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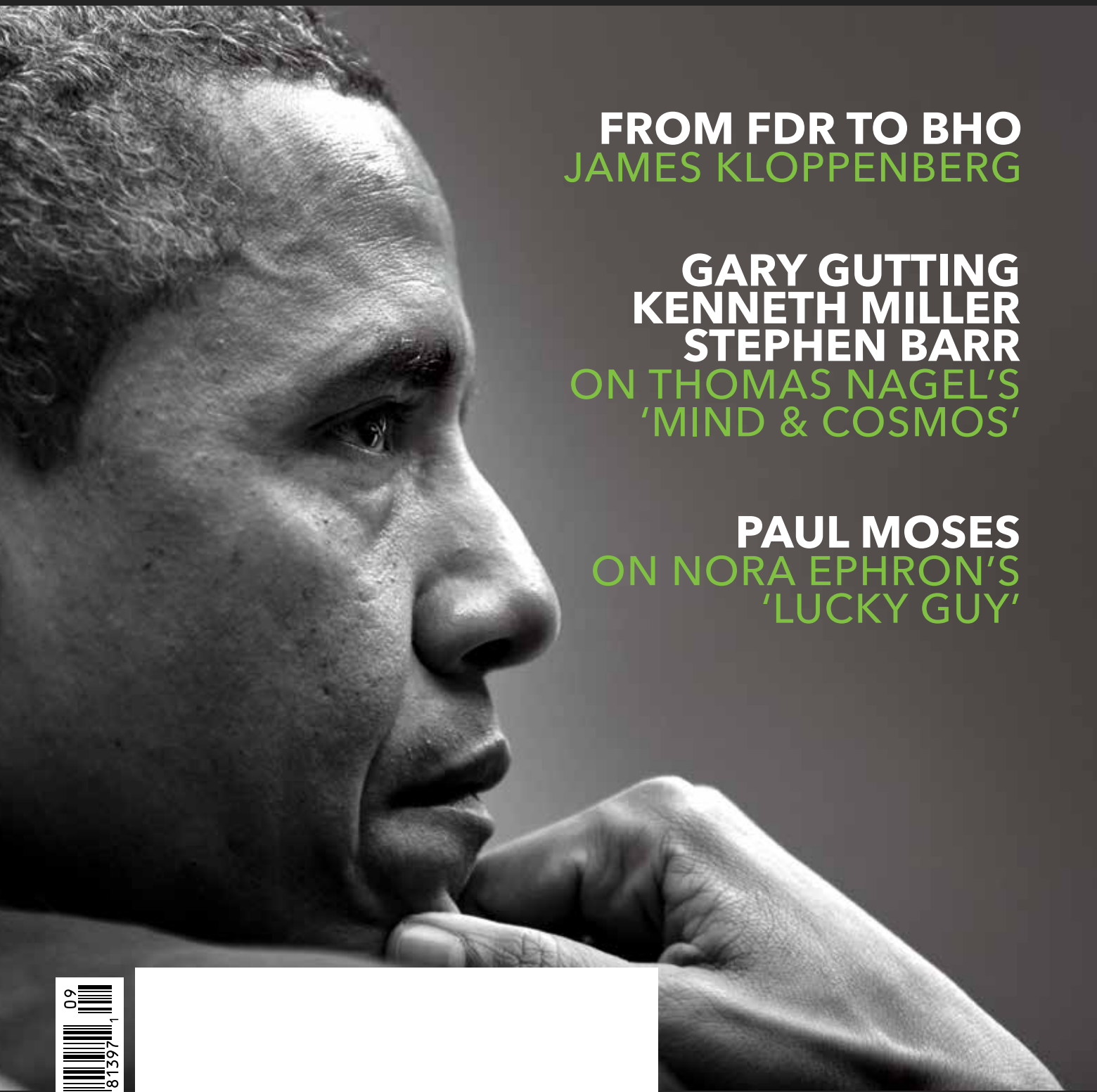

FROM FDR TO BHO
JAMES KLOPPENBERG

GARY GUTTING
KENNETH MILLER
STEPHEN BARR
ON THOMAS NAGEL'S 'MIND & COSMOS'

PAUL MOSES
ON NORA EPHRON'S 'LUCKY GUY'

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LETTERS

Balthasar & Francis

VIEW FINDER

While I appreciated Luke Timothy Johnson's fair and serene review of Karen Kilby's *Balthasar: A (Very) Critical Introduction* (April 12), I disagree with both of them that Balthasar takes a "God's Eye View" of things. Or rather, their accusation misses the point. As Thomas Aquinas says: "Sacred doctrine derives its principles not from any human knowledge, but from divine knowledge, according to which, by means of the highest wisdom, all our knowledge is set in order" (*Summa Theologiae*). One could, after all, easily make the same charge against St. Paul when he says that "God made him [Christ], who knew not sin, to be sin for our sake, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5:21). Was Paul speaking here from God's viewpoint? I think his answer would be something like "No, not exactly." Instead he would say—as in fact he did say—that he was speaking from a *revelation* given to him directly by Jesus Christ (Gal 2:11–12). From this perspective, theology is but the explication of that previously accepted revelation. As Thomas again says: "The knowledge proper to this science [theology] comes through revelation and not through natural reason" (*Summa*). Theologians only seem as if they are taking a "God's eye view" because they accept that revelation really did come from God. As to Balthasar's speculations about Trinitarian involvement in Holy Saturday, he is only following the same "method" that G. K. Chesterton followed in *Orthodoxy*, where he said:

> It is written, 'Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God.' No, but the Lord thy God may tempt Himself; and it seems as if this is what happened in Gethsemane. In a garden Satan tempted man; and in a garden God tempted God.… When the world shook and the sun was wiped out of heaven, [that happened] not at the crucifixion, but at the cry from the cross, the cry which confessed that God was forsaken of God. And now let the revolutionists choose a creed from all the creeds and a god from all the gods of the world, carefully weighing all the gods of inevitable recurrence and of unalterable power. They will not find another god who has himself been in revolt. Nay...let the atheists themselves choose a god. They will find only one divinity who ever uttered their isolation, only one religion in which God seemed for an instant to be an atheist.

Was Chesterton speaking from God's point of view here? No, he was merely reading the Bible intelligently and with speculative verve, just as Balthasar did. Anyone who understands that passage will understand Balthasar too.

EDWARD OAKES, SJ
Mundelein, Ill.

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WHAT THE CHURCH NEEDS NOW

Thank you for Paul Moses's insightful take on the new pope and his name ("Why 'Francis'?" April 12). I appreciate Moses's recounting of the life of St. Francis, as it relates to both the failings and strengths of the church over the centuries. Seeing Pope Francis hop on the bus and refuse the Mercedes does inspire some hope for his pontificate, and for the church. There is important symbolic meaning in Jorge Mario Bergoglio's decision to take the

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THE LAST WORD

name Francis. Being from Latin America, the pope recognizes the great importance of serving the poor. His humility connects with St. Francis as a model of Catholic spirituality.

But therein lies the problem. As Moses writes, St. Francis "avoided speaking out against church authorities or miscreant clergymen, and instead made his point through example." He taught by example in ways that remind us of Mother Teresa and Dorothy Day. They aspired to a profound personal spirituality that was both interior and engaged in the world—a compelling approach. Yet the silence of St. Francis assumes an idea of the "good Catholic" that may prolong the corrupt and dated structures of the church.

The Second Vatican Council tried to renew the decaying structures of the church inherited from the Counter-Reformation. The council was, in many ways, our own Reformation. Yet many of its reforming efforts were largely thwarted by Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI. Those popes imposed an atmosphere of obedience and "orthodoxy" that has squelched dissent, and all but lost an entire generation of priests, nuns, and laypeople. They made it impossible for dialogue and renewal to overcome the archaic demands of silence and obedience to church authorities.

Taking their lead, conservative forces in the church resisted open discussion; they were not comfortable having the power of the clergy diluted by the laity, especially women. Mother Teresa and Dorothy Day will, of course, become saints, just as St. Francis did. They will serve as models of obedient Catholicism. But obedience is not what the church needs from the faithful. It needs compassion. Catholics must be willing to do the hard work of transforming the church and the world. That can only be accomplished if the church relinquishes its need to control the lives of the faithful. I hope Pope Francis can move beyond silent humility and challenge the church to divest itself of the social control it is so good at imposing.

ROBERT OLIVA
Floral Park, N.Y.

From the Editors

Broken Promises

On the evening of April 15—the day two bombs exploded at the Boston Marathon, killing three people and wounding more than two hundred eighty—President Barack Obama vowed that those responsible "will feel the full weight of justice." In light of the country's history of injustice in dealing with suspected terrorists since 9/11, Obama's vow was less a threat than a promise.

That dark history is detailed in an exhaustive report released April 16 by the bipartisan Constitution Project's Task Force on Detainee Treatment. The report examines the decisions made by President George W. Bush and his administration regarding the treatment of detainees, from seeking legal justification for the mistreatment of prisoners and using the state-secrets privilege to deny torture victims legal redress, to turning over detainees to the custody of countries where they were likely to be tortured, to holding and interrogating prisoners in secretive "black sites" around the world. Reviewing the establishment and operation of the prison at Guantánamo Bay, which was intended to keep detainees outside the reach of U.S. law, the report finds that Guantánamo became "a symbol of the willingness of the United States to detain significant numbers of innocent people (along with the guilty) and subject them to serious and prolonged privation and mistreatment, even torture."

Obama has resisted attempts to expose government wrongdoing in these matters, saying he prefers to "look forward" and not back. Even looking forward, however, requires acknowledging the plight of those still held at Guantánamo, many of whom have been there for more than a decade without facing any charges. In that time, the prison has changed from offshore interrogation site to warehouse for those swept up in the post-9/11 panic. Of the hundred sixty-six people currently held in the prison, the government has said it plans to hold forty-six indefinitely without charges: a review ordered by Obama found that they are dangerous but cannot be tried, often because abusive treatment has tainted the evidence against them. Another eighty-six have been approved for release since 2010 but remain in custody—the report calls them "victims of the complex legal and geopolitical politics the detention situation has produced."

In recent months, an increasing number of desperate prisoners have engaged in hunger strikes to call attention to their plight. At the end of April, one hundred detainees were considered by the military to be on hunger strike. Those who have persisted longest are being force-fed—itself a form of abuse, according to the World Medical Association—to prevent them from starving to death. Reporter Carol Rosenberg found that at least four of those being force-fed are among those cleared for release.

At his 2009 inauguration, Obama pledged to close Guantánamo within a year, saying, "We reject as false the choice between our safety and our ideals." But Congress blocked attempts to move detainees to the mainland, transfer others, and try accused terrorists in civil courts. Obama's defense department could still authorize the transfer of the cleared detainees by issuing individual waivers. The president could also do much more to pressure foreign governments to accept those cleared of terrorist charges. But he seems to prefer the scandal of indefinite detention to pursuing the politically awkward remedies that justice and common human decency demand.

Meanwhile, even before the surviving suspect in the Boston attack, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, was captured, Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.) and other Republicans were calling for him to be classified as an "enemy combatant" and held indefinitely for questioning without charges. Despite ample evidence to the contrary, some continue to insist that the most serious and effective response to terrorism—even domestic terrorism carried out by U.S. citizens—is to abandon our ordinary legal standards and procedural norms in favor of the rules that have governed the "war on terror." "We should be focused on gathering intelligence from this suspect right now," said Graham and his colleagues in a statement. This was just a few days after the Constitution Project's report spelled out the dangers of that approach: in the case of Guantánamo, the report says, "the view of the detainees as an intelligence resource to be mined" rather than as captives to be brought to justice "contributed to the rapid escalation of the coercive techniques deemed acceptable."

The detainees at Guantánamo are starving themselves to death because they have given up on American promises of justice. Their situation is a continuing scandal for the United States, and a reminder of the grave errors made after 9/11. The difficulty of restoring them to justice is reason enough to avoid making the same mistakes again in response to new acts of terror. ■

April 30, 2013

William Pfaff

This Time Is No Different

HALF-BAKED THEORIES CONTINUE TO DIRECT GLOBAL HISTORY

The blood runs cold when one fully appreciates how vulnerable Western policymakers are to slogans and magical thinking. The Reinhart-Rogoff case is the latest, and certainly will not be the last, in which the credulity and carelessness of experts wreak havoc among millions of ordinary people.

In 2010 Carmen Reinhart and Ken Rogoff, the former chief economist of the International Monetary Fund, presented a research paper that purported to demonstrate that when a country's debt goes above 90 percent of its gross domestic product economic growth falls off or may even regress. "Aha!" cried the politicians and policy experts in the United States and Europe. Here was just what they needed. If public debt inhibited growth, there was a sure-fire way to end the greatest slump in decades. All governments had to do was slash their budgets and soon investor confidence would be restored. The crisis would thus end in a way that vindicated the dominant economic theory of the Chicago School—the theory behind Reaganism and Thatcherism—and show the world that economic science always has the answer.

The policy wonks and journalists who publicized the Reinhart-Rogoff paper never bothered to check it, since it so nicely confirmed their untutored intuition. Olli Rehn, European commissioner for economic and monetary affairs, soon cited the paper to justify the EU's austerity policies, which involved slashing infrastructure and social spending throughout Western Europe. In the United States, Paul Ryan used it to defend his plan to shrink or replace entitlement programs.

Then Michael Ash, an economist at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, gave his students the exercise of reproducing the results of some current economics paper. Graduate student Thomas Herndon chose the Reinhart-Rogoff paper. But he couldn't make it work out. Others students tried. Ash himself also tried and failed. So he wrote to Ken Rogoff for an explanation. The latter pluckily sent the original spreadsheet and documentation for the paper. These revealed that Reinhart and Rogoff had used some very questionable methodology and that, because of a spreadsheet error, they had simply left out of their calculations five of the twenty countries supposedly being considered. According to BBC News, Reinhart and Rogoff sent a message to Herndon, thanking him for giving so much attention to their work and for "pointing out an important correction." They said they would "redouble" their efforts to avoid such errors in the future. Meanwhile, because of austerity policies their paper was supposed to support, Greece sees hardship and political chaos, the Irish and Portuguese economies have collapsed, Spain and Italy suffer serious crises, the French government totters, and everyone hates the Germans for forcing austerity on everyone else.

I am not writing this simply to pile onto the economists whose work was used to justify disastrous policies. What concerns me more is the demonstration of credulity on the part of elected leaders and policy professionals, who eagerly accepted research findings that seemed too convenient to be true.

This has happened many times before, with disastrous consequences. Marxism, which was proposed as a "science" of history, once entranced much of the Europe and later Asia. Of course, it wasn't science at all, not even as science was understood at the time of *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) or Marx's major theoretical work, *Capital* (1867–94). It was the Bolshevik Revolution that made Marxism famous, but that revolution did not follow the course Marxist "science" had predicted. Marx foresaw a worldwide revolution conducted by the industrial working class, which hardly existed in rural Russia at the time of the Bolshevik Revolution, and not at all in China at the time of its Communist revolution. *Peasant* armies defeated the White and European interventionist armies in Russia after 1918, and *peasant* revolutionaries, led by Mao, defeated Chiang Kai-shek in China (and later stalemated the U.S. military in Korea). In both places Marxism supplied what might be called a moral message of inevitable victory—foreordained by scientific history—and this was a vital motivational factor.

In our own time, two spurious theories have led the United States to spend billions of dollars and sacrifice thousands of American lives in unnecessary wars in Southeast Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East. The first was the domino theory of Asian communism's potential for launching worldwide revolution, which had to be thwarted at any cost. The second was the theory, associated with Samuel Huntington, of a "clash of civilizations" between the Islamic world and the West. This was seized on by the George W. Bush administration and neoconservatives to justify war in Afghanistan and Iraq after America had been attacked by a small band of religious extremists. Washington's reckless response helped convince a significant part of the Islamic world that the United States really was hostile to Islam. It is now reported that one of the young men accused of the Boston Marathon bombings said the United States was "at war" with Islam and had to be stopped. Yet another example of how much damage a half-baked theory can lead to when politicians are insufficiently skeptical. ■

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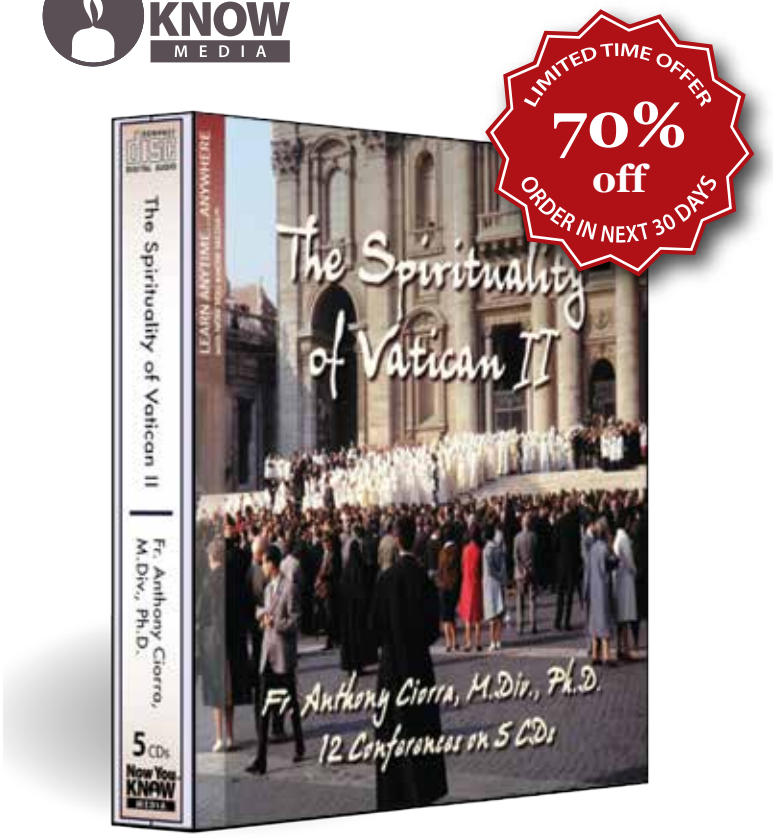

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Paul Moses

Finding Facts, Making Stories

'LUCKY GUY' & THE MIKE McALARY I KNEW

One of the most anticipated Broadway plays of the season, Nora Ephron's *Lucky Guy*, stars Tom Hanks as Mike McAlary, a writer who worked his way to stardom at three New York tabloids from 1985 through his death on Christmas Day in 1998 at the age of forty-one.

I worked with McAlary at *New York Newsday*, the setting for early scenes of *Lucky Guy*. Reviewers, publicists, and Ephron herself, before her death last June, portrayed the play as a love letter to the journalism of a bygone era. But beneath its nostalgic surface—the foul-mouthed newsroom repartee, wafting cigarette smoke, and late nights at the bar—the play poses serious moral questions about journalism and its place in the quest for celebrity.

McAlary was self-effacing, quietly funny, and ever helpful when we worked together in the paper's Queens and City Hall bureaus. He was also ambitious—as we all were. Most of the reporters *New York Newsday* hired after it opened in the early 1980s were in their late twenties, so the staff was naturally imbued with youthful energy. McAlary had two assets that set him apart. He knew how to get cops to talk, a crucial skill that eluded nearly all of us but that our tabloid competitors excelled at. And he was an especially good writer.

McAlary was not alone in wanting to be the next Jimmy Breslin, who regularly exposed our youthful inexperience in his *Daily News* columns. *Newsday* solved that problem by hiring Breslin. By that time, McAlary had secured police sources up to the Police Department's highest ranks, and had won a good deal of notice—especially for his 1986 coverage of a corruption scandal in a Brooklyn precinct. So the *News* hired him to replace Breslin.

I lost touch with McAlary in the years that followed. He bounced between the *News* and the *New York Post*, and he dominated page one like no one else. But I didn't recognize him in the tone of his more strident columns. The man I knew was pointed and keen in his observations, but with a sense of humor and a gentle irony. This is where Ephron fills in the story.

As she tells it, attorney and man-about-town Eddie Hayes (Christopher McDonald) lures McAlary into buying a luxurious home he can't afford on Long Island, pointing out the nearby residences of *New York Times* and *Vogue* editors. No reporter could cover that kind of mortgage, but Hayes is there to help. He becomes McAlary's agent, and induces a bidding war between the *News* and the *Post* for his services.

Hayes, who served as inspiration for a character in *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, is the Mephistopheles who puts the finishing touches on a series of temptations presented to McAlary. The first comes from John Cotter (Peter Gerety), freewheeling metro editor of *Newsday*. Cotter, a hard-drinking man who died of a heart attack at age forty-eight, was fun to work with. He was generous with the paper's money—insisting I buy a new overcoat before embarking on a wintry trip to Poland to cover a visit by Mayor Ed Koch. Cotter also insisted I fly home first class (Koch was in coach).

Cotter makes short work of McAlary's stated desire to do "God's work" as a reporter—and get the facts. "I may throw up," he says, explaining that journalism is about finding a story, not facts. McAlary disagrees, but bonds with Cotter.

Cotter headed a group of reporters the rest of us dubbed "The A-Team." Cotter adopted the term, too. His A-Team, which stormed the news of the day—usually a crime story—differed in some respects from the rest of the staff: it was mostly male, and white. It doesn't come through in the play, but *Newsday* had one of the most diverse staffs in journalism.

JOAN MARCUS

Tom Hanks as Mike McAlary in 'Lucky Guy'

There were many talented women, who often covered the beats that made the paper distinctive: poverty, homelessness, education, transportation. But no one would pick up the paper if the front page didn't shout loudly enough to be heard in New York. That was the A-Team's specialty.

Journalists can cause considerable collateral damage, as *Lucky Guy* highlights in the case of Brian O'Regan, a cop who admitted to McAlary that he was part of a ring that stole drugs and money from dealers. O'Regan shot himself to death in a motel; a copy of McAlary's *Newsday* article was nearby.

McAlary was devastated. We all were. Journalists sometimes fantasize about righting wrongs, as McAlary says later in the play. But this was no fantasy—a man had died. The play quotes O'Regan's suicide note: "McAlary wrote too much." McAlary is stunned, but still gives TV interviews and signs a book deal.

Lucky Guy explores a classic literary theme: the personal cost of pursuing the American Dream. If he's to cover his mortgage, McAlary has to leap some moral hurdles to make himself invaluable to his editors. As Ephron presents it, he writes a fawning story about Donald Trump based on an exclusive interview—the kind of story editors love but serious reporters loathe. And he starts taking risks.

Carousing with sources, he drinks to excess, which leads to a car accident he barely survives. McAlary's risky behavior comes to a head when he writes a column accusing a Brooklyn woman of lying to police about being raped. While detectives were still sorting out the facts, McAlary asserted that she fabricated the report to draw attention to an upcoming rally against rape. He relied on his high-ranking police sources, who were misinformed about the investigation. And he continued to insist he was right even after the commissioner confirmed there was a rape.

McAlary's quest for the American Dream led to a nightmare—for the woman he falsely accused, and for himself. He suffered public ridicule and was sued for libel. (The suit was dismissed because McAlary had quoted his errant source accurately.)

His grasp of the American Dream weakens further when he receives a colon-cancer diagnosis, and the script has McAlary wondering whether he's being punished. Ephron exaggerates the Irishness of the newsroom—but it allows her to add a dash of Catholic guilt to the story.

Yet there was also redemption. McAlary, weak from chemotherapy, went to a Brooklyn hospital to interview Haitian immigrant Abner Louima, breaking the story of how a police officer had sodomized him with a stick. Here McAlary took a risk in service of the truth—according to the play, his editors were initially reluctant to run the piece. But McAlary won the Pulitzer for that coverage. Months later, he succumbed to cancer.

More than anything, *Lucky Guy* is a morality tale. In the play, McAlary adopts the values of his celebrity lawyer, casting aside the traditional rule that reporters should avoid getting too comfortable with the people they cover. And he loses himself in the process. Perhaps Ephron is reflecting on her own story: Like her second and third husbands, Carl Bernstein and Nick Pileggi, she emerged from the scrum of daily journalism to achieve celebrity.

She presents McAlary as a throwback, but in some ways his story looks ahead to a day when journalists are expected to promote themselves in social media and broadcast interviews. With bosses watching the web traffic of every story, writers feel pressured to "brand" themselves and develop a following. That makes it hard to remember the journalistic value of humility. As deadline approaches, good reporters are aware that they may not have all the facts. But uncertainty doesn't play well.

Those disturbing trends are implicit in *Lucky Guy*. The play concludes with a humbled, weakened McAlary acknowledging his Pulitzer in a touching scene in the *Daily News* newsroom. At curtain, his buddies somberly sing a verse from "The Wild Rover," their drinking song: "I'll go home to my parents, confess what I've done, and ask them to pardon their prodigal son." ■

Paul Moses *is professor of journalism at Brooklyn College/CUNY. He was a reporter and an editor at* Newsday *for seventeen years.*

Great Exhortations

Taking Obama at His Word

James T. Kloppenberg

More than any other recent U.S. president, Barack Obama has succeeded in puzzling the pundits. His imperturbability and coolly analytical style have led even such incisive commentators as Nicholas Lemann, David Bromwich, and Anthony Appiah to describe him as inscrutable, enigmatic, and impenetrable. These same characteristics have also polarized and galvanized his critics. The political right views Obama's serene political persona as a mask for his sinister ambition to turn the United States into Scandinavia. The political left, which thought the nation had at last elected one of its own, has excoriated him as a centrist too timid to slay the Republican dragons that prowl the Capitol's corridors.

It has been particularly fascinating to watch the seesawing of opinion on Obama in the past year. Often it seems that every day presents a new avalanche of commentary on the president's performance, much of it devoted to sleuthing out backroom maneuvering in an attempt to explain what is happening. And yet perhaps because the cynicism that dominates contemporary political discourse militates against taking any politician's words at face value, surprisingly little analysis is devoted to what the president actually says in his principal public addresses. Americans are so busy figuring out Obama, they have stopped hearing him.

The president's official reelection campaign began at the Democratic Party's convention in Charlotte, where critics compared his tepid speech unfavorably to the barnburner delivered by Bill Clinton the night before. (They overlooked the point of Clinton's speech, which was to laud the undervalued achievements of Obama's first term.) But Obama's worst moment in the campaign came during the fall, in the first debate, when, in a jarring lurch to the center, the self-proclaimed "severely conservative" Mitt Romney calmly repudiated views he had espoused for two years. Obama, either caught off-guard or confident that voters would recoil from Romney's slipperiness, did little more than restate his positions on the issues. His supporters were disappointed at his failure to express outrage, and their dissatisfaction became the story of the debate. No matter how many newspaper articles detailed the glaring discrepancies between Romney's earlier speeches and his debate claims, the narrative was set: President Obama, once again too passive in the face of determined opposition, was now officially In Trouble.

In the second and third debates, pundits agreed that the president spoke with more energy and determination. Few seemed to notice that he was making exactly the same arguments about domestic and foreign policy that he had made in the first debate—indeed, the same ones he had run on in 2008. The stories described instead how the president had "seized the initiative" and "gone on the attack," highlighting Romney's notorious and damaging Boca Raton speech about the "dependent" 47 percent. Now, and for the rest of the campaign, it was Romney who was In Trouble—a judgment vindicated on election night.

Magnanimity comes easily to winners, so perhaps Obama's victory speech that night should have come as no surprise. Even so, his remarks were noteworthy for their generosity toward Republicans and for his plea to all Americans to appreciate the fact of our many common commitments and the grandeur of our democratic means of settling disputes. Acknowledging the stridency of the campaign, the president observed that citizens in nations struggling to establish self-government would rejoice at the freedom to argue that Americans take for granted. He acknowledged the deep differences between Democrats and Republicans, yet concluded that "we are not as divided as our politics suggests," and reiterated the theme that has marked most of his major speeches ever since he burst into the nation's consciousness at the Democratic National Convention in 2004: "We are greater than the sum of our individual ambitions, and we remain more than a collection of red states and blue states."

After the election Obama restated his hope that Republican legislators, freed from having to prevent his reelection, would now join with him to solve the nation's problems. But the same electorate that chose Barack Obama and returned a Democratic majority to the Senate also ensured the continuation of divided government by preserving the Republican majority in the House of Representatives. Eleventh-hour efforts

James T. Kloppenberg, *Charles Warren Professor of American History at Harvard, is author of* Reading Obama: Dreams, Hope, and the American Political Tradition, *and the forthcoming* Tragic Irony: The Rise of Democracy in European and American Thought.

to forge a bipartisan agreement on the tax cuts enacted under George W. Bush resulted only in modest increases for a sliver of the wealthiest and payroll tax hikes for most working Americans. Neither party could claim victory, though both tried their best.

Obama's second inauguration ceremony, January 21

With the latest evidence of fractured government fresh in their minds, Americans awaited Barack Obama's second inaugural address. A vast throng turned out to listen to the speech—a crowd so large, in fact, it was evidently exceeded in all of U.S. history only by the crowd at the same event four years before. Obama began his address by citing Jefferson's Declaration of Independence and its self-evident truths. Americans' commitments to liberty and equality, said the president, make us who we are as a nation. He then invoked words from the most familiar of all second inaugurals. Echoing Lincoln's references to blood drawn by the lash and by the sword, he deftly commemorated the Emancipation Proclamation and the Thirteenth Amendment, both of which are—or should be—on the minds of all Americans a hundred fifty years after the end of slavery.

As he has so often throughout his career, the president made sure to celebrate "initiative and enterprise" and "hard work and responsibility." For years the commentariat has dismissed Obama's praise for entrepreneurs and the free-market economy as mere rhetoric. This is a mistake. Contrast his inaugural address with a speech by the only previous president to win reelection with the economy still sputtering from an inherited catastrophe. In 1936 Franklin D. Roosevelt indicted the "economic royalists" who had transformed free enterprise into "privileged enterprise" for the wealthy few. Political equality had become "meaningless in the face of economic inequality," FDR charged, as "a small group had concentrated into their own hands an almost complete control" over the property, money, labor, and lives of other citizens. Americans had to retake control from plutocrats trying to "hide behind the flag and the Constitution;" we had to remember that the United States stands for "democracy, not tyranny; for freedom, not subjection."

Obama pointedly refused to follow FDR's lead. Declining to indict the business community that had resisted his overtures for four years and shoveled money to Romney, he played only a very muted version of FDR's populist anthem. Pledging to "remake our tax code" and protect Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security, the president insisted that "we, the people, still believe that every citizen deserves a basic measure of security and dignity." Yet he did not specify how he proposed to tackle an economic inequality in the United States greater than at any time since the late nineteenth century—nor did he admit that the gulf between rich and poor had in fact widened during his first term in office. Instead the president struck his characteristic chord of moderation and conciliation. "Being true to our founding documents," he declared, "does not mean we all define liberty in exactly the same way."

But FDR was right. When inequality transforms politics into a game that only the wealthy can play, not only is the liberty of the people sacrificed, but American democracy itself is at risk. A century has passed since progressive reformers last successfully challenged an economic elite that used its wealth to buy power. FDR's New Deal followed the lead of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, progressive reformers who fought the presidential contest of 1912 over the proper strategy for reining in the excesses of the industrialists and finance capitalists whose freedom spelled misery for millions.

It is true that in a democracy we may not all define liberty in exactly the same way. But the time has come to deny the validity of one definition of liberty—the one that entails exploiting workers by paying less than a living wage, or permanently damaging the environment to make a buck, or protecting the rights of gun owners at the cost of innocent citizens' lives. As Obama correctly observed in his address, the power of government in a democracy should "free us to take the risks that make this country great." Those are risks bounded by law. The United States was not created to enable individuals to do anything they wanted to do. It came into being in order to grant citizens precisely what the president described: "the power to set this country's course." Adams, Jefferson, and Madison all shared a conception of justice as the common good, not merely the sum of individual interests. In his first inaugural address, Obama proclaimed that America is "bigger than the sum of our individual ambitions." That ideal of a shared public interest, he asserted, stands at the heart of the "most ancient values and endur-

CNS PHOTO / JSCOTT ANDREWS, POOL VIA REUTERS

ing ideas." Securing liberty—as the founding generation understood, and as too many generations since have been called to demonstrate on battlefields here and abroad—does in fact require what the president called "collective action."

In American history, as in the Catholic tradition, the individual freedom prized by contemporary conservatives and liberals alike has always been bounded by the duties that democratic citizens owe one another. Only if the president insists that liberty still obligates every individual—from the wealthiest to the poorest, from opponents of fracking to hunters paying dues to the NRA—to shoulder the burdens we share in common, and only if he is able to translate that pledge into legislation, will his second term nudge the nation toward fulfilling its ideals. "Government in a modern civilization," FDR reminded the nation in 1936, "has certain inescapable obligations to its citizens," including "protection of the family and the home" and "the establishment of a democracy of opportunity." Recent events have shown that the insecurity FDR targeted has returned to the United States—and not only to our vulnerable populations, clustered in cities, but to suburban cinemas and schools and the impoverished populations of America's reddest states. Inequality has so constricted opportunity in the United States that citizens in most European nations now enjoy not only greater safety but also greater economic and social mobility than do Americans. The dramatic decision of Switzerland, hardly a hotbed of socialism, to adopt the Minder Initiative limiting executive compensation indicates the distance separating European from American social democracy.

The president in his first term often talked about his easy working relationship with his young chief speech writer, Jon Favreau, a Jesuit-trained political activist committed to Catholic conceptions of bounded liberty, community, and justice. Now that Favreau has left the White House, we shall see whether the president's references to these themes persist. In a moving passage in *Dreams from My Father*, Obama recalls telling the devout Catholics with whom he worked as a community organizer in Chicago that his motives were not much different from theirs, a revelation that may help explain why he and Favreau worked together so seamlessly for so long. But the president is now at a crossroads. Will he continue fighting against the Republican creed of individualism, confronting plutocracy with the principles of democracy?

Although popular fantasies of vast presidential power persist, the Capitol is not located in Hollywood, and the heroes of Aaron Sorkin's and Steven Spielberg's screenplays would not make it past today's legislative hearings.

Obama's next major speech, the February 12 State of the Union address, was widely criticized as an uninspiring sequel to his stirring inaugural. Yet it is clear that the two speeches were conceived as parts of a whole—the inaugural providing the ideals, the SOTU the programs necessary to realizing them. The president proposed universal preschool education and new programs in high schools and community colleges to prepare students for work in the twenty-first-century economy. He proposed manufacturing hubs to spur the re-emergence of factories, using smart technology to lower production costs and create new jobs. He emphasized the importance of investing in clean energy and our crumbling infrastructure. He returned to the issue of the minimum wage, a crucial feature of any attempt to address the problem of growing inequality. Finally, in the wake of the shootings in Newtown, Connecticut, the president called for gun-control legislation of the sort he has long backed.

In both speeches Obama advanced arguments he has been making for almost a decade. As always, he couched those arguments not in the defiant terms of FDR, but in a conciliatory mode designed to promote bipartisan cooperation. Obama has consistently criticized his own party for refusing to consider reforms unpopular among Democratic voters. He is willing to use government funds to spark innovation in education, energy, and manufacturing, but equally willing to use the power of the market to nudge private investors in those directions. He is less interested in maintaining ideological orthodoxy than in solving problems, another leitmotif in his speeches that distinguishes him from many other Democrats. Though, unlike Bill Clinton, Obama is a committed egalitarian, his means—like Clinton's—are those of a pragmatist more concerned with experimentation and results than with doctrinal purity. His preferred strategy for building support for his initiatives remains what it was in 2008, namely a grassroots effort to mobilize, individual by individual, a majority of voters behind these ideas, just as they were mobilized behind Obama himself in two elections.

A striking illustration of that strategy came in a press conference on March 1, the day sequestration took effect. This development, the consequence of an initiative thought to be so unpalatable that neither Republicans nor Democrats could accept it—and would thus agree to resolve their fiscal differences—resulted from the unexpected willingness of congressional Republicans to see the Defense Department budget cut

by 13 percent in order to shave some dollars from the deficit. (At a moment when Republicans appear to be abandoning many of their positions on issues ranging from gay rights to immigration reform, rock-solid resistance to government spending seems the only position on which all in the party can agree.) And the president's response? In the press conference he did not flinch from calling the cuts "dumb," "arbitrary," "unnecessary," and "inexcusable," and pointed out what all recent opinion polls have shown, that larger majorities of Americans oppose these cuts than favor shrinking the deficit (though many incoherently want both). But he also pledged to "continue to reach out" to Republicans to resolve the problem of the deficit and of rising costs, particularly in Medicare, if Republicans will agree to consider a "balanced" package that includes increasing revenues along with budget cuts.

The press conference also gave the president an opportunity to address the persistent question of whether he had done all he could to persuade the Republican-controlled Congress. He admitted that "the conventional wisdom" holds that "I should somehow convince them to do what's right." But how, exactly? By constitutional design the president lacks such leverage. Congressmen are independent, as Obama noted: "There's no 'special sauce' to persuade them. All I can do is make the best possible argument." A president can make concessions and offer compromises, but "can't force Congress to do the right thing," Obama reminded reporters. "I'm not a dictator. I'm the president." In the end, the president placed his faith in the American people. Cynics would say that is because he knows polls show the majority is on his side, but his writings and speeches suggest that he genuinely believes that is how American democracy must work. In time, he predicted, "the common-sense and practical approach" of the electorate "will win out," and Congress will "[come] to its senses."

Though Obama's press conference attracted little attention, his words deserve scrutiny, because they highlight a feature of American constitutionalism that the president appears to understand better than many of his critics. Obama has never—not even in his first two years in office—enjoyed the overwhelming congressional majorities that enabled FDR and Lyndon Johnson to override Republican opposition. Nor can he hope to use the chicanery, recently on display in the film *Lincoln*, that was standard among politicians in an earlier day. Any administration attempting to "persuade" members of Congress using the tactics Lincoln's aides employed would be pilloried today, and deservedly so. Although popular fantasies of vast presidential power persist, the Capitol is not located in Hollywood, and the heroes of Aaron Sorkin's and Steven Spielberg's screenplays would not make it past today's legislative hearings.

Perhaps the Republican congressmen who have chosen sequestration over any increase in tax revenues expect the money extracted from the economy to be replaced by increased spending spun off from record Wall Street bonuses, skyrocketing CEO salaries, and record-high corporate profits. It's true that sequestration will not hurt purveyors or purchasers of luxury goods. Rather, it is janitors at military bases, Head Start teachers, airport employees, and clerical workers in federal offices around the country who will feel the pinch—as will the already-struggling local grocery stores, car-repair shops, and diners that depend on their business. Apart from a few doctrinaire libertarian economists, bewitched by the specter of deficits and convinced that the United States has become Greece, no one considers sequestration good medicine for a recovering economy. Even the *Economist* and the *Wall Street Journal* describe the cuts as counterproductive.

In the face of polls showing that almost no Americans want these cuts, the readiness of the Republican leadership to accommodate its right-wing fringe testifies to the radicalism of today's conservatives. At a time when Republican intransigence infuriates almost everyone in American politics except Tea Party true believers, Obama's continued willingness to cooperate with his opponents can seem either superhuman or insane. His proposed budget for fiscal year 2014 has been greeted with dismay by many on the left, but is just the most recent example of that inclination. Especially disturbing to many Democrats is the president's evident willingness to limit benefits to Social Security instead of asking those with higher incomes to contribute more (payroll deductions are capped at $113,700 a year). But Obama's willingness to compromise has been his trademark throughout his political career. It has brought him both successes and failures—and for better or worse, there is no reason to expect it will change in the next three years.

In his inaugural address, the president insisted that we should not "mistake absolutism for principle" or "treat name-calling as reasoned debate." Agreed. But if he intends to make more progress against inequality in his second term than he did in his first, Obama will need to insist more forcefully that there is a distinction between two competing notions of liberty that are polarizing and obstructing our politics today. For many members of today's radical right, liberty means only freedom from the power of the federal government. As Obama has noted over and over in his speeches, that is an impoverished and inaccurate understanding of our nation's creed. A deeper, richer sense of that creed's historical meaning emphasizes the importance of securing for every individual the real opportunity, including the necessary resources, to develop his or her potential.

At the close of his second inaugural, Obama exhorted us "with common effort and common purpose, with passion and dedication...[to] answer the call of history and carry into an uncertain future...[the] precious light of freedom." Only if that freedom is effective, rather than merely abstract, said the president, can "we, the people" claim fidelity to our stated ideal of "liberty and justice for all."

Those are fighting words. Time will tell whether this president is prepared to fight for them. ■

Nagel's Untimely Idea

Is There More to Nature than Matter?

Few recent works of philosophy have provoked as much controversy as Thomas Nagel's *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False* (Oxford University Press, $24.95, 130 pp.). Reviewing the book for the *New Statesman*, Simon Blackburn wrote, "If there were a philosophical Vatican, the book would be a good candidate for going on to the Index." The *Guardian* named it the Most Despised Science Book of 2012, while the evolutionary psychologist Steven Pinker took to Twitter to pronounce that a scathing review in the *Nation* had "exposed the shoddy reasoning of a once-great thinker." As for Nagel's defenders, some have been defensive (the title of one mostly favorable review: "Thomas Nagel is not crazy"); others have been defiant: the *New Republic*'s Leon Wieseltier wrote, "I understand that nobody is going to burn Nagel's book or ban it. These inquisitors are just more professors. But he is being denounced not merely for being wrong. He is being denounced also for being heretical."

Why all the fuss? In *Mind and Cosmos,* Nagel argues that "the Neo-Darwinian conception of nature is almost certainly wrong" because it cannot explain the origin of conscious life, much less the human mind's ability to apprehend scientific truths or objective moral and aesthetic values. In the book's introduction, Nagel writes that the failure of neo-Darwinian theory to offer a satisfactory account of these things suggests that "principles of a different kind are also at work in the history of nature, principles of the growth of order that are in their logical form teleological rather than mechanistic." Nagel does not believe these principles are supernatural; as an atheist, he rejects every kind of supernatural explanation. But he also rejects the claim that the natural world is reducible to the material world. Consciousness, he believes, is no less natural than the material world, but is not itself material. Nagel does not propose a scientific alternative or supplement to Neo-Darwinian theory; instead, he presents the problems that such an alternative would have to solve. "Humans are addicted to the hope for a final reckoning, but intellectual humility requires that we resist the temptation to assume that tools of the kind we now have are in principle sufficient to understand the universe as a whole. Pointing out their limits is a philosophical task, whoever engages in it, rather than part of the internal pursuit of science—though we can hope that if the limits are recognized, that may eventually lead to the discovery of new forms of scientific understanding."

We asked three writers—the philosopher **Gary Gutting**, the biologist **Kenneth R. Miller**, and the physicist **Stephen M. Barr**—to assess Nagel's critique of "the current orthodoxy," and to describe how that critique fits into the larger discussion about what the natural sciences have yet to explain about ourselves and the world we observe.

—The Editors

Gary Gutting

Not surprisingly, most reviewers have approached Thomas Nagel's *Mind and Cosmos* in terms of philosophy of mind or philosophy of science. But the book is also of considerable interest from the standpoint of science and religion.

We're used to seeing religion and science as competitors in explaining the world. But until the middle of the nineteenth century—about two hundred years after the Scientific Revolution—modern science was the main source of evidence for a creator God. The precise regularities of physics and the complex mechanisms of biology seemed irrefutable proof of a designer. This grand alliance of science and religion collapsed only with Darwin's discovery that we can explain apparent design through a combinaton of chance variations and natural selection. The result was a "war" between science and religion, with religion continually retreating as science explained more and more aspects of our world with no reference to a divine will. The pseudo-science of "intelligent design" is the last gasp of an effort to return to the pre-Darwinian theological glory days.

The one "cloud" threatening the triumph of science has been the fact of consciousness. As Nagel points out, Galileo and Descartes excluded "everything mental from the scope of physical science" by making what seem to be qualitative features of matter (colors, aromas, tastes) features of the perceiving mind, not of the objects perceived. This gave the mathematical methods of the new science full scope in the objective, external world, but posed an enduring obstacle to a science of the mind. Scientists have established detailed correlations between the physical and the mental, to the point of showing that, as Nagel says, "our mental lives, including our subjective experiences...are...probably strictly dependent on physical events in our brains." The mind changes only if the brain changes. But even total correlation of mental states to brain states wouldn't show that the mind is, like the brain, a material thing completely describable by the physical sciences.

Neuroscientists often claim to have made great progress in providing a scientific account of consciousness. But they have never done anything more than specify more precisely the correlations between brain events and mental events. For their part, philosophers have repeatedly proposed ways to describe the mental in entirely physical terms. But, as Nagel notes, "such strategies...leave out just what was deliberately left out...by Descartes and Galileo in order to form the modern concept of the physical, namely, subjective appearances." The fact is we still don't know how to fit subjective experience into an entirely materialist world.

Nonetheless, most scientists and scientifically minded philosophers have been confident that we will eventually achieve a materialistic account of consciousness. At one time, Nagel himself agreed, although he suggested that such an account would involve an expanded conception of mind that "will permit subjective points of view to have an objective physical character *in themselves*." We would, in other words, find a way to think of the mind as both entirely material and irreducibly subjective. But in *Mind and Cosmos* Nagel has changed his view and now thinks that integrating the mind into the world requires not a new conception of the mind but a new, nonmaterialistic conception of the world.

Other philosophers—most notably, David Chalmers—have also given up on materialism. Chalmers, however, opts for a version of dualism, positing units of consciousness (qualia) in addition to the material units (e.g., elementary particles) of physics. Nagel rejects dualism and instead proposes that we think of the world as made of a single stuff that somehow includes the seeds of both mind and matter. (Such a view, called "neutral monism," had been suggested by Bertrand Russell and by John Dewey.) Nagel's development of this idea is both sketchy and highly speculative. But one of his key suggestions is that the fundamental stuff of the world is directed toward goals that constrain the outcomes of evolution, moving it toward higher forms of organization, such as human consciousness.

Why does Nagel insist on a radical rejection of the materialist metaphysics rather than endorsing Chalmers's dualistic supplement to it? Because, Nagel maintains, materialist accounts rely on Darwinian evolution, which is not capable of explaining the origin of consciousness from matter. He agrees with the claim—often advanced by intelligent-design theorists—that there is not enough geological time for the processes of Darwinian evolution to produce the organisms that currently exist. But he offers no reason that laypeople should ignore the strong scientific consensus against such arguments—apart from the disdainful thought that the consensus persists only because "almost everyone in our secular culture has been browbeaten into regarding the reductive [Darwinian] research program as sacrosanct."

In any case, even if Darwinian evolution could in some sense explain the origin of consciousness, it could not, Nagel maintains, provide a *good* explanation. A good explanation, he says, must show that consciousness is not just a low-probability possibility that happened to occur but rather something to be expected from evolutionary development. Since evolution depends on random variations, there are many possibilities, each of them in its own right quite improbable, so that what actually happens was not to be *expected*. But why should such a situation exclude a good explanation of what occurs? There's a low probability for each of the possible results of spinning a roulette wheel. But when the ball settles on, say, twenty-two, we rightly explain this by saying that this is a result that will occur every so often. Nagel doesn't reject (or even discuss) such examples, but he apparently thinks that consciousness is too "remarkable" a feature to be explained in this way. Why, however, he doesn't say.

The second half of *Mind and Cosmos* offers much better developed and more interesting arguments that our knowledge of objective truths—logical, factual, and moral—are undermined if our minds are the results of the vagaries of random

mutations and natural selection. Here Nagel lends his powerful voice to a case Alvin Plantinga and a few others have been trying to make for several years. The core claim is this: Evolution can explain our having certain beliefs only because they have survival value, but a belief can have survival value even if it is false. For example, our belief that 2 + 2 = 4 would have survival value even if in fact 2 + 2 equaled 3.9999999, since it would be an adequate approximation for any practical purpose. Similarly, a widespread belief that murder is objectively wrong would help preserve the human species even if it were not in fact true. This argument has been strongly contested, and we still have a lot to learn from the ongoing discussion.

Despite its argumentative failings (thoroughly canvassed by early reviewers), *Mind and Cosmos* is an important contribution to our thinking about science and religion. Nagel is, at points, sympathetic to the intelligent-design community and, especially, to Plantinga's vigorous defense of theism. But Nagel's own view is secular, indeed atheistic. He rejects materialism (the idea that there is nothing but matter) but not naturalism (the idea that there are no supernatural forces in the universe). Believers may welcome his aid as a critic of materialism, but his work will be most valuable to agnostics and atheists seeking intellectual depth, subtlety, and flexibility not available in the crude materialism of popular unbelief. Even though the brief book is short on rigorous detail, it outlines a potentially fruitful picture of what a metaphysics of atheism might be.

Nagel's book also suggests the possibility of a turn to—of all things—idealism within analytic philosophy. With the demise of positivism, much analytic work, especially in epistemology and ethics, has centered on Kant. But there has been little movement, at least in the fundamental domain of metaphysics, toward fulfilling Wilfrid Sellars's prophetic aphorism: When Kant appears, can Hegel be far behind? Nagel is no full-bore Hegelian, but he does allow that he is "an objective idealist in the tradition of Plato and perhaps also...of Schelling and Hegel." He rejects the subjective idealism that regards the so-called external world as mere appearance, but, like Hegelians, sees mind as implicit in all reality. It is not surprising that he shows sympathy for another glimmering of idealism in the analytic world, Galen Strawson's panpsychism, which sees all matter as at least minimally conscious. Nagel also speaks with respect of an intriguing quasi-idealistic path-not-taken by analytic philosophy—Alfred North Whitehead's process metaphysics.

An atheism that is antimaterialist, even idealistic, and committed to teleology and objective values—right or wrong, it's a refreshing change in our stale battle between science and religion!

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Kenneth R. Miller

Put "Darwinian" and "false" on the cover of a book, and you're bound to attract plenty of attention. Whether he planned it that way or not, that's exactly what's happened with Thomas Nagel's *Mind and Cosmos.* After seeing the book's subtitle—with its claim that the "materialist neo-Darwinian conception of nature is almost certainly false"—one would expect a scientific broadside against evolution to be packed into the pages of this slim volume. But it's not there. In fact, the big surprise in *Mind and Cosmos* is how little it offers in the way of science.

To be sure, Nagel is skeptical of the evolutionary process. He says it's "prima facie highly improbable that life as we know it is the result of a sequence of physical accidents together with the mechanism of natural selection." But he does nothing to support that intuitive skepticism. He puts forward no statistical argument, no critique of the fossil record, and no discussion of molecular evolution, genetic novelty, or biochemical complexity. His subtitle notwithstanding, Nagel leaves the vast inventory of evidence for evolution untouched. Indeed, those seeking a full-throated takedown of Charles Darwin will have to look elsewhere, as Nagel himself admits, writing that he proposes merely "a revision of the Darwinian picture rather than an outright denial of it."

Why, then, does he claim that the neo-Darwinian view is "false"? As the reader quickly discovers, Nagel's problem isn't so much with evolution as with neuroscience. To put it simply, his big complaint is that the human brain has not yet succeeded in figuring itself out. Sorry, but this is not news.

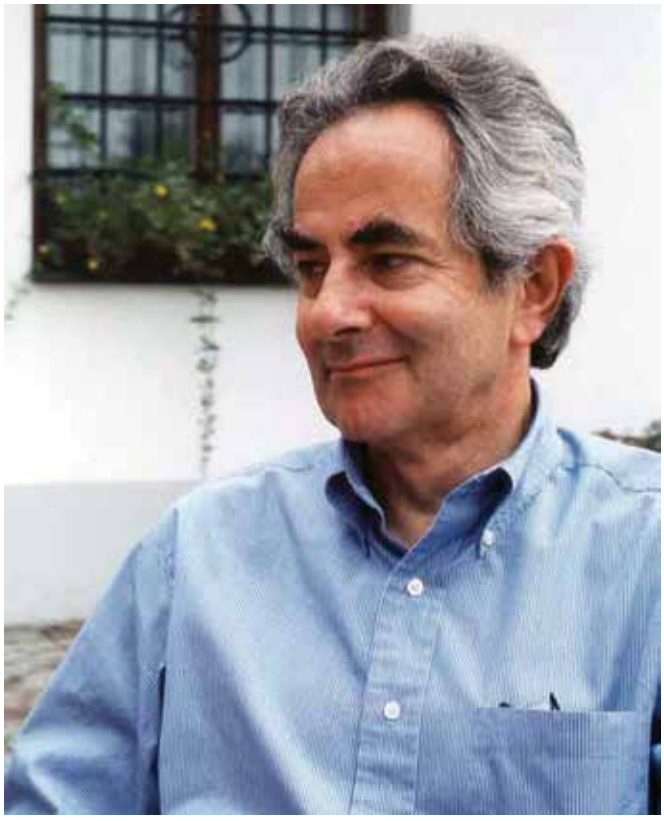
While the neuroscience research community may welcome the assertion that there are still fundamental problems for it to solve, Nagel regards this as a fatal critique of the materialist program in biology. The premise of that program, he claims, is that all of biology is ultimately reducible to chemistry, which is reducible to physics, which deals with matter and energy and nothing more. As an experimental biologist, I have to admit that's a pretty fair description of how the science has operated for the past hundred years or so. And I'd say it seems to be working pretty well, at least so far. But Nagel sees an obstacle—a big one—to the ultimate triumph of materialist science: consciousness.

Nagel starts with the obvious fact that consciousness has, as yet, no detailed material explanation. Fair enough. But then he asserts that it will *never* be explained in terms of physics and chemistry. This matters because "if physics and chemistry cannot fully account for life and consciousness, how will their immense body of truth be combined with other elements in an expanded conception of the natural order that can accommodate those things?" So, why is the theory of evolution also in trouble? Because, as a theory of biological origins, it must offer some account for the emergence of mind and consciousness. And, "Since a purely

materialist explanation cannot do this, the materialist version of evolutionary theory cannot be the whole truth."

While most neuroscientists would agree that we have not achieved anything close to a mechanistic explanation of consciousness, the assertion that such an explanation *cannot* be achieved is striking. Nagel supports this claim not with empirical evidence, but with philosophical arguments about the nature of cognition, drawn ultimately from the mind-body dualism of Descartes. Echoing Descartes, Nagel argues that "since we can clearly conceive of the mind existing without the physical body and vice versa, they can't be one thing." The experience of a sensation, like the taste of sugar, cannot be identical to the physical brain state involved in tasting sugar. Therefore the conscious reality of what sugar tastes like cannot be fully accounted for by the physics and chemistry of the organ we call the brain.

Nagel also argues at some length for a moral realism that is independent of evolutionary accounts of the emergence of moral judgment. He recognizes, as have others, that if our moral sense is entirely the product of evolutionary forces related to reproductive success, then it becomes difficult to argue that we are equipped to discover and evaluate genuine truths that do not depend on our own subjective views.



Thomas Nagel

JANET MALCOLM

These are fascinating arguments. While making clear that he holds no brief for theism, Nagel nonetheless appreciates the believer's intuition that there must be something above and beyond the order of nature itself. This is a sentiment I gladly share. But Nagel, an atheist, goes further, observing that "the existence of consciousness seems to imply…that the natural order is far less austere than it would be if physics and chemistry accounted for everything." Less austere? One has to ask, how does he know that? While some of the more dreadful undergraduate courses in physics and chemistry might indeed seem austere, nature itself is filled with extravagant beauty and creativity. And that beauty is built, as far as we can tell, on the very physics and chemistry that Nagel disparages. The problem of consciousness notwithstanding, Nagel's bold arguments about the nature of the physical universe are clearly grounded more in personal preference than in the realism he seeks to defend.

Despite that criticism, I would urge my scientific colleagues to take his arguments seriously, and especially to consider the central nature of the problem of consciousness. Referring to our own species, Carl Sagan once wrote that "we are a way for the cosmos to know itself," and so we are. In Nagel's words, "The process seems to be one of the universe gradually waking up." If we are creatures truly formed from the cosmic dust of physics and chemistry, the question of how we have come to know ourselves and the universe around us demands our attention more than ever.

Frankly, I confess a certain admiration for Nagel's boldness. As a philosopher, he looks at the research community from the outside. While others may see this as a problem, there have been times in the history of science where someone standing outside a field was able to see its difficulties far more clearly than those working within it. One of those times came in the 1940s when physicist Erwin Schrödinger cobbled a series of lectures together into a book with the title *What Is Life?* Many scientists, including James D. Watson of double-helix fame, have credited Schrödinger's book with inspiring them to think critically about the chemical and structural nature of the gene. It's instructive that Schrödinger himself once made a claim remarkably similar to Nagel's. Specifically, he argued that our then-current understanding of physics was incapable of explaining the chemical nature of the gene. Science, he felt, had to take a leap forward to accommodate the challenge of heredity by discovering "other laws of physics, hitherto unknown." Nagel makes a similar assertion, telling us that "the tendency for life to form may be a basic feature of the natural order, not explained by the nonteleological laws of physics and chemistry."

Schrödinger, however, did not claim that our current understanding of those material laws was "almost certainly false." Nor did he indict "materialist science" as being unable to solve the problem of the gene. Rather, he wrote that those "other laws" of physics, "once they have been revealed, will form just as integral a part of this science as the former." And so they have. Discovering the double helix and the molecular nature of the gene showed pre-1950s physics and

chemistry to be not false but merely incomplete in their ability to explain living matter. Schrödinger's challenge to biology was met by new discoveries that, far from rejecting materialist science, actually validated its power and extended its reach. The same will be true, I predict, with respect to the problem of consciousness.

Nagel's great mistake is that he seems to regard naturalistic science as hopelessly stymied by the problem of consciousness. From such a viewpoint, any unsolved problem becomes fatal to a science that claims to have everything figured out. But no science, even "materialist neo-Darwinian" biology, can actually make the claim of finality. Rather, all science is necessarily incomplete, and recognizing that fact with respect to questions like consciousness does not mean that the great achievements of neuroscience and evolution are "false." In fact, it tells us something quite different. It tells us that we have only now reached a level of understanding from which we can begin to address exactly the questions Nagel considers off limits to materialists. Far from being at a dead end, we're at a point where things are just getting interesting, and the material sciences Nagel scorns are the very tools that will show us the way ahead.

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Stephen M. Barr

Scientific materialism is perhaps the main intellectual rival to religion today, and one that recently seems to have grown in popularity. It is therefore a momentous occasion when a forceful attack on materialism is made by a leading philosopher who is himself an avowed atheist.

Scientific materialism claims that everything that exists and everything that happens is ultimately reducible to the behavior of particles, fields, energy, forces, and the other kinds of entities posited by theoretical physics. Those who embrace this view are encouraged to do so by the enormous explanatory success of modern science. That success has been based on a form of reductionism that explains physical systems by analyzing them in terms of their fundamental constituents and how those constituents are organized and interact with one another. Wherever such analysis has been carried out—at least for inanimate matter—the resulting explanations seem complete. Most physicists (myself included) think it highly implausible that there is anything about the nature or properties of a chunk of iron, say, or a drop of water, or a star, or an atom that is not explicable in this way. This kind of reductionism has been extended with increasing success to biology. Molecular biology and related disciplines are giving us an ever greater and more detailed understanding of the processes of life.

The big question, of course, is whether *minds* can be understood completely in this way. Thomas Nagel contends that they cannot be and that materialism must therefore be false. His main argument is that materialism cannot account for three aspects of mind: consciousness, cognition (specifically, certain features of human rationality), and the human capacity to apprehend objective values. He argues, moreover, that even if materialism could explain how minds *can* exist in a purely physical world, it has no plausible account of how and why they did *in fact* come to exist. Darwinian evolution, being a purely physical theory, is not enough. To use Nagel's language, materialism provides neither a "constitutive" nor a "historical" account of mental phenomena. What's more, materialism leaves unexplained the remarkable fact that the world is intelligible. As Nagel puts it, not only is "nature such as to give rise to conscious beings with minds…it is such as to be comprehensible to those minds." On the basis of all these considerations, he concludes that mind must be recognized as a feature of the natural world just as fundamental as matter.

Though I find all of Nagel's antimaterialist arguments cogent, I will confine my comments to the argument that consciousness is not reducible to physics. As a physicist, this conclusion seems to me obvious and to follow directly from the very nature of physical science and the way it explains things. According to physics, every physical system is completely characterized—indeed, *defined*—by a set of "variables," which mathematically describe what its elementary constituents are doing and whose evolution though time is governed by a set of mathematical rules and equations. (The transition from classical to quantum physics in the twentieth century did not change this basic framework, it only made the system of rules and equations more subtle.)

Of course, one does not need to keep track of all the variables of a physical system in order to know many interesting and important things about it—otherwise it would be impossible for human beings to do physics. But if one *did* know what all the variables were doing and the laws governing them, one could in principle derive everything there was to know about the system's properties and behavior—if the system is just physical. This derivation could be carried out using only the rules of mathematics and logic. That is what physicists generally believe, and for very good reason: in the purely physical realm—for example, the realm of inanimate matter—nothing has ever been found that gives grounds for doubting it.

In any event, whether you believe in this kind of reduction or not, it is the only kind that is done in physics. And so, if the physical sciences provide any warrant for believing in reductionism, it is only this kind of reductionism. It is clear, however, that *this* kind cannot be extended to consciousness. Even if one knew all the variables of a physical system, their values at one time or at all times, and the equations governing them, there would be no way to derive from that information anything about whether the system in question

was conscious, was feeling anything, or was having subjective experiences of any sort.

Of course, we sometimes infer from its physically observable behavior that a being has feelings. When my dog begs for a strip of bacon, I know it's because he enjoys the taste. But that conclusion is based on an analogy between the dog's reactions and mine, not on a mathematical or logical derivation from physical facts. Nor could it be based on such a derivation, for such things as enjoyment or taste are not quantities, and physics deals only with quantities—quantities that appear in equations and quantities that are measured.

While Nagel rejects "psychophysical reductionism," and believes mind to be as fundamental as matter, he rejects any form of mind-matter dualism. "Outright dualism," he says, "would abandon the hope for an integrated explanation…and would imply that biology has no responsibility at all for the existence of minds." Instead, matter and mind must be seen as parts of "a single natural order that unifies everything on the basis of a set of common elements and principles." In his view, the evidence "favors some form of neutral monism"—the idea that there is really just one basic stuff in nature, which has both physical and mental aspects.

Nagel may be right to reject dualism, but his reasons for doing so seem weak to me. It is not clear why dualism would preclude an "integrated explanation" of the physical and mental. After all, even *within* the physical realm there can be distinct entities, quite irreducible to each other, that are embraced by a single theory that "unifies [them] on the basis of a set of common elements and principles." Physics provides many instances of this. For example, electromagnetic fields and electrically charged particles are two distinct kinds of entity, whose relationship to each other is explained by an integrated theory called "quantum electrodynamics." Furthermore, in this theory the charged particles have some "responsibility" for the existence of the electromagnetic fields despite being utterly distinct from them. It is not clear why, in an analogous way, matter organized into biological structures couldn't be responsible in some degree for the existence of minds, despite being ontologically distinct from them.

Even if one knew all the variables of a physical system and the equations governing them, there would be no way to derive from that information anything about whether the system was conscious, was feeling anything, or was having subjective experiences of any sort.

Finally, there is the question of Nagel's atheism. Nagel admits that theism has an advantage over materialism in that it at least "admits the reality of more of what is so evidently the case"—in particular the reality of mind, purpose, and value. He also admits that theism has some explanatory power. It might, for instance, be able to explain why the universe is such as to bring forth minds, and why it would be intelligible to those minds. (That might be part of God's intention in creating the universe.) But Nagel objects to theism on the grounds that merely positing the existence of God does not provide the kind of explanation he is seeking: an explanation of how matter and mind fit together within a single unified natural order. And, of course, he is right that it doesn't. Knowing that God is the author of the natural order does not, by itself, tell one very much about how the natural order works.

Of course, if one could know completely the mind of God (which is impossible without being God), one would understand what he understands, including everything there is to understand about the natural order. But the theist is not in that position, obviously. To say that God is the ultimate explanation of everything is not to say that *theism* is the explanation of everything. It doesn't have to be such an explanation, however, in order to be a rational and well-founded belief. It only has to explain more than the alternatives. And a key point, which Nagel at times seems to forget, is that natural explanation and theism are *not* alternatives to each other. The idea that all the various aspects and components of the natural order fit together in some internally coherent way and the idea that some mind (God's) conceived the natural order in the first place can be seen *themselves* to fit together in a coherent way.

We ought to be grateful that Nagel has been able to see so much "more of what is so evidently the case" than most contemporary philosophers, even if that does not include the existence of God. ■

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Richard Alleva

Girls Gone Gangsta

'SPRING BREAKERS'

Spring Breakers has attracted a fair amount of buzz, but it's an uneasy buzz. The initial scenes—with the camera fixed on the boobs and butts of adolescent girls gyrating on Florida beaches, saluting the skies with beer cans, the beer sloshing down over their chins, chests, and bare midriffs—provoke the question: Is this just a big-screen version of *Girls Gone Wild*? But then writer-director Harmony Korine cuts away to silent, vacated dorm rooms and the sudden hush seems like an authorial reproach to the riot on the sands. Next we're in a dim lecture hall with a teacher expounding the post–World War II reconstruction of Europe while one of our heroines-to-be giggles with a pal and draws penises in her notebook. Is this a smart-alecky swipe at the instructor's earnestness or a reproach to unworthy American youth who will never reconstruct any country, including their own? Glimpses of an on-campus Christian prayer meeting add more ambiguity: Is the over-the-top enthusiasm for Jesus a salvation road unheeded by the beach bacchants or is it merely another way of blowing off steam, neither more nor less mindless than a beer bash? *Spring Breakers* doesn't have the single-mindedness of porn or reality TV, and for that, I suppose, we should be grateful.

Three girls—Candy, Brit, and Cotty—realize they don't have enough money for the spring revels, and so decide to knock over a fast-food joint. So we're in an action movie? But what kind of action movie stages a holdup this way: as Candy and Brit execute the robbery, the camera stays on Cotty in the getaway car as she drives around to the exit to pick up the others after they've finished the job. The close-up shot keeps Cotty in the foreground but also lets us see the robbery through the restaurant's windows in the background. Their thick glass cuts off all sound as the amateur bandits wave water pistols and smash furniture with hammers. Somehow the silence amplifies the violence and makes it more frightening, as if we're watching a grotesque ballet spinning out of control. Apparently we're in the hands of an artful moviemaker, but where is his art leading us?

The three thieves and their much more innocent pal Faith join other students on a bus headed to Florida, and soon there's beer guzzling, sexual teasing, wave surfing, and motel-room wrecking. Inevitably, the cops descend. Unable to pay a fine, our heroines face several weeks in jail until they're sprung by a drug-dealing would-be rapper named Alien (played by James Franco, whose wacky costume, including cornrows and metal teeth, reminded me of Sacha Baron Cohen's even wackier Ali G). Alien carries them all off to his pad for private revelry. The situation seems riper than ever for moralistic melodrama or soft porn or some combination of the two.

But here's what's odd about *Spring Breakers*: Both melodrama and porn require a certain grittiness of texture, but Korine's filmmaking evokes the mystical. In fact, with its elliptical editing, odd jumps in chronology, and disjunctions of sound and image (we see carousing while we hear the plaintive sighs of the jailed girls), the film's style recalls Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life*. In both films, we hear the characters repeating certain phrases over and over on the soundtrack. "Why is this happening to us? This wasn't supposed to happen," Korine's heroines keep asking. But *Tree of Life* employs such devices to meditate dreamily on the human condition, to delve beneath surfaces and get at the thoughts, yearnings, and fantasies of its characters. The disjunctions and repetitions are intended to communicate a sense of spiritual life. What has spiritual life got to do with Korine's spring breakers, with their vacuous faces, toneless voices, clichéd babblings, and affectless sexuality?

To be sure, one of his protagonists is different from the others. Faith (and of course the name isn't randomly chosen) is innocent of the robbery and appalled when she hears about it. And unlike the actresses Vanessa Hudgens, Ashley Benson, and Rachel Korine (the director's wife), whose features are exploited for their creamy blankness, Selena Gomez, the pop singer who plays Faith, is allowed to project a variety of emotions—doubt, fear, curiosity, amusement, anticipation—all of which the actress manages with touching natural-

Welcome to Florida

A24 ANNAPURNA PICTURES

ness. There's a life being lived behind her eyes. The other three might as well be digital avatars. They form a sort of combine of lovely amorality from which Faith stands apart, apprehensive and wavering, afraid to join them but also afraid to reject them. Does this mean that Faith, who exhibits some sign of moral agency, is the real protagonist of the movie? And, if so, shouldn't the real drama of *Spring Breakers* hinge on her decision either to sink with her friends or to escape from them?

Well, maybe in another director's movie, but not in Harmony Korine's. Faith's destiny is almost immediately resolved. Her plea to Alien to let her return home falls on surprisingly sympathetic ears: he puts her on a bus and tenderly promises that he'll be thinking of her while enjoying the favors of her friends. So the only character most viewers will empathize with is safe and out of the story. Only then does Korine begin to reveal the function of all those dreamy voice-overs and counterpoints between frenzied images and languorous narration. While Malick uses those techniques to explore inner life, Korine uses them to signal to viewers that he is taking them into *his own* fantasy world, not his characters'. The final sequences of *Spring Breakers* will make no sense at all to any viewer expecting that minimal resemblance to reality that even the most conventional crime or action movie clings to. In this film, Korine shows no interest in the elements most dramatists and directors deploy to create drama: moral choice, reversals of fortune, exertions or surrenders of will, and everything else that promotes character development. Perhaps Alien's unexpected kindness to Faith could be taken as a moral gesture, but it turns out to be more of a plot expedient than evidence of character development. With Faith safely out of the story, Korine is free to bring his heroines to a very peculiar apotheosis.

Armed with guns from Alien's considerable stockpile and wearing stocking masks, our heroines go on a crime spree with the rapper. They haven't really changed; they've simply returned to the delight in criminality they discovered while committing the fast-food robbery. Only now they use real weapons and seriously injure victims without the least remorse. And when a rival drug dealer wounds Cotty, Alien and the other girls invade the enemy's compound and, though Alien is slain immediately, Brit and Candy, with virtually no training in weapons, shoot down the rival and his dozen bodyguards with an ease and accuracy that James Bond would envy. Do the bodyguards not shoot back? Of course they do, but, though they are gangsta to the max, none of their bullets can find its mark. What supernatural protection hovers over Candy and Brit? Korine's dream life. This director is visually gifted, but he uses his skills to conjure images of beautiful, vapid women in violent action because these sights titillate him and he counts on our being similarly turned on. So these supposedly ordinary American college girls become furies, better looking than the Eumenides but just as impervious to human suffering. And while the Greek monsters pursued unpunished criminals in the name of justice, these girls eliminate gangsters simply because it feels cool. Or because Harmony Korine thinks it *looks* cool.

He does take a stab at sociology when he has the girls tell one another just before their first robbery, "Pretend it's a video game." Ah yes, here's the dulling of the moral sense by means of virtual reality. But *Spring Breakers* itself carries no more dramatic weight than a video game, since its characters (excepting Faith) are mere confections. By contrast, the French film *L'Appat* (*Fresh Bait*), directed by Bertrand Tavernier in 1995, which contains situations similar to *Spring Breakers*, engages the emotions and has moral weight even when extreme violence makes it hard to watch. Its young criminals immediately convince us of their reality, so we are appalled when the media unreality clouding their minds permits them to commit atrocities. *Spring Breakers* isn't *Girls Gone Wild*. It's just a director's whim gone ballistic. ■

Alan Wolfe

Highbrow Hatred

Hitler's Philosophers

Yvonne Sherratt
Yale University Press, $35, 328 pp.

This book addresses one of the most puzzling questions of our era: Why did the most evil regime of modern times develop in a country so committed to higher learning and so culturally accomplished? Yvonne Sherratt, a British writer and social theorist, focuses that question through the lens of Germany's prominence in the field of philosophy. It is generally conceded that not since ancient Greece—and perhaps not even then—had a country produced thinkers of the quality of Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. Yet the first three of these men developed ideas that the Nazis would appropriate, and the last became an active Nazi himself. What is it about Germany—indeed, about philosophy itself—that enabled this to happen?

So important was philosophy to German culture that Hitler, a crude and unoriginal thinker, insisted on representing himself as one of its geniuses. Try to imagine a U.S. president instructing his generals, as Hitler did in 1944, that "it is on Kant's theory of knowledge that Schopenhauer built the edifice of his philosophy, and it is Schopenhauer who annihilated the pragmatism of Hegel." It's not just the namedropping that makes this statement so remarkable (nor the ignorant characterization of Hegel, of all thinkers, as a pragmatist), but rather the use of the term "annihilation" to make an ostensibly philosophical point. Here the high and the low conjoin, ominously, in one sentence—the mad butcher who would slaughter millions citing thinkers who pushed human thought to its highest limits.

Sherratt's approach to this fascinating subject abjures chronology in favor of portraiture. Some chapters offer capsule biographies of important thinkers: Carl Schmitt and Heidegger on the Nazi side; Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, and Hannah Arendt on the Jewish side. Others paint collective pictures, including the neo-Darwinian thinkers who influenced Hitler, the most famous of whom was Ernst Haeckel, a nineteenth-century biologist who distorted Darwin's ideas into an ugly theory of racial hierarchies. Another chapter discusses Kurt Huber and his students in the White Rose group, who opposed the Nazi regime and paid for it with their lives.

There is plenty of room for indignation, and Sherratt does not shy away from expressing it, emphasizing how paltry a price the Nazi thinkers paid not only for their opportunism, but for their cruelty. (Heidegger, for example, removed a dedication from *Being and Time* to his Jewish mentor Edmund Husserl and also refused to attend his funeral.) Time, Sherratt makes clear, has been unduly merciful to the Nazi philosophers; Heidegger is now considered a major figure, and recent years have seen a significant revival of interest in the ideas of the jurist Carl Schmitt, a Nazi Party member and avid anti-Semite.

A careful reader of secondary sources, Sherratt draws forth devastating evidence of the depths to which these figures could sink. Heidegger's discomfort with Jews is well known, but until reading this book I had no idea how avidly he joined the Nazi attack on Christianity as well: "No committed Christian of any denomination," he declared at one point, "should in future be admitted to university lectureship." And while we hear a lot about the big names in German philosophy, Sherratt also pays attention to the many obscure

Martin Heidegger

Nazi ideologues whose opportunism is astonishing to behold. These figures—Ernst Krieck, for example, or Alfred Bäumler—not only held atrocious anti-Semitic views, but rose to prominence after Jews were removed from the German academic system; like their better-known colleagues, they managed to escape any punishment commensurate with their crimes.

There is something to be said for the way *Hitler's Philosophers* proceeds, avoiding technical and abstract language in favor of storytelling. Still, Sherratt pays a price for her breezy style and willingness to jump from one topic to another. A great deal of the material she discusses has been discussed before—many times—and her treatment of it discloses precious little that is new. I am not sure why she spends so much time on the love affair between Arendt and Heidegger when their tryst has already achieved soap-opera status. And while her description of the immaculately European Adorno's attempts to negotiate the egalitarian customs of the United States makes for amusing reading, it (again) adds little to what is already widely known about this complicated man. Walter Benjamin's suicide was indeed tragic, as Sherratt calls it, but she cannot know—nor, in truth, can anyone—why he took his own life. And nothing Sherratt writes about Carl Schmitt sheds light on how this man could be so brilliant and yet so vicious.

In a move presumably designed to make her book more readable, Sherratt adds details of everyday life to her discussions of these thinkers. "It was a hot, humid July day in Stadelheim Prison, Munich, 1943," she writes, by way of introducing Kurt Huber. This sort of triteness abounds. Sherratt describes how Heidegger, walking in Freiburg, "dodged his way past the bicycles that wobbled over the cobbles"; witnesses Walter Benjamin traversing Berlin's "many gray cobbled streets"; and notes that the caretaker in Huber's prison could be seen "scraping the cobbles" as a corpse was removed after a beheading. We learn that when Arendt made it to Paris to reunite with her husband, she brought along a copy of his first novel. "It smelt of bacon," Sherratt writes, "because she had hidden the novel in the attic in a greasy cheesecloth hung up with many slabs of bacon and had then smuggled it safely through Prague, Geneva, and finally to France." What are we supposed to learn from this—that Arendt did not keep a kosher home?

In the end, it is a shame that such a serious subject has received such unserious treatment. Obviously there existed a powerful physical attraction between Heidegger and Arendt. But they were thinkers as well—and is there anything in their respective understanding of metaphysics or ethics that might help readers understand such an unlikely love affair? Most of the philosophers portrayed in these pages were preoccupied with the Enlightenment, and nearly all of them, Heidegger as well as Adorno and Max Horkheimer, criticized it. Yet Hitler was no mere counter-Enlightenment thinker, but a mass murderer, and one has to wonder why it was so difficult for the non-Jewish philosophers to understand such a simple point. It is true, as Sherratt writes, that the acceptance of Nazi thinkers into the canon of contemporary academic philosophy "leaves a worrying aftertaste." But what is it about academic philosophy that has allowed this to happen? The questions go on and on, and of course no one can answer all of them. But I would have liked to see Sherratt try at least *some*.

I'm all in favor of making books about difficult subjects accessible to non-scholars—and especially works dealing with philosophy, a subject so easily lost in abstractions. But there can be too much of a good thing. Sherratt is so determined to bring matters down to earth that she leaves all the big questions up in heaven, where they remain as puzzling as ever. ■

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Barbara Dafoe Whitehead

Status Symbol

Marriage at the Crossroads
Law, Policy, and the Brave New World of Twenty-First-Century Families
Edited by Marsha Garrison and Elizabeth S. Scott
Cambridge University Press, $34.99, 344 pp.

Scholars who study marriage have generally focused on describing how broad changes in our society have led to changes in that institution. Several contributors to *Marriage at the Crossroads* take this approach, providing a useful if familiar litany of economic, cultural, and legal changes that have altered the meaning and purpose of marriage over recent decades. But what makes this volume fresh and compelling, as I read it, is the story of how marriage itself is reshaping society. It is doing so in two ways: marriage is integrating gay and lesbian Americans into mainstream society; and marriage is fracturing American society along class and educational lines and contributing to rising economic inequality.

Participation in marriage is now legal for gays and lesbians in nine states, and the movement for marriage equality in both federal and state law is gaining support. For many advocates, the inclusion of same-sex couples into marriage represents full social acceptance. Marriage, they argue, will not only make same-sex couples equal but also make their families normal in the eyes of the larger world. And for many same-sex couples, the recognition conferred through marriage is as important as access to its legal rights and tangible benefits. Some anticipate the day when same-sex marriage is just plain marriage.

The perspectives of the legal scholars and sociologists in this volume run the gamut from secular progressive to utopian radical, and their views of same-sex marriage fall within the same range. Most think that the demand for "marriage equality" is part of the larger evolution of marriage from a public and social institution governing family life to a private, egalitarian, two-person relationship based on love and sexual attraction. For sociologist Andrew Cherlin, this evolution has opened the door to same-sex marriage and should be recognized in the law.

To that, legal scholar Katherine Franke essentially says: Hold on. The social integration of same-sex couples into marriage may not be altogether wonderful. After all, she argues, marriage imposes conservative social and legal norms on same-sex couples who will "bend lives toward marriage and its civilizing norms." This, she believes, may divide the gay community, splitting married couples from others who do not or cannot marry. In short, Franke fears that the legal right to marry will collapse into the social obligation to do so.

Whether or not Franke's fear is warranted, her view of marriage is well founded. Marriage is a powerful socializing and conservatizing force. In times past, it has served as a central institutional pathway for bringing "outside groups" into the social fold and for bringing "insiders" into closer ties with outsiders who have been discriminated against. Franke cites the extension of legal marriage to newly freed slaves after the Civil War as one example. She might also have cited the even earlier example of religious sects—circuit-riding Baptists and Methodists in the eighteenth century and Mormons in the nineteenth century—who held radical views of marriage and family life but achieved broader social acceptance as they adopted norms of middle-class marriage.

Yet even as marriage integrates same-sex couples into the mainstream, today's marital patterns among heterosexuals are contributing to a societal economic divide. In the not so distant past, marriage was achievable for nearly all who sought it. High-school graduates and college graduates differed in some respects, but their family formation patterns were nearly identical. Both groups married and reared children within marriage.

Today, however, though majorities in both groups still see marriage as desirable, their marital patterns are diverging. Close to two-thirds of college households are married-couple households. Less than half of the nation's noncollege households, however, are married-couple households. A majority of noncollege households now include only one adult

Une noce chez le photographe *(1879) by Pascal Dagnan-Bouveret*

or two opposite-sex adults who are in a cohabiting union. Forty percent of children are born outside of marriage—most within such unions.

Diverging marital patterns are accompanied by a divergence in income. Adjusted for household size, the median income of a household with a four-year college degree and a marriage license is $70,000 greater than that of a household with neither a four-year degree nor a marriage license. Unmarried couples without a college degree make up a third of the nation's households; the married couples with at least one college degree between them make up one quarter of households.

This marriage divide also contributes to inequality in opportunities for children. On one side of the divide, we find some households with two married college graduates, each with high earning potential, who invest their time, social connections, and substantial resources in their children. These children are likely to do well in school, go on to college and beyond, and form stable marriages of their own.

On the other side of the marriage divide, we find many fragile families, formed by parents in unstable cohabiting unions or mothers raising children on their own. Because cohabiting parents are likely to break up after a few years, their children are often exposed to multiple disruptions in family, household arrangements, and schooling, according to sociologists Sara S. McLanahan and Irwin Garfinkel. Frequent moves may disrupt children's learning and make it hard to catch up later on. By the teen years, children may have fallen so far behind that they drop out of school.

These divergent patterns in family formation lead to radically different American childhoods. Children with college-educated and stably married parents grow up in a family, school, and neighborhood environment with all kinds of opportunities for enrichment. Children whose unmarried parents have less than a college degree and may have troubled romantic relationships too often land in an educationally impoverished family and neighborhood environment where educational opportunities are meager and supportive adult attention is in short supply.

In sum, marriage today is like a highly selective college. It is a sign and symbol of personal achievement and social advantage. Indeed, along with higher education, marriage works to select and sort the already privileged into stable parental partnerships that, in turn, transmit and consolidate advantages for their offspring. So the high status of marriage is double-edged; it is increasingly open to same-sex couples who seek its social and legal blessing, but it is increasingly closed to those who, by birth or life circumstance, are unable to find a way into its charmed circle. ■

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William H. Pritchard

So You Think You Can Write?

Good Prose
The Art of Nonfiction
Tracy Kidder and Richard Todd
Random House, $26, 224 pp.

Good prose? Do we really need yet another book filled with tips, instructions, and warnings against this or that? Only if the take on the subject is as uncommon as the one offered by this book. One of the authors, Tracy Kidder, is a Pulitzer Prize winner with an impressive line of nonfiction books to his credit, including *Soul of a New Machine, House*, and *Among Schoolchildren*. The other is his longtime editor, Richard Todd, a well-respected practitioner of the trade at the *Atlantic*, Houghton Mifflin, and other venues. Parts of the book are written by Kidder, parts by Todd, in a joint enterprise that mixes good sense, wide experience with the written word, and plenty of ironic reflection on the vagaries of the bookman's world.

These "stories and advice from a lifetime of writing and editing," as the subtitle has it, mark a connection that began forty years ago when Todd, a young editor at the *Atlantic*, met Kidder, an aspiring writer with an unpublished novel in hand. The result of their collaboration over the decades is "a practical book," addressed "to people who care about writing, about how it gets done, about how to do it better."

Good Prose allots mercifully little time to airy generalizations. Its first chapter, "Beginnings," considers various opening sentences and paragraphs from well-known books like Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* and Vladimir Nabokov's autobiography, *Speak, Memory*, along with some that are new to me. The following chapter, "Narratives," hazards an unpretentious, sensible definition of the well-worn phrase "point of view" as "the place from which a writer listens in and watches." As a nice example we are given the first sentence of a famous 1950 *New Yorker* profile by Lillian Ross: "Ernest Hemingway, who may well be the greatest living American novelist and short-story writer, rarely comes to New York." This intimate and unobtrusive beginning signals a mode the authors call "first-person minor," with the writer assuming a rather dutiful persona—"like a stock figure of the

'Wildly egotistical and grandly self-mocking'

MDC ARCHIVES

time, the 'gal Friday,' cheerful, omnicompetent, without apparent needs of her own." Joan Didion, in contrast, is said to specialize in "mild and stylistic derangement"; whereas Norman Mailer's third-person narrator in *The Armies of the Night* is both "wildly egotistical and grandly self-mocking," a pose perhaps impossible if we hadn't already heard about "Norman Mailer" and his various escapades. Mailer's voice is the opposite of first-person minor—very major indeed, one might say.

These chapters on narrative beginnings suggest that one must decide "what to withhold until later, or never say at all." At the start of their work together, we learn, Todd told Kidder that his novel manuscript—the book in the end would remain unpublished—was in need of "irony." As Kidder explains, the irony his editor had in mind was no "mindless joking or nihilism," but rather "irony in the older sense of saying one thing and meaning another, or of saying one thing and not saying the other"—in short, "meaning more than you say." That older sense of the word was the one Robert Frost was fond of, and when Todd tells Kidder to "play the novel for comedy. The flatter the better," we're again in Frost territory, who liked his humor dry "with all the wet squeezed out of it." To both Todd and Kidder, this capacity for meaning more than what is said, this habit of implication, is what makes a successful storyteller "a kind of restrained illusionist."

The book is filled with good sayings about writing, many of which were new to me—such as A. J. Liebling's boast that he could write better than anybody who could write faster and faster than anybody who could write better, or T. S. Eliot's observation that some editors are failed writers, but so are most writers. (The book lacks footnotes, and I could have used one here.) But the most amusing part of *Good Prose* is a brief closing section, "Notes on Usage," in which the authors skewer "words whose main function is to call attention to themselves"—such as "eponymous," now frequently encountered in student papers. Everyone has his or her candidates for most disliked phrase, and I was pleased to encounter such personal favorites as "proactive," an annoying neologism; or "pass" for "die"; or any word, like "indescribable" or "ineffable," that "proclaims one's own inability as a writer." Also coming in for deserved scorn are various words and phrases of the digital age; all sports metaphors; and the use of "folks" for "people," on which topic the authors point out that "when a president says 'folks like me,' you are only reminded that there are no folks like him—he's the president." "Bottom line" and "at the end of the day" don't get mentioned, perhaps because they're too obviously wretched.

The most engaging thing about *Good Prose* lies not in any specific advice it offers, but in its generally humorous manner. Todd, for instance, takes note of the frequently heard complaint that this or that book "needed an editor" by remarking, plaintively, that "often it had an editor, but the writer prevailed." As for his own work with Tracy Kidder over all those books and decades, Todd describes a partnership that proceeded mostly via "amiable insult." The pithy and unobvious phrase catches a certain social tone regarding contemporary male relationships. "This mode of being is much lamented, but it is not entirely useless as a basis for lasting friendship, at least if you have time," Todd writes; "and as it turned out we had decades."

In a book filled with enlivening moments, perhaps the best one concerns a publishing panel Todd was on. When asked why she went into the trade, one panelist answered, "Well, I just really like writers." Todd's response, years later: "Imagine liking writers! I mean liking writers as a class of people. Safecrackers or jugglers or dental hygienists, sure, but writers?" This witty response, like the book overall, does its teaching by example: Anyone who finds it a terrific piece of writing is well on his or her way to appreciating, if not mastering, good prose and the art of nonfiction. ■

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WHETHER TO THIN THE LILIES

One day we leave the city for its limits
To chase long-rested leaves off family graves

And let the children play among the mausoleums.
We are not all farmers anymore—

At first hands fumble with a spade into dark
Beds of pioneers whose stones stare back our name.

Let the lilies go? We are but idle strangers
Let us thin them and find each other

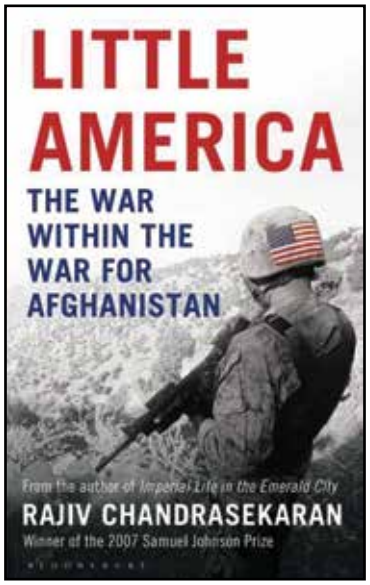
—Emily Stout

Emily Stout is a graduate of the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana English Program. She works nights as a registered nurse in the oncology department of a Midwestern hospital.

BOOKMARKS

Anthony Domestico

Endings are times of reckoning. Now that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are winding down, it seems an appropriate moment to consider their costs. What have these wars done to the countries they were supposed to liberate? What have they revealed about the United States—both the leaders who so cavalierly led the country into long-term, unwinnable engagements and the civilians who sat so meekly by while all of this was happening? Finally, what damage have these wars caused to the bodies and minds of our soldiers?



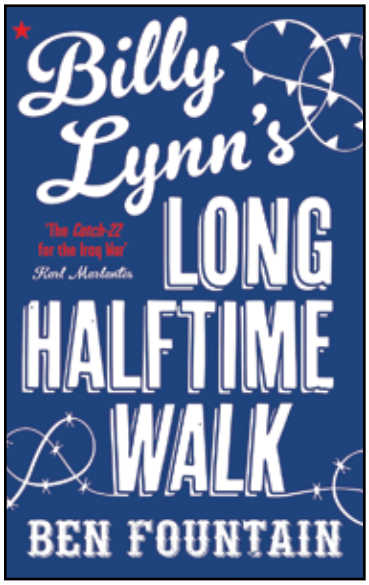
These questions—questions not just about our country's policies but about our country's soul—are taken up in a series of recently published books. Rajiv Chandrasekaran's ***Little America: The War within the War for Afghanistan*** (Knopf, $27.95, 384 pp.) is a detailed and sobering work. An associate editor at the *Washington Post*, Chandrasekaran is best known for his 2006 book *Imperial Life in the Emerald City*, where he exposed the almost surreal incompetence of U.S. reconstruction efforts in Iraq. If *Imperial Life in the Emerald City* often read like farce—look at how obtuse Americans can be!—then *Little America* reads like tragedy. The fact that we can see the catastrophe coming from a mile away doesn't make it any less devastating.

Shortly after taking office, President Barack Obama had to decide what to do about the increasingly unstable situation in Afghanistan. Civilians like Vice President Joe Biden favored a more restrained approach; military leaders like General Stanley McChrystal preferred an expansive counterinsurgency plan modeled on the Iraq surge of 2007. As is his wont, President Obama chose the middle course: Biden suggested 20,000 more troops, McChrystal asked for 40,000, and Obama decided on 30,000. The plan failed. The country isn't much more secure than it was in 2009, and more lives, Afghan and American, have been lost. As Chandrasekaran writes, "Obama should have gone long, not big"—that is, should have kept fewer forces in place for a longer time.

One is tempted to say that this book shows just how little the United States has learned from Iraq. That's not quite true. We have learned some things, but we've learned them too well. We learned that surges can work, so now we believe that surges always work; we didn't want to be seen as occupiers, so we started standing down before Afghan forces were ready to take our place. The title of *Little America*'s final chapter tells us how things stand in Afghanistan: "What We Have Is Folly."

Little America displays the virtues of the best nonfiction. But what of the virtues of fiction? Until recently, American novelists have avoided our current military conflicts; they were happy to take on September 11, but less willing to take on Iraq or Afghanistan. With the recent publication of Ben Fountain's ***Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*** (Ecco, $14.99, 320 pp.) and Kevin Powers's *The Yellow Birds*, however, this is no longer the case. Fountain and Powers, both first-time novelists, swing big, attempting to represent how war is felt, fought, and imagined in the United States.

In *Billy Lynn*, Fountain employs a strategy used in modernist classics like Mrs. Dalloway and Ulysses, focusing on a single day and location but allowing the play of consciousness to introduce much larger concerns. Fountain sets his novel on the most American of events on the most American of holidays: a Dallas Cowboys game on Thanksgiving Day. Billy Lynn and the other members of the Bravo Squad have recently returned



from Iraq as heroes. The soldiers' firefight at Al-Ansakar Canal was televised live on Fox News, and the higher-ups, in an attempt to increase support for the war, have decided to send the group on a whirlwind tour of the country. They've been wined and dined, cheered and interviewed, and now that their sales pitch is done, these "soft, sated, bleary, underrested, and overproduced" soldiers are about to be shipped back to Iraq. Before that, though, they'll experience once

LITTLE AMERICA: KNOPF; BILLY LYNN'S LONG HALFTIME WALK: ECCO

again the strangeness of American celebrity: they are to be honored during an extravagant halftime show at Cowboy Stadium, complete with fireworks, lots of choreographed dancing, and a performance by Destiny's Child.

Billy Lynn depicts the merciless logic of wartime experience. Being engaged in combat isn't ennobling, Fountain writes, but simply a "sort of road rage feeling"; being a soldier is less about courage than it is about avoiding "all the small, petty, stupid, basically foreordained fuckups" to which military life is heir.

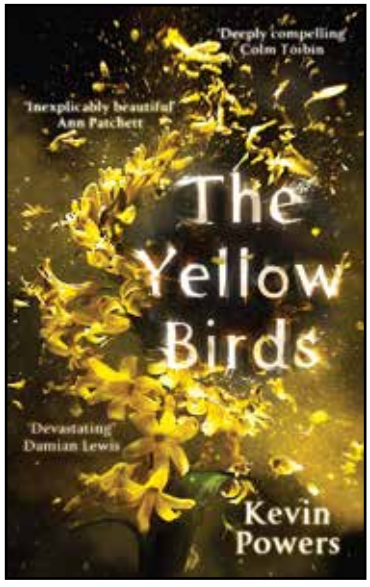
But the most memorable passages are those in which Fountain uses war and how it is talked about at home to reflect on American culture more broadly. In a late-capitalist, media-saturated world, Fountain suggests, Americans feel an existential void, a void they try to fill with military action in which most don't take part and with vague platitudes about sacrifice that most don't really understand. War becomes not a cause for self-reflection but a cause for self-congratulation: "Here at home everyone is so sure about the war. They talk in certainties, imperatives, absolutes." American citizens are "bold and proud and certain in the way of clever children blessed with too much self-esteem."

Billy Lynn contains several rants worthy of Philip Roth: screeds against the financialization of our economy ("a shadowy, myth-based parallel world, a transparent overlay of *Matrix*-style numbers through which flesh-and-blood humans move like fish through kelp"); against American excess ("Where else but America could football flourish, America with its millions of fertile acres of corn, soy, and wheat, its lakes of dairy, its year-round gushers of fruits and vegetables"); against our class-based military, our lazy political discourse, our hypersexualized yet puritanical culture.

Fountain trains his eye like an anthropologist on the strange world that is the United States. What emerges is a hilarious, disturbing picture of a country that lauds self-sacrifice but refuses to practice it, that pays lip service to the tragedy of war but actually longs for the certainty it provides its nonparticipants. *Billy Lynn* reminds us both of "the state of pure sin toward which war inclines" and of the lengths we go to in denying this fact.

If Fountain is primarily interested in what war says about our country, then Kevin Powers, an Iraq veteran and author of ***The Yellow Birds*** (Little, Brown and Company, $24.99, 240 pp.), is interested in what war does to our soldiers.

The Yellow Birds, narrated by the twenty-one-year-old Private John Bartle, shifts back and forth between Bartle's time fighting in Al Tafar, Iraq, and his time trying to understand those experiences once he's back home. Early on, we discover that Bartle had something to do with the death of his platoon mate Daniel Murphy. The rest of the novel is devoted to figuring out what



exactly happened and what it might mean. Tormented by what he did and what he failed to do, feeling guilty about his own survival, Bartle ponders the imponderables: Is war pure contingency, a concatenation of accident and aftermath? Or is there some "pattern in all the strange things that occurred"? How can we trust our memory of past trauma when "half of memory is imagination anyway"?

Despite what some reviewers have claimed, *The Yellow Birds* is not a story about the deep bonds forged by war. Bartle and Murphy are linked by the place from which they came (Virginia, where they've both "had small lives, populated by a longing for something more substantial than dirt roads and small dreams") and by the hell in which they find themselves. But that's about it: the two may like each other, but they certainly don't love each other. In fact, Murphy often seems more a plot function—we continue reading to find out what happened to him—than a fully realized character.

The most distinctive feature of *The Yellow Birds* isn't its plot or characters but its strange prose style. Powers, who has an MFA in poetry from the University of Texas at Austin, attempts a delicate balancing act, trying to wed unsparing realism (think Hemingway) to an intense, almost vatic lyricism (think Faulkner). The result can be inspired, as in the novel's opening:

> The war tried to kill us in the spring.… While we slept, the war rubbed its thousand ribs against the ground in prayer. While we pressed onward through exhaustion, its eyes were white and open in the dark. While we ate, the war fasted, fed by its own deprivation. It made love and gave birth and spread through fire.

But the writing can also be flabby and overwrought, straining after poetry when prose would do. Too often Powers sounds like a poor man's Cormac McCarthy—not quite as powerful and not quite as weird. At one point, we see a tower rise "out of the dirt and dead flora like some kind of ancient exclamation"; elsewhere, we hear "the old and childless hovel dwellers who wailed some Eastern dirges in their warbling language, all of them sounding like punishments specifically for our ears." Such details don't tell us what war is actually like, nor do they tell us, I suspect, what war would feel like to Private Bartle. Rather, they seem to exist in order to call attention to themselves: "Pay attention!" they shout, "Aren't I striking?" Striking? Perhaps. Convincing? Rarely.

For obvious reasons, I'm uncom-

THE YELLOW BIRDS: LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY

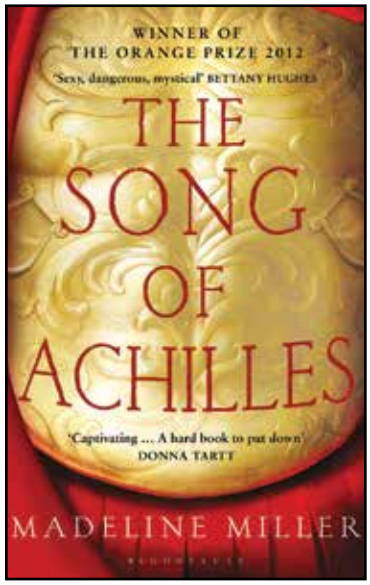
fortable with criticizing a veteran for aestheticizing war. But this complaint is important to register because, when Powers reins himself in, he is a gifted writer, capable of aphoristic formulations ("War is the great maker of solipsists: how are you going to save my life today?") and powerful music ("We curled ourselves into absurd shapes and huddled below the whitewashed walls of our position. We stayed awake on amphetamines and fear"). At its worst, *The Yellow Birds* reads like a parody of an MFA project. At its best, though, it reminds us that war has its own peculiar, painful beauties.

Billy Lynn and *The Yellow Birds* place themselves within a specifically American tradition of war literature. In its absurdist humor, Billy Lynn recalls Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*; in its spare but occasionally lyrical realism, *The Yellow Birds* echoes Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*. Madeline Miller's The Song of Achilles looks back further, to the ur-text of war literature: *The Iliad*.

In writing ***The Song of Achilles*** (Ecco, $14.99, 416 pp.), Miller, a classicist trying her hand at fiction for the first time, asks two central questions. First, what would the Trojan War look like if it were approached obliquely, not through the perspective of Achilles or Hector but through the eyes of someone who lived mostly on the sidelines? And second, what would happen if we reimagined *The Iliad* as a romance—not, as Simone Weil described it, as "the poem of force" but rather as the poem of love?

Miller's narrator is Patroclus, Achilles' beloved friend and brother-in-arms. Scholars have long debated the precise nature of the two men's relationship—was it erotic or not?—but Miller is no milquetoast. For her, Patroclus and Achilles were lovers, and, in her vision, *The Iliad* is a poem that examines not just the violence brought about by war but also the violence brought about by romantic loss.

Miller paints Patroclus's childhood as filled with mishap (he accidentally kills a bully and is banished) and misery (his father despises Patroclus's lack of courage and physical prowess). But then, while in exile, Patroclus meets, befriends, and falls in love with Achilles. We follow the two through their short-lived but passionate love affair, staying with them as they encounter frightening prophecies, angry goddesses, and kindly centaurs. But all of these adventures pale in comparison to their love for one another. Even when we arrive at Troy, we're still in the land of pure romance, where to be young and in love is to be "like gods at the dawning of the world," where the carnage Achilles leaves in his wake can't distract from his loveliness: "All I saw was his beauty, his singing limbs, the quick flickering of his feet."



The pleasures of *The Song of Achilles* are real: a quick pace, a fluid if occasionally treacly style, a cast of well-known characters. But they are also shallow, and the enjoyment we get from the tale doesn't quite make up for the cloying nature of the telling. Hardly a page goes by without our hearing about the "rosy gleam of [Achilles'] lip" or how he "moves easily, his heels flashing pink as licking tongues."

War novels rarely end happily. As a war romance, though, *The Song of Achilles* proves an exception. In a conclusion that is more *Wuthering Heights* than *The Iliad*, Achilles and Patroclus, parted on the fields of Troy, are reunited forever in the afterlife: "In the darkness, two shadows, reaching through the hopeless, heavy dusk. Their hands meet, and light spills in a flood like a hundred golden urns pouring out of the sun." This is a far cry from the endings of *Billy Lynn* and *The Yellow Birds*, both of which tell us that, at least for the combatants, the horrors of war can't be escaped, let alone transfigured into golden sunlight.

How to reconcile war's poetry with its pain, the golden urn with the dead ash it contains? That's the task of all great war literature. None of the current crop of war novels fully succeeds in pulling this off—even *Billy Lynn*, the best of the bunch, focuses so incessantly on how the war is understood at home that it loses sight of how it's experienced at the front. But at least these writers are taking up the challenge. They remind us that, if American literature is to be taken seriously, it must consider the violence that is done in America's name. ■

Anthony Domestico, *a frequent contributor, is currently finishing his PhD in English at Yale. "Bookmarks" will be his regular books column.*

THE SONG OF ACHILLES: ECCO

A Higher Power

Sarah Ruden

Grace, *photograph by Eric Enstrom, 1918*

While I lived in South Africa, I got to know a remarkable Quaker, John Broom. He taught me the real basis of sainthood: understanding and honoring the difference between the human self and God.

As a young man, he had settled in Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia) and become a partner in Deloitte and Touche—not an accounting firm, but *the* accounting firm in southern Africa. He owned a small fleet of cars, some horses, a mansion, helped start a golf club.

Then one of his clients, a farmer, overextended himself building an irrigation dam and didn't see how he could avoid bankruptcy. John looked at the books and wasn't hopeful.

"Is there anything you can do for me?" the client asked. John, who had never been religious, heard himself saying, "I don't know—I guess I'll pray," and went home and did that. That same evening, ideas started coming for adjustments that could prevent a crisis until the dam (actually a good investment in itself) started to pay off. He hurried back the next day for another conversation with the farmer. Within a year, the farm was out of danger.

John, for his part, was powerfully intrigued by the notion of God's compassion for human limitations. Continuing to think, "Well, there's always prayer," in the face of the immense problems surrounding him, he set to work—this was in the late 1970s—preparing the country economically for majority rule, and by the time it came he had built up a nationwide training organization for aspiring black commercial farmers. He even served in the finance department of the new black government.

A couple of decades later, I interviewed him in his modest apartment in Cape Town. He brought out a folder packed with business cards of an astonishing variety: people with expertise in retail, services, mining, manufacturing, import, and export. It really seemed, as I paged through the book, that after Zimbabwe had achieved majority rule, and the international sanctions fell away, the country's economy might have diversified and advanced, particularly with John's help. He had written more than a hundred investment plans and even obtained a multi-million-dollar industrial development grant from the German government.

But the new Zimbabwean regime made excuses and stonewalled, and in time John realized that not a single permit was forthcoming. Officials also reduced John's agricultural organization to uselessness, at the same time resisting the "willing buyer, willing seller" model of land reform that the international community insisted on. Havoc and devastation prevailed from 2000 on, when the government took matters into its own hands through violent confiscations. Long before, John had seen it coming, and seen his own inability to intervene. He set off—with only the possessions he could fit into a compact car, since those were all he was allowed to take—for South Africa. There he studied painting but could not stay away from assisting small businesses and charities, activities that have continued through his eighties.

He is not vituperative about Zimbabwe. He is forthright in explaining the officials' rational motivations, and diligent in applying what he learned. He knows he must work around Africans' distrust of Westerners. "They think we're magic, because of ATMs," John told me. "We command money to come out of walls, and out it comes—but that doesn't work for them." (He was right: I had often stood fuming behind a laborer as he submitted one wish after another and the genie beeped its impatient refusals.) John is encouraged, on the other hand, by African ingenuity in narrow circumstances, as when a (nonpaying) client of his had come up on his own with a money-management system: "This pocket is to buy stock, and this one is to pay my help, and this one is for the tax man."

I think John's energy and good cheer come from his understanding that the human ego is too weak to endure on its own either extreme of fortune. If things turn out as if a superb wisdom has guided them, then their earthly doer or director is in danger of believing that more power for himself is indispensable if the world is to become a better place. And if someone believes that outcomes depend on him personally, how could he avoid the immobilization of cynicism or shame after he finds, as is commonly the case, his sincere efforts on behalf of others meeting with huge disappointment?

This is why prayer seems to me to be not just an emotional comfort or a ritual necessity, but a practical means of staying sane in a world like ours. If I were an outright atheist, I would still pray, by imagining what God would be like if there were a God, and inexorably concluding: "A heck of a lot better than myself." ■

Sarah Ruden *is the author of* Paul Among the People *(Image Books). She has translated five major works of classical literature (among them the* Aeneid*) and is the author of* Other Places*, a book of poetry. She is a visiting scholar at Wesleyan and Brown Universities and lives with her husband in Hamden, Connecticut.*

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