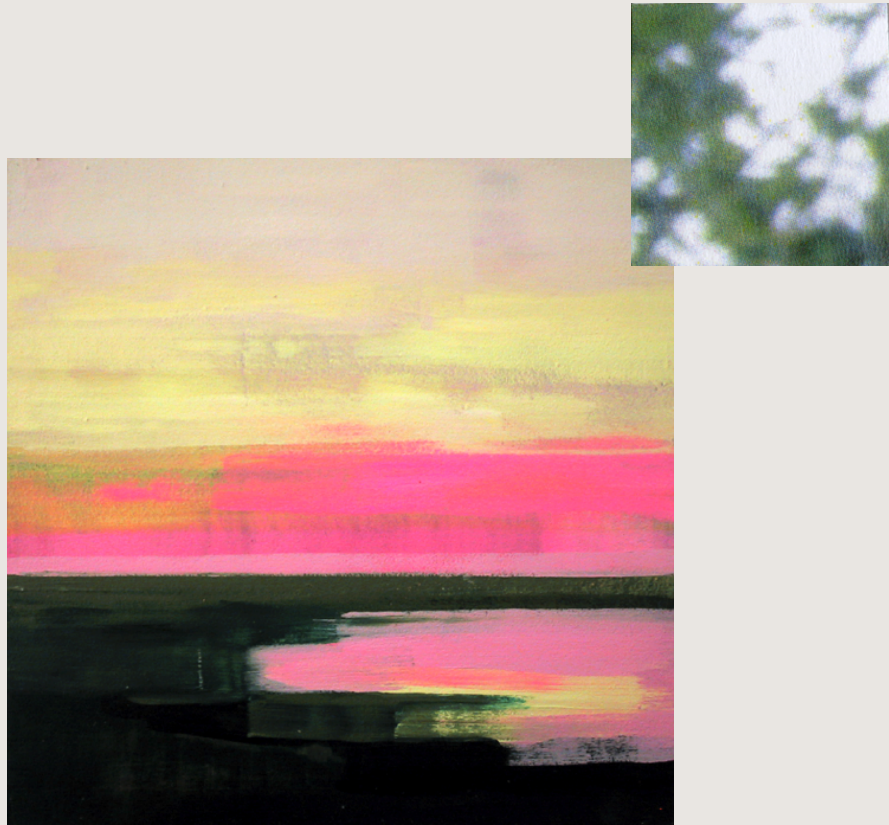
JASON BURKE

New threats, old threats, non-threats, ISIS

ISSUE 38

THINGS ARE HEADING SOUTH

Plus: Jamie Brisick introduces you to your new favorite transgendered surfer, Je Banach describes the decline of coffee culture, Erik Hinton tries to read well. And here's a new column from someone who knows nothing. But he's trying to learn.



Five Dials

Issue 38

Things Are Heading South

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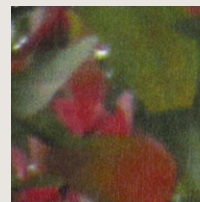
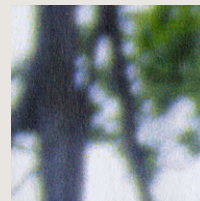
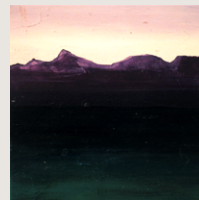
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Jamie Brisick is a writer, photographer, and director. His books include *Becoming Westerly: Surf Champion Peter Drouyn's Transformation into Westerly Windina*; *Roman & Williams: Things We Made*; *We Approach Our Martinis With Such High Expectations*; *Have Board, Will Travel: The Definitive History of Surf, Skate, and Snow*; and *The Eighties at Echo Beach*. His writings and photographs have appeared in *The Surfer's Journal*, *The New York Times*, and the *Guardian*. He is presently co-directing *Westerly*, a documentary about Westerly Windina. He lives in Los Angeles.

For almost two decades, **Jason Burke** has been reporting for the *Guardian* and *Observer* from the Middle East and South Asia. He is the author of *Al-Qaeda: The True Story of Radical Islam* and *The 9/11 Wars*, which was described by *The Economist* as 'the best overview of the 9/11 decade in print'. His books have been translated into twelve languages. He is currently South Asia Correspondent for the *Guardian*. His latest book is *The New Threat From Islamic Militancy*.

Margaret Eby is a journalist and critic who has written for *The New York Times*, *Vanity Fair*, *The New Yorker*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Paris Review Daily*, and *Bookforum*, among other places. She grew up in Alabama and now lives in New York City. The excerpt is taken from her new book, *South Toward Home: Travels in Southern Literature*, published by Norton.

Erik Hinton is the Director of Interactive Media at *VICE*. A programmer, writer and editor, his work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *VICE*, *Source*, *TPM*, and *Poynter*.

Paul Murray's first novel, *An Evening of Long Goodbyes*, was shortlisted for the Whitbread First Novel Prize in 2003. His second novel, *Skippy Dies*, was longlisted for the 2010 Man Booker Prize. In the *Guardian*, his recently released third novel, *The Mark and the Void*, was called both 'impressive' and 'hilarious'. The review went on to state '...there is profundity beyond the laughter, not least in the book's depiction of the bleak emptying-out of a country. Rainswept plazas, crumbling Celtic Tiger penthouses, tottering banks surrounded by protestors dressed up as zombies; this is a Dublin far from that most famous novel 'about a day in somebody's life', *Ulysses*.'

Paul Theroux was born in Medford, Massachusetts in 1941 and published his first novel, *Waldo*, in 1967. His subsequent novels include *The Family Arsenal*, *Picture Palace*, *The Mosquito Coast*, *O-Zone*, *Millroy the Magician*, *My Secret History*, *My Other Life*, *Kowloon Tong*, *The Elephanta Suite* and *A Dead Hand*. *The Mosquito Coast* and *Dr. Slaughter* have both been made into successful films. Theroux's highly acclaimed travel books include *Riding the Iron Rooster*, *The Great Railway Bazaar* and *The Tao of Travel*. In his new book, *Deep South*, excerpted in this issue, Theroux writes for the first time about his country of origin. Theroux divides his time between Cape Cod and the Hawaiian Islands, where he is a professional beekeeper.

Contents

- Letter from the Editor*
- 5** **A Guide for Writers Planning on Taking Up Residence at Shakespeare and Company in Paris**
Craig Taylor
- Q & A*
- 11** **'It was like a ten-year stag party'**
Paul Murray
- On Foodstuffs*
- 19** **The Decline of the Coffee to Stay**
Je Banach
- On the Road*
- 21** **The Fantastictions**
Paul Theroux
- Our Scattered Correspondents*
- 27** **John Kennedy Toole's Hot Dog Carts**
Margaret Eby
- Help Me, Five Dials, I Need to Understand...*
- 48** **The New Threat from Islamic Militancy**
Jason Burke
- Surfing and Sexuality*
- 54** **Becoming Westerly**
Jamie Brisick
- The Reading Life*
- 63** **Give It Up**
Erik Hinton
- I Knew Nothing*
- 67** **About the Word 'Laconic'**
The First of a Series

Craig Taylor

A Guide for Writers Planning on Taking Up Residence at Shakespeare and Company in Paris

Over the years we've been lucky enough to form a bond with our favorite bookshop in Paris. Shakespeare and Company has hosted *Five Dials* events, sold copies of our vinyl album, and even, at one point, provided a bedroom to a member of our editorial team. Although its storied past has been celebrated and celebrated again, the shop maintains a bright pulse. They do sell plenty of copies of *A Moveable Feast*. They must. But they sell other books as well.

On the evening of 13 November, 2015, the shop's writer-in-residence, a Canadian named Harriet Alida Lye, emerged from an underground cinema after a showing of the latest Bond film. Her phone was buzzing with missed calls and messages – the inevitable 'Are you OK?' When she returned to the shop the doors were shut, the lights were off, but she was soon ushered through the door. 'True to the bookshop's spirit,' she wrote in a piece published a couple days after the terrorist attacks, 'anyone who didn't feel comfortable leaving that night was invited to stay; around 20 customers took up the offer, plus all the staff and resident Tumbleweeds. Tea was made. Someone made oatmeal. Phone chargers were lent. Those of us who live in Paris were frantically fielding messages and leaving our own, finding out whether friends were safe.'

That night, Shakespeare and Company continued its role as a special kind of sanctuary. Ever since we started planning this issue, we knew we'd like to start with an FAQ for those who might someday like to become, like Harriet, writer-in-residence at the shop. The recent attacks forced us think a little harder about why it was important for writers to keep traveling to Paris, to write, look at art and briefly call home a city where bookstores still dot the corners. It was important to pledge allegiance to a place where it was fine to read at length, read throughout the day, read until they start wiping the tables at the café.

One of the most bizarre phrases in the aftermath of the 13 November attacks could be found tucked within ISIS's statement claiming responsibility. Victims at the Bataclan

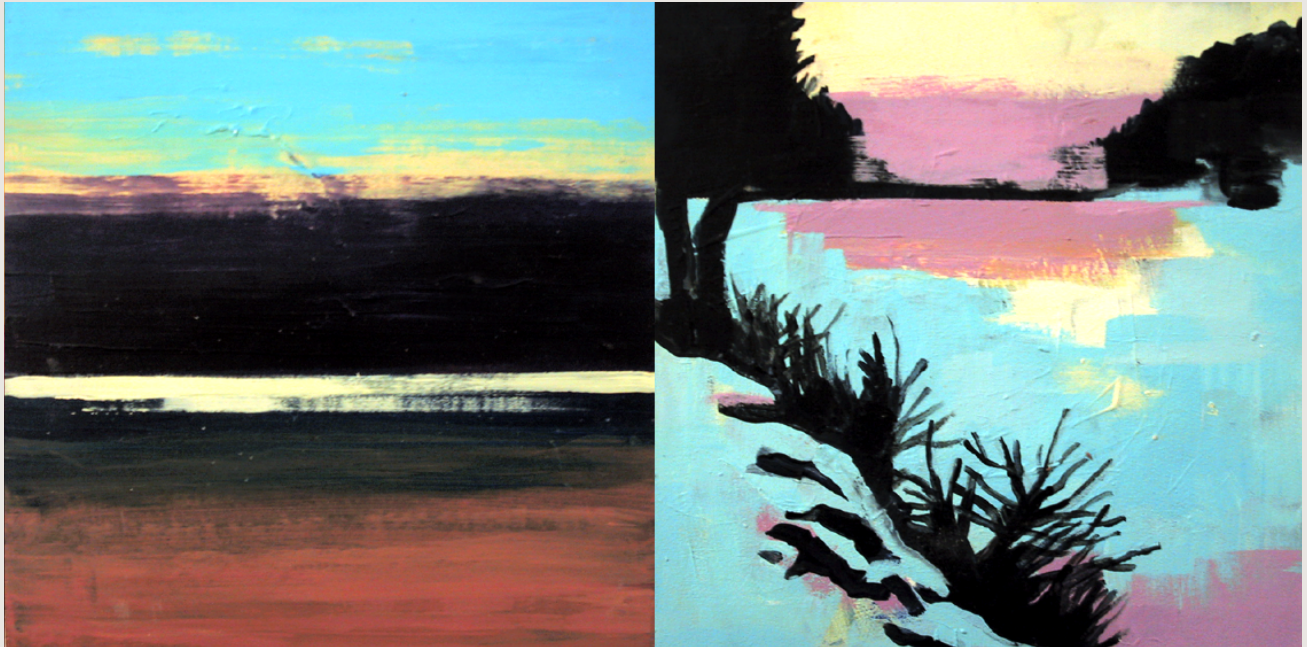
Theatre, they wrote, were punished for taking part in a ‘party of perversity.’ I can’t imagine who would want to refrain from attending that party, Paris’s everlasting party, even after the events of the 13th. In the appreciation we published in issue number 8, Ali Smith wrote of its perverse wonders, ‘...the filmic city of stone and smoke, knownness and anonymity, chic and chicanery, where classical meets playful in such a wise simultaneity. How lightly it goes deep, how profoundly it lightens things, how generously and indifferently it works its transformations.’ Terrorists who rail against perversities like going to a concert, or perhaps even watching a film at a single screen cinema on the Left Bank in the middle of the day, want a barren Paris, passed over, empty save for a few tumbleweeds. Paris in general, and Shakespeare and Company in particular, have need for only one kind of Tumbleweed. Nothing should keep writers away.

As for the magazine, this issue of *Five Dials* features an interview with reporter Jason Burke that will help clarify your knowledge of the workings of ISIS. After the attacks, Jason began to produce quick and insightful dispatches for the *Guardian*. He took time out of his schedule to update his answers in light of the events.

We’ve also gathered writing from two of our favorite Pauls – Theroux and Murray – as well as a gorgeous essay that must be read by anyone who has ever picked up *A Confederacy of Dunces*. Margaret Eby travels south to New Orleans to examine the history and lasting impact of O’Toole’s book, as well as his mother’s relentless drive to publicize the work and usher it into myth. Both Eby and Theroux explore the soaked, mysterious world of Southern writing. Eby’s book, *South Toward Home*, is a journey into the heart of Southern literature. Theroux’s latest, *Deep South*, is a travelogue. Eby sticks mostly to books while Theroux takes on some of the cuisine, although he is not always a fan of dishes like ‘a deep tray of okra, as viscous as frog spawn, next to a kettle of sodden collard greens looking like stewed dollar bills.’

There’s more. An excerpt from Jamie Brisick’s latest book will introduce you to a transgender surfer in the midst of her transformation. Je Banach pleads for better coffee culture. And then there’s a new series, ‘I Knew Nothing’, in which a writer tries to finally, finally learn something, anything, everything about the world. The first entry is entitled ‘I Knew Nothing: About The Word Laconic’. You’ll know something about it by the end of this issue.

But back to Paris. Here is our set of FAQs. What follows is advice for anyone who is thinking of traveling to Shakespeare and Company to become the writer-in-residence. Who knows? Someday it could happen to you. Don’t let recent events take anything away from the experience. Don’t let anything, especially now, keep you away from the city’s eternal party of perversity. On the day this was written, the 4.10pm show at Le Grand Action was *Les Yeux brûlés*, directed by Laurent Roth. Head to a future showing. It might be a good place to start.



FAQs

You're the writer-in-residence.

Where will you sleep?

If you're lucky, as I was, you'll be offered residence in the apartment above the shop. You'll have to share the apartment. During the day the front room is an office used by bookshop employees. They order stock and plan events. You'll place your suitcase in the back bedroom. Its walls are lined with books. A red-cloth curtain covers the window on the door. The other windows offer a view of the courtyard beneath. Occasionally, through these open windows, you'll hear the sound of someone practising the piano in the shop.

How old will you feel?

At times older than the shop itself. You'll think: there is too much youth in this place, constantly replenished, because who doesn't want to come to Shakespeare and Co. to sleep in the back and stack its shelves? Who thinks, two weeks after graduating from university, Shakespeare and Co. and life in Paris might be a bad idea? Tumbleweed is the name given to those who stay at Shakespeare and Co. In the early evenings they clamber the staircase to the upstairs apartment to cook in the narrow kitchen.

These meals quickly transform into acts of garlicky socialism. You'll be offered a plate. Dip the bread in the sauce.

At night you're supposed to be left alone in the apartment by 10 p.m., but most of the time you'll let the Tumbleweeds stick around and do what they've come to Paris to do: drink red wine and talk about the role of the writer in today's society. Like an eighty-year-old you will respond in a series of croaks. Cobwebs will waft from your mouth. You'll mention how important it is to get your invoices in on time. They will stare at you with pity because, as they know, writing will soon change the world. It's happening already, spreading from their notebooks downstairs.

Will your body hold up?

Running along the cobbled banks of the Seine in the early-morning light is something you want to include in emails to friends with young children. There are ways of making this sound less boastful. In reality it is too romantic. The water glistens too much. You will be too urgently reminded of the fragility of life. On that first morning you'll unplug your headphones, watch the Seine, take ragged breaths, and then mercifully this moment will end as you continue your run under a bridge with walls sprayed with what must be the most potent urine ever released. The gagging will offset the beauty. Later, writhing in your bed next to the bookshelves, you will cradle your splintered shins and swear off cobblestones and anything resembling a North American fitness regime.

Does it get better?

You'll walk downstairs the next morning as the shop is coming to life, as employees wheel out the racks of discount books. The streets are still wet. Don't brag about this quiet moment. It happens all the time. You'll walk up Boulevard St Michel with folded printed pages in your hand. Stop yourself from thinking: I will remember this some day.

How do you spend your days?

Sometimes productively, sometimes not. 'What's the definition of productivity?' is a good question to ask while spreading butter on a piece of fresh bread. If you're able to sit and work at the small desk in the upstairs bedroom, you will. You might lose time there gainfully. If the sound of the shop's piano flickers up the walls of the courtyard and breaks your concentration, take your printouts and walk through the shop, past the Tumbleweeds, and sit in the reading room. Watch the tourists as they enter, loudly discussing Trip Advisor. Hear them decrease their volume. They'll take a seat, stare out of the window, stop reviewing.

Does writing at Shakespeare and Co. mean solitude?

You will keep moving. If a spot in the shop needs to be used, if a dog needs to lie down, if a group needs to rehearse *The Taming of the Shrew*, then take the gift the bookshop offers – the improbable real estate – and leave. At night, when the shop closes and the Tumbleweeds take what's left of their red wine and walk down to the Seine, or, on some rare nights, go to bed early, you'll get the couch upstairs to yourself. The room is no longer an office, the business of running the bookshop is done. As the screensavers on the nearby computers revolve and change colour, you'll get to lie on the couch. Each time you shift the book on your chest to turn a page you'll glimpse Notre Dame through the window, lit up white, and if you get too distracted by the view and the whisper of cars passing on the Quai des Grands Augustins and the occasional clacking of heels against the cobblestones – if it's overwhelming to think that just for a while your primary living arrangement has a view of Notre Dame – the simple solution is to change positions on the couch. Face the other way. Arrange a pillow under your head. You won't silence the cars and pedestrians, but at least romantic, intrusive Paris will remain out of sight.

How many people tell stories of this place?

You'll think about this a lot, sometimes while watching the crowds drink wine on the cobblestones by the river. (You won't mention your run.) How many people remember this shop as they click a car seat into place or cut vegetables in some North American kitchen? How many wander back to their time at Shakespeare and Co.? One night, on the couch, you will read through some of the one-page biographies of previous Tumbleweeds in binders that stretch back a half-century. Most must remember. Some might still feel connected to the place, to its ideas, and, because of it, to a strange, imperfect, over-romanticized, much-needed, somehow indispensable literary culture. They made their pilgrimage and who knows what happened to them, bio after bio, weed after weed. The binders are the most interesting novel on the bookshelves of Shakespeare and Co. It's a story made almost entirely of earnest beginnings.

Which books should you read during your stay?

Whatever you like. Best not to muss the new copies on the tables downstairs. Stick with the used. At points you'll get sick of books. You'll walk to the local cinemas and watch Ozu one night and a crackling old print of *Fire Walk with Me* the next. The scratches will make it more menacing. Don't write emails to friends telling them you prefer David Lynch when his films are shown in scratchy prints in one-room French cinemas on the Left Bank. You'll notice there's a Cassavetes week at Le Grand Action cinema.

Maybe those twenty-one-year-old Tumbleweeds won't understand, as you couldn't understand at that age, the pain Gena Rowlands feels in *A Woman Under the Influence* as life barges in, as her control slips, as she strokes Peter Falk's face and tries to understand the blunt folly of adult life. You'll feel differently when you come out into the June air. It's another experience you can't quite translate. The best you can say to friends is that it's much better than watching Cassavetes on a laptop.

How does the real world creep in?

Of course. You'll see that Shakespeare and Co. is the first bookshop some people have been in for years. You'll witness farce, but don't pass judgement. A man will enter the room with an SLR camera the size of a cannon and wander the bookshop like it's a museum or mausoleum. He'll tell his wife to pick up a book and turn towards the lens. 'Pretend to read it,' he'll say before he shoots. You'll notice those who mistake the shop's vitality for novelty. I remember bookshops, you'll hear more than once.

During your stay hold on to the present, because this will never be Paris in the 20s/40s/60s. You'll need to ignore young men who have adopted names such as Buster. They'll wear pork-pie hats. Confiscate their movable feasts. Read today's paper. You might receive interesting news during your stay, like the *International Herald Tribune* is going to become the *International New York Times*. Each story on the metamorphosis features a photo of Jean Seberg.

What's the gift?

Impermanence. You'll understand you won't get this soft bed for ever. Even the best Tumbleweeds can't own their patches. They have to go back to their old lives, or press forward into new ones. There's only one way, eventually, to achieve permanence in this place. Go about your day. Eat the salade at Le Methode, eat the croissants at Le Rostand near the park. Eventually wipe the table with your forearm, send the remaining bits of pastry to the ground, and start to work. Thousands have passed through this shop, written their one-page bios, slept on its floors, flipped down the chairs of the reading room.

Clear the table. Brush off the crumbs. The only way to take up permanent residency of any form in Shakespeare and Co. is to finish the book, your book, the one that might just sit on its shelves some day, the one slowly emerging from the endless drafts that rest, one after the next, on the various tables beneath you.

A Q&A with Paul Murray

‘It was like a ten-year stag party’

Paul Murray on the Celtic Tiger, on why the Irish place so much importance on the future, on the funniest financial terms, and that time when he (very briefly) considered becoming a live-in poet for a property developer

Novelist Paul Murray was traveling the world when we first contacted him with the following questions. We thought for a moment it was research and he had embarked on a tour of all the countries still roiling from the 2008 financial meltdown. Not quite. But he did touch down in one epicentre, New York, to launch his latest novel, the brilliantly funny *The Mark and the Void*, which asks big questions of big banking and features as its protagonist a young banker who falls in with a outlandish Irish writer named – of course – Paul Murray.

Five Dials needed to know: What’s the best way to dredge humour from the financial turmoil of the past seven years? Paul told us he’d get to the answers as soon as he returned to Ireland. Perhaps the jetlag helped with the task. Perhaps Paul was compelled to get up early and survey the landscape of Dublin. The resulting Q and A goes far deeper than expected into the soul of Ireland and the consequences of a decade’s worth of financial turmoil.

Five Dials: How does economic collapse reveal itself in a place like Ireland? What did you notice as it unfolded?

Paul Murray: The economic collapse was pretty hard to miss, because Ireland had already been through a dramatic reversal of fortunes in the decade preceding. While the rest of Europe had a rocky start to the 21st Century, Ireland had this incredible boom, and went almost overnight from being a conservative, Catholic, quasi-agrarian backwater to this economic powerhouse. In the space of a couple of years, it became one

of the wealthiest countries in the world. Even at the beginning of 2009, you had the former Irish Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, speaking in Honduras about the 'Irish Model of Development'. And the city I lived in, Dublin, was literally transformed.

It looked, and felt, much as I imagine London did in the 1980s. It was a very status-oriented culture, very materialistic. Conspicuous consumption was rampant. Irish people had never been rich before, and we genuinely didn't know how to do it. So people watched TV and took their cues from that – from *The Hills* or *The OC* or whatever. Everyone was driving SUVs, everyone was wearing sunglasses, everyone was doing Herculean amounts of boozing. It was like a ten-year stag party. And there was, in retrospect, a lot of anxiety behind it. Nobody felt secure; everyone was battling each other to get on the property ladder, to stake out some place in this new country that was accelerating at such a rate that no matter what you did, you always felt on the verge of being left behind.

Because of that anxiety, I guess, everyone refused to see the warning signs until far, far too late. And when the crash came, everything just stopped, literally. The construction frenzy came to a halt, the city was full of these half-built or quarter-built office blocks, like concrete skulls. The skyline was littered with abandoned cranes. And the shops were suddenly empty. During the boom, which went roughly from 1997 to 2007, all of the shops were full all of the time. Likewise the pubs, the restaurants. Every day was like Christmas Eve. And now the streets were deserted. I remember talking to a guy who ran a record shop, who compared it to the weeks immediately after September 11 – just no one around. Pretty soon shops started closing, restaurants started closing, half of the street would be shuttered buildings.

One issue was that no matter how bad things got, the landlords wouldn't lower the rent. In fact, many of them put up rents subsequent to the crash. Factories closed, thousands of people lost their jobs. Things got very dark indeed. It turned out that a lot of people had taken on serious amounts of debt during the good times: some borrowing against their houses to fund their Celtic Tiger lifestyles – the weekend shopping trips to New York, the holiday home in France, etc. Others had taken out 90-100% mortgages to buy houses. A lot of my friends did this, thinking that the value of houses could only ever go up. Now they found themselves having to make these crippling repayments on houses that were worth 50 or 60% less than they had been. And some simply couldn't do it.

There were suicides. There were heartbreaking stories in the press all the time. I remember reading about a guy who was living on pigeons that he shot in his back garden. The *New York Times* infamously ran a story about the horses whose owners could no longer afford their stable fees and had been abandoned out by the Dunsink

Observatory. They got their facts slightly wrong, but as a metaphor, the starving horses was unimpeachable.

Also, hundreds of thousands of young people emigrated. In a very small country, this made a very big difference. Suddenly, when I went to a gig or a music festival, everyone there was the same age as me. So many young people packed up and left, and with them they took their energy and their dissent. Ireland has always been very good at exporting its dissidents.

Greed is simply a mode of being that reduces the world to what you want from it. It's a way of bracketing out everything that doesn't relate to your own desire.

FD: How did you research greed?

Murray: Greed is a tricky one, because on the face of it, if one is not greedy oneself, it seems like such an infantile emotion. I've never had a huge amount of interest in accumulating money or stuff. That's not to laud myself, it's simply the way I am. And any time I have splurged on some sort of fancy commodity, I've always been surprised at how little joy it's brought me, compared to a walk in the park, say, or a conversation, or learning something new, or reading a book. So initially I felt sort of mystified by and removed from this world I wanted to write about, this world of people who'd put all of their energies exclusively into making money. And I suspected that simply presenting that greed and critiquing it would be quite a boring and sanctimonious read.

But you know, you can be greedy in different ways. You can be greedy for cake, you can be greedy for sex, you can be greedy for time alone. You can be greedy for books. A monk can be as greedy as a banker in that regard. I met a friend who'd given up the rat race to surf full-time, and who found that he'd imported all of the avarice of his old life into the new one – except now he was greedy for waves, for the next big

waves, and he resented the sea if the waves weren't forthcoming. Greed is simply a mode of being that reduces the world to what you want from it. It's a way of bracketing out everything that doesn't relate to your own desire. In that regard, it's a simplification of experience and a simplification of yourself, and from being unbearably complex, life becomes this cartoon of itself wherein you're either getting what you want or you're not.

When I started thinking about it that way, greed became much more interesting. It became the symptom of much darker forces. Everyone knows that greed is self-perpetuating, everyone knows that the more you have the more you want, and that the more you pursue what you want the more you hollow out yourself. So what is it about our culture that leads us to valorize greed regardless? What is it about modern experience that we find so terrifying that we take refuge in this strategy that is so vacuous and so obviously doesn't work, in terms of personal happiness?

Increasingly I began to think that the experience of the bankers was one that differed from my own only in terms of degree – that we're all being taught to see the world as this atomistically lonely place that can only be survived by journeying deeper into yourself, building the walls around you ever higher.

FD: 'No one wants to see poverty,' one of your characters, Ariadne, remarks at one point. She goes on to point out: 'They cover it up with talk of the future.' Why is the future so important to the Irish?

Murray: Talking about the future is one of the best ways not to talk about the past, and even better, not to talk about the present. I don't think this is a specifically Irish thing, but as with the boom and bust in financial capitalism, it's something that happened in such an extreme and compressed way here that the lines are perhaps easier to discern.

The world has become a scary place! Since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the triumph of capitalism, a lot of the protections and safety nets that had been introduced over the previous fifty or sixty years have been removed. Life is more precarious now, it's harder to raise a family, it's harder to own your own home, it's harder to find any kind of permanent work. People are poorer for the very simple reason that a larger chunk of everybody's money is being kicked upstairs to the 1% and the 0.1%. And we're told that that's progress. We're kind of dangled these little futuristic gadgets by way of distraction, we're made to feel like we've been given this special dispensation according to which we can live, at least partly, in the future.

George Packer had a really interesting piece in the *New Yorker* about how our obsession with technology mirrors the obsession with cinema in the America of the 1930s. In times of great anxiety, people want to escape. In the 30s, during the Great Depression, they escaped through the fantasies of the silver screen. Now we escape through the various iterations of the iPhone. The fact that it's got a 21 megapixel camera, or whatever, helps us to not think about the fact that by the time we retire, pensions will be a thing of the past.

In Ireland perhaps that will to the future is even stronger, because our past is so very dark. Like Stephen Dedalus says in *Ulysses*, 'History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake.' This is a country that has always been ruled by foreign empires, from the Vikings to the Normans to the British to the Catholic Church, and most recently by the forces of globalisation and the troika – the International Monetary Fund, the European Union and the European Central Bank.

The Irish are used to being disempowered and I think one consequence of that is to misuse power when we do have it – to act, putting it simply, greedily, to grab as much as we can for ourselves rather than thinking in any kind of 'big picture' way about what kind of society we want to live in. Instead 'the future' is conjured up as this utopian space where all of our problems will be solved, when we're finished lining our own pockets. And that utopian space is sufficient to cancel out the dystopian space of the past, the centuries of brutalization, starvation and horror that the Irish experienced at the hands of others, before learning to do it for themselves.

FD: Tell us your banking history. What has your relationship with banks been like over the years? Did you ever see them as dramatic settings?

Murray: Well, the first job I had out of college was in the Operations Centre of one of the big Irish retail banks. It was this enormous underground bunker where all of the cheques lodged that day were sent. My job was to put them into the processing machine, where they'd be scanned and barcoded and filmed. The machine was very sensitive, so if a cheque had a corner or, God forbid, a staple, the whole thing would come grinding to a halt and I'd have to call the engineer.

So I stood there all day long like a chump, trying to keep the processing machine sweet, making minimum wage while millions of pounds flowed through my fingers. It was pretty alienating, frankly. I started work at 2pm, and finished only when all the cheques were done. Towards Christmas, there were more and more – this was the late 90s, and people still paid mostly by cheque – and you mightn't finish till 1 or 2 in the morning. I think that's where my ambiguous feelings towards capitalism may have begun. The Centre had its own generator, so you couldn't even hope for a power cut.

Beyond that, my dealings with the bank were kept mostly to a minimum. I spent most of the Celtic Tiger writing a book, and even if I'd wanted to I couldn't have bought a house. Quite early on I resigned myself to living on the lower rungs of the new Irish hierarchy. I thought I could get a job as live-in poet somewhere, singing the praises of a property developer maybe, like the bards of old. Later on, watching my friends having to deal with these debts they'd been encouraged to take on, I felt like I'd dodged the bullet.

I saw banks as the opposite of dramatic. In *The Day Today*, Steve Coogan was featured in this genius sketch, a soap opera set in a Bureau de Change that showcased just how undramatic and dull that world can be. But paradoxically that's what attracted me to them. These institutions that are so central to everything, so taken for granted that we don't even need to think about them – that's exactly the kind of environment a writer should be looking at. Because as I say in the book, the banks are the heart, the world-within-the-world, the engine room of literally everything that's happening around us.

And they tell us more about ourselves, the kind of people we are, than all of the little details we imagine make us special or distinct. In the same way that what you do at work, eight hours a day five days a week, ultimately counts for more on a personal and on a social scale, than the poems you write in your spare time, or your butterfly collection or whatever it might be. We're sort of in denial about who we are as people and I think art colludes with that to a certain degree by largely bracketing out the working world.

That said, it took me a long time to understand how the banking system worked. The first time I even heard of an investment bank was when my sister got a job in the Bank of Bermuda. I thought that was funny. Hitherto I'd associated Bermuda almost exclusively with ships and airplanes disappearing. It seemed like a deeply unwise place to store one's money. Only later did I discover that that is what investment banking is all about.

In the same way, I was attracted to the International Financial Services Centre because it seemed on the face of it to have so little to do with my life and life in Ireland generally. The Centre was built at the end of the 1980s. It's the financial district, and it essentially functions as a tax haven. It's very lightly regulated. Multinationals use it to do all of the things they don't want anyone else to see. I found it fascinating because they've worked so hard to make it look and feel like a non-place, somewhere that is right in the middle of Dublin but is absolutely deracinated, absolutely ahistorical. For that reason maybe, Irish writers – with the exception of crime writers – have been slow to write about it.

And yet, looked at another way, it's the most Irish place there is. For starters, it's the economic engine of the country, with billions and billions of investors' money coming in and out. But beyond that, it employs this Irish gift for looking the other way, for making anything problematic simply disappear. The truth in Ireland, more so I would contend than in other countries, is something malleable, fungible, contingent. Maths and numbers and abstraction, these all seem like very un-Irish things; but imagining other worlds, turning reality into a hall of mirrors, these are things we are very good at. And the hall of mirrors is where business at its highest level is conducted nowadays.

These institutions that are so central to everything, so taken for granted that we don't even need to think about them—that's exactly the kind of environment a writer should be looking at.

FD: What's the funniest financial term?

Credit default swap?

Murray: I'm a big fan of the collateralized debt obligation (CDO) and its spin-offs, the synthetic collateralized debt obligation and the 'CDO-of-CDOs', or CDO-squared.

FD: How does a writer find humour in the workings of the financial world?

Murray: See above. The smartest people in the world were falling over themselves to put money in CDOs of CDOs, despite the fact that no one actually understood what they were. That's what I learned over time – that beneath the three-piece suits and the big serious glass buildings, international finance basically looks like a Marx Brothers film.

FD: Has Ireland's attitude toward the financial sector changed since you were researching the book?

Murray: I think people are more wary or cynical about the financial system, but at the same time, they feel even less able to change it. Again, that's not just an Irish phenomenon. I was just in the US and most of the people I spoke to there seemed to feel the same sense of impotence. Nobody's gone to prison. Very, very few people even lost their jobs. Dick Fuld, the former head of Lehman Brothers, has reinvented himself as a financial adviser, so if you want the opinion of the guy who presided over the largest bankruptcy in US history, give him a call. He still has the \$480 million he took home before the crash.

In Ireland, there's a government inquiry taking place right now, with the major players, bankers, developers, ex-ministers and so on all being hauled up to account for what happened. But at this stage, the various villains, who for a couple of years were running scared, have now realized that they're not actually going to be punished or made accountable in any way for what they did, so they're using the inquiry to proclaim their innocence and basically give the entire country the finger. It's all a bit dispiriting, and you have to wonder whether any lessons at all have been learned. In the US the hedge funds are already betting on the next crash, which they predict will come from defaulting college loans. I guess we'll just have to hope there's a new iPhone available when that day comes.

FD: What's your PIN number?

Murray: I don't use banks anymore: instead, I safeguard my money using a patented combination of very old and very new technologies. I keep it in Bitcoin, which I hide in an old sock.

Je Banach

The Decline of the Coffee to Stay

As the American coffee house undergoes a minimalist makeover that forces out its patrons and divorces coffee and culture, it's imperative that we forgo 'to-go.' Je Banach reports.

In 1894, on the day of the grand opening of Budapest's New York Café – a coffee house furnished with marble, silk and bronze, housed in an Italian Renaissance-style palace – playwright and novelist Ferenc Molnár stole the keys to the front door and threw them into the Danube so that the café could never be closed. So the story goes, according to café lore. Whether or not this story is entirely true is insignificant; what is important is the sentiment it represents – haven't most of us felt some similar if not equal passion for our own coffee house? Certainly I had. Without frescoes or chandeliers or frills of any kind, I fell in love with my own plain house, and I fell hard. I went regularly and stayed for long periods of time. I loved that the baristas knew me by name, inquired about my work and refilled my cup before I could ask. But what I loved most of all was that, no matter the time of day, it was always filled to capacity with readers and writers, students and intellectuals, who had come with a singular purpose: to read, to write, to study and to think – together, in public. How could one ever feel pessimistic, lonely or uninspired here? What a place! But then one day, with little warning, out went the beautiful iron-sided tables

and comfortable chairs, and with them the people and all of their books.

The reason for the new design could be explained away as aesthetic – tiny 'café' tables after all! – but one could see from the unnecessarily large swathe of empty space, which now looped from door to counter and back to door, that there had only ever been one goal in mind: to increase circulation in order to increase sales. An unfortunate side effect of which was a severe reduction in comfortable seating – or seating of any kind, for that matter – and, subsequently, the elimination of opportunities for any kind of exchange not financial in nature. While across the sea European coffee houses have been making their patrons more comfortable, while sponsoring prizes in literature and hosting exhibitions of international art (think: the Venice Biennale), US coffee houses have been undergoing a minimalist makeover that relegates them to pedestrian versions of the drive-through. Its most loyal patrons have either been forgotten or were never really understood at all. The latter is likely.

As Gertrude Stein put it, coffee has always been 'like an event' giving those who consume it in public 'a chance to be,

like be yourself'. We do not go to coffee houses for the coffee. At least, not those of us who sit in. We go to look and listen and read and write and think and create. Of course, these things could all be done at home, but why do them privately only? We go because we want something to happen and because something electric does happen when we do these things as a community – a chain reaction. We go to be and to be seen, to show who we are, to think about who we've been, and to consider who we might be. We go to be reminded of something or to forget something that we're reminded of too often. We go to fall in love or to move on. We go to be alone, to get lost in a crowd. We go to be less alone. We go because we want someone to witness something, or because we want to be witnesses. We go because we want to figure something out or because we want to be asked a question. We go because we want to be recovered or uncovered. We go because we want to live and be a part of the world, and this means being with others who also want to live and be a part of the world. We go because it is something to do. We go because we wonder what will happen to us and what is possible. We do not go for the coffee. We go because the coffee house has always given us freedom, more than any other space – personally, socially, politically, intellectually and artistically. What other venue allows us to be so completely human? We go because the coffee house is, and has always been, one of the most effective and incredible incubators in world history. When we claim them as our own, the sit-down coffee house isn't selling coffee – it's serving culture.

It wouldn't be a stretch to say that the coffee house has been both venue and host of the most amazing and influential cocktail party of all time. As early as the sixteenth century people gathered in shops in Mecca and Constantinople to tell stories, debate and talk openly about politics. In seventeenth-century London coffee houses were the most fashionable places to spend one's time, so much so that the way to know thy neighbour was not to evaluate their clothing, profession or home address, but to find out which coffee house they frequented. The exchange of ideas

was so impressive during this time that the coffee house has been called the birthplace of the Enlightenment.

Further proof that the best accessory to bring to the coffee house has always been a book, shops around the world – Literaturnoe Kafe in St Petersburg; Café Montmartre in Prague; The Antico Caffè Greco in Rome; La Rotonde, Le Dôme Café, Les Deux Magots, Café de Flore and Café Procope in Paris; and New York City's Caffè Reggion, to name just a few – were the home away from home for writers from all over the globe: Russian novelists such as Chernyshevsky and Dostoevsky; Romantic fellows such as Byron and Keats; realists and absurdists; American expatriate writers Hemingway, Fitzgerald and Stein; French philosophers Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir; Norwegian dramatists; folk lyricists; and Beat poets. What other venue can claim such a guest list? More importantly, why should the party end now?

Like the owners of these businesses, we can choose to think of our coffee houses as sites that generate wealth. Increasing the cultural profit they yield doesn't require an elaborate, time-consuming and costly redesign of one's person or one's life. It only requires that we sit down with a book in a public place and remain open to the possibilities that follow. What would be possible if 'public intellectual' was not a term that referenced a single individual, but rather a community that engages in reading, writing and discourse in public, as if these acts were as fundamental as eating when hungry and drinking when thirsty? If by sitting in we took the keys so that our coffee houses could never close, who could we be as individuals and as a culture – or as Stein would say: Who could we be, like really be?

Paul Theroux

The Fantastications

Is Southern Fiction evasive? Has it served to deflect from the bald facts of Southern life?

Reading made me a traveler; travel sent me back to books. When I got home, I immersed myself in Southern fiction. The Faulkner I had read in my last interlude, and the places I had seen in the spring, made me curious to know how the novels and short stories located in the Deep South might give me better access to the reflective interior of those states, so passive, so mute. Many Southern writers are defiant in their belief in a nebulous concept of regionalism – that they are expressing in their work the heart and soul of the South. Faulkner’s conviction in this was so strong that his fiction seemed to define the South, its history and its people. Though the more I read him, the greater my realization that, for all his obsession with detail, he left unwritten, undefined, the simple fact that for his entire life he lived at the edge of a university campus that demeaned its black workers and excluded black students. Fascinated to the point of mania by the past, he seemed bored, annoyed, and uncomprehending of the enormous events of the present to which he’d been an eyewitness.

On my previous trip, on the banks of the Savannah River I had passed by Wrens, Georgia, childhood home of Erskine Caldwell, who, apparently inspired by the country folk he knew, wrote *Tobacco Road* (1932), one of his earliest and most successful novels. This is the saga of the sharecropper Jeeter Lester, his wife Ada, who has no teeth (‘she dipped snuff since she was eight years old’), his son Dude, who marries a much older woman named Bessie (who has no nose), his daughter Ellie Mae (who is mute and has a harelip) and his daughter Pearl, whom he marries off to his friend Lov Bensey when she turns twelve. This twelve-year-old wife sleeps on the floor, refusing to share the marital bed with the much older Lov, who is aggrieved at his child wife’s disgust. What the hail is going on here?

In his works of fiction, once immensely popular for the very coarseness for which they are belittled now — they sold in the tens of millions in the 1930s and '40s — Caldwell created a popular image of the South as a landscape peopled by grotesques. Most of his white characters seemed to come from Dogpatch, L'il Abner's hometown, which first appeared in the Al Capp comic strip in 1934. *Tobacco Road* and *God's Little Acre* (1933), just as outlandish in its cast, along with Faulkner's *Sanctuary* (1931), set the tone for the Southern novel of tenants and sharecroppers in which the freakish and the darkly comic predominated — bizarre characters, unspeakable crimes, unnatural acts, shocking sexual situations — almost as a form of literary indirection. Why does this seem like a trick? Because black life, the racial rejection and the peasant misery only obliquely enter these narratives.

Though Caldwell's novel *Trouble in July* (1940) and his long story 'Kneel to the Rising Sun' (1934) concern the lynching and harrying of innocent black men, and Faulkner's *Light in August* (1932) has a near-lynching that ends in the shooting and castration of Joe Christmas, these works are exceptional. Southern fiction and its grotesques, sometimes termed 'Southern gothic', seldom touched upon (and seemed to accept) the day-to-day injustices of the 1920s and '30s. So we have a nightmarish literature of dwarfs, hunchbacks, albinos, night hags and deviants (in *Sanctuary*, the impotent Popeye, who has 'yellow clots for eyes', rapes Temple Drake with a corncob), but little mention of forced labour, racial violence, extreme segregation and the lynching of blacks. You see this Witches' Sabbath of freaks throughout Flannery O'Connor and Carson McCullers and in the early Truman Capote.

'The Artificial Nigger', Flannery O'Connor's much-praised story in the collection *A Good Man is Hard to Find* (1955), shows black life as a grotesque netherworld. In another tale in this collection, 'Good Country People', a bogus Bible salesman runs off with the prosthetic leg of a woman he has failed to seduce. Good fun, you think, but O'Connor's intention is often spiritual redemption and high-mindedness, as in her brilliant short story 'Revelation', from *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (1965), describing the enlightenment of Mrs Ruby Turpin, which buds in a doctor's waiting room and blooms in a pigpen. The story is about class, race and God's grace. Here, in a paragraph of Southern paranoia, Mrs Turpin tortures herself with a farcical dilemma:

Sometimes at night when she couldn't go to sleep, Mrs Turpin would occupy herself with the question of who she would have chosen to be if she couldn't have been herself. If Jesus had said to her before he made her 'There's only two places available for you. You can either be a nigger or white trash,' what would she have said? 'Please, Jesus, please,' she would have said, 'just let me wait until there's another place available,' and he would have said, 'No, you have to go right now and I have only those two places so make up your mind.' She would have wiggled and squirmed and begged and pleaded but it would have been no use and finally she would have said, 'All right, make me a nigger then — but that don't

mean a trashy one.’ And he would have made her a neat clean respectable Negro woman, herself but black.

Carson McCullers’s novel *The Member of the Wedding* (1946) is the story of a twelve-year-old Southern girl, Frankie Addams, and her assorted friends and family. By chance, she meets a soldier on furlough, who persuades her to visit his hotel room, where he attempts to rape her. Her black cook, Berenice Sadie Brown, blind in one eye, wears a blue glass eye: ‘It stared out fixed and wild from her quiet coloured face.’ A transvestite, Lily Mae Jenkins, puts in an appearance. An important experience for Frankie is her visit to the House of Freaks at the Chattahoochee Exposition, where she sees the Giant, the Midget, the Fat Lady, the Alligator Boy and the Wild Nigger, though ‘some said he was not a genuine Wild Nigger, but a crazy coloured man from Selma – he ate live rats.’ Later, Frankie wonders whether she will grow into a freak and, she reflects, the near-rape by the soldier was ‘like a minute in the fair Crazy House’.

Hardly fifty pages into Capote’s debut novel, *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948), we have met a witch-like woman (‘long ape-like arms . . . a wart on her chin . . . dirty-nailed fingers’), a black dwarf (‘a little pygmy’), a one-hundred-year-old man named Jesus Fever and a long-necked woman, a cook, who ‘was almost a freak, a human giraffe’. Colourful, perhaps, but you have no notion that this narrative is taking place in a bleak segregated town; the horrors of the everyday are an accepted fact, not worth mentioning.



Reading made me a traveler; travel sent me back to books.

To Kill a Mockingbird (1960) seems on the surface to be a worthy evaluation of small-town Southern values, even if it is tediously plotty, overwritten and predictable: the black labourer on trial for manhandling, throttling and raping the white woman has a withered arm and could not possibly have done the deed, but he is found guilty and ends up shot dead. The critic Jeffrey Meyers has referred to the novel as ‘a sentimental, simple-minded rip-off of [Faulkner’s] *Intruder in the Dust*’. And my brother Alexander has called attention to its ‘ecological fascism’, asserting that while the novel insists ‘it is wrong for anyone to kill a mockingbird which so sweetly sings its heart out for us, it is nevertheless all right to shoot blue jays – this, when the headline theme of this so-called heartfelt, liberal novel unapologetically attacks the extremes of racism, bigotry and

ethnic selection.’ With a cast of stereotypes confirming every conventional prejudice against the Deep South, the book has sold in the millions.

Look closer and you see that *Mockingbird*, which most readers took to be a tale of the intolerant 1950s South, is set (decorous courtroom talk) ‘in this year of grace 1935’, and it, too, has a line-up of freaks, including Misses Tutti and Frutti and the hideous racist Mrs Dubose: ‘Her face was the colour of a pillowcase, and the corners of her mouth glistened with wet, which inched like a glacier down the deep grooves enclosing her chin.’ Turns out Mrs Dubose is a morphine addict. Boo Radley, taken to be a weirdo, turns out to be a hero. The news that Harper Lee was releasing another novel, *Go Set a Watchman*, written before *Mockingbird* and apparently rejected by her publisher, filled me with gloom.



The tall-tale tradition of Southern life as a malignancy – ‘gothic’ is an elevating misnomer meant to ornament or dignify it – has persisted. The work of the late Barry Hannah, a Mississippian (born 1942), is an example. His fiction, too, has been described as ‘darkly comic’ and ‘set in a phantasmagoric South’. His stories, especially those in *Airships* (1978), have an unusual garrulity and undeniable power, a tipsy love of language and broad humour; they are memorable for the utter absurdity of their situations. The same can be said for Charles Portis, whose name is solely attached to the comical Western *True Grit*. Portis was born and still lives in Arkansas, and his work is inspired by life in Arkansas even when the work is not set there. *The Dog of the South*, a brilliant road book – a manic drive from Little Rock to the Honduran jungle – is a good and hilarious example of this, and so is Norwood, which features an ex-circus midget, Edward Ratner, ‘the world’s smallest perfect fat man’. Most of the gringos in *Gringos*, which is set in Mexico, are misfits and fantasists.

The best of these outlandish writers is Portis, because of the consistency of his humour, his fluency, his ear for the nuances and inflections of Southern speech, and his comic purity – his wish (nearly always achieved) to produce laughter. His characters, such as the con man Dr Reo Symes, enlarge themselves with their talk, which is usually paranoia or bluff. ‘A lot of people leave Arkansas and most of them come back sooner or later’ is one of the compact observations in *The Dog of the South*. ‘They can’t quite achieve escape velocity.’

Hannah and Portis broadened and deepened the same furrow that was ploughed in the Southern soil by Caldwell and Faulkner, and the fantastications of their extravagant prose seem like a diversionary tactic. In the work of these writers, something odd and evasive is also taking place. It is as if an alternative reality, verging on a crude surrealism (‘phantasmagoric’), in the form of mutilated and misshapen whites and freakish blacks, a sideshow of distraction, was invented to deflect from the bald facts of Southern life, the boredom and poverty and fatigue, the pedestrian cruelties and common abuses, the sorrows, the fatal misunderstandings.

This was why I felt so strongly about the writing of Mary Ward Brown, modest in scope but unsparing in its scrutiny. And the interconnected stories in Eudora Welty’s





The Golden Apples (1949) were a masterly evocation of a Delta town in Mississippi. I was not a fan of Harper Lee's over-praised *Mockingbird*, preferring her fellow Alabamian William March (1893–1954), best known for his last novel, *The Bad Seed*, and the obscure author of earlier ones, *Come In at the Door* and *The Looking Glass*, and many great short stories, as well as a superb war novel with multiple narrators, *Company K*. His story 'Runagate Niggers', in *Some Like Them Short* (1939), is an ironic account of racial injustice and debt slavery. His work is without fantasticality and is to my taste; to the land and people it depicted, it is devastatingly truthful.

All of these writers are white Southerners. The South's black writers, by contrast, have no need to resort to fantasticality: the truth behind their fiction is so bizarre that the grotesque comes first-hand, ready-made. From the South's earliest black novelist, William Wells Brown – who partly based his 1853 novel, *Clotel: or, The President's Daughter*, on Thomas Jefferson's relationship with Sally Hemings – through Zora Neale Hurston, Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright and Ernest Gaines to Alice Walker, the works of black writers are more factual, contain more obvious self-portraiture, are often polemical in their sentimental rage and are emphatically racial in their indignation. And with the exception of Gaines, none of these writers remained in the South. For example, Brown, an escaped slave, died in Boston in 1884.





Margaret Eby

John Kennedy Toole's Hot-Dog Carts

Going to New Orleans after a fresh reading of A Confederacy of Dunces gives the city a different flavor, writes Margaret Eby.

Every sign begins to read like a knowing wink, every passer by is an excised extra from the book. It's in Louisiana she considers the smoothed out gaps – the biographical comb-over – of the life of its author

John Kennedy Toole was thirty-one years old when he pulled his blue Chevy Chevelle on to a road shaded by pine trees outside of Biloxi, Mississippi, strung a green garden hose from the exhaust pipe into the back left window, locked the car, started the engine, and slowly asphyxiated himself on the poisonous cloud of carbon monoxide pumping in. Two months earlier, he had walked out on his job as a professor at Dominican College in New Orleans and skipped town abruptly after a nasty spat with his mother. The inside of the car, the deputy sheriff who discovered Toole's body reported, was spotless, Toole's hair neatly combed, his clothes pressed and clean. In his pocket, his mother later told interviewers, was a stub proving that one of the last stops on his journey had been to Flannery O'Connor's house in Milledgeville, Georgia. On the passenger seat, Toole had balanced a ten-inch stack of letters, papers and notebooks on top of a black suitcase, topped by a final note to his family. What papers from this pile Toole's mother did not get rid of were impounded by the Biloxi Police Department, and then destroyed by the floodwaters of Hurricane Camille. In Toole's back room in New Orleans was a box containing the manuscript for the novel he had struggled over for six years, *A Confederacy of Dunces*.

The story of how *A Confederacy of Dunces* went from a collection of smeared onion-skin pages in a bedroom in Uptown New Orleans to a Pulitzer Prize-winning comic novel published eleven years after Toole's suicide has become as integral to the book's identity as

its spluttering, bombastic main character Ignatius J. Reilly. It is as marvellously unlikely as the plot of the book itself, as the city of New Orleans in which *Confederacy* is set.

After Toole's death, his mother, Thelma Toole, applied herself with relentless vigour to getting her only son's manuscript published. Thelma was a stubborn woman with a penchant for drama. In later interviews, John Kennedy Toole's friends described Thelma as a type who landed somewhere in the spectrum between 'stage mom' and 'micromanaging parent', though one went straight for 'megalomaniac'. She had raised her son with a care that teetered on the edge of obsession. (One of the composition books Toole had left behind had 'Mom, please don't touch' written on the cover, echoing Ignatius Reilly's Big Chief notebooks scrawled with 'MOTHER DO NOT READ'.) She worked as an elocution expert, coaxing students out of their thick New Orleanian accents, and was fond of rolling her rs in conversation, often sporting opera gloves, despite the thick swamp heat of southern Louisiana. She lobbed the increasingly tattered pages of the manuscript at publishing houses. Eight houses turned her down; the financial risk of a comic novel by a deceased author unable to promote, edit or otherwise help the work presumably outweighed its literary merits, and editors were no doubt put off by Thelma Toole's impatient, repeated letters. 'Each time I sent it off first class and it came back bulk rate,' she later told an interviewer.



Finally, in the autumn of 1976, Thelma spotted a line in the *Times-Picayune* about novelist Walker Percy, who had immortalized his own corner of New Orleans in *The Moviegoer* and who was teaching a writing seminar at Loyola University for one semester. Thelma began pestering Percy with phone calls and entreaties to read the manuscript that Percy gently rejected. But one day after Thanksgiving, Thelma, outfitted in a pillbox hat and a thin layer of talcum powder, travelled over to Loyola with her elderly brother Arthur disguised as her chauffeur. She intercepted Percy as he was leaving his evening class, presenting him with a white box containing the torn pages of Toole's manuscript.

'Over the years I have become very good at getting out of things I don't want to do,' Percy later wrote in the introduction to *Confederacy*. 'And if ever there was something I didn't want to do, this was surely it: to deal with the mother of a dead novelist and, worst of all, to have to read a manuscript that she said was *great* and that, as it turned out, was a badly smeared, scarcely readable carbon.'

But Percy, out of some combination of politeness, surprise and sympathy, took the manuscript that Thelma offered, drove home and read it. In mid December he sent her a letter full of admiration for the book. '[Toole has] an uncanny ear for New Orleans speech and a sharp eye for place,' Percy wrote. 'I don't know any novel which has captured the peculiar flavor of New Orleans neighborhoods nearly so well.'

Percy committed to help usher *Confederacy* into print, using his literary clout and connections to move it out of the slush pile. Louisiana State University Press published the tome in 1980, editing very little from the stack of smudged onionskin pages that Thelma had pushed on Percy. Buoyed up by the unusual circumstances behind its

publication — a triangle between a dead author, an eccentric mother and a National Book Award winner made excellent copy — *Confederacy* got the attention of reviewers and climbed up the bestseller lists. In 1981 the book won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, cementing its ascent from near-garbage to literary gem.

Thelma Toole, by all accounts, had prepared for fame her whole life and spent much of Toole's childhood priming him for greatness. When the fame at last arrived, rewarding her grief and toil, she was not humble about it. Thelma assembled an entourage of friends to squire her about town, introducing herself as 'mother of the scholarly and literary genius John Kennedy Toole'. She gave to her friends as gifts relics from her son's life: a pair of his nail clippers, a set of his worn bed sheets. NBC flew Thelma to New York for an interview with late-night host Tom Snyder, in which she asserted her role as a medium to bring her son's talent into the world. 'I walk in the world for my son,' Thelma concluded, a line that became her mantra.

When interviewed, Thelma used the opportunity to lambast the publishing industry for her many rejections, particularly focusing her ire on storied editor Robert Gottlieb, who had corresponded with Toole about *Confederacy* in the early 1960s. The letters that exist between Gottlieb and Toole are full of encouragement and suggestions for revising *Confederacy*, though Gottlieb thought the novel needed substantial work before it could be published. Nevertheless, Thelma used her new platform to excoriate Gottlieb, not so subtly implying that the editor was responsible for the decline in mental health that drove her son to suicide. 'Gottlieb is the villain,' Thelma told *People*. To a reporter at *Horizon* magazine she went on an anti-Semitic screed about Gottlieb, decrying him as a 'Jewish creature . . . not a man.'

Thelma took her tales of her son around New Orleans in a one-woman show, combining impressions of the characters in *Confederacy* with off-key musical numbers and stories about its author. In a video recorded at her home on Elysian Fields Avenue in 1983, Thelma, resplendent in a long rope of pearls and a lacy blue housedress, performs at a baby grand, a huge velvet curtain with 'THELMA' lopsidedly emblazoned on it hanging behind her. The walls are crowded with pictures of her son and posters of *Confederacy*-related celebrations. 'I produced a genius,' Thelma boasts. 'He had the seeing eye and the hearing ear.'

Named Queen Mother of one of the Mardi Gras krewes, the social organizations that organize the annual festival parades, Thelma was infuriated when Walker Percy declined to come to her house for a knighting ceremony. To aspiring authors, Thelma's persistence became an aspirational tale, and to New Orleanians, Thelma became a celebrity, another character in the ever-evolving carnival of the city. When she died in 1984, just four years after the book's publication, her funeral drew a crowd of well-wishers. When her son's body had been laid to rest in the family tomb fifteen years earlier, only three people were in attendance: his two parents and his childhood nanny.

The hoopla Thelma created, ostensibly in celebration of her son's talents, served to propel the book into publishing mythology, but also muted the voice of its author. Toole could never contribute to the conversation, not just — and most obviously — because he died before his book entered the public sphere, but also because Thelma did her best to exert control over the narrative of his life. Thelma's vision of her son was of a long-suffering genius, superior in every way, a dutiful son driven to his death by the cruelties of the publishing industry. It's hard to read Thelma's account without wishing for a different filter, one less tinted by love and longing. Very few of us are as good as our mothers want us to be. But her clipped and trimmed version of Toole's days was the one widely disseminated; the voices of Toole's friends and co-workers relatively quiet in comparison. Several of Toole's closest confidantes, put off by the media hubbub over *Confederacy's* publication, refused to speak about their late friend, taking whatever knowledge they had of Toole to the grave rather than join the frenzy.

Despite the dutiful work of scholars, the story of Toole's life is full of gaps that have been unconvincingly smoothed out, a biographical comb-over. There aren't many details of his final years, the ones in which he tangled with the stuff of his novel and ultimately abandoned it. We know only the barest outlines of what Toole was suffering from in the years before his suicide, stories that he told friends about the government implanting a device in his brain and someone stealing his manuscript and publishing it under another name. There's also not much information about Toole's romantic life. Toole's early biographers, René Pol Nevils and Deborah George Hardy, speculated that Toole's personal life was riddled with problems. In their account, *Ignatius Rising*, they trot forth theories that Toole was an alcoholic, tortured by questions about his sexual orientation; a gay and closeted artist unable to cope with rejection. They interviewed a man who claimed Toole owned a boarding house where a secret harem of gay men lived, feeding the author's promiscuous nature. This double life, they posit, may account for Toole's scathing representation of the New Orleanian gay community in *Confederacy*, for those Freudian notes in Ignatius's obsession with hot dogs. Toole's surviving friends dismissed the book as full of sensationalism and gossip from unvetted sources that Toole was not around to refute. Cory MacLauchlin, in his Toole biography *Butterfly in the Typewriter*, debunked many of their claims. 'It is tempting to fit Toole into the trope of a fatally troubled artist, his genius unrecognized, sinking into an abyss of vices,' MacLauchlin wrote. 'The narrative is so commonplace that we seem willing to overlook a lack of evidence to believe it.'

There's no way to tell. Thelma, who steadfastly refused to give permission to would-be biographers until her death, preferred not to talk about the final years of Toole's life. It's not surprising: what grieving mother wouldn't want to remember her son in his happier days, trussed up in costume for a Mardi Gras ball or grinning at the beach, rather than his fraught last years, plagued with anxiety and depression? The biographer's goals and the family's are often at odds. But Thelma's efforts to edit the documentation she kept later frustrated scholars' attempts to piece together a more



complete version of Toole's life. Her archival methods followed her own rationale. She kept Toole's high-school maths homework, but there are no letters between him and his father. She destroyed Toole's suicide letter but kept her own perfectly preserved dental bridge.

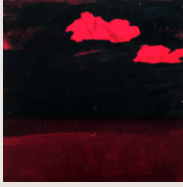
It's hard to read Thelma's account without wishing for a different filter, one less tinted by love and longing. Very few of us are as good as our mother want us to be.

People search for hints of Toole's voice because they wish there were more of it. His writing is so loud and theatrical that it makes his silence even more conspicuous. *A Confederacy of Dunces* is a book that's both brilliant and flawed, a romp through New Orleans so interesting that you barely mind the tour guide making fun of your shoes. Toole's portraits of New Orleanians seem like they were spoken to you surreptitiously while sitting next to him on a bench, taking in the crowd. You can't help but wonder what he would have written next. But Toole completists only have *Confederacy* and the considerably lesser *Neon Bible*, a novel Toole wrote when he was sixteen about a priest in Mississippi, published in the wake of *Confederacy's* success. That, and we have New Orleans.



Confederacy is a book about that most unlikely of cities as much as of any of its characters, the home Ignatius compliments as 'the comfortable metropolis which has a certain apathy and stagnation which I find inoffensive'. New Orleans is an easy place to write about, and a hard place to write about well. In popular culture it's a giant kooky sports bar constantly beset by tropical storms or a swamp dotted with antebellum houses, where men in seersucker suits ignore consonants and sip frosty juleps in their alligator-riddled backyards. It's a double-decker bus tour of the places levelled by Katrina. It's all fan boats and 'Who Dat' and jambalaya, or it's poverty and failures of government and high-velocity winds. There is little account of the place between Bourbon Street and the Lower Ninth Ward.





I've been using one excuse or another to visit New Orleans my whole life, drawn down by the delights of fresh, powdery beignets and a slow trickle of friends into the city. In Jackson, where my parents live, people sometimes brag about making the three-hour trek down just for a nice Friday-night dinner. The directions to get there from Mississippi are simple: follow the highway until the swamp eats it. Eventually, the ground drops out beneath the road entirely. You stop passing notices for counties and begin seeing ones for parishes; the squat warehouses filled with wholesale Mardi Gras spangles multiply; and finally the brackish expanse of Lake Pontchartrain stretches out languidly below, the shimmer of the Central Business District emerging on the horizon.

Going to New Orleans after a fresh reading of *Confederacy* gives the whole place a different flavour. I felt like a conspiracy theorist. Every sign began to read like a knowing wink, every passer by an excised extra from the book. As I drove in this time, pondering the eccentricities of Ignatius Reilly, I noticed a brewery sign recently rehabbed and installed on an apartment complex; its red neon letters blared FALSTAFF at the cars scurrying down I-10. (The letters, I later learned, change colours according to the daily weather report. Green means fair weather, red is for an overcast day, flashing red and white means that a storm is approaching.) I read the sign as a bit of marginalia, a reminder of Ignatius Reilly's roots in the long-winded Shakespearean figure. New Orleans scrolled out before me like a manuscript marked up with a sure hand, a play with the director's notes scribbled in every street.

Toole was a native New Orleanian; his Irish-Creole background traced back to Jean-François Ducoing, a friend of the French pirate Jean Lafitte who earned praise from Andrew Jackson for his role in the Battle of New Orleans. (Thelma often went by her full name, Thelma Ducoing Toole.) Though he spent several years studying in New York, most of Toole's life spread from Uptown, one of the oldest, most well-to-do parts of New Orleans. *A Confederacy of Dunces*, Toole told his friends when he was working on the manuscript, attempted to convey the texture of the place, in all its whirling, overlapping glory. 'Irene, Reilly, Mancuso – these people say something about New Orleans,' Toole wrote in one letter to Robert Gottlieb. 'They're real as individuals and also as representative of a book . . . with Ignatius as my agent, my New Orleans experiences began to fit in, one after the other, and then I was simply observing and not inventing.'

It is the last phrase that struck me the most: *observing and not inventing*. That observational quality is one of the most compelling, purely fun things about *Confederacy*: it feels like an inventive friend taking you into their confidence about the people in his office, or at her family reunion, mimicking their reactions and playing up their tics. If some fiction works by bringing the characters suffocatingly close, *Confederacy* works by keeping them all at arm's length. The joy of *Confederacy* is in its skill for recognizing absurdity in the familiar. It is a people-watching book, a taxonomy of the species of New Orleans.

Faulkner's New Orleans is a messy watercolour of a place, overrunning with pigment. Tennessee Williams's New Orleans is steamy, haunted and claustrophobic, full of nervous creatures and dilapidated boarding houses; it always seems to be dusk there. The New Orleans that Toole paints in *Confederacy* is a different city altogether, the only place out of the three that I recognize. His New Orleans is wider, weirder, always on the move. It expands into the neighborhoods upriver, tracing the intersection of an oafish intellectual and his longsuffering henna-haired mother with a foul-mouthed Italian woman, a defeated policeman, a working-class con artist, a Bible-thumping geriatric, a crusading New York beatnik and an underpaid, sarcastic black man who wears sunglasses indoors. Toole's characters don't speak; they scream. City life is a constant series of tiny social conflicts and misunderstandings.

In *Confederacy* Toole pins down the fleeting, spontaneous communities that form in New Orleans. Round the right street corner and you're suddenly swept up in a parade or a brawl or a funeral. You run into the same stranger repeatedly; you begin to suspect that you're simply waiting in the wings to be introduced into a story, that any minute you could be bound together with an unlikely companion. At the beginning of *Confederacy* most of the characters are unacquainted with one another. By the end of the book their lives are hopelessly snarled together. *Confederacy* is a chain reaction of coincidences coaxed into a pattern larger and more inevitable, something like fate. Its conceit is that it is about nothing, about the many nothings of ordinary life that somehow arrange, symphony-like, into the whole of everything.

New Orleans can read as a land of inexplicable quirks. The foibles of the city are numerous and well documented: here bodies are buried above ground and the seasons are, so goes the old joke, Summer, Hurricane, Christmas and Mardi Gras. The sun rises over the West Bank. During the weeks of Carnival, emergency rooms teem with injuries suffered by overenthusiastic revellers whipping beads at breakneck speeds. Even trying to read a map in New Orleans is a translation exercise, the mixture of Spanish, French and Louisiana English commingling in unruly collisions of syllables. In Toole's hands, the entropy makes sense, seems necessary. There is a code to the chaos, dream logic. *Confederacy* is often hailed for its grasp of the language of New Orleans, the flavours of dialect that Toole aptly mixed into the book. But he managed more than that. New Orleans has a grammar to it, and Toole was its most fluent practitioner.

The most obvious *Confederacy of Dunces* landmark in New Orleans is the statue of Ignatius J. Reilly, which is positioned outside the former D. H. Holmes department store on Canal Street. I headed there. In a town full of eye-catching things, the statue is not one of them. The D. H. Holmes is now the Hyatt French Quarter, the statue tucked underneath a voluminous purple awning. Directly above Ignatius's bronze head hangs a black-and-white clock that completes the scene from the book, though it looks out of place near the sleek hotel doors. On the column nearby a plaque has part of the opening paragraph of *Confederacy*. Ignatius, resplendent in his signature green hunting cap with

earflaps ‘stuck out on either side like turn signals indicating two directions at once’, surveys his fellow New Orleanians:

In the shadow under the green visor of the cap Ignatius J. Reilly’s supercilious blue and yellow eyes looked down upon the other people waiting under the clock at the D. H. Holmes department store, studying the crowd of people for signs of bad taste in dress.

When Mardi Gras is in full swing, the city removes the statue to prevent the crowds from desecrating or stealing it. (The temporary absence prompted an investigation by NPR in 2012.) But as I stood there, no one paid attention to the slouched bronze figure. Tourists wielding acid-green, alien-shaped plastic cups full of frozen cocktails bubbled past on their way to browse stores stuffed with ribald T-shirts, hot sauces, souvenir cups and cured alligator heads. Shoppers marched down the block, loaded with plastic bags in primary colours. A cart on the corner of Canal and Bourbon Street seemed exclusively to sell things emblazoned with Bob Marley’s face: T-shirts, hats, bags, flags, pins. It was easy to imagine Ignatius tallying the offenses of passers by, the myriad violations against his moral standard of ‘theology and geometry’.

Sculptor William Ludwig, who completed the Ignatius bronze in 1996, based the figure on John ‘Spud’ McConnell, a local character actor famous for playing Ignatius in stage adaptations of *Confederacy*. The likeness is a fair one: there is the crumb-dotted moustache above a half smirk, the rumpled clothes, the shopping bag presumably filled with replacement lute strings and the slumped posture of Toole’s description. But as with every book character that looms so brightly in the imagination, it’s an inexact translation into flesh or bronze. On Yelp!, where the statue has its own profile (and a four-and-a-half-star rating), fans who recognized Ignatius complained that he isn’t quite right. ‘Docking a star because haughtiness level is just not high enough, the artist seemed to put a glimmer of compassion on his face’ one reviewer wrote. ‘He can use 80 pounds of heft also.’

True, Ignatius’s statue seemed slighter than the mammoth-bellied figure Toole described. This bronze figure did not look like the man who, when perched upon a stool, ‘looked like an eggplant balanced on a thumbtack’, who, as he waits for his mother fidgeting, ‘sent waves of flesh rippling beneath the tweed and flannel, waves that broke upon buttons and seams’. But the criticism is a tribute to how powerful a character Toole created. Ignatius is the critic incarnate, so it’s little wonder some of his attitude gets reflected back on his own statue. He is a high-minded buffoon, overeducated and under-experienced, constantly aghast at his fellow humans’ failings. He is all knowledge and no wisdom; nevertheless, his perspective is addictive. People become surreal cartoons, collections of flaws and eccentricities. While writing the book on his army base in Puerto Rico, Toole explained to Gottlieb in a letter, Ignatius began to hijack his thoughts. ‘In the unreality of my Puerto Rican experience, this book became

more real to me than what was happening around me; I was beginning to talk and act like Ignatius.'

It's not just Toole. Once you read Ignatius, you absorb him. You begin hearing his voice in your head, that sneering indignation at the oddity and incompetence of other human beings. When I first read *Confederacy* in high school, I found Ignatius merely amusing. When I read *Confederacy* after college, I recognized him. I began to see him everywhere. I saw a little of him in everyone I met, and in myself especially.

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Toole created Ignatius in the 1960s, but there is a timeless quality to his cantankerousness. You can picture him being unhappy with any decade. He serves perfectly as a cartoon of an entitled twentysomething millennial. He still lives at home with his mother, Irene, after a lengthy period at college, where he studied medieval literature and philosophy and gained no practical skills. He is a relentless consumer – of hot dogs, of Big Chief writing tablets, of Dr Nut soda – and produces only various kinds of hot air. He strictly reads obscure philosophers and Batman comics. Ignatius is the great-granddaddy of snark. He watches movies so he can confirm that he hates them. He lives to document violations against 'good taste and decency'. He feels these infractions bodily, through the function of his oft-mentioned 'pyloric valve'. For Ignatius, taste is an ethical code. A movie he dislikes isn't just a dud, it's a moral failure. The contrast between Ignatius's rigid rules for everyone else and his lax ones for himself is the source of several of the book's funniest scenes, such as when Patrolman Mancuso visits Ignatius and Irene Reilly's tiny house in the midst of Ignatius's ranting at an *American Bandstand*-like television programme that showcases talented kids:

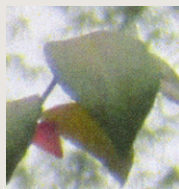
‘I would like very much to know what the Founding Fathers would say if they could see the children being debauched to further the cause of Clearasil. However, I always suspected democracy would come to this.’ He painstakingly poured the milk into his Shirley Temple mug. ‘A firm rule must be imposed upon our nation before it destroys itself. The United States needs some theology and geometry, some taste and decency. I suspect that we are teetering on the edge of an abyss.’

In a different era, Ignatius would have been terrific at the Internet. You can picture him tucked into his Constantinople Street bedroom with an empty case of root beer at his feet, crouched over a grungy, glowing laptop, posting screeds to his blog, adding pointed and overwrought comments below news articles.

‘When my brain begins to reel from my literary labors, I make the occasional cheese dip,’ Ignatius tells Patrolman Mancuso when asked about his profession, a statement that could also serve perfectly as a Twitter bio.

Toole’s inspiration for Ignatius was medieval scholar Robert Byrne, a friend of his from a year he spent teaching at Southwestern Louisiana Institute, two hours west of New Orleans. Byrne taught at the tiny English Department of the institute, now the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, and shared an office with Toole. Like Ignatius, Byrne was a hefty, moustached fellow obsessed with the philosopher Boethius and his treatise *The Consolation of Philosophy*, a tome that he assigned to every class he taught. The phrase ‘geometry and theology’ was one that his colleagues recall Byrne using often, usually because one thing or another lacked those qualities. Like Ignatius, Byrne loved hot dogs, wore a hunting cap with the earflaps arranged at odd angles and saw no sense in clothes that matched. In his memoir, *Ken and Thelma*, fellow faculty member and friend Joel Fletcher remembers Byrne appearing at the office one day in ‘three different kinds of plaid and an absurd hat’. Toole, who was fastidious in his dressing habits, was taken aback, and told Byrne that he looked ‘like the April Fool cover of *Esquire*’.

Anecdotes about Byrne paint him as a perfect Ignatian character. Fletcher writes about a time he was whistling while walking across campus with Byrne, who demanded to know the tune. Fletcher replied that he thought it was a Beethoven quartet’s *scherzo*. “‘I’ve always resented *scherzi*,” said Bobby. “They replaced the minuet, you know.”” A version of this exchange, which Fletcher likely relayed to Toole, appears in *Confederacy* when Ignatius asks if a hot-dog vendor is whistling a composition from Scarlatti. The vendor replies that the tune is ‘Turkey in the Straw’, and Ignatius seems miffed. ‘I had hoped you might be familiar with Scarlatti’s work. He was the last of the musicians . . . with your apparent musical bent, you might apply yourself to something worthwhile.’ Byrne even had the perfect response for interviewers who asked about his reaction to the success of *Confederacy*. When one reporter from the *Washington Star* asked if Byrne was bothered by his fictional likeness, you can practically hear the sneer in his voice from the reply: ‘I never read bestsellers.’



Though Byrne's sartorial sense and verbal tics filled in the physical details of Ignatius, the character Toole created isn't just a caricature of an old friend, it's also a skewering bit of self-parody. For all his idiosyncrasies, Byrne was a successful teacher, content to live in a cottage near the school and practise medieval music in Lafayette. Ignatius lives at home, locked in a combative relationship with his mother, a description that much better fits Toole than Byrne. Nor were Ignatius's money problems alien to Toole: after the tightening grip of mental illness left Toole's father unable to support himself and Thelma, Toole kept his parents afloat financially. Ignatius reads as much a compilation of Toole's greatest fears as a sketch of a real person. Ignatius and Toole are not the same, but his character acts as a conduit for Toole's observations about himself, and a fun-house mirror version of an academic with aspirations that don't match his circumstances. In Ignatius, he could express the worst of himself. 'The book is not autobiography; neither is it altogether an invention,' Toole wrote to Gottlieb. 'I am not in the book; I've never pretended to be. But I am writing about things that I know, and in recounting these, it's difficult not to *feel* them.'

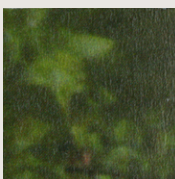
From the spot below the clock at the former D. H. Holmes department store, Ignatius and his mother, Irene, round the corner to Bourbon Street to recover from a scrape with the law in a seedy bar called Night of Joy, a place that becomes a fulcrum of the freewheeling misadventures that follow. No such establishment exists, at least not exactly, but from the vantage point of the Reilly statue, you can see the spangled marquee sign for a jewel-box theatre on Canal Street. The name of the establishment is 'Joy Theatre' but the sign reads simply joy in bold red letters, as if it were not a suggestion of feeling but a commandment for one. The theatre was built in 1947, well in

time for Toole to have taken note of the blaring letters hovering on the horizon. I took it as another note in the margins of the city and rounded the corner.

If you were blindfolded and dropped into the French Quarter, it's possible that you could find your way on to Bourbon Street just by your nose. Despite the vigilance of the brave men and women of the New Orleans Sanitation Department, the most populated blocks of the street always smell like sugar and stomach acid. It was late afternoon, and the night's rumpus had yet to begin. Evidence of the previous night's partying clotted on the sidewalks. Fleur-de-lis confetti, tiny plastic animals used in cocktails and feathers dotted the gutters of the side streets, as if a horde of drunken costumed Hansels and Gretels were hoping to find their way back again. Every other door leads to a glass-fronted daiquiri counter, touting an electric palette of frozen, saccharine cocktails, served from constantly whirling machines into huge Styrofoam cups. Groups of tourists in matching colourful T-shirts floated from doorway to doorway like schools of tropical fish. Above, on wrought-iron balconies, bored-looking men in football jerseys held fistfuls of cheap beads, waiting for an adequate target. At one corner a group of equally bored-looking evangelicals held signs asking passers by about their relationship with Jesus. It was, in short, excellent people-watching. As Ignatius says when his mother tries to pry him loose from their place at Night of Joy: 'We must stay to watch the corruption. It's already beginning to set in.'

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Confederacy is in part a satire of Bourbon Street. It's unlikely that any of the places I walked by literally had an act with a faux Southern belle being undressed by a cockatoo, but an animal act didn't seem far-fetched, nor did a scheming owner with a policy of watering down the drinks. The exaggerated Southern-ness that Darlene can't quite nail in her act is a big selling point on Bourbon Street. 'Come on in, y'all,' a man beckoned



to me, pointing to a sign for 'The Swamp Thing', a mechanical bull painted green. 'Laissez those bon temps right here.'

As I stood tucked into the sidewalk, scribbling notes, an older woman with a perfect blonde bouffant and frosted pink lipstick began speaking at me through a headpiece microphone. She wore a name-tag that read MARION LIGHTFOOT and a khaki shirt.



'Where you from?' she asked, pursing her lips. I began to explain my *Confederacy* mission and she cut me off. 'Well, that's fine, but I'm going to have to issue you a ticket.' She squinted at a saffron-coloured notebook and checked off several offenses before handing me the slip with a flourish. The ticket had a tiny ClipArt illustration of an upset policeman under the banner 'Party Pooper Award'. My infractions included 'Not Partying Hard Enough' and 'Being Too Serious', as well as 'Guy/Girl Watching' and 'Being Too Good-Looking.' When I looked up, she offered a khaki visor from her bag with BOURBON STREET embroidered on the front and began to solicit a donation for a charity organization. 'No thanks,' I said, finally catching on. Her smile contracted. 'Just hold this, cupcake,' she snapped. 'It's part of the skit.' I complied. She finished her spiel and then whipped around to begin the script again. 'Where you from? Wichita?' I heard as I scuttled away down Bourbon Street.

In my haste to escape, I almost missed the next stop on my Ignatius tour. There was no address for this one, but I had been assured that it would not be difficult to find, particularly along the tourist corridor parts of the city. I scanned the sidewalks for a distinctive red-and-white-striped uniform, feeling a bit like I had been plunged into *Where's Waldo?* But, finally, I spotted what I was looking for. There on the corner of Bourbon and Toulouse, sheltered under a bright red-and-white Coca-Cola umbrella, shone a seven-foot-long steel frankfurter with LUCKY DOGS emblazoned on top of the bun and wheels attached to the bottom. A red attachment on top advertises the short menu: Lucky Dog, Regular Hot Dog or Smoked Sausage. I had found a Lucky Dogs cart.

Lucky Dogs is a French Quarter fast-food staple, a beacon to those straggling home from the bars in search of sustenance or peckish while perusing the antique stores on Royal Street. It's the model for Paradise Vendors, the company that employs Ignatius as a lacklustre hot-dog hawker in the second half of *Confederacy*. Lucky Dogs has a lock on the New Orleans hot-dog market, thanks to a 1972 law that prevents pushcarts from operating in the Vieux Carré unless they had established themselves at least eight years prior. Lucky Dogs had been crawling through the Quarter since 1948, so the law effectively ensured a monopoly for the company. But the carts are more than a well-known stop for a five-minute dinner; they've also entered New Orleans iconography, thanks partly to *Confederacy*. Former Lucky Dogs manager Jerry Strahan wrote an amusing memoir of his twenty years employing a group of drunks, swindlers, misanthropes and other outsized characters who worked as his hot-dog vendors; in honour of his famous fictional employee, Strahan entitled the book *Managing Ignatius*. 'Our crew

is still made up of the same sorts of eccentric individuals that Toole must have met,' Strahan writes in the introduction. 'I had considered calling it *A Hundred and One People I Wish I Had Never Met*, but I couldn't narrow down the list.'

Painters in Jackson Square offer watercolours of the carts, and the company sells ties, visors and Christmas ornaments emblazoned with the Lucky Dogs logo. Drinking stories about New Orleans often end with the apocryphal tale of some hooligan riding on top of the cart when the vendors push them back to the garage around four a.m. Some couples rent out the carts to cater for their wedding receptions. (The minimum package for catering, three hundred hot dogs with all the fittings, starts at \$747.) There is a Lucky Dogs stand at the airport, and one appeared briefly in Disneyland Paris. Even at the time Toole wrote *Confederacy* the carts were everywhere, and had a reputation for being manned by colourful characters, the sort who would rather not report in to an office job. The one I stood in front of was doing brisk business despite the early hour, handing out wienies to a line of dudes in baseball caps and knock-off Oakleys. I got in line.

Confederacy might have bumped up the Lucky Dogs image, but it doesn't really celebrate the carts' gastronomic offerings. Ignatius gets hooked into selling wienies after he stumbles upon the cart garage and notices 'the distinct odours of hot dog, mustard and lubricant'. When Ignatius asks the ingredients of the meaty treats that 'swished and lashed like artificially coloured and magnified paramercia' in the pot of boiling water, his boss-to-be, Mr Clyde, replies, 'Rubber, cereal, tripe. Who knows? I wouldn't touch one of them myself.' Not exactly appetizing, but it doesn't deter Ignatius. He eats four in a row after that.

Ignatius makes a miserable hot-dog salesman. He refuses to sell hot dogs to customers who violate his standard of geometry, eats most of his wares himself and then lies to Clyde about being robbed. Instead of pushing the cart around well-trafficked areas, he parks out of the way and jots notes on Marco Polo. 'The wagon is a terrible liability,' Ignatius writes in his journal. 'I feel like a hen sitting on a particularly large tin egg.' He attempts to trap a stray cat and put her in the bun compartment of the cart to keep as a pet. He wheels it to a society ladies' art showing on Pirate's Alley – the narrow street behind St Louis Cathedral where Faulkner once lived – to mock their paintings. During all these antics, Ignatius sports the vendor's uniform that 'made him look like a dinosaur egg about to hatch', later jazzed up at Mr Clyde's insistence with the addition of a plastic pirate's cutlass, a red sateen bandanna tied around the hunting cap and a clip-on gold earring. He attaches a sign to the front of the cart that reads, in crayon, 'TWELVE INCHES (12") OF PARADISE,' which is inevitably vandalized with sketches of 'a variety of genitals'. He abandons the cart to go and watch movies in the middle of the day and ultimately uses the wagon's warming compartment to smuggle pornography.

Toole had first-hand experience in the hot-dog-selling game. While studying at Tulane, he sold wienies at football games to earn an allowance. In *Ignatius Rising*, the

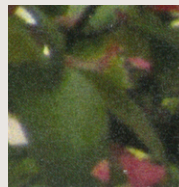
authors cite a musician friend of Toole's, Sidney Snow, who used to push a Fiesta Hot Tamale cart around the French Quarter. Toole would take over Snow's route at a pinch. But even without years spent pushing around a wagon of wienies, it's easy to see why Toole would choose that occupation for Ignatius. It's a great vantage point for making observations about the city, as integral to New Orleans as the taxi driver is to New York City. It's the perfect spot at the edge of the ceaseless parade.

I paid him for the hot dog and furtively checked the bun compartment for porn or kittens. It harboured neither.



I stood in line watching the vendor spear the pink sausages and present them to customers on pillowy buns, smothered in chili and relish and cheese. He used the universal utensil of the hot-dog vendor, the telescoping two-pronged tiny fork, the same kind Ignatius uses to flip dogs out of boiling water, and the same kind that his manager used to threaten Ignatius's Adam's apple when the lumbering medievalist eats most of the day's profits. He was wearing the trademark red-and-white striped smock, topped by a lace-patterned fedora. He had grey, wispy hair and was missing his two front teeth. His name, I learned, was Jerry. I ordered a Lucky Dog with onions and asked if he had ever read *Confederacy*. 'People ask me that all the time,' he replied good-naturedly, squirting ketchup on the hot dog as he spoke. 'But nope, I sure haven't. The library seems to always be out of copies.' I paid him for the hot dog and furtively checked the bun compartment for porn or kittens. It harboured neither.

I had reached my Bourbon Street saturation point, so I moseyed off to my next stop, munching the hot dog happily. My destination was in the Bywater, a pleasant ways away from the clang and churn of the Quarter. On my way out of the Vieux Carré I swung by Napoleon House, once offered by the mayor of New Orleans to the French leader as a refuge, later a favourite spot for Toole to drink with his friends, and now a famous Creole restaurant. I walked down Pirate's Alley, where Ignatius crashed that art show, past St Louis Cathedral, where Patrolman Mancuso had sought shelter. Outside the cathedral, in the wide promenade that circles Jackson Square, another Lucky Dogs vendor pushed his cart past palm-readers, voodoo wannabes and human statues. A sou-saphone player entertained the line of people outside Café du Monde, where tables of people merrily sipped chicory coffee and ruined their clothes with clouds of powdered



sugar wafting from hot beignets. I walked east past Frenchman Street, past a twenty-four-hour combination bar and laundromat, past vintage stores that displayed enormous feathered Mardi Gras headdresses, past a man in a camper chair selling gumbo from a bubbling pot beside his feet. Music from brass bands curled around the corners, beckoning. Further east, into the Bywater, I ran into a rolling bank of fog and emerged outside the compound of folk artist Dr Bob, whose paintings of cultural icons, decorated with bottle caps, instruct would-be visitors to 'Be Nice or Leave', as well as 'Who Dat or Leave'. I turned up Dauphine Street and hit upon the Bywater art lofts.

The lofts are in the former J. H. Rutter Rex Manufacturing Building, the place Toole probably used as inspiration for the Levy Pants factory. Toole based his portrait



of the slowly dying Levy Pants on his time working part-time for Haspel Brothers, a clothing company famous for its seersucker suits. (A paystub for a week's work, \$40, is among the papers Thelma kept.) Toole worked there after graduating from Tulane at the age of twenty, thanks to skipping two grades in elementary school. His boss was the son-in-law of one of the Haspel brothers, and no doubt some of his observations from the situation later drifted into *Confederacy's* description of the hapless Mr Levy and his exercise-board-addicted wife. Before his stint as a hot-dog seller, Ignatius works at Levy Pants briefly, until he gets fired for an attempt to foment a revolution among the factory workers, a campaign that he describes as a 'Crusade for Moorish Dignity'. He charms the senile Miss Trixie with athletic socks and lunch meat, throws away the filing he's supposed to do and instead builds a detailed cross. Toole describes the building as 'two structures fused into one macabre unit,' a sickly thing in the corner of the neighbourhood. 'Alongside the neat grey wharf sheds that lined the river and canal across the railroad tracks, Levy Pants huddles, a silent and smoky plea for urban renewal.'

Renewal had come, but not at the behest of any smoky plea. The Bywater was one of the few neighbourhoods left relatively intact after the devastation of Katrina, part of the 'sliver by the river' protected by a natural levee. The sudden influx of people into the neighborhood coupled with the lack of housing stock made the once-abandoned factory look more appealing than Toole might have seen it. A group of investors converted the space into apartments for lower-income artists. The former factory, trimmed in primary colours, now had various watercolour projects stuck into the windows to dry, giving it the appearance of an upscale elementary school. A few lanky men in T-shirts smoked cigarettes outside the door and spoke in low tones.

The epicentre of *Confederacy* is in the French Quarter, but except for this brief foray east, the rest of the book moves west up the crescent of the Mississippi River. Constantinople Street, where Toole places the ramshackle house in which Ignatius and his mother lived, is in Touro, in the Twelfth Ward, a streetcar ride away on the St Charles line. Toole paints the area as a claustrophobic, working-class one, where you can hear your neighbours through the walls and humid nights draw people out on to their porches. It's the kind of place where nosy homebodies write anonymous letters to one another, sniping about untoward behaviour. The Reilly home, Toole writes, was the tiniest one on a block of houses 'that dripped carving and scrollwork, Boss Tweed suburban stereotypes separated by alleys so narrow that a yardstick could almost bridge them.' The Reillys' yard is bare except for a frozen banana tree and a leaning cross-built on the burial spot of the family dog Rex.

I walked down Constantinople from St Charles, down from the pine-green streetcars that undulated away from the avenue, past the wizened trees that filtered the watery sunlight. In *Confederacy*, Patrolman Mancuso 'inhaled the mouldy scent of the oaks and thought, in a romantic aside, that St Charles Avenue must be the loveliest place

on earth.’ Though Toole lived farther Uptown, I always thought of that line as a little love note to his home slipped among the pages. It’s an easy sentiment to feel on a warm day, something about the rich arboreal aroma, the green-gold shade painting the sidewalk. On the corner of Magazine Street, a pop-up bakery was selling king cake, the scent of baking cinnamon-sugar dough wafting out from the ventilation system. Towards the river, on the southern blocks of Constantinople where the Reillys’ home would have been, little shotgun houses in pastel colours lined the block like Easter eggs in their carton. In one of these, perhaps the one with slanted shutters and a striped awning, or the one with a crumpled front gate, Ignatius could have been upstairs bellowing ‘Big Girls Don’t Cry’ to the distress of his neighbours, Irene Reilly hiding her muscatel in the oven.

Constantinople Street had shifted since Toole had seen it last, weathered almost half a century, a storm and an ensuing wave of construction. At first I couldn’t figure out what bothered me about the difference between the place as it stands and the one in *Confederacy*. And then I realized: it’s too quiet. No chatters or cackles leaked from the houses, no gossip or complaints echoed through the slim alleyways. What I was missing was the voices, the fretful ‘Al Smith Inflection’ of Irene’s y’at accent, that linguistic anomaly that appears simultaneously in deep New Orleans and deep Brooklyn. I had been straining my ears for Ignatius’s bellows, Irene’s sighs, the slangy endearments of her friend Santa Battaglia. Toole so deftly populated the street with their clamour that I had half expected to be able to eavesdrop on them.

Constantinople Street is not far from the Prytania Theatre, the movie temple Ignatius frequented to better understand the failings of Hollywood. Irene and Santa walked there through the fictional parish of St Odo to see a Debbie Reynolds movie, through the summertime ‘cacophony of dropping pots, booming television sets, arguing voices, screaming children and slamming doors’. Ignatius was even conceived thanks to the Prytania, after Irene and Mr Reilly had gone there on a date to see the Clark Gable romance *Red Dust*. ‘Poor Mr Reilly,’ Toole wrote. ‘He had never gone to another movie as long as he lived.’ The Prytania Theatre of the 1960s was a neighbourhood single-screen palace bedecked with a columned entrance and a grand marquee. The one that I visited was a squat, red-brick block with a blue cursive ‘Prytania’ sign on the upper-right corner of the building, as if a giant had casually autographed the place. The lobby, a pamphlet under the box office assured, had recently undergone extensive renovations. Iced coffee was now available alongside the usual shrink-wrapped boxes of Sno-Caps and bags of buttered popcorn.

Ignatius visited the Prytania religiously to hate-watch whatever they offered, his paunch spilling out over the armrests, an array of snacks occupying the seat next to him. Toole was an avid moviegoer, and some element of Ignatius’s behaviour might have been culled from his own audience pet peeves. (Some, too, must have been self-parody. In *Butterfly in the Typewriter*, one friend remembers Toole interrupting a couple snickering at the folly of Southerners during a screening of *Birth of a Nation*

in order to lecture them about the finer points of Reconstruction.) He paints Ignatius as the worst kind of movie watcher, the obnoxious scream-at-the-screen kind, the one who is quickest to remind you of the special effects and to spoil the ending. He examines the close-up faces of actors for scars and cavities, he yells in the kissing scenes about the probability of halitosis. In his journal, Ignatius proclaims that he seeks refuge there to ogle 'Technicoloured horrors, filmed abortions that were offences against any criteria of taste and decency, reels and reels of perversion and blasphemy that stunned my disbelieving eyes, that shocked my virginal mind, and sealed my valve.' But, of course, that's the joke. Ignatius isn't interested in the potential of the cinema as an art form; in fact, he shies away from one film he suspects might be good. He's there to bolster his world view by puncturing the illusions of other moviegoers, to confirm his rightness.

At first I couldn't figure out what bothered me about the difference between the place as it stands and the one in *Confederacy*. And then I realized: it's too quiet

The punchline here is the same one in the book's title, which Toole took from Jonathan Swift: 'When a true genius appears in the world, you may know him by this sign, that the dunces are all in confederacy against him.' Ignatius sees nothing but stupidity around him; he thinks of himself as an infiltrator at the party, scoffing at the small talk. But to the reader, he's clearly just as much a participant in the confederacy as any of the other characters. The loftiness of his perspective is a farce. And as you snicker at Ignatius, you begin to suspect that your own perspective is equally skewed. *Confederacy* is a book about the impossibility of just watching. There's no such thing as an innocent onlooker, as someone who's just a member of the audience. It's a book that makes you conscious of life's general absurdity, the ridiculous things we do that pass for pragmatism. We are all confederates in the duncedom.

From the Prytania, I drove farther uptown to poke around the neighbourhood in which Toole lived for most of his life. Thelma and Toole's father, John, a nervous car salesman, moved to the edge of the affluent neighbourhood shortly after Toole

was born. Thelma positioned the family there in order to enter into the competitive social games of high-society New Orleans, to distance herself from her downtown upbringing. The family moved from house to house, clinging to the neighbourhood even when it was no longer financially practical. In later years, Toole paid his parents' rent on their Uptown apartments, setting aside a portion of his wages from the Army to prop up their place in the neighbourhood. The last place he lived in New Orleans was there, a house on the corner of Hampson Street, not far from his job teaching at the all-girls Dominican College.

On my way to see it, the houses begin to widen and grow taller. The leafiness intensifies. The hues are muted creams, mossy greens, barely-there pinks, as if the neon colours of the French Quarter had washed, diluted, upriver. The house Toole lived in last is now sea-foam green with neat white trim, hemmed in by a row of hedges and a wrought-iron fence. A cheery flag with autumn leaves waves by the door. An attic window peers out from the roof like a periscope. Near the gate, a tasteful plaque marks the home as the Toole-Hecker House, in deference to the family that built the place in 1885 and its most famous tenants. At the corner outside the house is where Toole had his final argument with Thelma before rocketing away in his car, destined eventually for that pecan grove outside of Biloxi.

Within the pages of *Confederacy*, it's easy to picture the Toole his friends described, the one who impressed girls with his dance skills and quaffed cocktails in the Roosevelt Hotel's Sazerac Bar, the gifted mimic and notorious cheapskate, the Marilyn Monroe obsessive and sharp dresser. It's harder to imagine him after the party was done. I couldn't conjure up the Toole who lived here, the dedicated teacher slowly unravelling in the stuffiness of his family home. Bobby Byrne, the model for Ignatius, described his friend as 'extroverted and private', that most heady and paradoxical of combinations. He was a shapeshifter, as we all are. To his mother he was a doting genius, to his acquaintances a real card, to his readers an unsung literary hero. He even has different names to go with those different identities: 'Ken' for his Louisiana friends, 'John' for his New York buddies, 'Kenny' to Thelma and the full-bore 'John Kennedy Toole' for the rest of us. Here, at the spot where Toole lived in his last days, was where I felt most acutely how little information there was about Toole's personal life. His warm, witty voice in *Confederacy* brings him so close that it's jarring to realize you know nothing about him, that you are strangers still.

My final stop was the point on the map farthest from the Ignatius statue, an outlier on the arc from the French Quarter to the Toole home Uptown. Toole's remains, once collected from his car in Biloxi, were interred in the Ducoing grave in Greenwood Cemetery, up the expressway towards Pontchartrain, near City Park. New Orleans is famous for its cemeteries, the deceased interred in above-ground vaults thanks to the high water table and Spanish tradition. They are popularly referred to as cities of the dead, thanks partially to a half-admiring, half-horrified observation Mark Twain made about their architecture in *Life on the Mississippi*. Greenwood Cemetery is a suburb of

the dead. The graves are plotted in neat rows on streets named after flowers and fruit: Tulip, Evergreen, Lily, Magnolia, Lemon. A man on a riding lawnmower neatened the edges of the grassy avenues.

I went into the office of the funeral home for help with directions, and met a father-son pair of undertakers. A brochure on the father's desk showed the cemetery's monument to the Fireman's Charitable Association, and, in bold, 'Always Prestigious, Still Affordable'. I told him about my mission and he brought up Toole's name on his computer screen. 'Sure, in the Ducoing tomb. He's buried two down from my mom and daddy.' He pointed, highlighting the spot on a map. He paused and looked up from the screen slyly. 'That fella sure was a dunce, huh?'

The grave was on Latanier Avenue, a classy marble number with a cross above. Toole's name was sixth on the list of the buried, two above his mother's. The stone vases with DUCOING inscribed on them were empty. I plucked a clover that the riding lawnmower had spared and placed it on the stone.

When an author commits suicide, there's an urge to look back through his fiction for signs of trouble, for hints as to how his life will end. Toole left very few of those in *Confederacy*. His book is scathing, even sneering, but at the centre of it is a sense of glee. I come away from its pages marvelling at the weirdness around me, at the masquerade, rather than depressed by it. Even Ignatius, faced with his mother's threats to commit him to the mental hospital, gets a happy ending courtesy of his beatnik quasi ex-girlfriend, that 'musky minx' Myrna Minkoff. She appears at his doorstep just before the ambulance from Charity Hospital does, and the two of them, loaded with Ignatius's lute and loose-leaf papers, head to New York:

Myrna prodded and shifted the Renault through the city traffic masterfully, weaving in and out of impossibly narrow lanes until they were clear of the last twinkling streetlight of the last swampy suburb. Then they were in darkness in the centre of the salt marshes. Ignatius looked out at the highway marker that reflected their headlights. US 11. The marker flew past. He rolled down the window an inch or two and breathed the salt air blowing in over the marshes from the Gulf. As if the air was a purgative, his valve opened. He breathed again, this time more deeply. The dull headache was lifting.

The party doesn't end, it just moves. I wished that Toole's life could have had a similar *deus ex machina*, a journey that ended somewhere other than that lonely Biloxi highway.

A Q&A with Jason Burke

The New Threat from Islamic Militancy

Jason Burke on Paris, the evolution of ISIS's strategic thinking, and how to interview the family of a suicide bomber and the social aspect of terrorism.

Jason Burke has been reporting on Islamic militancy for nearly two decades, but if his reportage in the *Guardian* and the *Observer* has slipped past you for some reason, it's worth looking at his books. The previous two have simple, self-explanatory titles. If you want to know about al-Qaeda, you might want to read *Al-Qaeda: The True Story of Radical Islam*. If you're interested in understanding the conflicts that engulfed the world after the twin towers fell in New York, *The 9/11 Wars* does what it says on the tin. Burke's writing works in two ways – pressing forward, describing the world he encounters over the course of his reportage, and also working back into the history of militancy, the root causes and context. His recent book *The New Threat* offers nuance in place of the blanket statements given by politicians and pundits, and provides more than a few much-needed corrections. His reportage after the Paris attacks on 13 November described, with great care, the purpose of ISIS's use of violence.

We here at *Five Dials* were anxious to ask Burke about, among other things, the use of that word 'medieval', which seems to spring up in most discussions of the Islamic State.

Five Dials: Politicians often call extremism 'medieval'.

Why is this wrong?

Jason Burke: There are various problems. The first is that it is historically inaccurate. The adjective is used as a kind of shorthand for barbaric, retrograde, brutal and ignorant, and we know, of course, that much of what happened in much of the world in the

Middle Ages was the opposite of this. Nor does anyone ever specify where or what they mean by 'medieval'. Are we talking eleventh-century northern Europe or twelfth-century Mesopotamia, for example? But the broader issue is that it frames a phenomenon that is fundamentally contemporary as something that is some kind of irrational eruption from the past. This leads us to underestimate the very real capabilities of Islamic militants by effectively implying that they can and will inevitably be overcome by us with our modern ideas and modern weapons, and also leads us to misunderstand the nature of the enemy, which is fundamentally contemporary.

Significantly perhaps, the 'medieval' label was notably absent in the aftermath of the Paris attacks. I'm not sure why. Perhaps observers just worked out, watching the news as it came out and learning about the killers, that there was nothing at all medieval about them or what they were doing

In 1998 and 1999 I watched executions in Taliban Afghanistan. The audience was limited to those sitting or standing alongside me. Now we can all view the executions of the IS because of social media. This is a different kind of event, a contemporary one, not a throwback to a previous era. Islamic militants are of our time, now, and of our place, which is here. They are in fact ahead of the curve very often, not behind it. They were crowd-sourcing funding before the word was even invented. Their vision of a state without contiguous borders – the Caliphate as it has now been reimagined – is very novel and very much a product of our current globalized world and fragmented international political system.

FD: Obama described IS as 'a terrorist organization, pure and simple'. You point out it's not. It's a hybrid of insurgency, separatism, terrorism and criminality with deep local roots in local environment, in regional conflicts, and in broader geopolitical battles. Why is it so tough to view IS with nuance?

Burke: It's tough to view any extremism or terrorism with nuance. We have a deep need for a simple enemy, or simple problems, with the implication that a solution will be equally simple. Obama, who is a highly intelligent man being properly advised by well-informed specialists, is no doubt well aware that the IS is more than a terrorist organization, but recognizes that there is little room for a complex and nuanced description, and a complex and nuanced debate, in the current environment. Any analysis – including my own – necessarily involves a degree of simplification. The question is what degree? Not so much as to be distorting, I'd argue.

FD: Is IS failing in its attempt to create a different form of government? Is it becoming a traditional nation state?

Burke: The project of the Islamic State is evolving all the time. It's certainly not becoming a traditional nation state as such, not least because the idea of a Caliphate precludes the existence of nation states as we know them. The IS has made a major effort to explicitly base its appeal on the rejection of boundaries imposed by colonialists in the twentieth century and adopted by later regimes in the region. But it has nonetheless exhibited many of the same elements as those regimes, which is not surprising given that many of its senior members are former Ba'ath Party members who served Saddam Hussein. There's the same authoritarianism, use of public violence, repression, surveillance, intimidation of all dissent, attempts to brainwash, anti-Semitism, anti-Zionism, exploitation of sectarian or other identity-based prejudices, incompetence, arbitrary taxation, corruption, favouritism, manipulation of tribal allegiances and sense of victimhood. None of this is exactly unfamiliar locally.

FD: Why is it so hard for extremists to govern? Are they bad at the boring bits?

Burke: It's hard for anyone to govern, especially if you simply don't have the people with the experience and skills necessary to organize, say, rubbish collection, but particularly so if there is a series of fundamental conflicts between various elements of your overall project. The Islamic militants follow an agenda which has a global, expansionist drive at its heart, but which is supposed to convince people who are usually much more interested in local issues. All politics is local, and almost all conflict is too. So the aggregated vision of a global war between belief and unbelief, Islam and the West, etc., etc., isn't a great deal of use when trying to explain why sewers don't work in Abyan province or Falluja.

Indeed, there's a strong possibility that the IS is trying to offset its problems at home, locally, with the move to a global strategy. That's where the attack on Paris would come in, clearly. The message sent is that this movement, this project is still moving forward, it is both expanding and enduring, as the IS motto has it. The forward movement is absolutely essential to maintain credibility, appeal and the sense that this is a divinely favoured venture. There's a sense that the momentum has been slowing recently, even if it hasn't gone quite into reverse.

The militants also seek to control the behaviour of their population – the logic is that only if all Muslims are good Muslims and follow the shariat, the true path, to the letter will the community be able to withstand the onslaught of the unbelievers – and do not seek consent. This is pretty tough for many people to accept. The result is that the Islamic militants have to lever local rivalries to gain support, win over individual power

brokers, or simply coerce people into staying in line. Almost every Islamic militant effort to create a state has ended up with an increasing level of violence towards the people they are supposed to be ruling, simply because the package they are offering is only attractive in the most extreme circumstances – such as the Syrian civil war. Militants want the active support of local people, not just their passive acquiescence but eventually tend to end up with neither.

FD: In the new book you present al-Qaeda as an ageing presence – not great at technology, unwilling to change. How important are production values for today's militant group? Does al-Qaeda not care as much about production values?

Burke: Islamic militants' use of contemporary media technology no longer surprises us. But we see it as an opportunistic exploitation of technical tools. This is too narrow. The evolution of media technology has not just determined the choice of tactics from suicide attacks to execution videos, but the very structure of the organizations themselves. This has always been the case with terrorists, but is more marked than ever now. From bin Laden structuring al-Qaeda to be able to launch massive spectacular attacks to the dependence of IS on shocking videos and combat footage, from embedded 'reporters' with their militants and on to the new ultra-decentralized world of individual lone wolves with their GoPro cameras and laptops, Islamic militancy has not just used media technology but has been profoundly shaped by it. Indeed, of all the various factors influencing the evolution of Islamic extremist terrorist activity, this may be the most important. So yes, al-Qaeda has been very late in catching up on the potential of modern technology and has been less influenced by its capabilities. It is increasingly marginalized as a result.

FD: Organizations pledging allegiance to IS are compared to inkspots appearing around the globe. One example is Boko Haram. Where else are inkspots forming? Where could they form in the future?

Burke: You basically see the inkspots forming where several factors are unified: a prior history of Islamic militancy or at least activism locally, a degree of marginalization in cultural, economic, political or economic terms, some effective local actors on the militant side, some ineffective local actors on the government or local authorities side and a more general lack of governance. Put all that together and you've got a fairly toxic brew which suits the militant ideology with its ideas of victimhood, utopianism, violence and redemption perfectly.

This is dynamic of course. So where governance is established or certain actors eliminated, militancy will go into decline, or likewise surge where there is a particular change that brings a breakdown in law and order. The Arab Spring brought the latter on a vast scale, so many of the IS inkspots we see today are emerging in places like eastern Libya, north-eastern Nigeria, parts of Afghanistan, the Egyptian Sinai desert, and so on. I'm personally fascinated by the role certain towns play, such as Ma'an in Jordan or Tetouan in Morocco, over decades, both in revolutionary secular activism and religious militancy.

FD: What's your operating gambit when interviewing a former torturer? How do you get a person like that to talk about his past?

Burke: The one I interviewed in Iraq was quite happy to talk. I think it helped that I instinctively shook his hand when we were introduced, something I later regretted.

FD: What are considerations when interviewing the family of a suicide bomber?

Burke: The same as when you are interviewing any bereaved relatives. Tread softly, show respect. You have to try gently to get behind the boilerplate conditioned responses of 'I miss my son, but I am proud he is a martyr'. Clearly also there will be a lot that you won't be told. A lot is unsaid, implicit too. Having a very good translator is a must. My own local languages are too rudimentary to pick up on all the nuances.

FD: Have you ever been forced to reconsider your views on militancy after an interview? Have you ever conducted an interview with someone who made you understand the allure of a call to arms?

Burke: I think I've always understood the allure of a call to arms, just not their one. I went off to spend time with Kurdish peshmerga guerillas in Iraq when I was a student. The things I tend to bear in mind are that a) very few people fully understand the implications of getting involved in something when they initially become involved, b) once caught up in something, an individual's outlook can change dramatically, but then also change back again and c) the process which leads someone into extremism is not dissimilar to that which leads people into a range of other extreme, if less nefarious, activities, such as drug-taking or high-risk sports or a particular music scene or body piercing or something. The psychological and social barriers to actually committing violence are much higher, of course, but the actual mechanics of how a person becomes involved are fairly universal. Terrorism is a highly social activity, and we tend to forget this in our haste to imagine 'lone wolves' and masterminds in our simplistic, if reassuring, way.

We see this very clearly with the recent attacks in Paris. You have friends, relatives, brothers, all linked pretty closely. The recruitment, if that's the right word, appears to have been through friendship and kinship, not 'brainwashing'. If the killers had been taken off somewhere against their will and indoctrinated, it would have been much less concerning.

Jamie Brisick

Becoming Westerly

Could a powerful wave incite a surfer's very personal transformation?

It's funny how the ocean calls out to you. It's not about checking wave cams on the Internet, or reading the surf forecast. It's a feeling in your bones and blood, something like the way dogs sense earthquakes.

It was the summer of 2002. The sun was of a certain heat and density, the cloudless sky was of a pinprickingly rich cerulean, the air had a vague effervescence, carrying whiffs of whatever it was to his shitty little flat in Labrador, a redneck neighbourhood above Surfers Paradise, the only place he could afford on his meagre cabbie's pay.

He'd worked a long shift the night before, he'd been at the books all morning right through lunch, his sixth sense that wind, tide and swell were delivering arias in the form of waves – he felt no guilt in bailing on his plans to hit Woolworths and ducking out for a surf instead.

He loaded his six-foot-one Mad Dog thruster into his white Holden and drove south along the Gold Coast Highway in the pre-rush-hour traffic, past Jupiter's Casino and its monorail, past Rubber Jungle Wetsuits, past Miami High with its name spelled out on the side of the hill like some C-grade version of the Hollywood sign.

At the surf club he got his first glimpse of the point. Whitewash exploded up around the cove; a bottle-green wall shimmered past the pool. He passed Montezuma's where many a Top 16 surfer got toasted on margaritas, passed the Burleigh Beach Towers with its tennis court and steaming Jacuzzi, passed the patch of grass that was Ground Zero for the man-on-man format that they'd stolen off him. His eyes were half on the brake lights in front of him, half on the set of waves screaming down the point. You could always tell the surfers from the non-surfers based on whether they slowed down, how neurotically they craned their necks at the sea. A wave doubled up and heaved, the spinning tube ejaculating a ghostly spit. It enraptured Peter, washed him

with adrenalin. He was so glued to the surf that he nearly rear-ended the old Kingswood in front of him.

He parked in his usual spot under the pines, hopped out, shimmied into his wetsuit top. He ran around to the passenger side, opened the door and extracted his board. Another set caught his eye, this one slightly bigger. On the first wave a goofy foot pumped heartily but the curl dashed past him, leaving an empty blue wall that seemed to almost wink at Peter. A second wave roped, a third wave twirled.

From the trunk, Peter grabbed a bar of wax and rubbed it in circles across the deck, paying close attention to the tail, to the dents that marked his front foot, to the nose where after all these years he still loved to hang five. He tossed the wax back into the boot, locked the doors and stashed his key under the rear bumper.

He trotted up the grassy footpath, down the trail lined with pandanus, and across the black boulders already scorching in the 10 a.m. sun.

Burleigh boulders are the size of kegs and potentially leg-snapping when wet, but Peter knew them like he knew the furniture in his Wharf Road home; his feet had practically shaped themselves to this familiar dance, toes clasp ing ridges and puckers with koala grip. A wave heaved and shot foam up to his knees. Peter hardly noticed. His eyes were fixed on a head-high barrel corkscrewing down the point.

At the jump rock he paused, watched the water suck away, revealing shiny black rocks, darting crabs, wafts of brine, a primordial hiss. An exhalation later the ocean surged up to his knees. He lurched forward, mounted his board and stroked for the line-up.

It wasn't epic Burleigh but it was pretty damn good, especially considering there were only twenty or so guys out. Peter slipped into his rhythm the way he always did. He waited for sets, read the angle and the taper and what he liked to think of as the wave's visage, and picked the ones that seemed to call out to him. He drew his trademark lines, off the bottom and off the top, vertical bashes in the soft sections, lateral swooping arcs in the zippy bits, power surfing, albeit at a middle-age tempo.

Surfing at age fifty-two was something he was still trying to work out. Yes, it was humbling: the weaker paddling arms, the slower reflexes, the stuttering cutbacks, the gap between how he dreamed riding waves and how he actually rode them widening by the year. A single hour in the surf exhausted him, demanded afternoon naps – when did that start? Then there were the young blokes who literally paddled circles around him, flew above the lip. Clearly they had no sense of history.

But there was a chop wood/carry water simplicity to surfing that put things in perspective. He did some of his best thinking in the water. Something about the vastness, the exultant blue, the impregnable horizon. And the afterglow, those little cells and fibres and nerve endings so grateful for their daily fix. His life was a towering, teetering house of cards and at the bottom, wedged just so, was surfing.

Peter caught a slightly overhead wave from way out the back. It went fat as it rounded the cove. He kickstalled at the top, skittered and zagged, dropped to the

bottom and swooped. He climbed the gentle crumble of lip, floated over it, then darted off the bottom and across the steepening face. But the wave sectioned fast, too fast. He kicked out over the back.

His face slapped the water. His left ear seemed to tear open, a deafening hum. The power was preternatural; it belonged to Pipeline, Mavericks.

Behind it he saw a second wave. It was a tad smaller but it bent into a sort of saddle, that wonderful half-pipe effect that occurs during short interval swells.

He dropped to prone, sprint-paddled for the shoulder, stroked up the face sideways. As the crest redirected him he popped to his feet. He plunged down the face in a low crouch and sprung into a hard bottom turn. His lip bash was nearly vertical, punctuated with a faint arch of the back. His board stayed right under him as, mid-face, he dashed for the shoulder. The wall was velvety, delicious. For a suspended moment he just stood there, rapt, the nose of his board streaking past a thousand diamonds, the blinding white crest feathering. The wave mowed fast. He was nearing the inside section, where the sandbar sucks nearly dry and the swell bends off towards Surfers Paradise, the pocket like a slingshot. Subtly, with a thrust of his leading shoulder and a torque of the ball of his front foot, he pumped. The whoosh was mesmerizing. The curtain dumped over his back. The wall seemed to almost grow, sand clouds in its trough.

And then it was zippering away from him. He did what he always did on this inside section. He waited for the lip to nearly clock him, and with a matador's flourish, straightened out. Only this time it did clock him, square on the right side of his head, with brutal force. His face slapped the water. His left ear seemed to tear open, a deafening hum. The power was preternatural; it belonged to Pipeline, Mavericks. The turbulence rag-dolled him, pushed him deeper and deeper. Where was the bottom? Where was the surface? He tumbled and gasped and needed desperately to breathe. He felt himself losing consciousness, saw powdery white light, let go.

Then he broke the surface, gasped for air.

He coughed. Spume blinded and burned. His ear rang. His head swayed. He waved his arms, looked for fellow surfers, but there was no one. He turned around and there



He nearly stepped on a pair of women's shorts someone had left behind. They were pink with white stripes. He tried them on. They fit.

was another wave, about to collapse on his head. He lunged for his board, death gripped the rails, bounced shoreward. Whitewater deposited him on the sand. For a long while he just lay there lifeless.

‘This feeling is never to be forgotten,’ says Westerly. ‘Peter felt terribly disoriented, his equilibrium was shot, blood was pouring out of his ears, he thought he was dead.’

This accident, which left Peter with a concussion and perforated eardrum, ‘pretty much fried his brain’. Westerly says that there had been many instances when Peter felt like he was in the wrong body, but this loosened something, something irreversible. Peter started staying up into the wee hours, listening to classical music, feeling things shift inside him. One night he watched a documentary about albatrosses. He was transfixed, particularly by the part about the lone albatross out at sea for days, away from its family.

The documentary finished right around midnight. Peter got into his car and drove down to the beach he’d been frequenting, a secluded, wooded area near Sea World in Southport. He parked along the side of the road, crossed the dunes and walked along the shoreline, feet sloshing in the wet sand, surges of water licking his toes.

He felt light and bubbly. He stripped off everything but his underpants, which he hoisted up his hips because he wanted to feel like a woman. He felt a rhythm swelling in his body and he followed it, an adagio here, an arabesque there, a graceful flapping of the arms into a series of twirls. He danced and danced and danced.

‘It was like Moses parting the sea. He started dancing like a ballerina, like the Bolshoi Ballet.’ Westerly glows as she tells me this. I can almost see him twirling across the jewel of her eye. She snuffles. ‘That’s when it happened.’

A month or so later he was coming out of the surf at this very same beach, ambling across the squeaky sand, when he nearly stepped on a pair of women’s shorts someone had left behind. They were pink with white stripes. He tried them on. They fit.

Daily visits to thrift stores followed. She found herself searching solely the women’s racks. She became what Westerly calls a ‘phantom of the night’, staying up till dawn, blaring Tchaikovsky, trying on her new outfits in the full-length mirror, striking poses, dancing, making friends with the new sensations that coursed through her.

‘The creation of Westerly was totally unplanned and evolved under extreme sensitivities and vulnerabilities derived from sheer exhaustion,’ says Westerly. ‘Raw is a word that minimizes the feeling. Rebirth is the accurate way to put it. Restoration was/is the creation from rebirth.’

There have been cases of a similar ilk. After a head injury as a toddler, Alonzo Clemons of Colorado discovered an ability to sculpt animals to a remarkably lifelike degree using solely his hands and fingernails. Orlando Serrell of Virginia could tell the day of the week of any given date after being hit in the head by a baseball at age ten. Anthony Cicoria, a 62-year-old orthopaedic surgeon from New York, got struck by

lightning. Suddenly he could play the piano to concert standard. But these 'acquired savants' discovered hidden talents, not new identities.

For a long time it stayed in the closet, or, more precisely, in Westerly's home or on the beach in the middle of the night. In the mirror she saw what looked like a narrowing of the hips. Her legs, cleanly shaven, were beautiful woman's legs.

One day she was at an old bookshop near her home looking for a particular door-stop of a law treatise. After searching the shelves for a long while she finally found it. Next to it was a biography on Marilyn Monroe.

'I started reading and went, "Oh my God, we're exactly the same!" I forgot the law book, bought the Marilyn biography, and within a couple of days I'd read dozens of them and realized how much she and Peter had in common. They both suffered panic attacks, both hated to be alone, both had terrible low self-esteem, both studied method acting, both loved Brando and Gable, both spent two weeks in a mental institution, both tried LSD at exactly the same time. I realized Marilyn was deep inside me, almost guiding the creation of Westerly. I realized I was developing quite unintentionally into the image of Marilyn.'

Marilyn took up residence in Westerly's head. Not only did she consume her thoughts, but she kept popping up, as if trying to communicate with Westerly. Turn on the TV and there she is, in *The Misfits*, a movie Peter never much cared for when he saw it as a boy. Go into the thrift store, flip through old records and there she is, in classic Marilyn giggle, hot breath almost palpable, on the cover of *24 Great Songs*. Take Zac to get his haircut and taped to the tatted, nose-ringed hairstylist's mirror is the iconic *Seven Year Itch* image. There were sly winks as well. Marilyn died at age thirty-six. As far as Westerly saw it, that was the age that Peter died as well (by then his surfing career had declared bankruptcy). When Westerly so happened to look at the odometer on her car it read 100,036. On the Pacific Highway, headed up to Brisbane for a doctor's appointment, she got stuck behind a sea-foam-and-white '62 EK Holden driving absurdly slow in the fast lane. 1962 was the year Marilyn died. And guess the last two digits of the number plate: 36.

Marilyn was elsewhere when Westerly started thinking about a name for this girl emerging inside her. She saw phoenixes rising from ashes, caterpillars morphing into butterflies, space shuttles jettisoning their boosters. But it was the wind that burnished the waves velvety smooth, the wind that had summoned Peter to attention his entire surfing life, that won out. It rolled off the tongue. It had the ring of a Hollywood starlet. Only later, long after the name 'Westerly Windina' had stuck, did she realize that WW was MM turned upside down.

For years Peter Drouyn and his long-time friend Mark Bennett, a doctor, would meet up at 5 a.m. for a coffee then a surf. It was one of those rituals that cut the sting out of



this getting-old business. Mark was a good man, broader-minded than the rest of these Gold Coast philistines.

She didn't over-think it. She did it in the same fanciful way that she danced down the beach in the middle of the night, or recited lines from *Bus Stop* in the mirror.

It had the ring of a Hollywood Starlet. Only later, long after the name 'Westerly Windina' had stuck, did she realize that WW was MM turned upside down.

She got up at four, dressed in her Westerly girly stuff, drove to the little café in Mermaid Beach where Mark and she would meet. She waited in her car, anxious. When Mark pulled into the parking lot she got out, opened his passenger door and plopped herself right next to him.

Soft peach-coloured light hit their faces. Mark wore board shorts, a striped T-shirt and a totally baffled expression on his face. Before he could say anything Westerly spoke up.

'It's me, Mark. I'm a female. I'm a female.'

'Is that you, Peter?' He meant it sincerely, he was that shocked.

'No, it's not Peter. It's sort of – I'm me, I'm a new person who's come from Peter. You can still see me as Peter for a little while if you want. But, Mark, I've completely changed. I am not the person that you knew. I'm really happy in my new form.'

Westerly told Mark that she herself had had a hard time believing it at first, but that she was here, and there was no going back. Mark just stared at her, speechless.

'It's all good, Mark. Don't worry. Peter hasn't gone crazy. I'm more female than any female that you will meet in your life. And I'll keep changing. I'll keep transforming. I'm like a chameleon.'

Westerly tells me that it took a while, but Mark got used to Westerly, embraced her even. They kept up their weekly surfing ritual, but at off-the-beaten-path spots. Mark was married. He didn't want it getting around that he was having an affair with this platinum-blond surfer chick.

Over time Westerly observed a shift in the way Mark related to his new female friend. He opened doors for her, allowed himself to be more vulnerable. 'It was this subtle shift, Westerly pulling out the more honest man in Mark,' says WW.

In 2007 Westerly received an invitation in the mail for the Stubbies Pro thirty-year reunion. A tremor of her old self leaped from somewhere deep in her stomach, but before it could take root, it was replaced by a much grander thought: Could there be a more perfect stage to unleash the miracle of Westerly Windina?

Sleepless at 3 a.m., triumphant movie soundtracks on the CD player, she pondered outfits. Many nights she got up, slipped into a gown, dress, skirt, pair of shoes, and posed in the mirror. This went on for weeks leading up to the big night.

She settled on an outfit that was elegant but formal. She wore her favourite black-and-white Chanel ballet flats, a black slit skirt, a white frilly blouse and a cherry-red bolero jacket, with matching lipstick, her freshly blonded hair in loose curls, like those Burleigh barrels that rifle down the point.

On the evening of the Stubbies Pro reunion she started getting ready about two hours before Mark Bennett, her date for the evening (he didn't know that's what he was), was scheduled to pick her up. When the knock came at 7 p.m. she felt a squeal of butterflies. She opened the door. Mark stood there in jeans and a striped collar T-shirt, salt-and-pepper hair brushed back. He looked less surprised than scared.

'No,' he said, wagging his head from side to side. 'No. Definitely not.'

It was far from the response that Westerly had in mind, but over a beer in her kitchenette Mark made a convincing argument as to why this was a bad idea.

She didn't lose all of her girly things, but she toned it way, way down. Hoop earrings, silver sandals, pencil-line eyebrows – that was as much as she gave them that night. It was still enough to shake 'em up. Most of the guys were too uncomfortable to ask, they just shook her hand, treated her like a bloke, perhaps even more so, to over-compensate. The only one to outright confront Westerly was Randy Rarick, and there was no use trying to explain. She took the slithery approach, she told him what Peter would have told him: that it was an act, a way to get attention.

She came out on the Today Tonight show. 14 January 2008. She wore an orange high-cut swimsuit in one interview, and a red fifties-style sweater with lots of gold chunky jewellery in another.

'What's become of Peter Drouyn?' asked the host.

'Well, he's somewhere in there,' said Westerly. 'He's not dead. But he's not a he or he's not there any more. He's gone.'

She was poised and dignified. The reporter continually referred to her as 'he'. She said just enough to get her point across, but also to keep them guessing, to plant a little seed in their heads. The papers rang the next day. Neighbours stared. People at Australia Fair, the local shopping centre, did double takes.

Erik Hinton

Give It Up

Great works demand sacrifice? We should resent them.

I am clumsy and impotent with new books, nearly incapable of starting to read. I herk and jerk, skimming the front matter, pawing at the cover, staring at the first sentence and checking the table of contents, trying to prefigure some pithy tweet or status to announce that I've begun reading the book, which, of course, I haven't. I try to guess the book's 'big idea' and decide, well in advance of criticism or comprehension, whether or not the writing will be rich enough to entertain my friends when they ask, 'Read anything good lately?' Of course I have, and you need to read it too. I haven't yet. I can't decide if I can spare the time. But you should definitely give it a go.

In case you are looking for an early exit from this piece, one that will leave you with some fantastico bon mots for Twitter, may I suggest quoting, excerpting, pinning or pace-ing: 'I enter books like a consummate freshman, prodding absent-mindedly and fixating on the fish tale of my conquest.'

There's an uneasy negotiation that happens when you start a new book or when you open some hot-off-the-fingers, long-form article that thoughtbloggers and netleaders are pretending to have read. You have to consent to the work's rules. You have to believe that the piece's internal logics and details are real enough or, even worse, important. You have to abandon your prejudices against emplotment. You have to buy into the fiction of the composition, pass through the dust jacket into the work's sacred and artificial space. (This is true even in non-fiction, perhaps especially so. You are radically forgetful. You assume ridiculous, charitable positions: this author can cache out this subtle issue in 500 words, these anecdotes are acceptable substitutes for a measure of reason, I actually care what this twenty-two-year-old thinks about the Middle East.) Then you fake these beliefs until they make the piece habitable.

If you've reached this meta-parenthetical -- I'm not sure that is a thing but I didn't want to die without having ruttled with a word like 'meta-parenthetical' -- you've already acquiesced to a few of my fictions: I have read books before, there's some depth to the reading-as-sex conceit that I've smartly sprinkled about, there's a chance that you will finish this thing.

But how can you erase the stock order of your world, making space for the book/blog/article, if you are constantly plumbing your own cleverness and the speculative reactions of your friends? How can you give in to her new short-story collection about cancer and the American Dream, when you are weighing up each sentence, 'Is this emotionally charged and approachable enough to convince my friends that I have feelings?'

Of course, you can't proceed like this, one foot in. No Kindle or audiobook or after-hours Barnes & Noble speaker series or other literary expedience can drag you out of your incessantly reflective cherry-picking. You have to give it up. Assume any cachet that you can salvage will still be littered about when you finish. Hell, you can highlight!

Except in this piece. The further you get into it, the worse everything will seem. You'll be embarrassed by all those early sentences, the ones that made you nod, when you find out where they were leading. In a few paragraphs, there won't be a thread at all, just a shit-minotaur asking if you've ever read Kingsley Amis.

Take the last book I tried to start. I can't tell if I was successful and I won't tell you if I finished reading it. I love a good cliffhanger.

So I pick this book up, and it's got a stunning cover. Arguably this is the most important part of any book. Without the cover, there is no curtain to raise, no proscenium; there's no theatre; just a bunch of folks over-pronouncing words. This cover features a photograph of a woman with warpaint or facepaint or hippie-cheek-ephemera. There's tape over the part of the picture where her mouth would go. The words 'a novel' are written on the tape suggesting that the narrativization of this woman's life has silenced her or that all women are silenced or something about subaltern speech. Much like the grainy photo, printed on the textured cover stock, it's unclear. There are other words like the title and the author's name, but it's the photograph that beckons you into a world filled with savage women or, at least, one savage woman. This is how the bargain is struck and the sacred space is marked, measured out with a vivid image that folds behind the pages. I just have to open the book and I'll be in this primal, female world.

I crack the cover and skim the first chapter. I like to keep introductions at arm's length. Prologomena are not to be trusted, each one articulating the same unachievable ambition: I will encounter and wrestle beauty as if it were an angel, but this book isn't about beauty, and I only partially remember the angel-wrestling story (*Paradise Lost*, maybe?). Every introduction couches the book's mission in tragic ideals that will

eventually peter out, snuffed out by the exigencies of plot and theme, replaced by a wink and a nod. This isn't to say that every book is a failure. Every introduction is.

I breeze through Chapter 1, which turns out to be some strange flashback that no one reads, or, at least, no one remembers. Reading might just be remembering, but I'm no philosopher. By the time that I'm three paragraphs into Chapter 2, I'm a wreck. I've already aborted several attempts at editing a quote into 140 characters. I've tried out several critical opinions in my head, each one a vile home brew of pretension and fallacy. 'The author acquits her earnest, far-reaching proclamations with the endearing discomfiture of her tortured similes.' It's unbelievable that such a sentence could mean anything, much less entertain my friends. Alas, there are just enough surprising word combinations to throw acquaintances off their balance. 'I would have never thought of that.' Of course you wouldn't; it shouldn't be thinkable.

After another 200 pages of dog-earing, highlighting, underlining, over-lining, sub-tweeting and chuckling to myself (about some on-point insights), I wonder if I've ever even read a book before. I've certainly finished books and opined about many more. I've decorated my otherwise spartan man-space with shelves of colour-co-ordinated covers and hung some old volumes on my wall, grandstanding that I might smirk at them in the morning and mouth 'you done good, kid' to myself. I haven't done good, but that first-edition William Gass really throws off the Norman Mailer crew.

Did that last sentence do anything for you? I've been working on it for a few years. It's intended to inspire the following thoughts: Erik is an arch-prosaist or a prose-snob and he doesn't know the difference between the two. Erik does NOT respect hyper-masculinity or any masculinity. Erik has friends that carry pocket editions of *The Naked and the Dead*, yearning for the day it stops a bullet and they can finally climax; they are, in a word, studs.

There are only a few books that I've read on their own terms, stepping over the threshold, playing by their rules. I disclaim them as guilty pleasures, works that won me over in spite of myself. Naturally, I didn't love them. Yet I threw myself uncritically into thousands of pages of fantasy novels. I'd bury myself in a series that would never end, written by an author who'd eventually die and have his colossal arc taken over by another author who'd never wrap anything up. These authors all had names that I definitely remember but will pretend to forget and replace with absurd stand-ins: Brandon St Matthewcloud, Robert R. R. Perchance, Michael Moorcock.

You'd be right to note that these are all men. It took me a long time before I was ready to be dominated by a woman that hadn't given birth to me.

It was easy to abandon a critical distance. Reading fantasy novels was a forgetting. You didn't want to think about the rest of your awkward adolescence, that same nostalgic sob-story, impastoed in garish oils on every creative-and-weird adult male's wall: a pale, teenage boy sitting in the past, hiking up the boxer shorts he bought to

look cool, cowering behind his *Monster Manual*. Woe is me, it took twenty years to finally screw like a dragon slayer; jockier friends were well fucked by fifteen.

But the rest of my favourite books? I read them half-heartedly. It's uncomfortable and alienating to transgress into truly rich worlds, rigged with honest plots and arguments, the kind of real literary furniture that doesn't merely spin around to reveal some artifice of the reader's invention. We admire great works for their resources, but resent them at a distance for demanding sacrifice.

We need our sacred spaces to reflect ourselves. We are driven to nest, to sublimate into the trinkets and carpets of our rooms, to scatter tiny mirrors. The only safe perception is world-creation. It palliates the anxiety that we might just be passing through, that we are light. Every sentence has to be inhabited by the reader. Every sentence must be relevant. 'I can't believe how much the author gets me.' She doesn't. But you get yourself and you're talented at recognition, even where there's no resemblance. Her ideas are just words until you put them in your mouth. And that's why we don't read, and we certainly don't love good books. We aren't confident enough to avoid finding ourselves. And there's no love without self-renunciation.

An inept book-beginner, it's unbelievable that I can read anything during the working day, my attention tugged by the flashing lights of websites that keep publishing the same article, the eternal return of a navel-gazing thinkpiece about race and sex, written by the straightest, whitest man that the north-east media corridor could incubate. That piece might even be this piece. But, I was schooled in Pittsburgh, which is a real blue-collar steel town. I know all about bootstraps and the crushing burden of having almost every advantage, but it's that last one per cent of others' blessings that breaks the sugar-glass spirits of us mediocre men.

So, here I am, trying to start reading a book, or strive past the tortured lede of an online exclusive. Too hard. I try writing about the ideas, which I understand foggily, in the piece I still haven't looked at. But, at a certain point, this extemporizing feels forced. Maybe, I've just used up all my best anodyne opinions, exhausted my cache of non-controversial arguments that drag as edgy to like-minded friends.

Fortunately, I can write about not being able to write and not being able to read. I can suggest that all writing and all reading is as laboured and insincere as the writing that you're reading here. It's the trick that sutures the serpent's head to its tail. It's writing that could go on for ever and shouldn't have started. I don't even have to pretend to read any more. The perpetual motion of counterfeit memoir, a taxidermied self-care uroboros, is the only engine I need. It's what drives modern publishing, kids.

What's more, you're defenceless against it. There's nothing to buy into. The focus on the narrator absolves you of self-reflection. The vapidness of the argument frightens away any attempt at engagement. This is the funny dog falling up the stairs of writing. And, as such, it's going to be a huge hit.

[Or, more likely, no one will read it. That first paragraph wasn't great.]

About the Word ‘Laconic’

The first of a series. By J.A. Wilson

One morning I bought a weekday copy of *The New York Times*. They’ve become so thin on Mondays. They’re nearly skeletal on Tuesday, and then a little bulk appears mid-week. I’m not a purist, nor am I interested in nostalgia. I don’t buy these copies because I like the feel of paper. Reading the stories in sequential order allows me the pleasure of relinquishment. That’s it: one story must follow the next. More and more I seek out denied choice. More and more I like to be told what to do.

It was a Thursday paper, fattened by a style section. I bought it from a drug store down the street from my apartment. It wasn’t my only purchase. I walked down an aisle where rows of chips and flavoured pretzel segments were interrupted briefly by a few shelves of stationery. I bought the two highlighters left in a dusty box on the shelf – one red highlighter and one yellow. Since I had the morning free, I walked to the nearby European Café, sat at a table with a copper top, and began marking up the newspaper. I highlighted in red the words and phrases I didn’t know. I highlighted in yellow the words and phrases I recognized and had read before and thought I understood but, if pressed, could not define. ‘Qualitative easing’ glowed red. ‘Interest rates’ glowed yellow. By the time I finished, the newspaper was alive with colour: if paper editions were dying, which seemed to be the case, I had rouged this particular corpse. Eventually, after just over an hour, I turned all the pages back to the beginning. The photo on the cover showed a ruined hospital room in Kunduz, Afghanistan. It was not a particularly good reproduction; the photo would look cleaner online. The smudge of print gave it the look of a painting. Sunlight poured through a circular hole in the exposed brick wall of the ruined hospital. The floor was littered with

loose brick and twisted metal, and in the corner the bomb had stripped paint and left it in curls. Everything was ruined, still and unsalvageable. In the shadows to the left sat a chair, upright, and facing what must have been a window. The news story inside was full of accusation. The photo was calm. 'I know nothing,' I wrote at the top of the newspaper with the black pen. Around me in the European Café sat a few older men, some looking at newspapers of their own, copies of the *Post* and *Daily News*. One wrote notes in a cramped hand on a white cue card. There was dandruff on his collar. Hot sauce speckled what was left of the scrambled eggs on his Styrofoam plate.

I had a thought: I have finally unmasked myself. I have at last rejected the notion that I grasp even the basics of life, of society, or the laws of the natural world, the workings of business, or even the grammar of my native language. With the black pen I wrote a small '1' in the top corner of the paper. I put down the pen and turned my hand to examine my fingers.

Recently I've noticed a burning feeling at the tips of the pointer and middle fingers on my right hand. The pad of my pointer finger often stings. The pain comes from pulling my finger across the screen of my phone. When I feel this sensation, I press my thumbnail into the pad of my pointer finger until it abates. At first I thought I had rubbed down my finger pads from too much phone use, and obscured my fingerprints, smoothed out their ridges. Soon my fingerprints would be gone, I thought, or at least the topography would be changed, and I might be changed fundamentally, and then perhaps the pain would spread down my arm, and then on to my chest. Sometimes I pulled my finger across the dark screen of my phone and looked at the line left behind. I made patterns of the grease. We all move smoothly across life with our received knowledge. We're rarely confronted, rarely brought to account, asked to define. Most people demonstrate instead the tendency to proclaim they know. They argue points they suspect might be flimsy or plain wrong, and they do so in a pained and swelling tone of voice. Not everyone. Now I'm speaking about myself and the first ever entry in this project, the definition of a word that wasn't in the Thursday newspaper but had come up over the course of the previous evening: laconic. I know it has a Greek origin. Now I know. It's a word Susan wisely and confidently defined the other night. Across from her, I stuck with my own definition, so that I was forced, as we stood in her apartment on Grand St, in the heat of that bedroom, to pretend my definition was correct.

Susan teaches five year-olds. I used to think this meant she spent her time repeating what she already knew. In fact the job gives her coherence and mastery over so many subjects, and the repetition means she must convey ideas in the clearest way possible. This repetition often transfers to her personal life, which can be maddening, as it was when she was standing there, wearing her Old Navy trousers and a blue H&M cardigan

she favours for class. I later searched out both pieces online, on my phone, scrolling with that painful finger, in an attempt to pin down what she actually wore, rather than loosely remembering her in that room. When we arrive at disagreements, her presentation of knowledge makes me feel like a five year old. I look for ways to disagree. In the moment of conflict I also – and this is difficult to admit – silently belittle her because of her room, and because she'd decided recently to prominently display on the wall near her bed a caricature she had done of herself one evening on Canal Street.

Some mornings I would wake up, glimpse the caricature, and ask myself 'Who would actually do that?' Who would decorate their room that way, especially since the artist had Anglicized her, sleekened her, and removed everything that set her apart, the imperfections, the freckling, the mole on the edge of her chin, the mole on her top lip. Staring at it I felt like I could become enamoured with the wrong attributes. She had been amplified, which allowed me to look at her with an uncomplicated view. This must be the way, I thought, the divorced fathers look at her, especially the one who often lingered after class and asked stupid questions while his five year old pirouetted or clung to his leg.

The caricature was stuck to the wall at a level that made it impossible to ignore when sleeping on the right side of the bed, and it was signed with an aggressive F by someone named Fernando, though that does not sound like a Chinese or Albanian name. (The caricaturists I've spoken to on Canal St are all Chinese or Albanian.) Fernando could have been something he chose when he set up shop, down on Canal St, next to the fruit vendor and the man selling hot nuts, where he made her unreal, scrubbed her of the freckles and moles, imbued her with a pleasant and complimentary corn-fed American uncomplication, left her with certainly no hint, as you would find if Susan sat for a real portraitist, of the furrows of confrontation that often appear on her forehead, and certainly nothing that hints her parents are Greek. The Susan of the caricature wouldn't be able to speak out of those ballooned lips. The real Susan told lengthy stories – I spurred her on – of this divorced father of one of her students and the lengths he went to in order to discuss small details of his child's progress, especially the story of when he noticed her at a bus stop, marched back along a stretch of roadway, in the rain, after parking his car, its hazard lights flashing, and walked into the bus shelter to say, while dripping wet, he wanted to ask about this daughter's permission slip and what day, by the way, should it be submitted? I don't know how much exaggeration goes into her stories, so I mostly sit and listen to the ones about men with a well-prepared expression of nonchalance, which is how I arranged my face after saying 'Who is Fernando anyway?' when I entered her bedroom last night and took off my coat and examined up close the caricature for the first time.

I should also say I would like to learn, along with the words and ideas highlighted in the newspaper, along with much else, laconic included, how to stop immediately appraising bedrooms and posters and bookshelves. Although I am not an art historian, and in fact know very little about art, I enter someone's room and am immediately prepared to absorb visual clues, like someone who can scan an artwork and feel compelled to yell out fraud. I pass judgment. Not just on what is up on the wall, but how is it held there, if I can perceive in the light of the room those tell-tale lumps of blue tack. Also, if there are posters from exhibitions, I look to see when the exhibitions ran, and for some reason I feel a sort of pity if someone has a poster of an exhibition that is still ongoing. That's what made me pause that night, after taking off my coat, to ask myself what was I doing again on Grand St. How long does an exhibition need to be over before it doesn't bring about this poisonous response? It's all part of the judgment that is eroding me from within, when I should focus on the welcoming attributes of the room, and in the case of Susan's room, the immense bed. Even when I see the bed I'm reminded it is two single beds jammed together beneath the sheet and the lip between forms a small, uncomfortable canyon. Instead of telling her how good she looked in those Old Navy trousers, I said 'Who is Fernando?' Because his signature on the caricature had already caught my eye and this question immediately brought about another variation on her divorced father stories: that while walking down Canal Street she was approached by Fernando, who deserted his easel and plastic-wrapped caricatures of Angelina Jolie and Leonardo diCaprio and batted away her reservations by promising he would draw her for free. I somehow knew, during her retelling, he laid a hand on her arm, in a way that was so much more straightforward and appreciative than anything I'd done in years, a gesture that showed he wanted her, and he'd guided her back, convincing her with his action.

Then Susan described the drizzle, how it had just stopped, leaving a shine on the subway grating, and how Fernando had produced an Empire State tea towel, which he used to wipe off and dry the moistened camp stool. It pained me to think Susan would lower herself to that stool and into the ranks of unthinking tourists who became part of this lesser bit of the city's tourism and it pained me more to know how she enjoyed it based on the retelling, and Susan, who was well-versed in deepening a narrative, answered me immediately when I stepped towards the caricature, coat in hand and asked if Fernando had drawn his phone number as well. She said no, someone else asked me for my number as I was sitting there and I said Hmmm and she said He had me sitting there for a long time, people were walking around me, the rain had lifted, you know how crowds get around the subway exit right after the rain especially down there. I said I can see it took Fernando a long time, what with the crosshatching, though I have no idea what crosshatching is and in hindsight it's obvious cross-hatching was not a technique Fernando employed. He had lengthened Susan's neck and widened her eyes, plumped her lips, and if I had known what his technique was, or how

to describe it, I would have commented before Susan said: He saw what he wanted to see and I asked Who, Fernando? And she said Yes and I repeated the word Fernando, in a Spanish accent, this time quieter, still with my coat in my hand, still gripped in my hand, because I could never find the proper place to put it down in her room.

Next to the caricature Susan had photos of herself tacked directly to her wall with the kind of bluetack that would leave a permanent mark when she someday moved out and I hoped, for her sake, transferred the photos of her with her friends, with her grandparents, with some nieces and a nephew, to frames. I decided that's what I wanted to discuss in the moment, taking care of the photos, not whether she had given out her number while perched on a campstool on Canal Street, or all the details left absent from her stories, which tended toward the temperature of the air and the sparkle of the night, but said little of Fernando's final strokes and this other person, the eye contact, and the bustle of Canal and Broadway, all of this, the whole scene lit – I was keen to point out – from the cheap glow of the lights of the massage parlours along the street. It wasn't a classy part of town. I wanted to say that someday she should really get a few frames, she should frame her pictures, frame her photos. I wanted to tell her the exhibition posters would age. She shouldn't put up posters of shows that were still happening in New York. There was something tacky about it. Let them ripen and age. But there was no real way to introduce this subject into what I then realized was a considerable silence.

When I said bluetack, just the word bluetack, Susan was already sat across the room in the dim light. Behind her I could see an array of birthday cards arranged on her desk. Is this the part of the evening when you become laconic, she asked. I said, What, lazy? And she said: I don't think it means lazy.

At the coffee shop, with my highlighter, I looked down and my weekday newspaper had blossomed into something colourful; the world's news made into happiness. I looked at it and saw phrases highlighted like 'parliamentary democracy', 'diesel' and, written in the margins in my own hand but highlighted nevertheless, the word 'crosshatching', which I will, in the coming days, learn with such an accuracy I'll be able to spot examples as I walk through Canal Street and I know already from walking through this afternoon there is a great variety of technique on display, even on the bottom rung of the scale, even on the evenings when Fernando is not there, because he wasn't, according to one of the other artists, who happened to be from Macedonia, a country of two million, I now know, a country with a GDP of 10.17 billion USD.

What do you think the definition is? This used to be the simple question we asked each other. Maybe define it? I remember Susan asking me once. This must have been months ago, and I don't remember the particular word I defined for her, but I remember the energy I put into some obviously false but entertaining definition, a giant minute-long

curlicue that fell behind into the afternoon in this very room, which didn't seem to announce itself so garishly back then. We reached some sort of plateau of trust, before I decided, one day, to correct her.

I don't remember the particular word. No, I do. It was definitely, and I mentioned it because she'd spelled it, on a short, handwritten note, with an 'a' to make 'definitely'. 'I'll be here,' it said. 'Definitely.' Once you've corrected someone, it's hard to forget that dimming in their eyes.

I finally put down my coat. Susan's new phone was perched on her desk. I liked her old, smashed up phone with a touchscreen so spiderwebbed with cracks she needed to negotiate each request, no matter how simple, from that giant complicated web of family and friends, always messaging, phoning her, until she responded with a tentative staccato, unsure if the words would knit together on the broken screen. Her new phone had a very wide screen, and in the dimly lit room she made a few swipes and arrived at her dictionary application. I knew nothing, I realized, about the fabric of the curtains behind her and am determined to now find out how they glow with the light of the streetlamp, how they diffuse the streetlamp glow. Is it nylon? She was in silhouette. How do silhouettes form? What are the mechanics of the silhouette? One of the artists was making silhouettes, cutting them out, on Canal when I trudged through that day, a different kind of silhouette altogether.

Laconic, Susan said, reading from her phone. Adjective. Using few words; expressing much in few words; concise. A laconic reply.

Fine, I said back to her and her silhouette. Great.

Coming Soon

The Course of Love

BY *Alain de Botton*

Thus Bad Begins

BY *Javier Marias*

Five Dials

ISSUE 38

THINGS ARE
HEADING SOUTH